

Blood Relations: A Primer

By Sharon Pollock

Director: Danielle Wilson
Scenographer: Kelly Wolf

A production of the Department of Dramatic Arts of the Marilyn I. Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts, Brock University.

November 11, 12, 13, 2010 at 7:30 p.m.; November 12, 2010 at 1:00 pm
Sean O'Sullivan Theatre, Centre for the Arts, Brock University St. Catharines, ON.

'Lizzie Borden took an axe, gave her mother forty whacks...' In June of 1893, Lizzie Borden stood trial for the brutal murders of her father and stepmother, thus inspiring the popular children's rhyme. Borden was acquitted but the crime was never solved. So did she, or



Primer prepared by: Spencer Smith, Dramaturge and Fourth Year DART student.

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Blood Relations: A Primer

Department of Dramatic Arts,
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November, 2010

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Play Synopsis

On a cool Sunday afternoon in the fall of 1902, an actress from Boston is visiting a friend in her Fall River home. Her friend is the infamous Miss Lizzie Borden who has spent the last ten years keeping a low profile ever since her acquittal in the murder investigation that began with the two bloody corpses of her father and stepmother. Having been acquitted and with the murders left unsolved, Lizzie finds herself confronted by the doubtful eyes of her stern older sister Emma and her flamboyant actress liaison.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

The play begins ten years after the murders, when Miss Lizzie's friend (based on Lizzie Borden's real life actress friend and suspected lover, Nance O'Neil) insistently asks Miss Lizzie "Well, did you?". Rather than giving her a straight answer, Miss Lizzie proposes a gameⁱⁱⁱ in which The Actress is to play the role of Lizzie, while the real Miss Lizzie "paints the background"ⁱⁱⁱⁱ of her home and family life, as well as taking on the role of the household maid Bridget O'Sullivan. Miss Lizzie fills The Actress' mind with images to guide her performance at the subconscious level as we witness pivotal moments leading up to that grisly August morning of 1892 when Mr. Borden and Mrs. Borden were found with thirteen and thirty-two axe blows to their heads.



Fig. 3

Lizzie Borden: The Legend

The Murders

On the morning of August 4, 1892, Bridget O'Sullivan, the Borden's Irish maid, was reported 'walking fast', in search of the neighbourhood doctor. When Bridget returned with the doctor, they found a quiet Lizzie standing inside the screen door of the Borden house. Upon entering the house, the body of Lizzie's father, Andrew Borden, was found lying on the sofa in the sitting room, with multiple axe wounds to the face. At Lizzie's suggestion, Bridget and the doctor moved upstairs to find Lizzie's step-mother, Abbey, face down, in a pool of her own blood and similar wounds at the back of her head.

Bridget reported to have been napping in her attic bedroom and could not recall

hearing any kind of commotion throughout the house. Lizzie claimed to have been in the barn behind the house, eating a pear, before discovering the bodies. Lizzie's sister Emma was out of town visiting a friend and her alibi was air tight throughout the investigation that followed. Lizzie, on the other hand, had made her dislike of her stepmother known to most of Fall River's social elite, and inevitably she became the town's prime suspect.

The Investigation

There were a number of discrepancies throughout the investigation that contributed to the ambiguity of the case:



Fig. 4

– There was no more than a speck of blood found on Lizzie's person, and in the manner in which Andrew and Abbey were murdered, the killer should have been drenched in blood.

– A neighbour, Alice Russell, claimed to have seen Lizzie burn a dress three days after the murders, but Lizzie explained later that the dress was old and covered in paint. – It was revealed that Lizzie attempted to purchase prussic acid from a local pharmacy the day before the murders and Andrew and Abbey apparently felt ill the following morning.



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

– Lizzie's alibis varied as the inquest continued, ranging from eating a pear in the barn, to looking for a piece of screen to repair a window, to finding lead for some sinkers for her fish-line, even though she hadn't gone fishing in five years. Either way, officials noted that the dust on the barn floor appeared to be undisturbed.

The Trial

The fourteen day trial of Lizzie Borden was the first public trial in the United States to be extensively covered by the media, with several reporters from national publications coming to Fall River to catch a glimpse of the alleged killer. A female murderer was anything but common in that context, so undoubtedly most reporters focused on her femininity. Some however, criticized her lack of visible emotion – noting that she showed “no other feeling than that of a disinterested party”^{iv}. As well, it was reported that Lizzie had not been seen to shed a tear since the death of her father and stepmother, stating, “a woman who did not cry was surely an unnatural creature”^v. Perhaps feeling the pressure to perform, Lizzie eventually began to frequently burst into tears; ask to be excused for moments at a time; leaned heavily on the courtroom rails; changed outfits during a single proceeding, and on more than one occasion, fainted completely.



