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CITY LIGHTS THEATER COMPANY

HIGHLIGHTS

LIZZIE
by Steven Cheslik-DeMeyer, Tim Maner & Alan Stevens Hewitt

July 13-August 20, 2017

A companion guide to the rock musical
"Lizzie Borden took an ax ..." You know the children’s rhyme, but do you really know the story of Lizzie Borden? The Massachusetts spinster was put on trial for dispatching her parents with a hatchet in the summer of 1892, but was later acquitted of the crime. This rock musical with a riot-girl attitude tells the tale of Lizzie as you’ve never heard it before: a story of revenge, sexual repression, anger, despair and ultimate release. A live band — keyboard, guitar, bass, drums, cello and chimes — joins the cast of four women on the City Lights stage.

**Synopsis**

The _LIZZIE_ script contains powerful character descriptions. Here are excerpts:

**Lizzie Borden (Hayley Lovgren)** “is damaged, twisted. She can turn on a dime from fragile, broken, meek and obedient to conniving, sinister, furious and terrifying. … We find her at the moment she realizes she has nothing to lose.”

**Emma Borden (Amy Soriano-Palagi)** “is the older sister, eclipsed by the younger. She must content herself by playing a motherly Lady Macbeth to Lizzie, dripping her own hatreds into Lizzie’s ears over the years … She’s furious, but she’s also desperately sad.”

**Bridget Sullivan/Maggie (Chloë Angst)** “is the Bordens’ Irish maid. She may be a Banshee, called to wail at the Bordens’ door. She always seems to know what is going to happen. … She’s put upon, angry, and as resentful of the Borden sisters as she is of the parents.”

**Alice Russell (Sharon Lita)** “is the Bordens’ next-door neighbor. She is a luscious pear, the sensuous mother-sister-lover which is sorely lacking in Lizzie’s life. She appears to Lizzie in her greatest moments of need and attempts to lead her away from a path of destruction and toward one of love, truth, and affection.”

**Characters**

Clockwise from top left: Hayley Lovgren as Lizzie Borden, Amy Soriano-Palagi as seething sister Emma Borden, Sharon Lita as sensuous next-door neighbor Alice, and Chloë Angst as bitter maid Bridget. All _LIZZIE_ show photos by Steve DiBartolomeo, taken at the historic Fallon House in downtown San Jose.
The double murder of Andrew Jackson Borden and his second wife, Abby Durfee Borden, of Fall River, Massachusetts, stands as one of the all-time great mysteries in the annals of crime. It will never be solved.

No murderer has been or ever will be brought to justice for the unimaginably brutal and audacious daylight slaughter that took place in a quiet home on the stifling hot morning of August 4, 1892. Andrew’s younger daughter, Lizzie, (not Elizabeth; she was christened “Lizzie”) was arrested, charged with the murders, brought to trial, and ultimately acquitted — and that, as they say, was that. Or was it? Ask a room full of people with even a passing knowledge of the Borden case the classic question “did she or didn’t she?” and half will answer “Yes!” and the other half will answer “No.”

Lizzie and her alleged crime inflame our passions, and the argument rages on to this day. If Lizzie didn’t do it, then justice was served when a jury of her peers returned a verdict of “not guilty.” But if she did, then why was she acquitted? That question, too, can never be answered. Or can it?

The Borden trial of 1893 was the “O.J. trial” of the 1890s: the “trial of the century.” Mishandled evidence, errant rulings by the presiding justices, a “dream team” defense attorney – all of these and more contributed to the verdict of “not guilty.”

**The defense attorney**

Lizzie and Emma retained the services of former Massachusetts governor George Robinson to represent Lizzie at her trial, and he performed admirably, securing her acquittal despite an abundance of evidence pointing to her guilt. Time and again this courtroom magician pulled off legal legerdemain, obscuring the facts, turning key issues on end, poking fun at minor witnesses, and responding to the state’s allegations in a homespun style that connected with jurors in a way prosecuting attorney Hosiah Knowlton could never equal.

In addition, one of the presiding judges at Lizzie’s trial had been raised to the Massachusetts bench some years before by then-governor Robinson! There is no telling how his gratitude to Robinson might have influenced his thinking throughout the trial – but in virtually every contested issue, the court sided with Robinson and the defense.

