

LIZZIE

STAGESCENELA WOW!

You've seen the movies and read the biographies (or at the very least, you've heard the rhyme). Now, wielding her axe to a punk rock beat, LIZZIE ignites the Chance Theater stage like it's never been ignited before.



Feminist rockers can thank a trio of males—Steven Cheslik-deMeyer*, Tim Maner**, and Alan Stevens Hewitt***—for writing not only the ultimate female-empowering bio-musical but also one of the few so-called “rock musicals” to feature an honest-to-God hardcore score, though it's more likely the Devil that made Lizzie Borden do it—that is if she really did take an axe to her stepmother a grand total of forty times (and to her father another forty-one).

The aptly named “Forty Whacks (Prologue)” introduces LIZZIE's four female protagonists, each of them “a prisoner of a long, silent war” about to leave two victims slaughtered in the sweltering heat of August 1892.



Sultry next-door neighbor Alice Russell (Jisel Soleil Ayon) informs us, “I exchanged calls with Lizzie Borden regularly. She always welcomed me upstairs,” then lets us fill in the blanks.

Bridget Sullivan (Nicole Gentile), aka “Maggie,” has cleaned the Borden house for four years now and they still can't get her name right.

Emma Borden (Alli Rose Schynert) was fourteen when her father married for the second time, and unlike her much younger sister, her late mother is still very much alive in her memories.

Last but not least, there's Lizzie Andrew Borden (Monika Peña), “not Elizabeth, Lizzie,” who swears her innocence but will “leave it to my counsel to speak for me.”

Over the course of the next two hours it's up to us, the jury, to decide whether she did or she didn't.



Along the way, we are told in song after song of the incestuous abuse inflicted upon Lizzie by Daddy Dearest, of the romantic flames erupting between the younger Miss Borden and lesbian-next-door Alice, and of “Book of Household Poisons” recipes that just might come in handy now that Mr. Borden has rewritten his will to make wife number two his main beneficiary—that is unless the second Mrs. Borden should happen to die (or be murdered) first.



Four things set LIZZIE apart from previous dramatized treatments including the recent Chloe Sevigny-Kristen Stewart film (that posited Lizzie and Bridget as lovers) or the 1965 stage adaptation that told her story as grand opera.

To begin with is its score, described by the writers as “a sound owing less to Sondheim and Andrew Lloyd Webber than to Bikini Kill, the Runaways, and Heart,” in other words, this is hard rock at its hardest, and ace musical director Robyn Manion, her onstage band****, and sound design whiz Ryan Brodtkin turn the volume so high up, you could almost believe you were at a '70s, '80s, or '90s club listening to any or all of the above.



Second is its phenomenal cast, headed by the Chance's very own Peña, equaling if not surpassing her sensational star turn in last year's Violet, digging deep into Lizzie's anger and her pain and her primal urges while belting out sky-high notes to rival the roughest rock diva.

Likewise, Ayon's seductive Alice, Gentile's sly Bridget, and Schynert's seething Emma have both the dramatic and vocal chops to embody the women in Lizzie's life in all their complexities and ambiguities.

Third is LIZZIE's spectacular production design, from the rock-concert fire and flash of KC Wilkerson's lighting and projection designs (and some startling backlit silhouette effects on Kristin Campbell's striking, multi-level industrial set) to Rachael Lorenzetti's terrific 1890s costumes that get gradually stripped down from constricting period wear to skin-revealing 21st-century Victoria's Secret-style grunge.



Finally (or perhaps more accurately put, first and foremost), there is Jocelyn A. Brown's electrifying direction, that turns each of LIZZIE's two-dozen songs into its own stunningly individualized production number (aided and abetted by choreographer Hazel Clarke's subtly storytelling dance moves), with special snaps to an Act Two sequence that gives ingenious new meaning to the term “ties that bind.”

Kelsey Somerville is stage manager and Jessica Johnson is dramaturg.

You don't have to be a punk rock music fan (I'm certainly not one) to be blown away by the drama, the performances, the design, and direction now igniting Chance Theater. LIZZIE is contemporary rock-musical theater at its most explosive.

*music, lyrics, original concept
**book, additional music, original concept
***music, additional lyrics, orchestrations

****Jimmy Beall (bass), Lorianne Freilly (cello), Manion (keyboard), Jorge Zuniga (drums), and Jacob Gonzalez (guitar), the latter of whom adds an invigorating if unscripted testosterone boost to a couple of front-and-center solos

Note: Though Chance Theater is promoting their latest as Lizzie, The Musical, I've opted to go with the writers' preferred, all-caps LIZZIE to refer to the finalized, redubbed version that made its 2013 debut at Theater Under the Stars, Houston.



Chance Theater, 5522 E. La Palma Ave., Anaheim Hills.
www.chancetheater.com

—Steven Stanley
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Photos: Doug Catiller/True Image Studio

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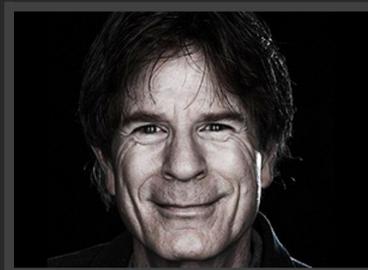
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ABOUT STEVEN STANLEY

As editor of StageSceneLA.com, Steven Stanley is one of Los Angeles' most prolific theater reviewers. He is also the author of *Moroccan Roll*, and an ESL instructor in the English Language Program at California State University, Los Angeles since 1979. (read more)

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