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The Intelligencer

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‘Family Ties’ parents Meredith Baxter, Michael Gross reunite for ‘Love Letters’ at Bucks County Playhouse



The actors have appeared together multiple times in the A.R. Gurney play, which chronicles a 50-year friendship through the letters, cards and notes they shared with each other.

Meredith Baxter and Michael Gross can't tell you for certain how many times they've co-starred together in "Love Letters," A.R. Gurney's Pulitzer Prize-nominated 1988 play that's told entirely through 50 years of written correspondence between two childhood friends.

When you've worked together as often as these two have, it's easy to lose count.

The actors, who will be linked forever as parents Elyse and Steven Keaton on NBC's hit '80s sitcom "Family Ties," have continued to share stage and screen projects in the ensuing three decades, perhaps most notably in "Love Letters," which runs for eight performances Wednesday through Sunday at the [Bucks County Playhouse](#) in New Hope.

They've both performed the play with other actors — too many to remember them all. In separate telephone interviews, Baxter mentioned doing the show with Richard Thomas, Jeffrey Tambor, John Rubinstein and the late David Ogden Stiers, among others, while Gross recalled co-starring in it with Adrienne Barbeau and "a number of other actresses through the years."

Inevitably, though, they always come back to each other for the play, which they remember first performing together at the Canon Theatre in Beverly Hills as part of a [565-show run](#) from 1990 to 1991 that featured a revolving door of big-name actors, 128 in all.

“I’ve done it with people I’ve known peripherally and others I’ve known pretty well,” Baxter said. “The thing about Michael is we have so much shared history, and these characters, Melissa and Andy, have years and years and years of shared history. That just makes it richer.”

At this point, the opportunity to co-star with her old TV husband (which the pair did most recently last summer at the Totem Pole Playhouse near Gettysburg), is as much a lure as the chance to repeatedly play Melissa, a character she adores.

“The attraction is twofold,” Baxter said. “One, I would probably go anywhere to work with Michael, and the other is I just love walking around in Melissa’s shoes. You know, she’s a funny character, a loving character ... and she *wants*. You’ve just got to love how much she wants. She tries everything, she’s just so misguided sometimes.

“Her engagement with him, how much she cares about him. They’re those two ships who can’t really meet when they need to meet. It’s Romeo and Juliet. But it’s not their families, it’s just life keeping them apart.”

And the two characters are definitely apart, even though they share the stage the entire time. The actors are instructed not to interact, or even look at each other, as their characters read the letters, cards and notes they’ve sent to each other through decades of crisis, triumph and heartbreak.

“This play is a real sweep of the history of two human beings and their relationship,” said Gross, who compared the familiarity he feels working with Baxter to that of an Olympic ice-dancing team. “I begin to think of Andy and Melissa as soulmates because they complete each other. He’s the responsible, solid part of the world that she can’t seem to access, and she’s the carefree, living-life-by-the-seat-of-her-pants, full-speed ahead that Andy can never quite be.

“Together, they make an interesting human being, filling each other’s gaps. I love that about them. That’s why I think they’re perfect for each other in some ways.”

In the play, the friendship between Melissa and Andy begins in second grade. In real life, Baxter and Gross did not meet until they worked together on “Family Ties,” which premiered in September 1982. But they’d actually been connected since birth — they were born on the same day, June 21, 1947, one of multiple little things the actors quickly discovered they had in common, Gross said.

Maybe that’s why they hit it off so quickly.

“Meredith was very welcoming,” Gross said. “I was primarily a stage actor, with very little experience in television, and Meredith already had several successful series. She was a commodity in LA and

Hollywood on television in a way I was not. But she was a great teacher in the way she handled the work, and I never felt she was judging me, like ‘Who’s this new guy, I never heard of him before.’”

On the contrary, Baxter said Gross “really became my best friend right away,” and it stayed that way during the show’s seven-year run.

She recalled Gross insisting on memorizing his lines early in the week, even though the scripts would often change by the time they were ready to shoot in front of the live audience on Friday.

“He was always one to know his lines before I did,” Baxter said. “I’d see him put his script away, he’d put it in the oven, on the kitchen set, I’d put mine in the silverware drawer. But he would get so upset because he’d commit himself to the lines, then they’d come in with a brand new script on Wednesday. I’d go, ‘See, don’t learn them yet.’ You have to go with the cycle of how often the writers change what you’re doing.”

Michael J. Fox became the breakout star on “Family Ties,” but America fell in love with the entire family. In separate TV Guide lists of the 50 greatest [TV moms](#) and [dads](#) of all time, Elyse Keaton finished 15th and Steven Keaton 12th.

Maybe that’s why audiences still get a kick out of seeing them together 30 years later. They’ve played opposite each other in a pair of recent TV Christmas movies, “Naughty or Nice” (2012) and “Becoming Santa” (2015) and, of course, keep coming back to “Love Letters.”

“The sweet thing is that people come to see it because they loved ‘Family Ties,’ they loved Steven and Elyse, but they will stay to see an extraordinary play,” Baxter said. “There are moments in the play that I can just feel the audience go, ‘oh,’ when they hear something that happens or something that was done, and it’s not what they wanted. The audience wants this couple together, so anything that’s impeding that is very painful for the audience to take in.”

Both actors acknowledge that the construct of the play — two characters sitting and reading letters — could potentially scare off audiences, but promise that there’s nothing boring about it.

“Because it’s so funny, and these characters are so vulnerable,” Baxter said. “Some people don’t necessarily want to come — ‘Ooh, you’re just going to read letters, that’s not very exciting’ — but it’s so much more than you’d ever expect because it’s so concentrated. Everything goes into our faces, our bodies, our expressions. It’s easy to underestimate just how much can be expressed because we take it all to the audiences.”

Gross said he’s drawn to the fact that he discovers something new in the characters and writing every time he does it, adding that the parts of the play he appreciated when he did “Love Letters” in his 40s are not the same things now that he’s 70.

“It’s amazing how full it is,” said Gross, whose recent projects include playing a 6-foot-3 elf in “Noelle,” written and directed by Marc Lawrence, a writer on “Family Ties.” “At first, you might think, ‘Oh, this

could be tedious.' It's not at all. It's amazing, the power of the piece, because the writing is so extremely well done.

"These are people who are really in love with each other and can't live without each other. It's a very complex relationship. I just hope every time we do it, we can do it justice."

If You Go

"Love Letters"

When: 2 and 7:30 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday; 8 p.m. Friday; 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday; 2 p.m. Sunday

Where: Bucks County Playhouse, 70 S. Main St., New Hope

Tickets: \$40-\$60

Information: 215-862-2121; bcptheater.org