

Play director checks barn murder facts

MARIA Marten or Murder in the Red Barn is a Victorian melodrama and tells the spine-chilling tale which never fails to intrigue the audience.

This play is the next production by the People's Theatre, Heaton, opening on Tuesday, July 21, and running until Saturday at 7.30 pm nightly.

William Corder really did murder Maria Marten on May 18, 1827, and buried her body in the Red Barn, near Polstead, Suffolk.

The body was discovered nearly a year later, and after the subsequent trial, William Corder was hanged on August 11, 1828, outside Bury St Edmunds' gaol, witnessed by a crowd of 7,000 people.

Broadsheets with news of the event sold in tens of thousands.

After the execution the crowd took several hours to file past Corder's naked body lying in the courtyard.

Christopher Goulding is the enthusiastic director of this piece of drama and his painstaking research into the facts prompted him to go to the scene of the crime.

He went to Bury St Edmunds and Polstead with Roger Liddle, who takes the leading role in the play as William Corder, and John Ross, who plays Mr Marten, Maria's father.

They were made welcome at Moyses Hall Museum by the curator, Gareth Jenkins, who gave valuable assistance by allowing access to relics on display, including Corder's scalp (with ear attached) which was removed after he was hanged, the pistols he used in the murder, and a handwritten account of the trial bound in Corder's own skin.

They were allowed to handle exhibits and have photographs taken.

They also visited the grave of Maria...

This was a thorough exercise in research which should help with the characterisation of the parts of Corder and Mr Marten.

A letter from Chris, which was published in the East Anglia Daily News, resulted in him obtaining copies of an old book about the murder with transcripts of the actual trial.

This led him to believe that the melodramatic version of the play he was to present at the People's (a barnstormer's version from the 1840s) had more in common with the sensational press of those days than the truth.

With this in mind, Chris decided that in his opinion Maria was not the innocent young thing she is portrayed in the melodrama, and Corder may have had help from one of Maria's own family in getting rid of her, but was then double-crossed.

So he has rewritten the second part of the play to contrast with the melodrama of the first half.

Maria is acted by Margery Bone, and Bob MacDonald portrays Dr Lawton who performed the post-mortem.

The set is designed by Ken Appleby, lighting by Eddie Auld, stage manager Frank Worswick, and Wendy Johnson is in charge of wardrobe.

The People's Theatre is situated on the Heaton side of the Armstrong Bridge and there is ample parking in the vicinity.



Roger Liddle, who plays the Red Barn murderer William Corder, examines a grim museum exhibit from the era