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Big star in a local show is becoming less commonplace



Sally Struthers arrives at the premiere of “Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life” on Friday, Nov. 18, 2016, in Los Angeles. Associated Press

By NEAL ZOREN, Daily Times Columnist

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Sally Struthers appearing live in a local show has me cheering.

Not only because her career includes a key role in an iconic television program, but because she makes me nostalgic for the era of the headliner, a performer who makes you want to see a show just to see them.

Struthers arrives Wednesday in “Clue: On Stage” at New Hope’s Bucks County Playhouse. She’s in a cast that features others with significant stage credits, Erin Dilly for one, but Sally is the one almost everyone’s heard of, and that makes her presence particularly exciting. Though her career boasts more, it’s enjoyable to have “All in the Family’s” Gloria Stivic and “The Gilmore Girls’s” Babette Dell right in front you, albeit playing an entirely different character, in “Clue’s” case, part detective and part murder suspect.

Stars used to come through Philadelphia quite regularly.

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Before Skype and Face Time, TV and movie folk would come in advance of a picture to do one-on-one interviews with reporters. In my time, I met Bette Davis, John Wayne, James Stewart, Charlton Heston, Anthony Quinn, Lauren Bacall, and newer stars such as Tom Cruise and Susan Sarandon. I was the first to interview “Designing Women’s” Annie Potts.

Also, tours coming to the Forrest and Merriam Theatres were usually headlined by stars from stage, screen, and television so that some of the glamor and familiarity they radiate was shared by the local audience.

Today tours coming to the Academy of Music, or to the Forrest, rarely have a star name attached to them. Philadelphia is low on the touring chain, so even if a star begins a tour, he or she is rarely it by the time it arrived in our midst. Fine actors, some with impressive Broadway credits, appear but few stars. I can’t think of one that came in anything all season.

Sally Struthers changes that.

Summer stock seems to lure the bona fide famous out of the Hollywood or New York environs and into ours.

Last year, Bucks County Playhouse attracted other TV greats such as Patricia Richardson, Jessica Walter, and Susan Sullivan. Local stages have local stars, and some, like Mary Martello, would be a constant toast of New York if she worked on Broadway, but it’s fun to see someone as recognizable as Struthers up close in all her luster. (Incidentally, Martello’s next role in Mama Rose in “Gypsy” at Philadelphia’s Arden Theatre, and in the cast is Monica Horan, a Delaware County native known for playing Amy McDougald-Barone, wife to Robert, on “Everybody Loves Raymond.”)

Sally Struthers was first noticed opposite Jack Nicholson in “Five Easy Pieces” and found lasting fame as Gloria Stivic, Archie Bunker’s trendily liberal daughter, in TV’s groundbreaking “All in the Family.” She continued her career on stage, often as a touring headliner in “Grease” and “Annie,” and returned to television in “The Gilmore Girls,” last year resurrected by Netflix after a six-season absence from its run on the CN. She also appeared on perhaps my favorite program of its type, “Maron,” a hilarious podcast featuring Marc Maron on www.wtfpod.com.

Struthers is one who likes to think in present tense. She understands the significance of “All in the Family” but considers it “old news” when it comes to her life which, after all, has gone on for 35 years since the program’s heyday and even a spinoff in which she played a divorced Gloria going back to school to forge her own career.

More recently, she provided laughs and energy as Babette, the gossipy, often suggestive neighbor to Lorelai and Rory Gilmore on “The Gilmore Girls.” You remember, the one who was once pushed from a moving car, treats her cat as if it was a child, and referred to a rock band’s guitarist by saying, “Yum, yum, he’s like a long-haired cake.”

In “Clue: On Stage,” a musical theatrical version of the popular board game, Struthers plays Mrs. Peacock, a guest at a dinner in which she, five other guests, and two servants quickly learn their host has been killed and have to solve the mystery of how it happened and whodunnit, the “who” obviously being one of them.

As mentioned, Struthers is the headliner, the performer whose reputation, popularity, and proven talent help to lure folks to the Bucks County Playhouse seats.

She is part of an ensemble cast that includes others who would be household names in a fairer world.

One is Hunter Foster, who has played important leads on Broadway and comes to “Clue: On Stage” as a director and co-writer. Another is Erin Dilly, who has made an impression as the female lead in several Broadway shows, including “Chitty Chitty Bang Bang.” Then there’s William Youmans, one of most reliable character actors in New York with dozens of credits and several visits to Philadelphia in touring shows.

I’m one of those fans who enjoys seeing stars, especially the ones who have maintained careers for more than 40 years as Sally Struthers has. It’s good to see what someone we knew as a twenty-something looks like now that she’s approaching 70. Best of all, you always see that spark of talent, timing, and knowhow that led to stardom.

Sally Struthers and “Clue: Stage” begin performing at the Bucks County Playhouse on Wednesday and keep working at their mystery through Saturday, May 20.