

## **Theater owner's death a mystery - Detroit Police believe accusations of fraud may have led to the death of a local businesswoman.**

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DETROIT -- Police are investigating whether a messy business dispute replete with accusations of fraud over a \$400,000 mortgage on the Fine Arts **Theater** may have led someone to kill one of its owners.

Valerie Atikian, 44, of Southfield held an ownership interest in the historic **theater** along Woodward Avenue in Brush Park for five years, but detectives who are investigating the case say she recently told friends she feared someone was trying to kill her and disguised her travels by renting a car.

She was found Saturday afternoon, shot once in the back of the head in the **theater**'s restroom. There were no signs of forced entry. Detectives say she went there to meet someone. Now, they are questioning former business partners and associates. A series of court filings allege Atikian and others created multiple companies in an effort to defraud mortgage companies who loaned money to the **theater**.

"So many people are talking about another side of my sister that I don't even want to think about that right now," said her sister, Rita Atikian. "She was the adventurous one who wanted to run a business and help my family."

The daughter of Armenian immigrants, the unmarried and childless Valerie Atikian was born and raised in Detroit, operated a women's boutique in Southfield called Via Bugotti and once managed boxers.

But at least one former business partner, Gloria Ray, obtained a personal protection order in 2003 from Wayne County Circuit Court to keep Atikian away, court records revealed.

The 600-seat **theater** hasn't hosted a concert since February, but neighbors complained of after-hours events. The Right Production, a Detroit promotions company, booked seven acts at the **theater** from Super Bowl week in 2006 until this year.

Singing act Natalie Cole and others sold out, but promoter Sulaiman Mausi said his family backed out of a lease to continue promotions because they sensed something was wrong.

"It's a nice property. In the right hands it could be a gem, but there was something wrong," Mausi said. "We talked about buying the place, but Valerie apparently decided she wanted to continue running it. There were rumors about the mortgage and troubles. We decided it was time for us to wish them well and move on."

Michigan Court of Appeals records claim Atikian may have profited from a \$400,000 mortgage obtained on the building in 2003 with her business partner and boyfriend, George Rider Jr.

Up to \$50,000 of that money may have been diverted to another company she owned, Fashion International Trendz Inc., according to legal papers filed by mortgage holder Interbay Funding of Pennsylvania.

The 93-year-old building's previous owner also met a violent end. Joseph Forster Jr., who also owned a deli and laundromat, was killed in October 1997 in an unsolved murder.

The building was purchased in 1998 from Forster's estate for \$360,000 by TGR Corp., court records indicate.

Gloria Ray was president of that company and Rider was the owner. Atikian was hired in May 2002 to be executive director to seek funding for renovations. She and a business partner formed Brava Entertainment Group, which provided about \$500,000 for the project.

Later, Brava took ownership of the building, court files indicate. Interbay's lawyers claimed Brava and TGR of being "alter egos" -- one and the same -- and accused Atikian and her business partners of fraud.

"I can only guess at why this happened or who did it. It certainly causes new wrinkles for us," said Mark Fink, a lawyer representing Interbay Funding. "The court documents speak for us and what we believe."

Court documents indicate Atikian gave her sister, Rita, 50 percent ownership of the **theater**. It was done without her permission, said Rita Atikian.

"She just put me down as a security blanket," she said. "I would sign over the deed for anyone who asked right now."

Atikian's body was found by a man who rents space in the building. Police declined to identify the man, who crossed Woodward shortly before 5 p.m. Saturday to Atlas Global Bistro to get help.

"He was very distraught, crying," said Mary Brinker, manager at the restaurant. "I really can't tell you what was going on over there lately. For a while, they had some great shows that the doctors and lawyers who eat here talked about because they all bought tickets."

Caption: Atikian

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