Fig. 7

The media was not the only party to exploit the fact that Lizzie was a woman. Lizzie’s defence attorney, Andrew Jennings, handpicked an entire jury of middle-aged men, as well as Judge Dewey, who all conveniently had daughters around the same age as Lizzie. Jennings’ main argument was that a woman could never be capable of such horrific actions, even though all medical experts agreed that the murderous blows were all in a ‘woman’s capability’^{vi}. Jennings was also able to dismiss the single speck of blood found on Lizzie’s petticoat the day of the murders by delicately suggesting that it was a trace of the woman’s ‘monthly sickness’, and since such a topic was “no fit subject for gentlemen to discuss in the presence of ladies”^{vii}, the evidence was disregarded instantly.

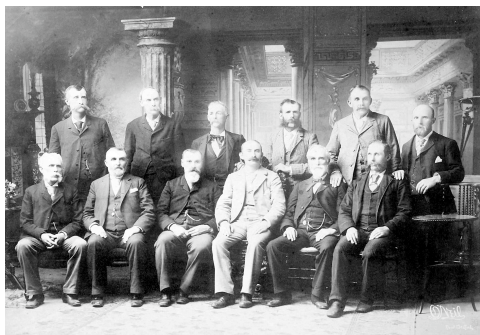


Fig. 8

As it appears in the play, Jennings concluded his argument by demanding that every man in the courtroom who believed Ms. Borden was guilty, to look to their own daughters: “If this gentlewoman is capable of such an act – I say to you – look to your daughters”.^{viii} It is often argued that in addition to Jennings’ defence, Lizzie’s femininity, social position, and public performance all contributed to her acquittal.

Veins of Blood Relations

Truth

Similar to the dubious details provided in the historical trial, there is no concrete truth within the production of *Blood Relations* because the story on stage is based on Miss Lizzie's recall; what 'happened' ten years ago depends on what is 'remembered'. As well, one must consider the source. If Miss Lizzie is in fact guilty, would she share the true series of events, or would she

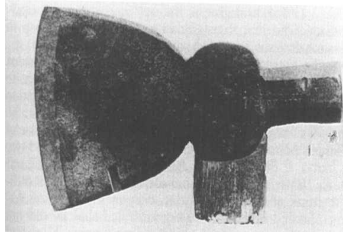


Fig. 9

construct a story that would earn her sympathy, if not vindication? And finally, the fact that The Actress is playing Lizzie drastically influences the portrait of the Lizzie Borden situated in 1892 Fall River because they come from two very different worlds. The Actress is a professional urban role-player; freely unconventional, uninhibited, while the original Lizzie Borden was an oppressed, rural, upper class 'spinster', who always

abided by her father's rules. Whose truth are we witnessing? Miss Lizzie's or The Actress'? The Lizzie we see on stage is the Lizzie created by The Actress. Miss Lizzie simply guides her by 'painting the background'. As the play progresses we see The Actress becoming more confident in her role. By the second act, she has become so proficient in her role-playing that Miss Lizzie has less and less hand in the ensuing events. Perhaps it is The Actress who manages to craft a Lizzie strong enough to commit murder.

Feminism

The fashionable attitude of a woman's situation by Lizzie's age in the late 19th century America was to be married, have children, and be running their own household. However, Lizzie had no marriage prospects, but plenty of male 'acquaintances'. She often socialized with Fall River's posh crowd on 'The Hill' and on one occasion asked her father to finance a European getaway for her and her lady friends. Upper-class idols of Lizzie's time were Consuela Vanderbilt and Jennie Jerome; heiresses who travelled to Europe and returned married to royal gentlemen. Lizzie refused to follow social expectation and suffered the consequences of being denied the opportunity to work in her father's business and discouraged particularly through the intervention of her stepmother from pursuing a more "freewheeling and luxurious social life".^{ix}



Fig. 10

Pollock's *Blood Relations* stresses the lack of options for women in such an oppressive culture and appoints the audience as judge and jury, offering a

contemporary feminist twist on an infamous Victorian moment in time. The question ‘Did she or didn’t she?’ becomes ‘Would you or wouldn’t you?’

Dream Thesis

Pollock uses this term to refer to her character’s escape into the make-believe in order to freely explore a highly controversial issue. By allowing Lizzie and The Actress to free themselves of their conventional roles, Pollock’s characters are able to openly explore the events that may have contributed to the Fall River murders without social restraint.

The dream thesis is the game between Miss Lizzie and The Actress, which incorporates metatheatrics (a play within a play), thereby emphasizing the role-playing element and the artistic license of The Actress in her portrayal of Lizzie Borden on stage. Miss Lizzie begins by directing the action of the play, but The Actress’ performance eventually envelops the entire production and Miss Lizzie is increasingly able to sit back and watch The Actress’s version of the story unfold along with the rest of the audience. This structure also allows Pollock to maintain a critical distance from her historical material and avoid choosing a side in the ongoing debate of Lizzie’s guilt or innocence.



