North Carolina Theater Stories

An Oral History of the Gilbert Theater ~ Part XIII

September 24, 2015

~~~~~~~~

[Musical introduction---gong sounds three times]

Jason: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. This is Jason Wetzel once again from scenic downtown Fayetteville, with Lynn Pryer, the creative genius of the Gilbert Theater. Hi, Lynn.

Lynn: Hi, Jason. I'm glad to be here. Here we are with show number whatever-it-is. [Jason laughs] And aren't we having fun going through our old scrapbook?

Jason: Absolutely.

Lynn: That huge ledger's chock-full and every day I sit there, but it's so big I had to put my head down like this and look at it at a ninety-degree angle. I was so glad when you said to me the other day---I said, "I'm going to paste these things back in here," and you said, "No, no, no. This isn't acid-free paper; we need to have all of these things from the huge binder for the first eight years of the Gilbert history out of there"---in what kind of sleeve?

Jason: Archival-quality, acid-free protection.

Lynn: Then they'll go in a box and so on. So I have been very happy. I have been tearing things out willy-nilly without any thought of saving the original scrapbook. I've been having more fun this week looking at this thing and that thing.

You know, over the years we had so many responses in the paper. The Observer has been a friend to us from day one. Perhaps I talked about this weeks ago; I'll say it again. Opening night twenty years ago, almost twenty-one years ago, we had no track record. Nobody knew us. Opening night no one had even heard of us. They hadn't been to a Gilbert play. And yet I called the paper and pitched what we were doing and they sent one of their top writers and photographers and gave us a full-page of colored photos and we were off---off and running.

Jason: Marvelous.

Lynn: So, ever since then and to this very day---and we are opening "Young Frankenstein" on Friday, the musical. Steve just left this very studio. I've been wanting to say "studio" for months now, because, you know, a.k.a. "dining room." It's also a studio, right, James?
James: Right; right.

Lynn: "Studio" has a real romance about that word. Just saying it gives me just a thrill. [Laughter] Anyway, we won't talk about that. Now, the other thing I have right here is a letter to the editor that was sent in to The Observer. This was November 23, 1996. She had just seen "Friendly Fire," and we were talking about that last week, weren't we? And this is what she wrote:

"Fayetteville Observer Times"--I guess she must have lived here for years---
"Attention, Editorial Page Editor," so on and so forth

"Dear Sir: A premiere production of the highest caliber is now being featured at the Gilbert Theater. It is the play, "Friendly Fire." Mr. Lynn Pryer, creator of this unique theater, is to be congratulated for producing this brilliant play written by Chris Canfield. The three main characters give strong performances, as well as the one supporting role. You will be drawn in by their skill and be mesmerized. Each dramatic scene reveals their troubles, culminating in the dramatization of this actual tragic incident."

If you recall, it was a true story, Jason. "... This is virtual theater, only you don't need special head gear. You just need to be there...." This is before the Internet. [Laughs] And it's signed, "Carol Canaan."

Thank you, Carol, wherever are, you came. You didn't miss a play for years and years. We so appreciated your patronage.

Here's another letter, a different kind. This is a personal letter to the members of the Gilbert Theater. When we did that in June 1994---actually that date is wrong, but I can't read it. We'll forget about the date, but it was years and years and years ago. And we had done a benefit---I think I mentioned to you---for an orphanage for Mother Theresa's orphans in Bangladesh. And I got this message from Sister Martinette Rivers:

"Dear Members of the Gilbert Theater: Greetings and gratitude from our poor in Bangladesh and me. Although gratitude isn't the greatest of all virtues, I think it is..." I can't read her writing, but anyway, it's not the greatest of the virtues, it is important. Anyway, Jason, we might just simply say right now, we had a lovely letter from Sister Martinette Rivers thanking us for the contribution to that orphanage.

Jason: From Bangladesh.

Lynn: From Bangladesh.

James: Written in cursive, I imagine.

