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"Exposed's" requiem for the dead continues to grow

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Tammy Packard. Dickie Packard. Nolan Howell. LaDawn Montague. Gordon Hill.

The names spill from grim-faced actors' mouths in the hushed theater, a somber roll call of the dead: Kelly McArthur. James Lyerly, Jr. Baby Girl Lyerly. Carol Dunlap. Governor Scott Matheson.

They come at the end of every performance of "Exposed," Plan-B Theatre's provocative drama about the human consequences of nuclear-weapons testing. Written by Utah journalist and author Mary Dickson, the play gathers sobering personal stories from "downwinders," or people exposed to radioactive fallout from nuclear explosions at the Nevada Test Site.

When "Exposed" premiered last month, the list contained 53 names of people, most of them Utahns, who died of cancers and other diseases their families believe were caused by nuclear fallout. Since then producers of the play, which ends its sold-out run today at the Rose Wagner Performing Arts Center, have invited audience members to add other names to a list on the wall by the theater's entrance.

As theatergoers contributed new names, director Jerry Rapier incorporated them into the play by typing them up and giving them to his actors to read at the end of the next performance. As of Friday afternoon, the list had grown to 131 names and counting.

"It's been really heartbreaking, all the stories I've been hearing. I've heard people say, 'I added both my parents,' " says Dickson, who has been hugged by sobbing theatergoers after performances. "I keep finding more and more [names]. And the sad thing is, it's just a tiny fraction of them."

Dickson based "Exposed" on actual people, including herself and her sister Ann Dickson DeBirk, who died of lupus in 2001 and whose name is the last one read at the play's end. Many of Dickson's lines are lifted verbatim from government documents, interviews and personal conversations.

At a time when low-level radioactive waste is being buried in Utah's west desert and Utah lawmakers are considering whether to allow the state's first nuclear power plant, "Exposed" dramatizes some 50 years of American history to probe the shadowy legacy of nuclear testing. Between 1951 and 1992, the United States government detonated 928 nuclear bombs in southern Nevada, sending radioactive particles into the atmosphere.

In 1990, Congress passed the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA), which paid \$50,000 to each person who contracted certain cancers and other serious diseases that might have resulted from living downwind of above-ground nuclear-weapon tests. In Utah, only residents of 10 southern counties are eligible for payments, although research suggests that radiation fallout spread widely across the state and beyond.

More than 27,000 Americans have made claims under RECA. So far almost 19,000 of them, including downwinders, uranium miners and test-site workers, have received government payments totaling \$1.25 billion. Meanwhile, pressure continues in Washington to extend the fund to more people in more places. One bill in Congress would allow downwinders in Idaho and Montana to apply for payments.

By speaking aloud the names of deceased downwinders at the end of "Exposed," and encouraging theatergoers to add more, the play's producers have created a living memorial to the dead not unlike an AIDS quilt or a recital of 9/11 victims. As an emotional coda to the play, the list of names also connects audiences viscerally with a complex issue.

"It's an invitation to make it personal, which I think is effective," said Julie Jensen, a Salt Lake City playwright who added the names of her father and two aunts -- all of whom grew up in southern Utah and died of cancer -- to the list after attending Thursday's performance. "It's all very palpable. On the whole, for me, it worked."

Although the play ends its Salt Lake City run with tonight's performance, its influence will likely be felt beyond Utah. Rapier, Plan-B Theatre's producing director, said he has heard from theater companies in Chicago, Sacramento and the Bay Area that want to stage the drama. So "Exposed's" requiem for the dead may continue to grow.

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Tribune reporter Judy Fahys contributed to this story.

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