

## True Crime in Massachusetts

By Kathleen Watt for *Stagebill Magazine*

*Stage versions of the story of Lizzie Borden are all out of whack, differing in detail from each other and from history. Even the famous jingle is wrong: it wasn't 40 whacks or 41—it was 19 and 11—which was plenty, but hard to rhyme. As NYCO presents Jack Beeson's "Lizzie Borden," Kathleen Watt explores its telling departures from the letter of history.*

THE TROUBLE WITH THE BORDEN STORY as drama is this: there was no drama. It was the very dearth of drama—decades of it—that tightened a winding sheet about the family, entombed in their strange and stingy house, and culminated in that infamous, deranged and liberating August morning in 1892. Choreographer Agnes DeMille, researching Fall River Legend, her 1954 ballet sprung from the same tragedy, understood the dramatic peril of staging this deadly nothingness. "Boredom bores, tedium tires," she wrote. "Dullness reaches an audience as fast as smoke, and clears the theater almost as quickly."

Jack Beeson and Kenward Elmslie, composer and librettist of the opera *Lizzie Borden*, grasped this too. Beeson, claiming artistic license, stressed repeatedly that "the audience must be willing to follow Lizzie up the stairs" to her murderous chore in the opera's third act.

Accordingly, the opera reconfigures almost all of the historical characters. Lizzie becomes a martyred older sister, instead of the petulant and controlling youngest of three children that history records. A middle daughter who had died in childhood is eliminated from the opera entirely, and sister Emma, Lizzie's elder by ten years, in the opera becomes the younger and fragile "Margaret," whom Lizzie helps to elope with "Jason," an ardent sea captain who could rescue them both. This transposition of the sisters echoes the Electra archetype to good dramatic effect. But there is no record at all of a special suitor to either of the sisters—so vigilant was their wealthy father, Andrew, against fortune hunters.

There had indeed been a domestic servant in the Borden household—but it had never been Abigail Durfee, as the opera suggests. Abigail Durfee did, however, become Andrew Borden's second wife and stepmother to his daughters when Lizzie was five years old. The historical Abigail was neither an evil stepmother nor the shrewish vixen of Kenward Elmslie's invention. She was liked by her neighbors, and the Durfee family could claim colonial lineage. Andrew Borden had rescued his neighbor, Abigail, from spinsterhood at 36, for which she rewarded him by tending him and his children for the rest of her life. She bore the brutal parsimony of his home with no apparent complaint, except, perhaps, as suggested by her famous girth (in excess of 200 pounds at the time of her death, Abigail's weight played an important part in Lizzie's acquittal). In fact, though her stepdaughters detested her unaccountably, Abigail's chiefest offense seems to have been her unrelenting ordinariness.

Finally, although history tells us that the crime scene was essentially clean of bloody splashes, that fact is almost always rewritten for the stage as a dramatic wash of Borden blood. Actually, the baffling absence of discoverable forensic evidence on either Lizzie's clothes or her person helped mightily to exculpate her. The composer explained, "We were not writing an opera about murders, but about why a woman (largely of our own making) would kill."

But who were these Bordens of Fall River, Massachusetts? And how did they come by their grisly renown? The truth is stranger than all the fictions.

As a ninth generation Borden of Fall River, Lizzie was something of an American archetype. Her earliest forbears had settled the New England wilderness as early as 1700. They had fought first the French and the Indians for dear life, and then the British for liberty. Bordens had tamed the river, bought the water rights, built the mills and the railroad. Bordens had been colonels and sea captains, Calvinist ministers, teachers and magistrates. In later generations, Andrew's branch of the Borden tree would wither somewhat, so that Andrew Borden took a righteous pride in his wealth, which was all his own. He had accumulated it dime upon dime, from his youth as a fishmonger, through his prosperous career as an undertaker, and his early investments in real estate. By 1892, the year of his unnatural death at the age of 70, Andrew Borden was worth more

than a quarter of a million dollars. Lizzie herself enjoyed a fine reputation for generous charitable service, as befitted her class. By dint of wealth and pedigree, the Borden family should have wielded both power and prestige. But they had neither.

Because Andrew was a penny pincher. He was never as shrewd as he was thrifty, and in Andrew Borden, thrift became a furious virtue. It meant that Andrew the undertaker sometimes cut off the feet of the corpses in his charge, in order not to waste his inventory of undersized caskets, bought at discount. It meant that Andrew the mill owner underpaid and otherwise abused whole families of foreign-born workers. Andrew the landlord overcharged and dispossessed. And Andrew the head of his household inflicted wholly unnecessary hardships upon the four women who lived there with him, in a cramped, old-fashioned house down by the ironworks, spared the profligacy of gaslights, or a toilet, or a bathtub of any kind.

