



In 'Wanted,' Outlaw
Sisters Pass for White
to Settle the Score

The new musical, set in the late 1800s in Texas, originated from the family lore of the book writer and lyricist Angelica Chéri. Its journey to Broadway took a dozen years.



Listen · 8:11 min

By Derrick Bryson Taylor Visuals by Myesha Evon

Sept. 16, 2026

Angelica Chéri was a little girl when she first heard the rumors about Mary and Martha Clarke, her great-great aunts, while thumbing through photo albums at her grandmother’s kitchen table in Bakersfield, Calif.

Between bites of cornbread or potato pie, their eyes would linger over black-and-white photographs of the Clarke sisters. Unlike the aunties and cousins in other pictures, some dating as far back as the 1800s, they looked white.

“We knew that they passed, and we knew that they were outlaws,” said Chéri, the playwright and lyricist. From there, the lore about the Clarke sisters became “deliciously incongruent,” with family members volunteering fables, sometimes about them robbing banks, stealing trains or even killing.

“It was hysterical,” she said. “Which was another reason why it felt epic enough to become a musical, because it’s like nobody knows.”

It took 12 years to get Chéri’s family legend to Broadway. She faced rewrites, cast changes, creative team overhauls and a global pandemic to boot. Broadway is risky business for any musical as production costs continue to climb, but especially for those that aren’t based on existing films or books or that don’t have a Hollywood actor (or three) attached.

But Chéri and her cast, creative crew and producing team believe “Wanted” can prove an exception — its stranger-than-fiction back story and its mix of country, R&B, gospel and other music genres may help its chances of survival when performances begin Oct. 15 at the James Earl Jones Theater.

The stories about the Clarke sisters stayed with Chéri, and in 2014, at New York University's Graduate Musical Theater Writing Program, she pitched the idea of a musical about their lives to Ross Baum, a fellow student and composer. The two had hit it off during the first year of the program, and she thought it could be their thesis project.

“It was literally the first idea that she tossed out,” Baum said, “I was like, ‘Yep, that’s it. That’s the show.’”



Angelica Chéri first met Ross Baum, who wrote the music for “Wanted,” at New York University’s Graduate Musical Theater Writing Program.

They had few facts to work with. Chéri knew the sisters were outlaws and that their grandfather was a Frenchman and that their grandmother was an enslaved woman. “The rest changed depending on what time of the day it was, what day of the week, what temperature, what was on the table,” Chéri said.

Chéri and Baum spent the next year writing the first draft. Nearly five years later, in January 2020, they mounted the first production of “Gun & Powder,” at the Signature Theater in Arlington, Va., with Robert O’Hara as director. The musical, about a pair of biracial, white-passing twins in 1893 who ruthlessly rob whites to wipe out their mother’s sharecropping debts, ran for nearly four weeks. After it closed, Chéri and Baum tasked themselves with deepening story lines and restructuring the creative team. “We went back into the lab for those four years,” Chéri said.

The show was mounted again in 2024 at the Paper Mill Playhouse in Millburn, N.J., this time with Stevie Walker-Webb as director.

The New York Times review said that it refashioned a classic myth of the American West about white men who fancy themselves above the law into an “irresistible revenge fantasy.” The show, it said, was the “type of audacious and rollicking story that’s too often missing from American stages.”

Chéri and Baum, however, were still not satisfied. They have since made more tweaks, most noticeably by adopting a new title: “Wanted.”

Audiences found the original title confusing, while the word “gun” created some practical challenges with advertisers and social media platforms.

The new title also fell squarely within the show’s western theme and sparked conversations about what it means to truly belong.

Baum says that audiences who saw the production at the Paper Mill Playhouse will see a “completely different” show on Broadway “because there have been redesigns in the production, that I think in a really, really beautiful way are going to strip it down to more of its essence, so that people are really going to be able to

hear the story clearly.” The Kinfolk, an ensemble of ancestors who guide the audience through the story, will drive the action, sometimes physically transforming the world around them by carrying furniture and even platforms.

The Paper Mill Playhouse in Millburn, N.J., presented the musical in 2024, when it was called “Gun & Powder.” Jeremy Daniel

Walker-Webb said that the intention behind the Broadway show has also changed. Directing the show for the second time, he closely rewatched footage of the Paper Mill production to root out when the “muse,” as he calls it, leaves the stage. He used this opportunity to collaborate more closely with the design team and Chelsey Arce, the show’s choreographer. “The spectacle now is about the emotional stakes and the danger that these women navigate as they try to lay hold to the American dream,” he said. “It’s a dangerous thing for a Black woman to dream in 1893.”

The show will feel like a spaghetti western, he said, using a term for a subgenre of western films from the 1960s and ’70s known for its highly stylized grittiness. “You’re going to smell the dirt in a way that you hadn’t smelled it before,” Walker-Webb said. “You’re going to feel the heat and the sweat.”

“Wanted” reunites Solea Pfeiffer and Liisi LaFontaine as Mary and Martha Clarke. They first met at a 29-hour reading of it in 2018, but have not been onstage together; Pfeiffer starred in the Signature Theater production, while LaFontaine was part of the Paper Mill one.

The sisters, Pfeiffer said, are fighting to love each other the way they see best. That tension onstage — manifested in Mary’s calculated cautiousness and Martha’s impulsiveness — makes the show “complicated” and yet “beautiful because it’s just like two people who want the same thing for each other, but cannot figure out how to make those things align.”

The actresses have become fiercely protective over each other and are invested in the show’s success. “It’s not unlike expecting a child,” LaFontaine said. “I think the show feels like our baby as well because we’ve been attached for eight years.”

Playing Mary and Martha presents a rare experience for Pfeiffer and LaFontaine, who are both half Black and half white, to play women who share their racial background in another time period. The actresses said that digging into their characters had helped them explore their own biracial identities. “I think Black history tends to be condensed and monolithic when it’s taught to young American kids,” Pfeiffer said, “so throughout my life I had a hard time placing myself in history and couldn’t quite figure out what identity was mine to claim.”

Liisi LaFontaine, left, and Solea Pfeiffer, said that digging into their characters had helped them explore their own biracial identities.

Pfeiffer said she was excited for any discussions the show might provoke about the role of race in post-Reconstruction America (and today), as well as what it means to wear whiteness as a costume. “It’s not going to be necessarily the most comfortable,” she said. “We are talking about race in a way that is intrinsically and specifically American.”

Rounding out the cast are the R&B singers Ledisi, who plays Mary and Martha’s mother, Tallulah Clarke, and Luke James, who plays Elijah, a formerly enslaved man and Martha’s love interest.

It’s been a long, twisting journey for Chéri from the kitchen table to Broadway. And it’s one that she’s proud of and ready to share, adding that Mary and Martha’s story encapsulates a beauty and agony.

“Bringing my family’s history to Broadway truly blows my mind,” Chéri said. That “radically and beautifully challenges our culture’s perception of the ‘American tale.’”

Derrick Bryson Taylor is a Times reporter covering breaking news in culture and the arts.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section AR, Page 22 of the New York edition with the headline: A New Show Steeped In Family Lore