



SHELTON STATE

C O M M U N I T Y C O L L E G E

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THEATRE TUSCALOOSA WELCOMES GUEST ARTISTS TO “LOVE LETTERS”

TUSCALOOSA – Theatre Tuscaloosa will present the play “Love Letters” by A.R. Gurney for three performances only, Friday, February 12 at 7:30 p.m., Saturday, February 13 at 7:30 p.m., and Sunday, February 14 at 2:00 p.m. Nationally known theater veterans Betsy Palmer and Jon Finch will perform the show.

The production can be seen at the Bean-Brown Theatre on the Martin Campus of Shelton State Community College, 9500 Greensboro Road. Tickets, \$17-adult; \$14-seniors (60+); \$10-students with I.D. and Shelton State employees; and \$5-Shelton State students, are available through Theatre Tuscaloosa’s Web site, www.theatretusc.com, or by calling the ticket office at 205.391.2277. Discounts for groups of 10 or more are also available. Tickets for all performances will be general seating.

A.R. Gurney’s “Love Letters,” which premiered on Broadway in 1989, tells the story of lawyer Andrew Makepeace Ladd III and artist Melissa Gardner, whose lives have been entwined since they met in second grade. “Love Letters” brings to life their correspondence over 50 years, chronicling hopes, dreams, and disappointments; from teenage valentines to the letters and postcards that mark the trials of adulthood, marriage, and divorce, right up to a still separated middle age. The story of their bittersweet relationship gradually unfolds from what was written, what is between the lines, and what was left unsaid.

Betsy Palmer (Melissa Gardner) is remembered for her 10 years as a panelist on the TV game show “I’ve Got a Secret,” but her acting credits from more than 50 years on stage, screen, and television are more impressive. Today, she spends much of her time performing in benefit productions of “Love Letters” across the county.

Palmer was born Patricia Betsy Hrunek and grew up in East Chicago, Indiana. After high school she attended her mother’s business college before enrolling at DePaul University. She majored in drama and worked to help pay for her education. “For three years I would take the train into Chicago in the morning, work during the day, attend classes at night, then board the train back home,” Palmer said.

After graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1949, Palmer joined a regional stock company, where she spent two years performing with touring professionals. Following the advice of Imogene Coca, Arthur Treacher, Burgess Meredith, and other actors with whom she performed, the young actress left Chicago with a new name, \$400, and a determination to “make it” in New York. Within a week she was cast in a TV soap opera.

Palmer's guest appearances on TV span 50 years, and include roles in most of the highly acclaimed drama programs from the "Golden Age" of television. For two years she was a guest star on "Knots Landing," and is familiar to viewers from her performances on "Murder She Wrote," "Columbo," "Newhart," "The Love Boat," and other series.

Film credits include "Mister Roberts" and "The Long Grey Line." Palmer is recognized by a later generation as the murderous mother in "Friday the 13th," Parts I and II, although it is not one of her favorite roles.

"Movies are more for the directors and cameramen, not the actors," she explained. "So much of film making is hurry-up-and-wait. There isn't as much opportunity for actors to have dominion over what they are doing, and they are at the mercy of the directors and editors."

Palmer is happiest performing on stage. Her Broadway credits include "Cactus Flower," "Same Time Next Year," and Tennessee Williams' "Eccentricities of a Nightingale." Equally at home on the musical stage, Palmer was featured in "South Pacific," "Gigi," "Mame," "The King and I," and "Peter Pan."

In 2002, Palmer appeared on the 50th anniversary broadcast of "The Today Show." She was one of the first "Today Girls" with Dave Garroway, the original host. She joined Barbara Walters, Jane Pauley, Phil Donahue, Bryant Gumbel, Hugh Downs, and other veterans of the popular, long-running program.

Jon Finch (Andrew Makepeace Ladd III) likes nothing better than to lure an apathetic student to a Broadway show and watch the transformation. A strong supporter of the arts, both regionally and nationally, Finch has made it his job to guide and encourage young people to appreciate, if not participate, in the fine arts arena.

Aware of Finch's abilities, University of Central Oklahoma President Roger Webb wasted no time bringing Finch to UCO to design and direct UCO's Broadway Tonight series. Over the last eleven years, Finch booked Broadway touring shows and an entourage of legendary Hollywood and Broadway performers into UCO's Mitchell Hall and Rose State College Performing Arts Theatre, providing a successful entertainment series welcomed by the surrounding community. Some of those entertainers and shows included Shirley Jones, Patti Page, John Astin, Carol Lawrence, Roger Williams, Melissa Manchester, Carol Channing, Debbie Reynolds, Betsy Palmer, Lucy Arnaz, "42nd Street," "South Pacific," "Hairspray," "Grease!," "Hello, Dolly!," "Sweeney Todd," "Blast!," "The Full Monty," "Titanic," "Fosse," and "Jekyll & Hyde."

A native of Bartlesville, Oklahoma, Finch's introduction to the world of entertainment was as a young man who thought traveling with a circus might help his attempts to write children's literature. He learned how to be a clown and spend a summer with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus clutching a dog named Beauregard. Despite the glamour and glitz of performing, Finch found that, in reality, his niche lay somewhere behind the scenes.

Five years of publicity and promotions work for the circus lead Finch to New York and the Broadway theater where he broke ground as a company manager for "Hello, Dolly!" with Carol Channing.

His work with Broadway shows gave him an appreciation for the long hours of rehearsals, learning lines, and the "ache" of a dancer's legs. Over the years, he toured with country with Shirley Jones in "Maggie Flynn," Chita

Rivera in “Sweet Charity,” and Robert Goulet in “The Happy Time.” But Finch never divorced himself from Oklahoma and days on the road and all motels looking the same. He signed on to teach English and journalism at Northeastern State University in Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

There, he was asked to design a cultural arts series that would link students of Northeastern with the community. Under Finch’s direction, the community enjoyed the talents and stature of Gregory Hines, Richard Thomas, Carol Channing, President Gerald Ford, President Jimmy Carter, Shirley Jones, Carol Lawrence, John F. Kennedy, Jr., and journalist Helen Thomas.

In 1997, Finch was chosen as the recipient of the Governor’s Arts Awards for national and statewide achievements in contributing to the cultural enrichment of the state of Oklahoma.

“Love Letters” opens Friday, February 12, 2010, at the Bean-Brown Theatre. Tickets may be purchased by calling 205.391.2277 or online at www.theatretusc.com.

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