

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Production portrays persecuted Catholic in new light

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PROVIDENCE—Catholics were banned from the jury. The judge told jurors to give more credibility to the testimony of native-born Americans than Irish immigrants.

Such was the environment in 1844 when John Gordon, 29, was convicted of murdering Amasa Sprague, a wealthy and powerful mill owner who was the brother and father of two Rhode Island governors.

Gordon, an immigrant Irishman, was the last person to be executed in Rhode Island. His story is dramatized in a new play written and directed by Ken Dooley, a Cranston native who grew up listening to a song his grandmother used to sing of "Poor Johnny Gordon."

The play, entitled **The Murder Trial of John Gordon**, is set to open Jan. 14 at the Park Theater in Cranston. The play depicts Gordon as an innocent man who was wrongly convicted on circumstantial evidence and the extreme bias of a legal system that stacked the deck against him.

"The more you got into the background, the more you realize this kid was railroaded," said Dooley, who has written 38 books, including a biography of former Boston Celtics patriarch Arnold "Red" Auerbach. Dooley's play also identifies who he says was the real murderer.

Dooley's research into the Gordon trial has already resulted in Rep. Peter Martin (D-Newport) and Sen. Michael McCaffery (D-Warwick) proposing that Gordon's name be cleared in the state records. Those who attend the play, which will run through Feb. 27, will be asked to sign a petition calling on the General Assembly to take up Martin's proposal.

Dooley said Father Bernard Healey, the Diocese of Providence's governmental liaison, brought the Gordon matter to Martin's attention.

"We are all complicit if we do not correct the historical record," Dooley said.

On Dec. 31, 1843, Amasa Sprague, owner of the A&W Mill in Cranston, was found shot and beaten to death in Knightsville, R.I. A few months earlier, he had been threatened by Nicholas Gordon, John's brother, after Sprague pulled strings with the Town Council to revoke Gordon's liquor license. Sprague did not like it that Gordon's general goods store had cut into his company store sales, Dooley said.

Police immediately arrested Nicholas, William and John Gordon. They were convicted in the minds of the general public.

"When I came back to Rhode Island, I had access to the (Providence Journal) archives, and I was horrified at some of the articles I read," Dooley said. "The Gordons were referred to as the guilty parties. They were tried in the newspaper."

Dooley said Judge Job Durfee, who presided during the trial in 1844, sided with the prosecutor, a Sprague ally. The Gordon's attorney, John Knowles, a Protestant, took the case against the advice of his family and friends. At the time, William Sprague, the victim's brother, was a U.S. senator. Dooley said Knowles never fulfilled his dreams of a political career.

The evidence presented at trial included contradictory witness statements, snow tracks that indicated the murderer had a similar size shoe as John Dolan's and a "bloody" overcoat (red markings on the jacket were later confirmed to be red dye) found at the scene. A prostitute whose testimony tied John Gordon to the overcoat, was unable during cross examination to identify the defendant after claiming she was personally acquainted with the Gordon brothers.

Prosecutors also focused on a broken gun found at the crime scene. The Gordons had told police that a gun they kept in the house had disappeared.

Nicholas and William Gordon were acquitted, but John - an alcoholic prone to blackouts who could not account for a three-hour period on the night of Sprague's murder - was convicted and sentenced to be hanged. That sentence was maintained even after his brothers produced their gun - which obviously would not have been used against Sprague.

John Gordon was executed on Feb. 14, 1845. Before his death, Father John Brady - who will be played in Dooley's production by Father Bernard O'Reilly, pastor of St. Patrick's Church in Harrisville - heard his confession.

Father Brady is recorded in Dooley's play as telling Gordon: "Have courage John, for now, you are going before a more merciful judge. You are not the first nor will you be the last Irish martyr."

Father O'Reilly said Dooley called him about the play. Dooley was looking for a priest to play the role, preferably a priest with an Irish brogue.

"I thought it was a nice opportunity," said Father O'Reilly, who knew of the Gordon case before being asked to play Father Brady. Father O'Reilly said he had dabbled in acting in high school and college productions.

"I think the play becomes a very important tool from an educational perspective. Very few people today know about the case. It has historical importance in that it provides an opportunity to correct the record."

"From a moral point of view, the story leads us to the very ugly period of prejudice and bigotry in Rhode Island in those days. It also reminds us of the powerful role forgiveness plays in the play. John Gordon very publicly forgave his enemies."

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