



PLAY RELIVES FATAL WINDS

By Nancy Van Valkenburg | October 12, 2007

The play picks up in 1985, after Mary Dickson's surgery for thyroid cancer, during her radiation treatments, and before the untimely death of her sister, Ann, of lupus.

Dickson, a journalist and host of KUED Channel 7's "Contact," is a "downwinder," whose life changed after winds brought fallout from nuclear testing in Nevada to her Salt Lake City neighborhood, to all of Utah, and to much of the nation.

Dickson's first play, "Exposed," opens in its world premiere a week from tonight in Salt Lake City. Plan-B Theatre is producing the piece, about the human consequences of the 928 atomic bombs detonated in the Nevada desert between 1951 and 1992.

If you lived in our region during testing, especially in the 1951-1962 period of above-ground tests, you can call yourself a downwinder as well. After 1962 and until 1992, testing was moved underground, but Dickson said about half of the tests leaked, and fallout entered the atmosphere.

"The whole nuclear testing thing has been my passion for the past 25 years," Dickson said. "It's my whole life, except for my job. It's what I write articles about. In the neighborhood where I grew up, 54 people died of cancer or immune system problems, and that's in a five-block area.

"The play is my way of bearing witness to what happened, to try to keep it from happening again, and to memorialize people who were casualties of the Cold War," Dickson said.

THE PLAY

"Exposed" weaves the Dickson sisters' stories with the stories of other downwinders, some dead and some surviving. Some scenes are lifted from the actual declassified minutes of the Atomic Energy Commissions meetings, and from testimony at government hearings.

The play uncovers a web of government lies and coverups, Dickson said, spanning the years through the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, right up to the Bush administration's push for new nuclear weapons and additional testing, including Divine Strake.

Layton actress Teresa Sanderson plays six roles, including that of Bountiful native Darlene Phillips.

"She became sick in 1959," Sanderson said. "She first noticed it when she was brushing her hair and a hunk of hair came out with scalp still with it."

The National Institute of Health studied Phillips' case, which it classified as spontaneous immune-system failure.

"Doctors at the National Institute of Health told her husband it was probably caused by radiation or fallout," Sanderson said, "but said they would deny saying it if anyone asked them.

"There is so much evidence now. The government knew it was dangerous when it was happening. They only did tests when the wind was blowing away from Los Angeles. They chose to expose what they called a 'low-use' segment of the population. But the rest of the country was downwind."

Phillips survives today.

"She said she buys her life one month at a time," Dickson said. "Her son-in-law died of pancreatic cancer, and she knows lots of other people who died from similar problems. She got cataracts like the people in Japan did after the bomb. Darlene said she hated to get surgery for the cataracts because it removed evidence."

FEEDBACK

As a public speaker, Dickson has met many more survivors ready to share their stories.

"It's amazing, talking to groups of women in their 80s and 90s," Dickson said. "They wanted to talk, and show me their surgery scars, and tell me about their husbands who died of leukemia, esophageal cancer, or other cancers or diseases related to the immune system. For downwinders, it's never over."

Dickson said her own cancer remains in remission, although she gets sick more easily and frequently than she would like.

"My personal story is not tragic," she said. "I just know how to write it. So many people have lived horrendous tragedies, losing organs, losing kids, losing spouses, losing mothers. Dealing with one death, my sister's in 2001, was just awful. Dealing with multiple deaths, I can't imagine."

Dickson's extended family, including the children of her late sister, will attend a dress rehearsal. They are concerned the story might make them break down, which would embarrass them if they were at a public performance.

"I've sat through a couple rehearsals, and I always cry," Dickson said. "I look at the actors who are watching, and I see them cry, too. It's emotionally exhausting."

The play is powerful enough that it seems to have taken on a life of its own, Dickson said. An actress friend from Los Angeles plans to attend, bringing a producer along in hopes of taking the show west. A Bay Area theater company that did a reading hopes to do a production in an upcoming season. A columnist in Chicago plans to attend the show, and write about it.

Three performances are already sold out. Among those planning to attend are many downwinders.

"The play puts a human face on it," Dickson said. "Every night, we will read the names of people who have lost their lives, and we will let the audience add names. It's so personal and so powerful. It's hard not to get emotional."

