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ARTS

Did 'Anarchists' bomb Milwaukee police station in 1917? World premiere play hashes it out



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The full story of the Milwaukee police station bombing of 1917 would never fit into a "Law & Order" episode.

Too many characters. Little forensic evidence. Complicated cultural politics. Overturned verdicts.

In Milwaukee Chamber Theatre's new show, playwright Martín Zimmerman doesn't shy away from the narrative difficulties. The world premiere production of Zimmerman's "The Not-So-Accidental Conviction of Eleven Milwaukee 'Anarchists'" tackles the near-impossibility of dramatizing the 1917 incidents head on.

In "Not-So-Accidental," four actors portrayed by Elyse Edelman, King Hang, Dimonte Henning and Kelsey Elyse Rodriguez tussle over how to tell the story and how to interpret the meaning of events. Each actor has a distinctive temperament that affects their approach.

Performances begin April 26 at the Broadway Theatre Center.

Violent conflict in the Third Ward

"It was the largest single loss of police life in U.S. history until the terror attacks on Sept. 11, 2001," Journal Sentinel reporter Ashley Luthern wrote in a 2017 article marking the 100th anniversary of the incident.

On Nov. 24, 1917, Erminia Spicciati and her daughter Josie went to clean Italian Evangelical Mission Church at 335 Van Buren St. Josie spotted a strange package outside the church and pointed it out to her mother. She brought it inside. Finding it suspicious, settlement worker

Maude Richter called police. When they did not respond after a time, she dispatched young handyman Sam Mazzone to carry it to the police station on Oneida Street (now Wells Street).

Eventually, the package was deposited in the station's squad room, where Sgt. Henry Deckert and a number of detectives examined it. The package exploded about 7:43 p.m., killing nine police officers and civilian Catherine Ruby Walker, who had been in the station making a complaint.

"It was packed with screws, bolts, heavy sharp-edged pieces of metal, designed to shred human bodies, and it did," said Dean Strang, author of "Worse than the Devil: Anarchists, Clarence Darrow, and Justice in a Time of Terror," one of several books about the bombing and its aftermath.

The bombing happened during a tumultuous period in Milwaukee's Third Ward. Prior to that night, The Milwaukee Journal had counted 10 recent bombings in the area.

Here is where everything gets complicated.

"It was believed that the bomb was placed at the church by sympathizers of the anarchists who were arrested in connection with the Bay View riot of September 9th, 1917," the Milwaukee Police Department states in a memorial web page about the incident.

On Sept. 9 that year, Rev. Augusto Giuliani, a Methodist minister and immigrant, led a rally supporting the American effort in World War I into the largely Italian Bay View neighborhood. He'd been there before, and many neighborhood people — including a group of anarchists — opposed his evangelical and patriotic demonstrations, so he asked for police presence this time.

In the chaos and conflict that erupted at the end of the rally, two local Italians were killed and two police officers were wounded, not seriously. Police arrested 11 people they dubbed anarchists. In a jarring oddity that Zimmerman's play highlights, Giuliani served as the Italian translator for some of the defendants' statements to police.

The police station bombing occurred a week before their trial. Even though their charges were in connection with the Bay View riot, the trial came to be viewed as a forum on the bombing.

"Anti-Italian bias — as well as, of course, bias against radicals — might be read in a number of facets of the trial, from post-bomb hysteria and the refusal of a venue change to the

lackadaisical spelling of the defendants' names in official documents," Robert Tanzilo wrote in his book "The Milwaukee Police Station Bomb of 1917."

Immigration is central to the story

"I think it's important for people to know that Italians weren't considered white in 1917," one of the characters in Zimmerman's play declares.

That character also says: "In 1924, Italian immigration would be restricted by the federal government to preserve the 'racial purity' of the country," referring to the Immigration Act of that year, which instituted strict national origin quotas on eastern and southern Europeans (and completely eliminated immigration from Asia).

The centrality of immigration to this story made it compelling for Zimmerman, whose mother emigrated to the U.S. from South America. Telling a story about the past that "speaks very acutely to the present, that's really important to me," he said during a telephone interview.

"To me, it is particularly terrifying, the way in which the same sort of narratives and patterns keep repeating in the history of our country," he said.

In a way, using the past to look at ourselves can make an audience less defensive, Zimmerman said.

Wrangling a set of events that includes some 40 to 50 people and that, thanks to the complicated historical record, doesn't translate easily to a dramatic structure, became a challenge. There are questions and gaps. Even supporters of the 11 who went on trial, such as the famed radical Emma Goldman, knew few details about them, Zimmerman said.

He said he realized the "questions that shouldn't be left off stage but should actually be hashed out on stage in front of an audience."

"The Not-So-Accidental Conviction of Eleven Milwaukee 'Anarchists'" was originally commissioned by the Milwaukee Repertory Theater. An early workshop was held at Bay View's Puddler's Hall, 2461 S. St. Clair St., with a reading of selected scenes earlier this year at another Bay View joint, the Cactus Club, 2496 S. Wentworth Ave.

"This is a story that a lot of people in Milwaukee don't know about," Zimmerman said. But at those readings, people seemed deeply invested in hearing about it, he said.

At different points, director Brent Hazelton has taken both Zimmerman and the cast around the Bay View locales important to the play, including the Bay View Rolling Mill, where militia killed seven strikers in 1886.

That experience was helpful in understanding just how circumscribed people's lives were then, which is hard for us to grasp today, Zimmerman said.

If you go

Milwaukee Chamber Theatre performs "The Not-So-Accidental Conviction of Eleven Milwaukee 'Anarchists'" April 26 through May 12 at the Broadway Theatre Center, 158 N. Broadway. For tickets, visit milwaukeechambertheatre.org/anarchists or call (414) 291-7800.