Lizzie and Emma knew what they were doing when they hired this one-man “dream team,” and they were immediately put at ease when, upon meeting her, he laid a hand on Lizzie’s arm and said, “It’s going to be all right, little girl.” (After being acquitted, Lizzie was reported to be quite put out when she received Robinson’s bill for $10,000.)

**The Evidence**

What dress was Lizzie wearing on that sweltering morning: summer cotton or winter silk? Was the dress ever found? Was the hatchet discovered by the police during their initial search of the Borden property the murder weapon? Could an intruder have remained hidden in that cramped, wood-frame house to commit two gruesome murders 90 minutes apart, with two able-bodied women in and around the property all morning long? Wouldn’t that intruder have been drenched in gore? These are only a few of the questions raised during the trial of Lizzie Borden – questions that were never answered. That there ARE answers to them there can be no doubt, but every attempt to get at the truth during the trial only served to
further obscure these and other issues. And in two instances, evidence clearly pointing to the defendant’s guilt was prohibited from being introduced at the trial by the presiding judges.

First, Lizzie’s attempt to buy prussic acid days before the murders was excluded as being, according to the judges, “remote.” Lizzie had told druggist Eli Bence she wanted prussic acid to remove moths from a sealskin cape; Bence had responded that prussic acid is a potent poison that was (and still is) unavailable except in minute doses by prescription only. (Lizzie’s request is especially suspect when one considers that sealskin is naturally immune to moths!)

Second, Lizzie’s inquest testimony, given over three days during the week following the murders, was excluded on a technicality. Because Lizzie had been informed by the town marshal that she was a suspect in the case, the court determined that she was “virtually under arrest” from that moment on, and therefore her inquest testimony – given before she had secured legal representation – was inadmissible under Fifth Amendment protections.

**The Inquest**

Lizzie was one of several witnesses called to testify at the coroner's inquest the week after the murders. No one was “on trial.” Held to determine if there is enough evidence to charge someone with a crime, an inquest, presided over by a judge, allows a prosecutor to question witnesses who appear under oath but are not represented by counsel.

The key witnesses at the Borden inquest were Lizzie, her sister Emma, and their maid Bridget (called, affectionately, “Maggie” by the girls). On the whole, the inquest was a routine, even dull affair, as each witness gave testimony consistent in itself and consistent with that given by every other witness. The sole exception was Lizzie.

While it is now, 125 years later, almost unbearably dull to read in transcript form, Lizzie’s inquest testimony was no doubt revealing to those who were there, as it contradicted itself and that of virtually every other witness. Her testimony was enough, in fact, to compel presiding Judge Blodgett, a kindly old soul who had known Lizzie since childhood, to judge her, with tears in his eyes, as “probably guilty,” and to order that she be charged with the murders of her father and stepmother. That testimony was enough, further, to compel a preliminary hearing to order that the case be taken up by the Grand Jury who, upon hearing all of the available evidence including Lizzie’s inquest testimony, ordered Lizzie bound over for trial.
Only at her trial was Lizzie's inquest testimony excluded (see “The Evidence,” above). It was not heard by the jury, and that jury ultimately found Lizzie “not guilty.”

Note: Though no stenographic record of the inquest was kept, Lizzie’s testimony was published in major newspapers after the trial jury was sequestered (yes, reporters of the period were remarkably thorough in taking down such testimony, in a way that modern technology has rendered unnecessary and obsolete). It is available today from many sources, including online.

THE BORDEN FAMILY

Lizzie Andrew Borden was born on July 19, 1860, in Fall River, the last of three children born to Andrew Jackson Borden and Sarah Morse Borden. Her older sister, Emma, had been born ten years prior; a second sister had died in childhood. Lizzie’s mother died when she was three, and when Lizzie was six, Andrew married Abby Durfee Gray, but Lizzie remained closer to her sister than to her stepmother, whom she came to call “Abby” and later “Mrs. Borden” rather than “Mother.”

