

THE DUCHESS OF STRINGTOWN © 2018

A fictionalized play based on facts
Written by Michelle Jones and Anastazia Schmid

Background

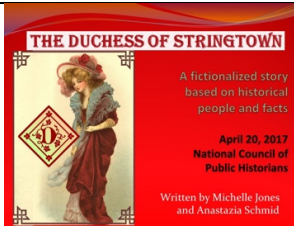
In February of 1872, *The Indianapolis News* reported a scene claimed to be the “most remarkable and impressive ever witnessed in this vicinity” at the unseemly location –a funeral service. Reverend David Stevenson delivered a heart rendering “solemn sermon” of death and Judgment on behalf of the late Mrs. Ann Kitchen, better known as the “Duchess of Stringtown,” a well-known socialite, rabble-rouser, and long-term keeper of a house of prostitution. Reverend Stevenson’s perhaps morbidly ironic sermon was enough to excite the proselytizing passions of another well-known attendee and long-time acquaintance of the Duchess, Mrs. Sarah Smith, the Matron of the Home for Friendless Women. In what could be interpreted as a Nineteenth century soap opera, religious moral reformer Sarah Smith turns the tables at this news-worthy gala event to wring the audience up to “a fever point,” leaving a “lasting impression,” illustrating the “consequences of sin the most graphic manner.”

In addition to Smith’s funeral speech, much of what we know about the Duchess comes from tabloid-like news documents in which the Duchess was frequently mentioned. Like Smith’s posthumous shaping of the Duchess’ character, newspaper tabloids sensationalized much of the Duchess’ life. Thus, piecing together a more accurate depiction of the Duchess requires that researcher and readers approach these documents with a critical eye for what is not said. Although the truth about the Duchess’ life might never be fully uncovered, we can make progress towards undermining the fiction that currently shrouds her life and legacy. We argue that the Duchess of Stringtown is more than a scandalous news spectacle; historically, her life and work in prostitution is a hidden but essential component of early feminist work. In many ways, women like the Duchess unwillingly served as pawns in the feminist agendas of women like Sarah Smith.

The juxtaposition of these two women within the narrative of this funerary scene provides for a telling analysis of working women’s positionality in Nineteenth century Indiana. Further examination of these two women’s working lives provides an opposing historical perspective for feminist critique. Sarah Smith and the Duchess of Stringtown can be analyzed comparatively through the lens of the maternal figure. As Matron, in the case of Smith, and Madam, in the case of the Duchess, these women effectively performed different modes of the same role. Both of their “homes” provided refuge for “unfortunate” women, and both women sought financial gain through the management of other women’s labor. However, while the Duchess provided opportunities for vulnerable women to choose their terms of employment, Smith’s influence over such women was both coercive and paternalistic.

The play is an outgrowth of this research on Sarah Smith, Rhoda Coffin, Joanna Kitchen and Dr. Theophilus Parvin and suggests that under these constraints highlighted above in addition to city official’s desires to absorb Stringtown into greater Indianapolis, men of industry desiring to expand local commerce in the area, an adulterous husband and an ambitious 2nd in command, coupled with the agenda of the religious officials in the area, The Duchess of Stringtown’s death was intentional.

Production



2017 April.

Selected scenes performed for the National Council of Public Historians at the Indiana Women's Prison. Twenty student actors performed.
Directed by Gigi Jenewein.



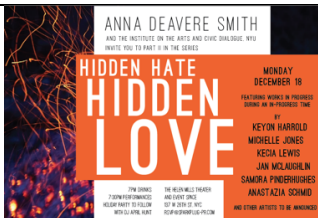
2017 April.

Table Read by professional actors performed at Indy Convergence, Indianapolis, Indiana.
Directed by Gigi Jenewein.



2017 October.

Table Read of Five Scenes in conjunction with Anna Deavere Smith's "Hidden Hate/Hidden Love" series sponsored by the Institute on the Arts and Civic Dialogue/New York University. New York, New York.
Directed by Elena Araoz.



2017 December.

Hidden Hate/ Hidden Love, Part II; Staged Reading of Selected Scenes, produced by Anna Deavere Smith sponsored by the Institute on the Arts and Civic Dialogue, Helen Mills Theater, New York, New York.
Directed by Elena Araoz.



2017 December.

Full production produced by the Phoenix Theatre Indianapolis and Indy Convergence. Adapted by Toni Coleman Pressman. Indianapolis, Indiana.
Directed by Gigi Jenewein.

Talk Back Clip: <https://vimeo.com/259750845>

Password: phoenix



2018 April.

Short staged reading of an excerpt "Bending Towards Justice?" *New York Live Arts, Live Ideas 2018: Radical Vision*, Bill T. Jones Theater, New York, New York.
Directed by Elena Araoz.

Directors:

Elena Araoz, Stage Director of Theater and Opera. Directed New York staged readings of *The Duchess of Stringtown*. Website: <http://www.elenaaraoz.com/>

Gigi Jenewein, DePauw University, Indiana. Directed Indiana productions of *The Duchess of Stringtown*. Bio available at <https://www.depauw.edu/arts-and-culture/arts/theatre/the-spring-spectacle-of-shakespeare/meet-the-director/>

Press and Reviews:

Schwartz, Jordan. "A Play About a Neighborhood: Community and New Play Development in The Duchess of Stringtown." *Howl Rounds Theater Commons*. 14 January 2018. Available at <https://howlround.com/play-about-neighborhood>

Mannheimer, Steven. "Notorious madam, married 6 times, inspires new play and catches Hollywood's eye." *Indianapolis Star*. 20 December 2017. Available at <https://www.indystar.com/story/entertainment/2017/12/20/notorious-madam-who-married-six-times-notorious-madam-and-collector-husbands-inspires-play-power-sex/964679001/>

Peterson, Julie. "Review: Indiana Women's Prison Bus Tour and Performance." *The Public Historian*. Vol. 39 No. 3, August 2017. (pp. 108-113) Available at <http://tph.ucpress.edu/content/39/3/103>

Genovese, Holly. "What Makes a Prison Writer?" *Society for US Intellectual Society*. 4 June 2017. Available at <https://s-usih.org/2017/06/what-makes-a-prison-writer/>

"The Duchess of Stringtown Play Reading" *Discover Near West Indys*. 15 March 2017. Available at <https://discovernearwestindys.org/2017/03/.../the-duchess-of-stringtown-play-reading/>

Fister, Barbara. "Helping Gifted (and Incarcerated) Students Conduct Research – A Volunteer Opportunity." *Inside Higher Education*. 21 April 2016. Available at <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/library-babel-fish/helping-gifted-and-incarcerated-students-conduct-research-%E2%80%93-volunteer-0/>

"Duches of Stringtown." Phoenix Theater, Indianapolis. Available at <https://www.phoenixtheatre.org/duchess-of-stringtown/>

Workshop:

Producer Virginia Grise and Director Elena Araoz facilitated an in-depth workshop on the script with paid actors and playwrights in August 2020.