

Minnesota Now (MPR) | Duluth's most famous murder mystery takes the stage at the History Theatre 01G7AD6Z50AWK1G3DFB3F5R69W

HOST: A musical from St Paul's History Theater is telling the story of one of Duluth's most notorious murders. On June 27, 1977, at Glensheen Mansion, Elizabeth Congdon, heiress to a vast mining fortune, was killed along with her night nurse. The mystery became a media sensation and one of the city's most infamous tales.

So here to tell us more about *Glensheen*, the musical, is playwright Jeffrey Hatcher. And Jeffrey, welcome to *Minnesota Now*.

JEFFREY Hello. How are you?

HATCHER:

HOST: Good. So what inspired you to write a musical about Glensheen?

JEFFREY Well, I've always been interested in murders and murder mysteries and thrillers and things like that. But actually,
HATCHER: it was Ron Peluso's idea. Ron's the artistic director of the History Theater. And you know, he's always finding terrific ideas about things that have happened in this state and the upper midwest.

And so he asked me about it a couple of, well, many years ago now, probably 10 or 12. And we batted around different ways we might approach it. And then I was working with the composer Chan Poling on another project. And it suddenly struck me, I think this could really work and probably work best as a musical.

So I asked Chan, and he said yes. And bing bang bong, there we are.

HOST: OK. So why did you think a musical would be best?

JEFFREY Well, a musical already takes you into an elevated or theatrical realm. And I knew the story of Glensheen, which
HATCHER: as you said in your intro, includes the two murders. But it also follows the murderers, the conspirators, and the family, and the police, and the prosecutors, and the defense attorneys for another 20 some years.

So you've got to combine and condense a lot. You've got to exclude a lot, jump around in time. And I thought that since it was a black comedy in many ways, that changing styles would be useful.

And again, that makes you think about music and how music can put you in suddenly a new place, a comic place, a mysterious place, romantic. So it seemed to me that would be the perfect template.

HOST: So can you describe for us one of your favorite moments in Glensheen?

JEFFREY Oh, there are lots of them. At some point, Wendy Lahr, who plays many roles, but one of them is the defense
HATCHER: attorney, based on the late Attorney Meshbesh, leads the defense team in a song called *Conspiracy*. It's the top of the second act.

She addresses the audience as if they're the jury. And it's this wild manipulation of the jury's state of mind, to make them identify with the murderer. So that's one.

And then there are moments like Jen Marin and Dane Stauffer as the killers when they decide to commit the murder, a song called *What to Do*. And one of my favorite moments is actually a song towards the end of the show where we tell the audience what's true and what's false in the play because it's the History Theater. So you're supposed to get the facts right.

But we do take artistic license. But we want to be fair about it in a fun way. And so we have a song called *Truth and Fiction* that tells the audience this was true, this was false, this was close, this we're not sure, this was verbatim.

And it's, again, something that you couldn't do in a straight play. It only really works if you do it in the context of something like a musical number.

HOST: So the musical has been, you've been, touring all over the state this summer. And how is that going?

JEFFREY HATCHER: Oh, it's been great. I mean, naturally, the tour was scheduled for 2020. And it was put off by the pandemic. And we wondered how it would go to come back after two years. And also, what would other cities think about it?

And it's been a huge hit, and especially in Duluth. We played up there at the North Shore. And we wondered, of course, would this be hitting too close to home? Because that's where Glensheen is. Would people think that we were dancing on graves, et cetera?

But it went over great. And the audiences jumped to their feet and cheered and laughed at all the Duluth jokes, which I guess is the test. That's the litmus test.

And yeah, no, really. And now we bring it back to Saint Paul where I think we're almost sold out already. So I'm supposed to say, get your tickets now because they're going fast.

HOST: Oh, good. So that's wonderful to hear. And so, but I have to ask you, back performing in Duluth, did that make a difference for the actors and for you? I mean, sort of this experience of doing it there?

JEFFREY HATCHER: Well, yes, again, you're literally less than a mile from the mansion. And we imagine there might be family members or friends. I mean, it is a long time ago since the murder. And you can never tell.

And I think on a preview night, Jen Maron who plays Marjorie Congdon Caldwell, Jen was like, I don't know if they like me. And at the end, they cheered voraciously. But that's a character that's difficult to like anyway.

And Jen's great. She's charming. She brings them in even though Marjorie is kind of a repellent character. But she's also a wounded character. And she's easily identifiable with.

So I think there is a little bit of a clench, like will they like us here? And it turned out that they liked us as well if not better than any other place we've played.

HOST: So tell us, again, History Theater in downtown Saint Paul. When does it start? And how long is the run?

JEFFREY HATCHER: It runs for two weeks this time. It starts July 9. I think that's Saturday night. Right? And it runs through the 25th. So I know I'll be there.

And we get a lot of repeat audience members. We even get audience members who dress up as Marjorie. That happened up in Duluth too. So we've created a very strange fan base.

HOST: Excellent. Well, thank you very much for taking your time.

JEFFREY HATCHER: Oh, not at all. Thank you.

HOST: Jeffrey Hatcher is writer of the musical *Glensheen*.