Lizzie grew up a regular churchgoer, a Sunday school teacher (she taught English to Chinese immigrants), and a member of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. By all reports, she loved animals, including birds. Just as her natural mother was prone to bouts of sudden rage, Lizzie suffered from periodic “peculiar spells” that might have been, according to some experts, a symptom of temporal epilepsy.

Despite her father’s wealth, Lizzie and the family lived “down under the hill” in a cramped, two-story house in a working-class neighborhood of Fall River, rather than “up on the hill” where the affluent lived in spacious, elaborate homes on lush, tree-lined streets. There is evidence that the family’s style of living was a constant stressor in the household, and that Lizzie craved a better life, and given her father’s financial acumen, after all, wasn’t she entitled?

For his part, Andrew placated his younger daughter with a handsome allowance and gifts of property, and the year before he died he splurged and treated her to the “Grand Tour” of Europe with several other Fall River ladies. Evidence suggests that Andrew, as the years passed, and for whatever reason, recognized an ever-increasing need to keep Lizzie happy, and he did it in the only way he knew how: through her pocketbook. After the trial, Lizzie and her sister moved swiftly from the house on Second Street to a mansion “up on the hill” … far too swiftly for conservative Fall Riverites, who effectively ostracized Lizzie. And to make matters worse, Lizzie broke with cultural tradition when she committed the sin of naming her new home. In later life, Lizzie changed her own name from Lizzie to Lizbeth, and became “Lizbeth of Maplecroft.”

There were well over one hundred heads of families named Borden in Fall River in 1892. Tall, gaunt, and utterly humorless, Lizzie’s father Andrew was one of the richest – and the town’s legendary skinflint. It was
rumored that when he was an undertaker as a younger man, he would cut the feet off a corpse to fit it into an undersized (cheaper) coffin. Andrew walked downstreet (“downtown” in modern parlance) every morning to collect rents, strike hard bargains with tenants and other business partners, fulfill his duties as a board member of numerous banks and textile mills, and assess the progress of the newly erected Andrew J. Borden building. Though Andrew was recognized as a mogul in Fall River society, the house on Second Street in which he lived and died had no electricity or modern plumbing. He considered both unnecessary extravagances; he lit the home with kerosene. Residents and any rare guests used chamber pots and a basement privy for sanitary purposes.

Andrew’s second wife, Abby, was solitary, sedentary, and virtually invisible to anyone outside the immediate family. At only 5 feet tall, she tipped the scales at over 200 pounds. Exercise, for Abby, consisted of passing through the house once daily, flicking a feather duster. She rarely left the house – the maid, Bridget, did the shopping – and then only to visit a relative once or twice a year on the other side of town.

Sister Emma, Lizzie’s senior by ten years, remains a mystery: a seemingly unassuming spinster who enjoyed the company of friends and wanted nothing so much as a quiet life out of the spotlight. She stepped into the dual role of mother and friend to little Lizzie when their mother died, and the two remained close throughout the murders and trial, moving together after the acquittal to Maplecroft, a fine home up on the hill. There they lived until Emma moved out quite suddenly, without explanation, after a party Lizzie had thrown in honor of an actress friend, and the two never saw each other again.

Neither Lizzie nor Emma ever married. Lizzie died of pneumonia on June 1, 1927, in Fall River. She left the bulk of her estate to the Fall River Animal Rescue League, and $500 in trust for perpetual care of her father’s grave. Nine days later, Emma died in Newmarket, New Hampshire. The Borden sisters rest side by side in the family plot in Oak Grove Cemetery in Fall River, with their father, mother, stepmother, and sister.

“**They not only agreed to let us take pictures: they gave us an ax.**” -TripAdvisor review

What does that infamous house in Fall River look like today? Go on Yelp or TripAdvisor and see.

Yes, you can spend the night under the Bordens’ roof, because that one-time blood-spattered house is now a bed & breakfast and museum. There are ghost cams, an official psychic, and a gift shop. Because you were just dying for that Lizzie bobble-head doll.
Flash back...not to 1892, but to 1990, when LIZZIE was first seen on the stage in Soho. Back then, it was called Lizzie Borden: An American Musical, created by writer/director Tim Maner and songwriter Steven Cheslik-DeMeyer for tiny mythic theater company’s American Living Room festival. Inspired by the pair’s love of, as they put it, “musicals, Americana, women rockers and late-’80s queer politics,” the show rocked the house with an ax coming out of the ceiling.

