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BY PATTI ROBERTS



Janis Stevens assumes the role of a famous Sacramento serial killer.

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Memories of murder

Serial killer Dorothea Puente gets the stage treatment

In the early 1980s, the old gray Victorian on the 1400 block of F Street had seen better days. The ramshackle rooming house was sagging and faded, matching the Sacramento neighborhood where many were trying to scratch out a living.

The nondescript house provided a roof for poor tenants living on their Social Security payments, with a rather unremarkable woman acting as landlord. Dorothea Puente was a quiet, thin, gray-haired woman offering housing for the down-and-outers, and her unassuming manner let her blend in, while also letting her get away with murder—multiple murders.

Sacramento is home to one of the most notorious con artists and serial murderers—the seemingly sweet Puente, who killed her tenants, buried them in her backyard and then continued to cash their Social Security checks.

Now, her story is coming to the stage.

Ray Tatar, artistic director of California Stage, remembers the shocking days, weeks and months in the early '80s when the bodies were dug up and the killer was slowly unveiled.

“At the time of the murders, I worked at the California Arts Council three blocks away from the boardinghouse on F Street,” Tatar says. “I actually drove by the day the police were digging up the yard. On the following day, when I read about the bodies, I felt the same revulsion most people experienced.”

With so many unanswered questions about the victims, the motive and the mysterious madam of F Street, Tatar slowly realized how compelling the story could be.

“As I began to follow the trial in the papers, I began to think that there is a deeper story, one that could make a great play,” Tatar says. “I was convinced that there was also much to learn from the life of this villain.”

Fast forward almost 40 years, and Tatar reached out to award-winning East Coast playwright Mark Loewenstern and commissioned him to write that play.

The result is the California Stage premiere of *Dorothea Puente Tells All! An Evening with the Magnanimous, Distinguished and Noble Lady of Sacramento*, starring local award-winning actress Janis Stevens and opening Jan. 24 for a five-week run.

“I’d vaguely heard about the boardinghouse lady who buried bodies in her yard, and my first thought was that I didn’t want to do a play that sensationalized murder,” Loewenstern says. “My initial reaction was that she was an evil genius. With not even a high school education, she spent her life fooling many people whose job it was to see through scammers like her.”

Loewenstern learned so much more about the con woman-turned-murderer when he came to Sacramento for some on-the-ground research.

“I was able to get interviews with people who were part of this story: a social worker, a detective, a juror on the trial, a lawyer she retained for civil matters,” he says. “I drank and jawed with patrons at places she drank at or worked at: Henry’s Lounge, the Zebra Club, the Round Corner, the bar that’s on the site where Joe’s Corner Tavern used to be.

“I certainly felt an obligation to make her more than just a one-dimensional killer who kills,” Loewenstern says. “Her ability to manipulate people and institutions reminded me of an evil genius. I was interested in how she got so many people to love and admire her while she was doing so much damage.”

Tatar adds: “Some of the key issues [that] come barreling out of this production include criminal motivation impelled by narcissism, greed, deception and conning. And if I do not say this I would be remiss—the growing devaluation of human life in America.” □

Catch *Dorothea Puente Tells All!* at the Wilkerson Theatre, 1725 25th St. Fri, 8pm, Sat 8pm and Sun 2pm. Runs through Feb. 23. Tickets are \$20. For more info, visit calstage.org.