

WEEDPATCH: SYNOPSIS

by Paul Phillips and Bill Harley

ACT I

Scene 1 – James Callahan arrives at the Arvin Federal Migrant Camp near Bakersfield, CA in 1940 to teach math and music to Oklahoma migrants at the Weedpatch School, which is viewed skeptically by the town denizens. Leo Hart, the Kern County School Superintendent, introduces James to Nora Borden, the principal of the school. Nora has Sarah Rondell sing for James, and everyone joins in. James is impressed, but Cal, Sarah’s father, disapproves and orders her home.

Scene 2 – Back at her family’s tent, Sarah tells her grandmother Agnes how excited she is that James believes in her talent. Cal berates Sarah for not doing her chores. He is bitter that his wife Laura died during their journey to California and that he now faces so much hardship. Cal doesn’t like it when Sarah sings because she sounds just like Laura, and Sarah agrees not to. Sarah commiserates with her best friend, Patty.

Scene 3 – Leo tells James and Nora that he believes that featuring the new Weedpatch Chorus at the upcoming Kern County Talent Show will convince the community of the worth of the Okies. Nora is skeptical, but James tells Patty to get Sarah, and the chorus practices “Our Promised Land” by the celebrated Gus Monroe. Sarah arrives, very reluctant. When it’s her turn to sing “Away, Far Away,” the song reminds her of her mother. She is overcome with emotion and runs off.

Scene 4 – James goes to the Rondell tent to convince Cal to let Sarah develop her talent, but Cal is suspicious. Agnes intervenes, attempting to soften Cal’s animosity. Cal relents and agrees to let Sarah sing at the Talent Show.

Scene 5 – At the Talent Show in Bakersfield, Leo and his fellow emcee introduce the performers; first ballet dancers, then jugglers. Willy (Sarah’s boyfriend) and other kids from Arvin and from town taunt the performers and each other. The Weedpatch Chorus sings “Bright Morning Stars,” and Sarah sings beautifully at first, but falters at the line, “Oh where are our dear mothers?” The town kids mock Sarah, and Willy begins a fight. The police arrest Willy and send the Okies back to Arvin. A furious Cal tells Sarah never to sing again.

ACT II

Scene 1 – Four children find a dime and dream of what they might spend it on.

Scene 2 – At the Rondell tent, Willy arrives and tells Sarah excitedly about his night in jail, after which he rambled around California. Willy asks Sarah to run off with him, but Sarah is ambivalent. Agnes tells Sarah to believe in herself and her dreams.

Scene 3 – James bursts in on Nora’s classroom, to her great consternation. Undeterred, James tells her about a letter he has just received from Professor Ruth Crawford, his former professor at Berkeley. The professor’s son Pete is coming to Weedpatch with Gus Monroe! The kids and staff at the school are totally psyched. James tells Nora of his plan to feature Pete and Gus in a concert with the Weedpatch Chorus in three days. Nora is opposed, but James convinces her to agree to the concert.

Scene 4 – James prepares the excited Weedpatch Chorus for the upcoming concert. Sarah initially refuses to sing, but as the chorus rehearses, Sarah can’t help herself and joins in. Everyone praises Sarah, but Cal enters and furiously reminds Sarah that she must never again sing. James and Nora share how committed they are to helping Sarah through her plight.

Scene 5 – The Weedpatch Dance Hall is abuzz. Pete and Gus are late, to the consternation of Leo and Ruth. The School Board members express their impatience and their disapproval of Gus Monroe. In desperation Leo asks James to lead the chorus in a song. Sarah is torn, but finally decides to sing. The chorus again sings “Bright Morning Stars” and again Sarah falters at “Oh where are our dear mothers?” This time, Cal rises and sings from where she left off. Others stand and join in, one by one, until everyone is singing. Ruth offers Sarah a scholarship to Berkeley, and her family implores her to go. Meanwhile, the School Board tells Leo they will fund the Weedpatch School. Finally Pete and Gus arrive, and they lead everyone in a final rendition of “Our Promised Land.”