Fig. 11

Director’s Notes

“There are four kinds of homicide: felonious, excusable, justifiable and praiseworthy.” –Ambrose Bierce

I first came across *Blood Relations* about twelve years ago. By that time it had won the Governor General’s award, it had been produced across Canada, throughout the United States and from Tokyo to Australia to England and remains to this day playwright Sharon Pollock’s most popular play. When I re-read the play about a year ago, it held the same intrigue as that first encounter with it.

Just as Miss Lizzie ignites the imagination of The Actress as she ‘paints the background’ of the events that prelude the murder; so did the role-playing framework ignite my imagination as I began to dream the theatrical possibilities of Pollock’s play. More than just a simple re-telling of the events leading to the

murders of that hot August morning in 1892, I began to see the play as 'theatre of the mind'. An image of another character on stage began to form; another aspect of Lizzie, present, but in the background, quietly mirroring and underscoring key moments in the play and slowly becoming more vivid as The Actress begins to take ownership of her role. I kept wondering what if 'the game' Miss Lizzie creates is her way of finally revealing her inner 'demon' to The Actress? What if it is Lizzie Borden's way of revealing to all of us our own inner demons? Thus the mysterious woman on the aerial silks was born.

On a universal scale, The Actress becomes our collective will, forced to respond to the question: What would you be capable of when faced with the denial of your independence and sense of self? What would any of us be capable of given the appropriate circumstances?

Through the persistent question "Lizzie, did you?"^x, the play cleverly holds a mirror to the audience and effectively places the spectators in Lizzie's shoes by asking: Would you have done it?

So... Would you?

Sharon Pollock: The Playwright

"Sharon Pollock was born in 1936 in Fredericton, New Brunswick, the daughter of physician and MLA, Everett Chalmers, on whom the portrait of "Doc" in the play by that name is based. She attended the University of New Brunswick, but left before graduating in 1954 to marry Ross Pollock, a Toronto insurance broker. When they separated in the early 1960s, she returned to Fredericton with her five children. She worked at the Playhouse Theatre in Fredericton at various jobs, including some acting, then moved to Calgary in 1966 with actor Michael Ball. She toured with the Prairie Players in 1966, and won a Dominion Drama Festival award for her performance in Ann Jellicoe's *The Knack*. She began writing her first play, *A Compulsory Option*, while expecting her sixth child; this unpublished play won an Alberta Culture playwriting competition in 1971, and premiered in 1972 at the New Play Centre in Vancouver. *Walsh* premiered at Theatre Calgary in 1973, and the following year it was produced at the Stratford Festival in the Third Stage theatre. While living in Vancouver, she wrote children's plays for Playhouse Holiday and Playhouse Theatre School, and radio plays for the CBC. *And Out Goes You?* was first produced at the Vancouver Playhouse in 1975, and *The Komagata Maru Incident* at the same theatre the following year. Pollock played Lizzie in her next play, *My Name is Lisbeth*, when



Fig. 12

it was produced at Douglas College, Surrey, B.C. in 1976. The same year, she worked at the University of Alberta as a playwriting instructor.

In 1999 she was awarded the Harry and Martha Cohen award for her significant contribution to Calgary theatre. *One Tiger to a Hill* premiered in Edmonton in 1980 at the Citadel Theatre; *Blood Relations* at Edmonton's Theatre 3, Generations at Alberta Theatre Projects, Calgary in 1980; *Whisky Six Cadenza* in 1983, and *Doc* at Theatre Calgary in 1984. She has been the artistic director at both Theatre Calgary [1984] and Theatre New Brunswick [1988], her tenure at both theatres cut short by differences of opinion over artistic direction with the board. She has also been playwright in residence at Alberta Theatre Projects and the National Arts Centre, and head of the playwright's colony at the Banff Centre for the Arts [1977–80]. In 1981 she returned to performing, as Miss Lizzie in Theatre Calgary's production of *Blood Relations*, and in her monologue, *Getting it Straight* [1989], at the International Women's Festival in Winnipeg, and at the Fringe Theatre Festival in Edmonton.

In 1993 *Fair Liberty's Call* premiered at the Stratford Festival and *Saucy Jack* opened at the Garry Theatre in Calgary under her direction. *Moving Pictures* opened in 1999, and *End Dream* in 2000, both at Theatre Junction in Calgary.

Sharon Pollock has received many awards for her plays: the Governor General's Award for *Blood Relations* in 1981 and *Doc*, the Canada Australian Literary Award in 1987, a Japan Foundation Award in 1995, the Nellie Drama Award for her radio play, *Sweet Land of Liberty* [1981], and a Golden Sheaf Award for her writing for television.

