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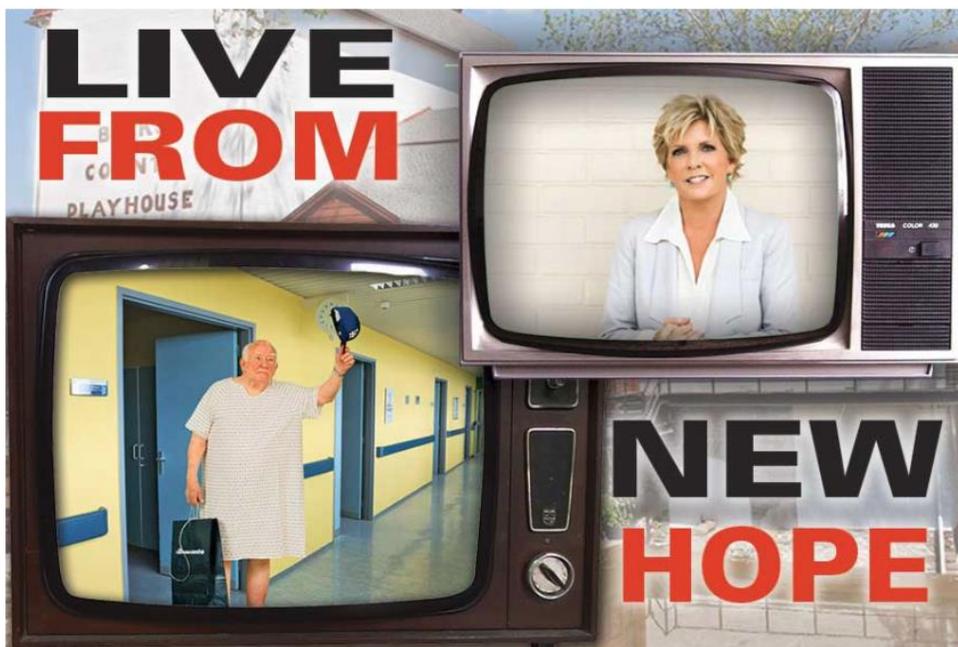
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FEATURES —

LIVE FROM NEW HOPE: TELEVISION ICONS TAKE THE STAGE IN BUCKS COUNTY PRODUCTIONS



By Larry Nichols

Stars from classic and beloved television shows and film will star in a pair of theatrical shows at the Bucks County Playhouse.

The first up is Emmy-winning actor and television icon Ed Asner, starring in “A Man and His Prostate,” a one-man show written by Philadelphia native and nine-time Emmy winner Ed Weinberger. Based on a real experience, the stage comedy is an unflinching and heartwarming examination of Weinberger’s encounter with pain, relief and the retrieval of his manhood when his vacation in Italy takes an unexpected turn after he is rushed to a hospital for prostate-cancer surgery. Faced with an operation he doesn’t want, in a medical system he doesn’t understand, he decides he won’t take any of life’s injustices sitting down.

"It's wonderfully funny," Asner told PGN about the show, running March 30-April 1. "It's written beautifully enough and we keep them entertained the whole time. Women are the hardest laughers of all."

Asner said that while the show overflows with humor, it also touches on some less-than-pleasant facts about prostate cancer. "The salient point is, a man dies of prostate cancer in this country every 16 minutes."

Asner has portrayed a wide range of characters, both comedic and dramatic, throughout his long and storied career, ranging from kind-hearted souls to irrepressible scoundrels. Asner said he's never shied away from taking roles that are the opposite of his personality.

"I'm quite willing to take as big a stretch as possible," he said. "When I was cast as Axel Jordache in 'Rich Man, Poor Man,' I loved the book and I love the character. But I didn't think I was right for it. Yet it's one of the characters I'm best known for. I've scored better in comedy than I have in drama, so I guess I should keep doing what I've learned to do well. It's worked out well for me playing both sides of the street. I have fans from both areas and I would hate to limit myself."

Two actors from the classic series "Family Ties" are reuniting on the Bucks County Playhouse stage from April 4-8. Meredith Baxter and Michael Gross are starring in "Love Letters," the story of two friends, Andrew and Melissa, who sustain a romantic friendship through written correspondence over the course of 30 years.

Baxter and Gross spent a number of seasons portraying loving former hippie parents, Steven and Elyse Keaton on "Family Ties." Out actress Baxter said that she knows the expectations that audiences will bring to "Love Letters," even though the characters have little in common with the Keatons.

"I love to be working with Michael," Baxter said of her former castmate. "When people see names linked that they are familiar with, they might often come with those expectations. And sometimes you come to see those characters, but my expectation is that they will stay to see the play."

Baxter said she hopes the play also draws audiences who have never seen or probably even heard of "Family Ties," which she would view as a good thing.

"I think people bring more to the table when they aren't coming with a predisposed idea of what they want to see or whatever it is they're looking for, and come see this play. So you'll recognize the performer but you will stay and see [something different]."

"Love Letters" has been performed nationally by a who's who of notable actors. Baxter said the story is what keeps talented performers signing up to play these characters.

"The writing is so rich," she said. "The characterizations are wonderful, moving and hilariously funny."

Baxter added that she feels a kinship with the character of Melissa.

"We have a shared childhood in some way; a certain kind of unhappiness that you recognize and you feel like kindred spirits in a way," she said. "Michael and I have performed this many times together and what is so satisfying is that the audience will take this journey with us. I believe that if they stay and care about these characters, they will go where we go. Just know that it is a very worthy trip that they take with us."

Since classic sitcom revivals are all the rage these days, we thought we'd ask Baxter about the possibility of maybe ...

But she cut us off with a decisive answer before we even got the question out.

“Nope! Nope! Not at all.”

All right then. Moving on.

We also asked her if coming out, which she did in 2009, had any noticeable effect on her career.

“It’s hard to say,” she replied. “There’s so much ageism in the industry that it’s hard to know why they’re saying no. My career kind of slowed down anyway, which is not unusual for women. So I don’t know whether I would chalk it up to ageism or the fact that I was a lesbian. They don’t usually tell you these things. It just gets a little cooler for whatever reason.”

Bucks County Playhouse presents “A Man and His Prostate” starring Ed Asner March 30-April 1, and “Love Letters” starring Michael Gross and Meredith Baxter April 4-8, 70 S. Main St., New Hope. For more information or tickets, call 215-862-2121 or visit www.bcptheater.org.