

Lizzie Borden's legend kicks off Theatre Aurora season on a 'dark' note



In the age of the 24-hour news cycle, along with the proliferation of social media, how would the story of Lizzie Borden play out today?

Acquitted of the bloody axe murders of her father and stepmother in 1892, the now-legendary case remains unsolved, spurring countless theories about what actually took place that day in that well-heeled house in Fall River, MA.

Borden's sensational trial gave her a celebrity that stayed with her for the rest of her life, inspiring numerous books, films and television shows, but it is *Blood Relations*, a play by Sharon Pollock, that will have Aurora audiences considering the possibilities.

Blood Relations, directed by Sergio Calderon, opened Theatre Aurora's 61st season last Thursday night, a season which delves into the darker side of things with the theme of *The Furious Five*.

'It is an intriguing story and, had the murder happened today, it would have gotten a one-day play in the news cycle and that would have been it,' says Calderon. 'Plus, it would have had all the modern, forensic investigative tools to be able to have solved this mystery. Of course, with something that happened in 1892, it was all argumentative in how they approached the case. The mystery endures, the American folklore endures. Had it happened today, it would have been case open, case closed, and we would have moved on much quicker.'

But the world has not yet moved on from Lizzie Borden. Questions swirling around the case still fuel speculation, and these questions are tackled right up on the stage.

Although Calderon is a Theatre Aurora veteran, having sat in the directors' chair numerous times, this is his first time directing what could be considered a thriller. As a director, his first question was how to explore that genre on stage while still keeping the spirit of what is, at its

core, a period piece requiring a contemporary approach.

It's a play that stands the test of time, he says, with a timeless psychological element, asking the audience to question what actually drives a person to commit a murder ? or two.

?If you take a look at any kind of case that they would label as a crime of passion, something that isn't necessarily premeditated but happens in the moment, what takes a person to that brink? We're talking about a period where they don't have some of the influences that we would have today, like technology, that would pressure or really dictate this sort of psychological fragility that Lizzie Borden may have had: financial issues, problems with families and relationship issues, there's even some question of sexuality and things that pressure us or force us to have stress in our every day lives ? at what point does each person have a break?

?The way the play presents itself is, if you were to be put in the same position, what would you do? There is a dramatic device within Blood Relations that the playwright uses for the retelling of the Lizzie Borden story, which is a play-within-a-play. An actor friend of Lizzie Borden decides to take on her role and Lizzie herself sets up all the situations and circumstances. But it is up to the actors to decide that she's reached that breaking point and, when she does, what is her decision in terms of being able to actually commit those murders??

With Hallowe'en just around the corner, a play about a cold case is a fitting way to kick off Theatre Aurora's latest season. The Furious Five is a collection of, as the name suggests, five plays and musicals, mostly skewed to the darker side of things, with a splash of comedy thrown in for balance, themed around ?revenge and passionate lashing out.?

Additional productions lined up for the 2019-2020 season include the Stephen Sondheim musical Assassins (November 28 ? December 7), in which Calderon returns to his acting roots playing Lincoln assassin John Wilkes Booth, Christopher Hampton's Les Liaisons Dangereuses (January 23 ? February 1), Shakespeare's The Tempest (March 5 ? March 14), and rounded out by Joseph Kesselring's comedy classic Arsenic & Old Lace (April 23 ? May 2).

?Thematically, we thought this was the one play to open up the season because it sort of calls into question ? it is not a black and white full-revenge or crime of passion, or a visceral response to something. It is a bit more mysterious and up in the air,? says Calderon.

By Brock Weir