In 1998, she was elected president of the Alberta Playwrights Network. She continues to encourage new writing and new playwrights, and remains committed to the life of the theatre".^{xi}

i Pollock Pg 19

ii Pollock, Pg 20

iii Pollock, Pg 20

iv Jones, 216

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vii Jones, 221

viii Pollock, 36

ix Wyle, 83

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xi Nothof, 180-182

Collaboration

Production Team

Danielle Wilson – Director, Dramatic Arts
Kelly Wolf – Guest Scenographer
Doug Ledginham – Audio Designer and Assistant Technical Director, Dramatic Arts
Ken Garrett – Lighting Designer, Dramatic Arts
Adrian Palmieri – Technical Director, Dramatic Arts
Roberta Doylend – Head of Wardrobe, Dramatic Arts
Brian Cumberland – Production Manager, Marilyn I. Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts

Eric Frank – Assistant Director, student, Dramatic Arts
Geoffrey Heaney – Assistant Designer, graduate, Dramatic Arts
Jenna Cumming – Production Stage Manager, graduate, Dramatic Arts
Jessica Falcioni – Stage Manager, student, Dramatic Arts
Max Holten Andersen – Composer, graduate, Music
Amy Teetzel – Aerial Skills Choreographer, graduate, Dramatic Arts
Fede Holten Andersen – Aerial Skills Choreographer, graduate, Dramatic Arts
Spencer Smith – Dramaturge, student, Dramatic Arts

Cast (students of the Department of Dramatic Arts)

Aaron Berger	<i>Mr. Borden</i>
Jacqueline Costa	<i>Miss Lizzie</i>
Rebekka Gondosch	<i>Mrs. Borden</i>
Michael Janssen	<i>The Defense</i>
Trevor Ketcheson	<i>Dr. Patrick</i>
John McCartney	<i>Harry Wingate</i>
Karen McDonald	<i>Emma</i>
Tanisha Minson	<i>The Actress</i>
Jennifer Moore	<i>Aerial Silks</i>

Crew (students of DART 2P42 in the Department of Dramatic Arts)

Justine Benteau	James McCoy
Erica Charles	Jessi Robinson
Kate Hardy	Liz Smith
Shauna James	Emma Strong
James Katsabouris	

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Fig. 1 – Miss Lizzie Borden – <http://retrovision.tv/freevideo/lizzie-borden-meek-or-murderess-2009>. www.retrovision.tv.com. Web. 21 Sept. 2010.

Fig. 2 – Nance O’Neil (The Actress) – <http://alistofsurprises.blogspot.com>. www.alistofsurprises.blogspot.com. Web. 21 Sept. 2010.

Fig. 3 – Crime scene photo of Andrew Borden – http://www.thecabinet.com/darkdestinations/image.php?sub_id=dark_destinations&by=category&locale=ghost_hunters&location_id=the_lizzie_borden_bed__breakfast&image_id=8. www.thecabinet.com. Web. 21 Sept. 2010.

Fig. 4 – Crime scene photo of Abbey Borden – <http://www.ghostsandcritters.com/whatsnew.html>. www.ghostsandcritters.com. Web. 21 Sept. 2010.

Fig. 5 – Bridget O’Sullivan – <http://www.francesfarmersrevenge.com/stuff/serialkillers/borden.htm>. www.francesfarmersrevenge.com. Web. 21 Sept. 2010.

Fig. 6 – Backyard view of the Borden residence (yr. 1892) – <http://phayemuss.wordpress.com/2008/03/>. www.phayemuss.wordpress.com. Web. 21 Sept. 2010.

Fig. 7 – Artist rendering of Lizzie Borden attending trial (yr. 1893) – <http://www.prairieghosts.com/lizzie.html>. www.prairieghosts.com. Web. 21 Sept. 2010.

Fig. 8 – Jury participating in the trial of Lizzie Borden (yr. 1893) – <http://www.tauntonlibrary.org/Court.html>. www.tauntonlibrary.org. Web. 21 Sept. 2010.

Fig. 9 – Suspected murder weapon used to kill Andrew and Abbey Borden – <http://posterityplaylists.blogspot.com/2009/08/delirious-insomniac-manic-attack.html>. www.posterityplaylists.blogspot.com. Web. 21 Sept. 2010,

Fig. 10 – Emma Borden – <http://www.lizzieandrewborden.com/CrimeLibrary/Trial.htm>. www.lizzieandrewborden.com. Web. 21 Sept. 2010.

Fig. 11 – Miss Lizzie Borden – <http://www.prairieghosts.com/lizzie.html>. www.prairieghosts.com. Web. 21 Sept. 2010.

Fig. 12 – Sharon Pollock – <http://www.canadiantheatre.com/dict.pl?term=Pollock,%20Sharon>. www.canadiantheatre.com. Web. 21 Sept. 2010.

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