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Meredith Baxter and Michael Gross are reuniting to star in 'Love Letters' at the Bucks County Playhouse

- By Keith Loria

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Meredith Baxter is starring in "Love Letters" at Bucks County Playhouse.

For seven seasons, Meredith Baxter and Michael Gross played liberal ex-hippies Steven and Elyse Keaton on the NBC juggernaut, "Family Ties," providing sound parental advice, and plenty of humor, to the millions who watched each week.

Their chemistry on screen was superb, and the veteran actors have continued a friendship that has lasted nearly 30 years since the show's run ended in 1989.

The pair will reunite at the Bucks County Playhouse April 4- 8 to perform A.R. Gurney's critically acclaimed two-hander, "Love Letters."

The play is one any romantic will love. When Andrew accepts an invitation to Melissa's birthday party, and she writes a thank-you note, a correspondence is born that will last more than 50 years. Though their relationship constantly changes, these pen pals remain each other's most trusted confidantes.

"Love Letters" is a two-person show that is often done by actors who have some association with one another and this isn't the first time Baxter and Gross have appeared on stage together for Gurney's play. In fact, over the years, they have teamed up for it about 90 times.

But they've both done the show with others, as well. Gross has performed in "Love Letters" opposite Adrienne Barbeau, his wife, Elza Bergeron, and Karen Grassle, while Baxter has done it with a handful of other actors, including Richard Thomas (of "The Waltons"), David Ogden Stiers (of "M*A*S*H") and John Rubinstein (who played Baxter's ex on the 1970s drama, "Family").

"The play never changes, but the experience one gets out of it will change each time you see it with different actors," Baxter says. "When we do it, people just have this reaction of seeing Steven and Elyse back together. But while that may get people to the theater, my hope is that they will fall in love with these characters."

Gross adds that every time he does the show with Baxter the show is different than the last time.

“We bring different things to it, that’s the fun of live theater,” he says. “It depends on what our state of mind is, what we had to eat that day and who we are that day and in that moment.”

Although the two actors stay in touch by email and text, Baxter doesn’t think she has ever sent a letter to Gross, though she notes he is something of an old-fashioned letter writer. The actor admits that is accurate.

“In the days of email, I do it less, but for certain things — thank yous or condolences, I still write a note, get out an envelope and put a stamp on it, and put it in the mailbox,” Gross says. “I think that’s still kind of special in this day of electronic mail.”

Gross actually has all of the letters his father wrote his mother during World War II, and he looks forward to going through them all with his family. He also has a letter he wrote to his grandmother while in college. That’s something that he shares with his “Love Letters” character.

“In the play, I have a long speech about how important it is to put thoughts on paper,” he says. “You can take a letter and keep it and read it again and again over the years any time you want and revisit it often.”

Baxter feels one of the reasons she and Gross work so well together is that they were both born on the exact same day and year — June 21, 1947.

“The stars were aligned in some way and we share a lot of similar instincts,” she says. “He is much healthier emotionally than I am, and is very wise and loving and is one of the most compassionate people I know. He is an intellect but doesn’t laud it over anybody, and he’s so funny. He just made me laugh so many times over seven years.”

The entire “Family Ties” cast, Baxter says, was something special, throwing some love to Michael J. Fox, Justine Bateman and Tina Yothers, who played the three children (Alex, Mallory and Jennifer) on the show.

“We just liked each other so much,” Baxter says. “We were a good mesh. We were well cast, even though I don’t think Justine looked like any of us — we found her under some gorgeous rock somewhere — and there was a common respect among us. It helped develop this show into something lovely.”

For Gross, he knew the “Family Ties” cast was working well almost from the beginning, though it was about halfway through the first season when the writers began to relax through the family dynamics a bit more and the show became what it did.

“We all needed a little time to find our feet and in some ways, I took it for granted,” he says. “I had been mostly a stage actor up until that time so I did not know how special we were compared to other shows. You don’t know you’re making history at the time.”

Both Baxter and Gross have continued acting over the decades. She’s done a lot of theater and Gross’ current projects include a recurring role on Showtime’s “The Affair,” and a guest star role on television’s “AP Bio.” He also has several films coming out in 2018 and updates fans regularly on his Facebook page, “ActorMichaelGross.”

He and Baxter are happy their schedules still allow them to get together once in a while to do “Love Letters.”

Gross says there’s a shorthand he shares with Baxter, which makes their coupling so great together on stage.

“We have an intimate knowledge of each other — our lives, our personalities, our way of working,” he said. “She can anticipate the way I’m going to pull my chair on stage. Meredith and I can talk to each other about our performances and give helpful notes because we know each other so well. That magic comes about through hard work.”

"Love Letters" will be performed at the Bucks County Playhouse, 70 S. Main St., New Hope, Pennsylvania, April 4-8. Tickets cost \$40-\$55; www.bcptheater.org; 215-862-2121.