There was a pump in a mudroom outside the kitchen, and an earthen pit in the basement. Slop pails were emptied every morning into the back yard under the pear tree. There was no cart or horse, although Andrew made a trade in horses. There was no telephone in the home, and there were no books. There was an old coal burner which kept the rooms cold in winter and sweltering in summer. And the house was always locked, by night and by day. That is, the windows, and all the intersecting rooms of the house were locked, with spring locks and deadbolts, whether occupied or not. Andrew locked the doors behind himself, as he passed through. There was no gaiety around the family hearth of an evening. Proper entertaining was out of the question.

"Waste not, want not. Use it up, wear it out. Make it do or do without," intones Andrew the Yankee patriarch, in Act I. In New England, the homely virtues were as defining and binding to the spirit as were the fierce rules of Calvinist godliness, and they often combined perversely in the same conscience. For example, on the torrid and fateful morning of August 4, 1892, a Thursday, the Borden household faced a breakfast that included overripe bananas and a soup made from the unrefrigerated remains of the previous Saturday's mutton joint. All became violently ill. Andrew refused to pay for his wife's desperate visit to her doctor across the street, rebuking the doctor for his subsequent housecall. Allowing for a certain Calvinist zeal, it might be understood that a

frugal man could serve his family tainted meat and hope for poor health to pass. But what could have been Andrew's reason, some months earlier, for twisting off the heads of Lizzie's pet pigeons and leaving them in the barn for her to discover, in horror?

The Borden household was, in fact, a violent one, in ways both manifest and latent. Still, cruelty was not crime. After all, the abuses sustained by women in the 19th century were often societally accepted, even institutionalized. Historian Mary S. Hartman writes in her study, *Victorian Murderesses*, "...unmarried and unprotected females were by definition less than full members of their sex. [It was said that] 'of women these are the least truly women,' and their societies too often succeeded in making them so." In Massachusetts, a man had the legal right to will all but one dollar of his assets away from his children, though they be unmarried daughters, unemployable, and utterly dependent. What's more, every Victorian woman knew what was expected of womanhood. Lizzie may complain in Act I that she deserves—and can afford—a new dress for her Chautauqua, but father Andrew is comfortably within his penurious prerogative in insisting that Lizzie adapt an old dress of her late mother's instead. Of proper stitchery, the widely subscribed *Godey's Ladies' Book* of March 1890 offered this tutorial:

*...Old dresses left from last year may be brought out from their winter's hiding place and ripped up and got all ready for remodeling as soon as the summer styles shall have declared themselves....That there is a right way and a wrong way of doing everything is true of even such a simple task as ripping a dress. Great care should be taken to cut each stitch, pulling open the goods as lightly as possible, so as not to tear or stain the material. The slightest jerk is apt to leave a mark, showing where the stitches were...*

Thus, when Abby lend her violent hand to Lizzie's alterations, in Act II, she commits a truly shocking breach, exposing the exquisite strain on these Victorian

women's lives, suspended as they were over a cauldron of repressed desires and just claims, and heated to boiling by that airless August day. In her terrifying scena with Lizzie, Abigail regales an audience in her own imagination with ferocious coquetry, until she explodes upon Lizzie with retaliatory savagery, laying bare the pathetic self-delusion of Lizzie's delicious fantasies, and her own.

Indeed, these characters share a quality which historian Hartman finds endemic in Victorian women—not just the murderesses of her study. That is, they lie. Sometimes they lie to escape from reality into fantasy, sometimes to render socially acceptable their deeply contradictory feelings and urges:

*In matters large and small, [deceit] was elevated as a socially prescribed form of female behavior...and may account for [women's] creation of elaborate and intricate tales which became a sort of secret code, identified as such only by other women...*

This cognitive confusion surely figured in the travesty of the Borden trial. Twelve male jurors took less than fifteen minutes to acquit the gentlewoman Lizzie Borden of double parricide. This, though Lizzie gave conflicting versions of her alibi on the day of the murders, and was seen destroying evidence. This, though Lizzie obstructed the police investigation and signed a confession. Lizzie Borden was known locally to be an unrepentant kleptomaniac, who concocted phony intruders and poisonings to explain odd disappearances, and who may well have imagined everything that she testified to at her inquest. Lizzie herself may have lost track of the difference between truth and invention. But certainly she had stopped caring about it, in history as in the opera.

In musical language which Beeson calls "New England verismo," the Beeson/Elmslie music drama plumbs these rich and terrible depths with impeccable post-Freudian hindsight. But the Lizzie Borden murders—for so they are known, despite Lizzie's acquittal—are likely to remain forever unfathomed and unfathomable, repulsive and compelling as ever. Lizzie told us much—and, alas, nothing—when she wrote to a friend after her trial, "I dare not put my dreams into print."