

LIVE FROM LINCOLN CENTER
March 24, 1999 8-10 PM
New York City Opera: Lizzie Borden

Program Notes by MARTIN BOOKSPAN

"Lizzie Borden"- Music by Jack Beeson; libretto by Kenward Elmslie; based on a scenario by Richard Plant.

World premiere given at New York City Opera, March 25, 1965.

"Lizzie Borden took an ax,
and gave her father forty whacks."

This childhood rhyme may have passed from currency in the waning years of the twentieth century, but the event it memorialized was very much alive in the waning years of the nineteenth. Along with the likes of Paul Bunyan and Johnny Appleseed, Lizzie Borden of Fall River, Massachusetts, assumed legendary status in the American popular imagination.

In some respects the situation seems to be a remarkable parallel to one with which we are all familiar, the O.J. Simpson affair. These are the facts: on August 4, 1892, the citizens of Fall River were shaken by the brutal murder of two of its most solid citizens, Andrew Borden and his wife, Abbie Gray Borden. The finger of suspicion soon pointed to Andrew Borden's thirty-three-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, known as Lizzie, an apparently demure and reserved gentlewoman. She testified at an inquest, but thereafter refused comment, even declining to testify in her own defense at the trial that ensued. The evidence arrayed against her seemed confused and even conflicting, and many in the community could not bring themselves to believe that she was guilty. Weak testimony in her favor was offered by her sister, Emma; in the final summation, these were the words of her chief defense attorney: "To find her guilty, you must believe she is a fiend. Gentlemen," - and of course this was before the days of women's suffrage, so it was an all-male Jury- "does she look it?" The Jury found her not guilty.

After the trial, Lizzie sold the house at 92 Second Street, the scene of the crime, and moved into a much grander one in a better part of town. Shunned by most of her Fall River neighbors, she began to make regular trips to Boston and New York, where she attended the theater and cultivated friendships with actors and actresses. A onetime adherent of the Temperance movement, she now began to serve liquor at her home. When she died, in 1927, she left a pittance to her sister, Emma (who in any case died a mere nine days later), but something in the neighborhood of \$30,000.00 to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. This is the true story that served as the basis for treatments of the tale in theater, film, television, ballet (the Morton Gould/Agnes de Mille "Fall River Legend"), and opera.

There are six principal characters in the Beeson/Elmslie opera: Lizzie Borden herself (mezzo-soprano Phyllis Pancella); Margret, her sister (Soprano Robin Blich Wiper); Abigail Borden, their stepmother (soprano Lauren Flanigan); Andrew Borden, their father (bass-baritone Stephen West); Reverend Harrington (tenor Dennis Petersen); and Captain Jason MacFarlane (baritone Dean Ely).

ACT I: in the Borden living room, a Sunday school class is singing a hymn under the tutelage of Lizzie Borden. Reverend Harrington arrives, hoping to persuade Andrew Borden, Fall River's richest man, to contribute money to the financially-pressed church. Harrington is discouraged by Lizzie, who informs him that since the death of Borden's first wife, Evangeline, he has been alienated from the church. The best way to deal with him, Lizzie tells Harrington, is through his new wife, Abigail. When Borden arrives, Harrington leaves without broaching his topic; Lizzie, however, asks him for money to buy a new dress for her church meetings. Borden refuses, citing his formula for success in life- "I worked hard, I worked long", and "Use it up, wear it out, make it do or do without". There follows a remarkable scene in pantomime which describes the unspoken adverse relationship between the daughters and Andrew and Abby Borden.

Left alone, Margret and Lizzie strategize about the expected arrival that evening of Captain Jason MacFarlane, with whom Margret is in love. They are both convinced that the Captain and their father will not get along. Lizzie leaves the room, and Margret longs for the day when she will be free of the oppressive atmosphere of the house.

ACT II: Abbie, at a broken-down harmonium, sings a parlor song. By way of celebrating their wedding anniversary the next day, she asks Borden to buy her a piano. He refuses, and Abbie accuses him of continuing to treat her as the servant girl she was when she first entered the Borden household. Borden relents and agrees to buy the piano, and as a further conciliatory gesture, removes the large portrait of Evangeline (his first wife) which had dominated the room. The girls join them, and Abbie feigns interest in a tapestry that Lizzie is working on, but Lizzie rebuffs her.

Reverend Harrington arrives with Captain Jason MacFarlane. While Borden goes about his business, the others play a parlor game about harvesting one's desires. Borden returns, and Margret leaves the room, allowing Jason to ask Borden for her hand. He is rudely rebuffed; Borden believes that he is only after his daughter's money. When Jason insists that "money is beside the point", Borden replies that if this is so, then Jason must marry Lizzie instead of Margret. Jason refuses; Borden orders him to leave, and forbids Lizzie ever again to see either Reverend Harrington or Jason. Foreseeing an aimless and empty life, Lizzie loses hope and descends into turmoil and confusion.

ACT II: It is the next morning. Lizzie is mending her mother's wedding dress, which she intends to make over for her church meetings. Borden is heard

ordering Margret never to see Captain Jason MacFarlane again. Abbie and Borden depart to purchase the piano; after they leave, Jason arrives and makes plans with Margret to elope. They enlist Lizzie's assistance. She is in a dream-world, imagining that it is she and not Margret who will wed the Captain. She puts on the wedding dress. Abbie returns and mocks her dream; they fight bitterly, and Abbie demands that Lizzie leave the house, which Lizzie refuses to do; this enrages Abbie, who tears at the wedding dress and storms out of the room.

Later in the afternoon, Jason returns to collect Margret's belongings, especially letters that he had written to her while courting; Lizzie wants to keep these for herself, fantasizing that they were written to her. Abbie enters, and Jason leaves without the letters; Abbie continues provoking Lizzie, threatening to tell Borden of Margret's departure and Lizzie's complicity. Abbie exits the room; after a long moment, Lizzie follows her. A blood-curdling scream is heard.

Some hours later, Borden returns and calls for Abbie. A figure appears at the top of the stairs, and in the dark, Borden believes it is Abbie. But it is Lizzie, still wearing her mother's wedding dress, which is now covered in blood. Borden rushes past her in search of Abbie; Lizzie follows him...

EPILOGUE: several years later. Evangeline's portrait once again hangs on the wall in the living room; Lizzie is seen poring over financial ledgers, managing the large holdings that are hers by inheritance. Reverend Harrington arrives to return money that Lizzie has tried to give to the church; despite her acquittal, her society and her money equally have been scorned by the congregation. Harrington tells her that he has heard from Margret, whereupon she icily dismisses him. A chorus of children is heard outside, singing "Lizzie Borden took an ax and gave her father forty whacks".

The New York City Opera production of "Lizzie Borden", with music by Jack Beeson and libretto by Kenward Elmslie, is the next offering in our continuing LIVE FROM LINCOLN CENTER television series on PBS. It will originate from the stage of the New York State theater on Wednesday evening, March 24 at 8 PM. please check your local listings for the correct information for your area. See you then!