Lynn: And written in cursive and I needed my magnifying glass. But nevertheless, we are moving right along, and I've chosen another play in that early period, Jason, that was a real show-stopper: "Keely and Du" by Jane Martin. Now I'm telling you, what we were able to do with that eleven-and-a-half-by-thirteen-feet on that stage. And we're going to look at these photos in just a minute and describe them to our audience. But the story goes like this:

It's about abortion. And let's see what our director says about it. "Director's notes." This is our wonderful director, Marcela Casals. "'Keely and Du' is more than a
play about abortion or about the logic or illogic of either side. It is about choice; that human quality which allows us to chart a life. We use strange phrasing when we speak of choice; 'I had no choice,' 'You have no choice,' 'I had to,' 'I will not,' 'I cannot,' 'I was told to,' 'I will not allow' and on and on, and so on. We are constantly justifying, clarifying, excusing or blaming our choices. We surrender to obstacles and present them to others. We impose our choices on others and blame others for our choices, all in the name of everything from selfishness to fear, and fear to righteousness and love. This play does not give us an answer, but it does illustrate our relationship to the human quality of choice and the struggle that ensues when our choices come into conflict."

Thank you, Marcela, for that wonderful note.

Well, our play set in---this is one of those times when the setting was absolutely perfect. Now we refer to the space downstairs as the basement. Well, it was a basement, but it was also the garage, because in those days, mid-1920s, these huge old cars came around the back and came in there. They didn't want those unseemly things---in those days cars were so kind of new---taking up the beautiful look of a house like this one, which is Tudor English Romantic Revival. And so those cars were down there, out of sight, and so, it's a basement, it's a garage, but nevertheless, our stage, eleven-and-a-half-by-thirteen I'm forever saying.

We were able to do that so well because the play was set in a basement. Why? Because a woman, a pregnant woman, had been kidnapped. Her name was Keely. And she was divorced from her husband. And her husband came back into the house one night and raped her. And that rape resulted in a pregnancy, and she did not want to carry a child that was the result of rape. So she had gone to a clinic to have an abortion. And when she is approaching; I guess I kind of forget. She's in the parking lot moving toward the clinic, she's grabbed; something put over her head. She's thrown into a car and driven away.

She's kidnapped and taken to a house and put in this basement. And the group that had kidnapped her were pro-life---I'm sure the very ones today who are shooting doctors who perform abortions, who are fire-bombing abortion clinics, who are getting around the law a dozen different ways all over the country. We know the story about the right for women to choose as being approached in all ways to keep her from making those choices.

Well, in this case, she is kidnapped, put in this basement and chained to the bed, the idea being that she is going to be kept there until she delivers. What kind of premise is this for a story? And there's a preacher who is behind this whole thing. And so our wonderful Rhonda Brocki played Keely. She wakes up from the drug or whatever in this bed in a nightgown in this basement, and there is a nurse. Her name is Du, played by our incomparable Joyce Lipe. And the nurse is there to spend much of twenty-four hours with her, to see to her needs as a pregnant person and so on. The preacher comes in, and of course, Keely is very upset and pulls on the chains and finds out she's chained there.

Well, the play goes on and the preacher comes in and tries to change her mind and all; even brings in her ex-husband, who had raped her. He then comes in and sits on the bed and says, to her, "I'm sorry I did that, and let's see the baby come to term and we'll get back together." Well, she didn't want to be around him anymore. He had raped her; she was carrying his child. So, he kisses her hand and Keely grabs his hand and gives it a very vicious bite. He screams and---oh, before this happens, it's Keely's birthday, and so
Du is going to have a cake and brought her a dress to wear; something different to wear. Put on the dress, have a little party, have a cake, celebrate her birthday.

Well, the dress had been brought in on a wire hanger and put there on the chair, and then the hand is bitten and the former husband goes running out, and Du goes with him to see to his hand; she's a nurse. Well, Keely sees the wire hanger and you can guess what happens. She undoes it and in the darkness performs the abortion on herself. And as they come back in, she's bleeding and in terrible shape and will probably bleed to death. And they very skillfully turn the sheet over so that there was blood. It was beautifully choreographed, the whole part. And then they get her out of there and get her to a doctor and her life is saved.

The final scene, Du is behind bars, and she has had a stroke and she's speaking in this kind of broken---and Keely has come to visit her. And Keely's fine and the baby is no longer, and the play ends when Du—who was pro-choice, as you can see—and Du is unable to speak much anymore, but she is able to say one word. And she says to Keely. She's standing behind these bars, looking out at Keely, and Du says, "Why-hy-hy? And then Keely looks at her and says, "Why?"

[Music trails out]