

UC SANTA BARBARA

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UCSB PROFESSOR DEBUNKS URBAN LEGENDS OF MEDIEVAL THEATER

The story seemed plausible enough, given the violence and cruelty that seemed to permeate medieval Europe: During a performance of a play in Tournai -- now a part of Belgium -- around 1549, a convicted criminal was beheaded on stage in a scripted execution scene.

For years -- centuries, really -- the story circulated as fact.

But in her new book, Jody Enders, a professor of French at the University of California, Santa Barbara, places the tale squarely alongside more recent stories of alligators living in the New York City sewer system and fast-food restaurants serving up deep-fried rats. The execution story -- and 13 others included in Enders's just-published "Death by Drama and Other Medieval Urban Legends" (University of Chicago Press) -- is purely myth.

"I, myself, had circulated this story saying, 'Oh yes, this is true,'" Enders said. "Then one day I was discussing it with a colleague who said, 'Yes, I have always read that, but what's the source? Is there any real evidence?'"

Enders decided to find out.

And under the scrutiny of academic investigation, the story broke down.

"Every time I thought I had my finger on a piece of evidence that would definitively prove it or disprove it," Enders said, "the evidence would disappear.

And I thought, 'Oh my god, I've fallen for the medieval equivalent of a snuff film.'"

With the execution story disproved, Enders began to investigate other commonly believed bizarre stories of the medieval French theater and reached similar conclusions in nearly every case.

"Most of them turned out to be legends, too," Enders said.

She includes many of them in the book:

The tale of the theatergoer who became so enamoured of the lead character in the play "St. Catherine of Siena" that he married the girl who played her.

The effeminate-looking young actor Lyonard, whose portrayal of St. Barbara stirred the romantic passions of both a rich widow and a priest.

The story of the actor, Languille (in French, "The Eel") of the city of Melun, who became so affected by his role as St. Bartholomew that the line between fantasy and reality became blurred. One day during a scene in which St. Bartholomew is flayed alive, a terrified Languille suddenly began screaming even before the actor portraying the executioner had laid a hand on him. From this legend came a popular proverb about jumping the gun: "He's like the Eel of Melun, screaming before you skin him."

The actor who was said to have nearly suffocated during a portrayal of Judas's hanging, and another who nearly died on a cross playing the crucified Jesus.

Other actors were said to have gone insane playing madmen, to have turned evil while playing devils, to have died in poverty after playing paupers. There was the poor fellow who committed suicide after playing the character "Despair" on the stage.

And there was, of course, the story from which Enders's book takes its name, that of the convicted heretic beheaded on stage to add grisly realism to a drama of Judith and Holofernes.

Urban legends have long fascinated Enders, who grew up in a suburb of New York City.

"I used to walk by a sewer grate every day on my way to school and had been instructed that you should not walk too close to these things because there were alligators in there," she said. "It was kind of a traumatic moment for me in my adolescence when I was told the truth."

Enders said the medieval tales likely grew from the same sources as modern urban legends. "These things reflect our hopes, our fears and our superstitions about the world we inhabit," she said.

It should be no surprise that so many urban legends involve the theater, Enders said. "Theater's role is to make you confused about whether or not what is happening is real or if it is make-believe," she said. "And if you talk to actors today, they still have superstitions. Actors who play 'Macbeth' never pronounce the title of the play by name because it has a curse," she said. "They always refer to it as 'The Scottish Play' or 'The One about the King.' They believe something terrible will happen if they say they are playing Macbeth."

Enders, who joined the UCSB faculty in 1992, has an international reputation as a scholar of medieval theater. Of "Death by Drama," Richard K. Emmerson, executive director of The Medieval Academy of America, said: "Jody Enders has written that rare book that is both deeply learned and intellectually entertaining. I can't remember the last time I've learned so much while having so much fun."

Note to editors: Jody Enders can be reached at (805) 893-4696 and at jenders@french-ital.ucsb.edu.

A jpeg photo of her is available on request.

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[Professor Enders Web Site](#)

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