

Three 'couples' to take turns in Gurney play

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By **KATHI SCRIZZI DRISCOLL**
STAFF WRITER
April 29, 2010

Cotuit Center for the Arts offers three performances of A.R. Gurney's "Love Letters," but the director says audiences each night won't be getting close to the same experience.

"It'd be like if you were having the Obamas and the Bushes" appear in the show on consecutive days, says director Melinda Gallant. "All three are very different."

Fundraisers for the center and the American Cancer Society of Cape Cod, the three performances feature different "couples" of local celebrities playing lifelong friends Melissa Gardner and Andrew Makepeace Ladd III as they write to each other over 50 years about their lives and feelings.

Gurney's 1988 play famously involves two actors sitting at desks reading the letters, and it's a format that perfectly suits the busy lives of "couples" Wendy Northcross, CEO of the Cape Cod Chamber of Commerce, and husband Van Northcross, marketing and community relations director for Cape Cod Healthcare; Maggie Van Sciver, president of Arts Foundation of Cape Cod, and philanthropist Bill Zammer, president of Cape Cod Restaurants Inc. (including Coonamessett Inn and Flying Bridge Restaurant in Falmouth); and NPR host Mindy Todd and state Sen. Rob O'Leary.

"These are busy people who don't have time to blink," Gallant says, comparing trying to get the group together to "wrangling cats." Rehearsals had to be "catch as catch can."

Gallant knows some people "roll their eyes" at the Gurney play, frequently performed seemingly everywhere by celebrities over the past two decades, and worry that it's dated. But she loves the window that the two-person script offers on a time and a friendship.

"If you really read it, it's about relationships and people as they age," she says. "What I think is interesting is that it could almost be e-mails back and forth."

When she had the idea to stage this benefit, Gallant immediately knew that she wanted to ask the Northcrosses to become this couple: "I love reader's theater and I love the sound of Van Northcross' little bit of Southern accent in his voice pattern. Wendy has a nice voice and a nice way about her."

Of the three duos, those two are the only real-life couple, and you can tell onstage, Gallant says. "It makes it sweeter — not an icky, gooey sweet, but there's a warmth you might not feel in people who don't have a relationship."

Gallant had thought about "Love Letters" as a fundraiser for a different organization a few years ago and had Zammer in mind then. He said yes when the opportunity came up again, and Gallant thought it would be ideal to add Van Sciver, considering her position in the arts community. It proved a good match.

"They're both very forceful personalities who bring something totally different to the table," she says. "I'm not saying they're not warm — the words are the words and some of the words are warm — but they're very direct about it. They do more than read it, and everyone brings their own flavor to it."

For the third "couple," Gallant had admired Todd's voice on the radio and enjoyed listening to O'Leary talk with his New England accent.

"If you shut your eyes, you almost think you're listening to a Kennedy, it's so strong," she says. "Obviously, it's not a Kennedy accent, it's a New England accent, but it's so strong."

A bonus: Together, Todd and O'Leary "bring a little bit of humor to this," Gallant says. "They're just reading the words, but they themselves kind of chuckle at the end."

Gallant is thrilled that each performance has ended up being so different.

As director, "I wanted to make sure I didn't stifle them in any way," she says. "I knew they'd bring their personalities to the table. Again, they're reading it, but it needs to come through in their own voices."

Although all six are used to speaking in front of people, Gallant says none has stage experience and all are a little nervous. She's been amused at the joking rivalry that built up between the three couples, including a video on the Cotuit center website in which they each contend that their version of "Love Letters" is the best so patrons should make sure to attend on their night.

"They're all so competitive," she says, laughing.

If you go: What: "Love Letters."

Written by: A.R. Gurney.

Starring: Wendy and Van Northcross (Friday);

Maggie Van Sciver and Bill Zammer (Saturday);

and Mindy Todd and Rob O'Leary (Sunday). When: 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday

and 2 p.m. Sunday.

Where: Cotuit Center for the Arts,

4404 Route 28.

Tickets: \$50 for show and post-show reception with the stars; \$30 for show only. Reservations: 508-428-0669

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