

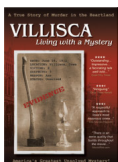
## Prime Suspects: "Villisca: Living with a Mystery," August 10 at the Englert Theatre

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 08 August 2007 02:18

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### **VILLISCA: LIVING WITH A MYSTERY**

Just over a year ago, I was sent a DVD screener from area filmmakers Kelly and Tammy Rundle (of the Moline-based Fourth Wall Films) for their feature-length documentary *Villisca: Living with a Mystery*

. I found it to be a beautifully researched and effectively unsettling true-crime thriller, but unfortunately, there never seemed an appropriate time to *tell*

anyone that; since receiving the DVD, the nearest the movie ever came to our area was during a one-night engagement in Cedar Rapids, and so I held off on writing about the film until it made its way closer to the Quad Cities.

On Friday, *Villisca* will be screened at the Englert Theatre, in conjunction with Landlocked: The Iowa City International Film Festival.

Close enough.

The film's subject matter is touted on the DVD cover as "America's greatest unsolved mystery,"

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which may be a tad hyperbolic, but is no less fascinating for being so: On the morning of June 10, 1912, in the burgeoning burg of Villisca, Iowa, a family of six and two houseguests were found brutally murdered, the apparent victims of both ends of an axe. There were plenty of clues - the murder weapon covered in blood, a skirt draped over a bedroom mirror, a slab of unsliced bacon wrapped in cloth - but they didn't appear to lead anywhere. Or rather, they appeared to lead *everywhere*; in a matter of weeks, the list of suspects came to include (as the film's theatrical trailer succinctly describes) a state senator, a crazy preacher, a jealous husband, and a tormented drifter.

As the killer was never caught - though a climactic analysis makes a pretty strong case for *none* of

those suspects committing the crime -

*Villisca*

is a

*hypothetical*

whodunit, and director Kelly Rundle (Tammy serving as co-writer and co-producer) amasses an intimidating amount of found footage and new interviews into a creepy, hypnotic, and thrillingly debatable entertainment.

Yet as its title suggests, *Villisca* is almost less concerned with the case than the effect it had (and *continues* to have) on the town's citizenry. The Rundles' chief accomplishment here lies in showing how an atmosphere of mutual mistrust and abject fear turned a once-bustling community - one of the first Iowa townships, we are told, to highly value "music and art and elocution" - into a depressingly insular one, leery of strangers and newly well-armed. On its surface,

*Villisca: Living with a Mystery*

is about an octet of killings in a small town. We gradually learn that's only half-true; by the end, this complex and thoroughly impressive work is about the killing

of

a small town.

*Villisca: Living with a Mystery* will be screened at the Englert Theatre at 9:30 p.m. on Friday, August 10, and more information on the film is available at (

<http://www.VilliscaMovie.com>

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