Over the years, the show grew into an extended one-act with six new songs, then a longer musical. Later, Alan Stevens Hewitt joined the team, bringing rock experience and classical training. In 2009, a production on the Lower East Side brought in sell-out houses and three Drama Desk nominations. Then the show went national — and international.

lizziethemusical.com is the place for the full story from the show’s creators. Until then, check out this Q&A with the trio.

City Lights: What are your favorite changes that you made to LIZZIE along the way?

Tim Maner: Developing musicals is a long process! And there have been so many changes and tweaks, and surprises along the way but one thing I’m very happy about is that LIZZIE today still shares the core impulse we started with all those years ago. Among the changes that made a stronger show: focusing on the Lizzie/Alice relationship as a core arc, the strengthened ending sequence from “13 Days” through the end, the fully realized orchestrations.

Alan Stevens Hewitt: I had the good fortune of coming at the piece from an outside perspective — only coming onboard in 2009, prior to the Living Theatre production (the first iteration of what we’ve come to think of as LIZZIE 2.0). My conservatory training in composition led me to implement extensive thematic processes throughout the score, tying together what had been more of an episodic structure. For instance, “This Is Not Love” is a recomposition of “13 Days In Taunton.” (The latter actually came first.) Songs that had comprised multiple parts were broken up and recomposed, in some cases separated and moved. Songs that had been separate were combined. Whole bits from previous incarnations were jettisoned.

Steven Cheslik-DeMeyer: The show started as a loud and sloppy 4-song rock show in an un-air-conditioned loft in Soho, but people who saw it then tell us that though it’s changed a lot over the years it still feels like the same show.
The most satisfying thing for me was strengthening the Lizzie/Alice arc, the story of secrets and love and betrayal at the core of the show. Everything turns on that relationship, and it was challenging to get it right, so that the audience understands the stakes for Alice and for Lizzie. After every workshop and reading, we made changes large and small to that story line. “Will You Stay” has been in the show since the early ’90s, but “If You Knew” was the last song we added, the last substantive change we made.

City Lights: The real Lizzie, of course, was acquitted. Why did you choose to put the ax in her hand in the show?

Steven: We were always more interested in the legend, the idea of Lizzie Borden being part of American mythology, than we were in the “true crime” aspect of it. Not that we aren’t interested in that stuff, too, personally — it’s an incredibly fascinating unsolved crime, and once you start reading the court transcripts, you become an addict — but the legal/criminal justice angle is not really what our show is about. I should say though that even though we’re more concerned with the myth than the history, most of what we portray in the show is stuff that actually happened, and many of the lyrics and lines are directly quoted from court testimony.

Tim: The kernel of the idea comes from the nursery rhyme and in that re-telling she "took an ax and gave her father forty whacks..." etc., so that was always the story we were telling. That became the core of the story. It’s about the rebellion of one generation against the other, which is the story of rock and roll. It’s literally smashing the patriarchy.

City Lights: LIZZIE had its European premiere in Denmark in 2014, sung in Danish. What changes needed to be made?

Tim: First off, just gotta say that Søren Møller and the whole team at Fredericia Teater in Denmark are amazing. They brought on a great team of translators who worked with us extensively. It’s a unique process to have your work translated. Of course there are idioms, and word pairings, and rhymes, and word play that work great in English, but didn’t have an exact match in Danish, but they did a great job making the show work, and it was clear watching the show with a Danish audience that the points all landed, the jokes landed the way they were supposed to.

Steven: We didn’t realize how many Americanisms we had in the show (idioms, references, etc.) until we went through the translation process. The translators were really detailed and sensitive to capture the spirit of our words. The audiences in Denmark — who all speak English very well — told us that the translation was beautifully done, and, when we watched the show with them, the reactions we expected (laughs, silence, sniffles) all came in the right spots, even though we couldn’t understand what they were saying or singing.

City Lights: What music are you listening to nowadays?

