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DAILY TIMES

MOVIES & TV

Television: ‘Family Ties’ reunion in Bucks County; Roseanne returns to TV



In this image released by ABC, Roseanne Barr, left, and John Goodman appear in a scene from the reboot of “Roseanne,” premiering on Tuesday at 8 p.m. Associated Press

By Neal Zoren, Digital First Media Television Columnist

Posted: 03/25/18, 1:23 PM EDT | Updated: 34 secs ago

Neither Meredith Baxter nor Michael Gross had burning ambitions to be actors.

Despite coming from a show business family and being raised in L.A., Baxter says she saw how unhappy her mother, “Hazel’s” Whitney Blake, was in her career and wanted something different for herself.

Gross, for a lark, did one play in high school, but headed off the University of Illinois campus in his hometown of Chicago and gave little thought to where that would lead.

“I didn’t have to choose a major right away, so I’d thought I’d sample a few subjects and see what interested me.”

Fate stepped in for both Baxter and Gross. They not only became actors, but Baxter became sort of an audience sweetheart in TV series such as “Bridget Loves Bernie” and “Family” before she and Gross teamed to become the iconic Keaton parents on the classic program, “Family Ties,” which starred them and a young Michael J. Fox.

The two, who incidentally have the same birthday — June 21, 1947 — pair up again next week in A.R. Gurney’s comedy, “Love Letters,” at New Hope’s Bucks County Playhouse from April 4-8.

Bucks County Playhouse is hosting a string of TV greats because this weekend, from Friday through Sunday” from “The Mary Tyler Moore Show” appears in a comedy, “A Man and His Prostate.”

Baxter, candid and thoughtful in her conversation, corrected me when I asked when she chose a career as an actress.

“I have to stop you there,” she said by telephone from her L.A. home, “I never chose to be an actress. In fact, I’d decided against it.

“I guess you can say I became an actress out of love for my children. I had married young, to a man who is not in show business. He was a decent guy. Nothing was particularly wrong with either of us. But we were young and not suited to be together. It was one of those times when life takes over, and you have to adapt.

“I had two children and needed a job. My mother is an actress, and my stepfather was an agent. I asked him if he could find me something to do, a job. Anything would be fine as long as it helped me support my children.

“Something that simple spiraled. The work he could get me was acting. I had small guest roles. It was hard at first, but I realized something that went beyond receiving encouragement. I saw how people cared about acting, and I began to care. What started as a practical idea to make money began to mean something. I was enjoying myself and became more interested in acting and all it involves. As I worked, I developed, and the full experience meant something to me.”

Honesty, and an ability to stop and clarify anything that might be misunderstood, are part of her flow of conversation. At first, I thought she was being careful, but then I realized she just wanted everything to be accurate and right. It impressed as being part of her being.

It also explained something to me. From the time I saw Meredith Baxter on “Bridget Loves Bernie,” and especially during the tenure opposite Sada Thompson and James Broderick on

“Family,” I have felt a warmth for her any time she appears on screen. Hearing the precision with which she expresses herself, I realized the same sincerity, the same insistence on truth informs her acting and draws me to her characters.

Acting came as an accident, almost a surprise, for Michael Gross.

He had done that mentioned high school show and had no intention to audition or seek parts, especially at University of Illinois Chicago, which had a theater department. Lack of intention was thrown aside when Gross bumped into one of his high school classmates on the UIC campus. She had been a lead in that high school production and was studying acting. She told Gross she remembered him from the show and that he should audition for a production of Arthur Miller’s “The Crucible.”

“She said they needed men for the company, and it would be great if I would try out. I had one of the ‘what the heck’ moments and auditioned.

“In high school, I was unfazed by being in the show. It was a student activity. ‘The Crucible’ was different. I was a dilettante, not an actor, but I admired everything everyone was doing, and I was praised for what I was doing. The bug that didn’t nip me bit me hard this time.

At UIC, there was a teacher, the director of ‘The Crucible,’ William Raffeld, and everything begins there. I am so serious, I go from UIC to Yale for graduate school. I’m two years behind Meryl Streep, and my classmate is Sigourney Weaver. It all just happened and continue to happen although now that I have grandchildren, I find I want to have more time to be home with them and give them the attention I worry my career kept me from giving my children.”

Gross went to New York after Yale. I saw him in his Broadway debut, playing a Berlin drag queen in “Bent” starring Richard Gere.

“The producers wanted Richard because they knew they’d have a male audience but wanted to attract women, Richard accomplished both.

“For me, it was an interesting time. I call home to Chicago and tell my parents I’m going to be on Broadway. My father says they will fly out to see me, but then I have this thought, ‘I’m playing a drag queen, a flamboyant one at that. Maybe I should wait until my next show to have them come, especially since I knew I would be in ‘Bent’ for only a short time. I had an off-Broadway show I committed to before ‘Bent’ and left to do it.”

Gross says one of the best parts of doing “Love Letters” opposite Baxter is they worked together so long, they know how to anticipate the way each will read line or make a gesture.”

“There’s comfort and trust in that,” Gross adds. “I have the same working relationship with Michael Fox. I did a guest shot on ‘Spin City,’ and could tell exactly how he would deliver his dialogue.”

Gross says he sees Fox when he comes to New York.

“Live Letters” is a series of letters sent back and forth between two friends for 35 years between childhood and old age. The notes start as simple ‘thank you’s’ and apologies but blossom into a personal and, at time, intimate correspondence.

Both Baxter and Gross point out that author Gurney specifies the letters be read rather than performed.

“Meredith and I take that under advisement,” Gross says. “We developed and act the characters of Melissa Gardner and Andrew Ladd III. It’s only natural to do that.”

“Melissa is less disciplined than Andrew. She has her share of scrapes. I have this sense she was everything he wanted to be while he offers her maturity and stability. The letters cover a lot of rites of passage and show the misunderstandings people might have when their young and the wisdom that sets in as they mature and have been adapted to so many changes.”

“This is the fifth time Meredith and I have done this show. We know what A.R. said, but we get charged up, and we have such symbiosis as performers, we give a lot to the characters.”