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Surviving downwind — Mary Dickson's play blasts nuclear testing

By **Ivan M. Lincoln**

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When "downwinders" comes up in a conversation, many — if not most — probably think it applies only to a small corner of southwestern Utah, not far from the drifting, poisonous dust that came from four decades of nuclear testing across the border in the Nevada desert.

But Mary Dickson, a well-known Utah journalist and writer, has a deeply personal perspective on the deadly aftermath of the testing. And now, she's put her experiences — originally part of an as-yet-to-be-finished book — into a "docudrama"-style play.

"Exposed," which Plan-B Theatre Company is staging as a world premiere next week in the Studio Theatre of the Rose Wagner Performing Arts Center, is comprised of Dickson's well-documented findings, which show that what the U.S. government first saw as an experiment that would have little or no effect on the few inhabitants in southwest Utah actually impacted thousands across a much wider area.

"The winds didn't stop at a chain-link fence or at county or state borders," Dickson told the Deseret Morning News, during an interview with her, the play's director and the two actresses playing both Mary and her late sister, Ann.

Delving into formerly classified government documents, Dickson is providing a dramatic new dimension to what one New York Times journalist called "the most prodigiously reckless program of human experimentation in U.S. history."

"We believed our government when they told us, 'There is no danger,'" Dickson said.

While the focus of Plan-B's drama is Mary and her sister — both of whom suffered from the consequences of the fallout — Dickson's play also brings in dozens of additional characters, including real-life government officials and composites of other figures.

When Mary refers to herself and her sister as "downwinders," you just assume they must have lived somewhere down around St. George. But they were actually among more than 54 people who got sick or died from fallout-related illnesses but live within a relatively small five-block Salt Lake neighborhood.

During the interview, Dickson said there are also many "downwind" victims who lived in Los Angeles. The deadly fallout was trapped between layers of L.A.'s infamous inversions.

A dramatic map shows that the spread of the fallout takes in almost the entire United States, including large portions of Idaho and Montana.

Above-ground testing in the Nevada desert involved the dropping of more than 100 nuclear bombs between 1951 and 1962. Atmospheric testing was banned in 1962, but underground tests continued for another three decades. More than half of these 828 underground tests leaked radiation into the atmosphere.

In Plan-B's production, local Equity actress Joyce Cohen will play Mary Dickson. In an ironic twist, when Cohen first moved to Salt Lake City nearly two decades ago, strangers on the street would address her as "Mary." Meanwhile Dickson was having the same, unnerving experience — people calling her "Joyce." Both women are petite blondes and both, at various times back then, wore their hair in similar styles.

Seeing them together during Plan-B Theatre Company's collaborative production process, it's easy to see how they could be mistaken for each other. They're almost, but not quite, twins in appearance.

Teri Cowan will be playing Mary's sister, Ann Dickson DeBirk, who died on March 18, 2001, following a nine-year battle with lupus.

During a joint interview with the three women, along with director Jerry Rapier, they seem to have developed into a backstage family, finishing each other's sentences as topics quickly change from one aspect of the drama to another.

"I'm not trying to imitate Mary," Cohen said.

Cowan added, "After we did one read-through, someone said Joyce was just like Mary," adding that "Normally, you're doing that backstory just based on what's in front of you (in the script), and you have to fill in the blanks. We have the luxury of Mary telling us that 'Ann was like this.' But it's also a little daunting to know that."

"The trick with this play," said Cohen, "is that there is so much information. You have to keep some of the stuff in and leave other stuff out."

"What's amazing is this whole collaborative process," said Dickson, "from Jerry to the actors."

Cohen added that "when you work on a play, you form a family. Sometimes it's intense and sometimes it's dysfunctional."

All agreed that the process of producing Dickson's play has become a communal experience.

Dickson's script brings up such well-known figures as eccentric Hollywood mogul Howard Hughes, whose 1956 Genghis Kahn spectacle "The Conqueror" became notorious for being one of the worst pictures ever made. And an alarming number of cast and crew (including stars John Wayne, Susan Hayward and Agnes Moorhead, and director Dick Powell) were stricken with cancer after the "on-location" shooting in Utah and Nevada, where the film's desert settings were in the direct path of the fallout.

Over the past few months, following limited "workshop" and staged readings of the script, Dickson has collected hundreds of names of people who were either ill themselves or who lost loved ones from the fallout.

The cast also includes Jason Tatom as Government Official No. 1, and a tour guide in the Atomic Testing Museum in Las Vegas, and Mark Fossen as Official No. 2, Howard Hughes and Dr. Harold Knapp.

Kirt Bateman will play a variety of men's roles, including outspoken protagonist Preston Truman of Malad, Idaho; newsman Peter Jennings; and retired Col. Raymond Brim, who was involved with the early years of testing and who later questioned the government's ethics.

Teresa Sanderson will also play several roles, including Elizabeth Bruhn Catalan of St. George, one of many who testified during congressional hearings, and Carole Gallagher, a Brooklyn, N.Y., native who became immersed in documenting the stories of many downwinders.

Studies by the National Cancer Institute indicate that the radioactive fallout affected virtually

every state and county in the continental United States — as far as 2,300 miles from the Nevada Test Site.

"Exposed" touches on events ranging from the Cold War trauma of the early 1950s to the recent controversy of plans for the "Divine Strake" blasts at the Nevada Test Site. The latter was called off following strong protests by members of Downwinders United and other anti-nuclear activists.

Dickson herself was diagnosed with cancer when she was 29, which eventually led to her having a hysterectomy.

Like fallout scattered across the North American terrain, Dickson's drama is a collection of tales of government cover-ups.

"The hardest thing is not the dying," Dickson says toward the end of her play. "It's that the dead are so easily forgotten."

► **If you go**

What: "Exposed"

Where: Rose Wagner Center, 138 W. 300 South

When: Oct. 19-Nov. 4

How much: \$18

Phone: 355-2787

Web: www.planbtheatre.org

Also: Post-show discussions on Oct. 21 and Nov. 3

E-mail: ivan@desnews.com

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