

Notorious woman

Solo show takes a good whack at Lizzie Borden

REVIEW

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NEW JERSEY STAGE
Miss Lizzie A. Borden Invites You to Tea

Note the middle initial in "Miss Lizzie A. Borden Invites You to Tea," Marjorie Conn's new play at the Hackensack Cultural Arts Center.

What does that "A" stand for in the accused murderess' name? Abigail? Agatha? Ada? In fact, Andrew.

Lizzie's father, Andrew, had his heart set on a son, named after himself. When the new baby turned out to be a daughter, Dad wasn't to be denied passing on his name.

That, according to Conn's one-woman play, is one of the many reasons why Lizzie (portrayed by Karen Asconi) gave her father 41 whacks with an ax, as opposed to the mere 40 she gave her despised stepmother. Andrew didn't exactly endear himself to Lizzie, either, with his plans to leave some of his property to his new wife, Abby.

Borden was acquitted in an hour's time by an all-male jury, but only 10 minutes pass in the drama before Lizzie 'fesses up that she did, indeed, cut up on that fateful Aug. 4, 1904. When the audience meets her, it's exactly 21 years later, and Lizzie reminisces at a tea party.

The audience is the only guest. Lizzie had quite a fall from grace from among the prominent citizens of Fall River, Mass., and no one in town has gone near her in the ensuing decades. Nevertheless, Lizzie has dressed for the occasion in a sparkling lavender gown better suited for a fortune teller.

Many one-person plays lose some effectiveness because the audience has to adjust to the idea of an actor talking aloud to no one in particular. Not here. In this show, mounted by Boz and the Bard Productions, Lizzie chatters for 100 minutes (interrupted by an intermission) because she's now certifiably crazy. Though there's no one in whom she can confide, she has a pressing need to tell her story.

Asconi is most accomplished in the role. There must be plenty of caffeine in the tea she constantly sips, judging from this fascinating, high-strung performance. Under Frank Avellino's taut direction, Asconi conveys a casebook schizophrenic.

Lizzie wavers from guilt to sassiness. "I'm an American legend!" she proclaims proudly, before looking deeply ashamed for her outburst. The actress switches to a haughty demeanor when she speaks of her wealthy forebears, as well as her behavior at the trial. "Many criticized me because I didn't cry," she says, waving off the memory with a fluttery hand. Then, with eyes narrowing to slits and her mouth turning into a sneer, she adds, "I wouldn't cry in front of them."

Asconi successfully shows Lizzie's infantile nature, too. As a child of privilege, she wasn't often denied. Little Lizzie is enraged when Andrew won't allow her to bring a beloved pet in the house. On and on, she gives reason after reason to justify her murderous rampage.

Even theater seems partly to blame. Lizzie expresses her admiration for Shakespeare's "Macbeth," especially an apparent role model, Lady Macbeth, whom she quotes in a soliloquy or two. Asconi beams and says, "I saw the play five times."

No need to share five teas with Lizzie. One visit alone to "Miss Lizzie A. Borden Invites You to Tea" is a worthwhile experience.