“The show is about the rebellion of one generation against the other, which is the story of rock and roll.”

-Tim Maner
**Tim:** I like to stream alt radio and college radio stations to hear new pop/rock/alt music. In the last year I’ve been listening to Courtney Barnett, a lesbian singer/songwriter out of Australia, and I recently discovered Sam Roberts Band out of Canada (ashamed I didn’t know of them earlier), and of course musicals like *Dear Evan Hansen*.

**Steven:** Right now it’s Aimee Mann’s “Mental Illness” (her records keep getting better and better, which doesn’t even seem possible because they’re all so great); Allison Krauss’ new record “Windy City,” which is all covers of classic-era countrypolitan songs; and since Maggie Roche died last year I’ve been listening to old Roches, especially “Seductive Reasoning,” which I think is kind of a masterpiece. I also recently came upon a 1962 album called “Love Is A Drag,” which was sort of an underground album passed around in gay circles in the early ’60s. It’s all standards that would have been sung by women (“Mad About the Boy,” “The Man I Love,” etc.) but sung by a male vocalist, recorded in straightforward piano trio arrangements. The singer and band, who are very good, weren’t credited on the record because it was so dangerous at the time, but it’s a great listen.

**Alan:** I’m listening to quite a bit of electronic stuff lately—Autechre, µ-Ziq, etc. Also recently was turned on to an old Sandy Denny album I’d never heard, “Like An Old-Fashioned Waltz.” Amazing record. I couldn’t believe I’d never heard it.

**City Lights:** What projects are you working on now?


**Tim:** I’ve been co-writing book and some lyrics (with Steven Cheslik-DeMeyer) for a new adaptation of *The Scarlet Letter* called *The Life & Hard Times Of Hester Prynne*.

**Steven:** I’m writing a musical roughly based on the life of Horatio Alger crossed with my high school diary. As far as past work, for many years I was half of a country-ish duo called Y’all. You can find our stuff all over YouTube and in the used bins on Amazon.

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**“I think I understand Lizzie now, at least a little”**

With *LIZZIE*, City Lights Executive Artistic Director Lisa Mallette is back in the director’s chair. She calls the show “a historical and psychological thriller” and “a hard-driving rock musical,” with “four amazing, star-making roles for women.”

But there’s more to why Lisa chose *LIZZIE*. It’s also a story of four oppressed and repressed women, tied into corsets in the often stifling Victorian era. Women who have no control over their passions and lives, and try to empower themselves in any way they can.

“The ‘war on women’ is nothing new – and *LIZZIE* tells the story of just one battle in that war,” Lisa writes in her program notes. “While I certainly don’t condone her actions, I think I understand Lizzie now, at least a little.”

Pick up a program at the theater to learn more!
City Lights Theater Company presents LIZZIE from July 13-Aug. 20, 2017. Shows are Thurs-Sat at 8 p.m., Sun at 2 p.m. (no show July 16). Three 8 p.m. Wednesdays: Aug. 2, 9 and 16. The theater is at 529 S. Second St. in San Jose. Details: cltc.org, 408-295-4200.

Director: Lisa Mallette
Music Director: Katie Coleman
Choreographer: Christine Herrera
Scenic Design/Production Manager/Technical Director: Ron Gasparinetti
Lighting Design: Nick Kumamoto
Costume Design: Pat Tyler, Melissa Sanchez
Sound Design: George Psarras
Properties Designer: Miranda Whipple
Stage Manager: Michelle Marko
Master Electrician: Joseph Hidde

Featuring: Hayley Lovgren as Lizzie, Amy Soriano-Palagi as Emma, Chloë Angst as Bridget, and Sharon Lita as Alice.
Sheila Townsend understudies all four roles.
Band: Katie Coleman (keyboard), Francisco Hernandez (guitar), Robin Snyder (cello), Andrew Lawrence (bass), Brietta Greger (drums)

Highlights is researched and written by City Lights dramaturg Rebecca Wallace, except for the “Why Lizzie Was Acquitted” section, which is by City Lights Associate Artistic Director Kit Wilder. Read digital versions of this and other issues of Highlights at cltc.org/highlights.