

Los Angeles Tribune

Friday, July 19, 2002

Painseeker Opening Statements: "The Story" Vs. "The Shotgun"

Laura Douglass Described As Cold-Hearted Killer And Best Friend

BY DANNY O'ROURKE
STAFF WRITER

LOS ANGELES -- Accused murderer Laura Douglass sat at the defense table dressed in the same blue pantsuit that she has worn each day this week. Head bowed, her gaze seems to never leave the notepad in front of her. She often pushes her notepad across the table to be read by her attorney, Les Levin.

It is difficult to interpret Ms. Douglass' actions in light of Thursday's opening arguments in the Painseeker Murder Trial at Los Angeles Superior Court. Either she is conspiring with Levin on the next bold move in her master plan or she is fighting for her life against a District Attorney's office desperate to put an ending on an increasingly embarrassing case.

Assistant District Attorney Thomas Andrews and high-powered defense attorney Les Levin projected starkly opposing views of the accused over the course of the day, as each side attempted to provide to the jury with their own framework with which to view the case. From the material presented today, each side believes that portraying Douglass' emotions and personality is just as important as the physical evidence.

Andrews used his opening argument to weave a story portraying Douglass as obsessed with her victim, Raychel Wagner. An aspiring singer, Wagner met Douglass three years before during

a meeting of artists who called themselves The Bleeders. The friendship between the two was portrayed as strained at times by Douglass' constant need for contact with Wagner. The two lived together at numerous times, with Wagner always eventually leaving Douglass.

Andrews also alleged that Douglass provided Wagner with illegal drugs to maintain their friendship. When Wagner received help for her addiction, Andrews stated that Douglass used several intermediaries to keep tabs on Wagner. The most notable of these was her alleged hiring of Wagner's personal bodyguard, Sharon Wolfe, who is also accused of taking part in the murder.

The prosecution stated that Douglass' interventions backfired when she discovered that her lover, Ken Kincaid had an affair with Wagner. Andrews maintains that Douglass felt betrayed by Wagner and paid Wolfe to assist in the murder. The two coldly waited for an opportunity, then assaulted Wagner before slashing her numerous times with a broken bottle.

Despite the complexity, Andrews' comments were extremely brief in comparison with Levin's; whose rolling argument began well before lunch, was interrupted by lunch and one afternoon break, and seemed destined to spill into Friday's session. Only a reprimand from Judge Michael Rodriguez spurred Levin to end his opening argument at precisely 5:00 p.m.

Levin employed a classic “shotgun defense” of his client. His argument was less structured, and deviated for long periods to rebut prosecution claims. He maintained that Douglass was Wagner’s best friend and had used her extensive contacts in the music industry to further Wagner’s career. He also portrayed Douglass’ relationship with Kincaid as “open.” Moreover, Levin claimed that the relationship between the two had ended long before the murder was committed.

Levin’s most defiant defense of Douglass was saved for the complete denial that she had ever hired Wolfe as Wagner’s bodyguard, let alone hired her to help murder Wagner.

Levin also dedicated time in his argument to attack the prosecution for its handling of the case. He stated that the Painseeker web site has created so much pressure on the unsolved crime that the District Attorney’s office felt the need to charge “someone, anyone” for the crime. He claimed that the D.A.’s need for convenience came at Douglass’ expense, and that she had been publicly and permanently humiliated by the charge. Levin also claimed that Douglass had

been disinherited by her father, recording industry executive Larry Douglass.

The jury was clearly tired and displeased with the defense’s indulgence. Some already seemed overtly skeptical of Levin, having witnessed his attempt on Wednesday to push the opening of the prosecution’s case back to Monday.

One observer noted the jury’s demeanor in court. “They are tired, they are angry, and it’s their first day,” noted Anna Fantiani, who is a contributor to the Painseeker web site. “Mr. Levin lost his credibility with the jury by trying to filibuster the trial into starting on his timeline.”

However, Fantiani believes that all was not lost today for the defense.

“Personally I think Mr. Levin’s argument was impressive. He answered each point brought by the prosecution. The question is what will they [the jury] remember tomorrow: his argument or how long he took to say it?”