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## 'Lynching' reopens old scars for some Mariettans

Bill Hendrick - Staff  
Monday, August 21, 2000

The story of Leo Frank has come home to Marietta, the town where the Jewish factory superintendent was lynched 85 years ago.

Marietta's Theatre in the Square is producing "The Lynching of Leo Frank" less than two miles from the spot where a mob, organized and egged on by many of the city's leading citizens, strung Frank up. The play, a dramatic retelling by Atlantan Robert Myers, ran in Chicago two years ago to rave reviews and earlier this year in an off-off-Broadway theater, where it did poorly.

Some Mariettans would rather not see the town's most notorious incident depicted yet again. Despite their protests, however, the play is more than an irrelevant rehash, because its exploration of violent prejudice comes at a time when overt anti-Semitism has resurfaced in Marietta, again directed at a local Jewish business figure.

"Lynching" will play in Marietta through Sept. 24, a date that won't come too soon for some Mariettans, who would rather not have the world reminded that the only lynching of a Jew in U.S. history took place in their town. No one was ever charged with Frank's murder, but the ancestors of some "OMs" --- Old Mariettans --- are found on lists of suspects that have been circulating secretly for years.

"I'd like to see it just go away," Charles Brown, an OM who acknowledges that his grandfather's name appears on some of the lists, says of the play. "I'm not going to worry about it, as long as I don't have to look at it."

"It's not a subject I talk about," says Tom Browning, a lawyer and chairman of the city's Historic Board of Review. "This was the past. Is this blood on the hands of people in Marietta today? No, and it shouldn't be. It's history."

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Tom Watson Brown, another Marietta lawyer, is angry that the Frank case won't die. He blames the press, Hollywood and "careless" playwrights for keeping the story alive.

In brief, that story goes like this: Frank, a Northern Jew, was convicted on questionable evidence of murdering Mary Phagan, a 13-year-old Mariettan who worked in the pencil factory he supervised. He was condemned to die, but Georgia's governor, swayed by protesters who said Frank had been railroaded, commuted the sentence to life in prison.

Tom Watson Brown's great-grand-father, Tom Watson, who later became a U.S. senator, is blamed in many accounts for whipping up anti-Semitism that helped lead to the lynching. Brown, counter to most historians' accounts, maintains that Frank was killed not because of his "religious persuasion" but because Jews bribed the sitting governor to commute Frank's death sentence, an act that outraged the citizenry.

"The playwright has apparently put out a largely non-factual presentation of the case," Brown says of "Lynching," which he has not seen.

It's unclear how many residents share those feelings, but obviously not everyone in Marietta or surrounding Cobb County, which today has a large Jewish community, is put off by the play. "Lynching" opened Wednesday to a house packed with theater subscribers, most of whom live in the immediate area.

And "Lynching" hasn't generated the overt controversy seen in the early 1990s when the theater mounted "M. Butterfly," a play with gay themes, and "Lips Together, Teeth Apart," which deals with AIDS. Those productions prompted the Cobb County Commission to adopt a resolution condemning homosexuality. That resolution, never rescinded, led the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games to pull planned 1996 events out of Cobb.

Anti-Semitism flares anew

"Lynching," though, comes at a time when prejudice has become an issue again in Marietta.

Dan Cox, a former city councilman and current director of the Marietta History Museum, fears that the play could stir up lingering anti-Jewish sentiment, which he contends "is just a little beneath the surface anyway."

"I still see anti-Semitism rearing its head today," Cox says. "We make progress, but then this anti-Semitism comes to the fore again. It's always been a black eye."

Cox cites a controversy involving Philip Goldstein, a Jewish city councilman and businessman, who has angered some Mariettans with his plan to build a condominium-office high-rise near the Marietta Square. At a recent Historic Review Board meeting, several people made anti-Semitic remarks, shouted and stomped their feet. One man turned to Goldstein's sister and snarled, "Remember what happened to Leo Frank."

Cox, himself an OM, says "anti-Semitism is more sophisticated than it used to be, but it is still here. Phil Goldstein won't talk about it, but he gets hate mail. I painted over a swastika in his parking lot recently. Another was put on his building. I'm appalled by it."

Goldstein, whose family owns much of the real estate around the square, apparently has chosen to lie low and declined comment for this story.

"Most buildings in the square are owned by Jews, especially the Cox says. "That family came to town basically selling rags. They have lived the American dream by hard work. But there's always been a certain amount of resentment."

Psychologist Jim Stark is one of Goldstein's fiercest foes on the high-rise proposal. But like Cox, he worries that recent developments are feeding prejudices.

"This play and the controversy over Mr. Goldstein are bringing it all out again, the anti-Semitism," Stark says. "It still exists. It's like a genetic code of silence. That's why these people haven't talked about it all these years."

Months before the play opened, Mariettans were forced to talk about it, because one list of suspects was published on the Internet by Atlanta historian Stephen Goldfarb (leofranklynchers.com). The list generated headlines around the country and reignited discussions about the Frank case in Marietta.

Stark recently wrote a letter to the Marietta Daily Journal, suggesting that the city and all OMs whose ancestors were involved in the Frank lynching publicly apologize.

His letter produced a flurry of replies, some so anti-Semitic that the newspaper wouldn't print them. Some of those published insisted that Frank was guilty of murder, despite the view of most historians. One, signed by Mariettan Justin Trew, asked, "Which was the greater crime --- Frank's illegal execution or his murder of Mary Phagan?"

Joe Kirby, editor of the Marietta paper's editorial page, said that only one or two letter writers agreed that the city or the descendants of lynchers should apologize.

Marietta Mayor Ansley Meaders did not return repeated phone calls seeking comment on the proposal. Brown, Tom Watson's descendent, says, "Maybe the Frank people should apologize for bribing the governor."

The value of remembrance

Chuck Clay, a local lawyer and head of the Georgia Republican Party, says modern Mariettans shouldn't have to apologize for their forebears' actions, but he does see value in "Lynching."

"It makes a fascinating study of character and society," Clay says. "The play may be looking at a tragedy unique to this community, but there is still a universality about it. We ought never take for granted that we've conquered this monster of prejudice. To try to keep alive lessons learned is important."

Palmer Wells, producing director of Theatre in the Square, says such sentiments are behind the production of "Lynching."

"People see it as an important piece of theater that really can allow them to look in the mirror and say, 'This shouldn't happen,'" Wells says. "We can benefit from the message that these injustices and prejudices existed."

That remembrance is welcomed by many in Cobb's Jewish community.

"When you speak of anti-Semitism in the South, Leo Frank comes up," says Eliot Arnovitz, president of the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta. "These kinds of events are never far from our psyches, our remembrances, just like the Holocaust. We can never forget that."

Rabbi Steven Lebow, spiritual leader of Temple Kol Emeth in East Cobb, several years ago helped erect a plaque to Frank on the spot where the lynching occurred.

"Memory is the key to redemption, as one of the great rabbis said," Lebow says. "It's a religious obligation to remember."

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