

*An Oral History of the Gilbert Theater ~ Part XVII*

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[Musical introduction---gong sounds three times]

Jason: Good evening. This is Jason Wetzel from scenic downtown Fayetteville, with Lynn Pryer, founder of the Gilbert Theater. Good evening, Lynn. What do you have in store for us this evening?

Lynn: Good evening, Jason, it's wonderful to have you back. You were on vacation.

Jason: Yes, sir; yes, sir.

Lynn: And we haven't had a history session together for a couple of weeks. I'm glad that you're back and I'm glad that we're talking about---I think more or less in chronological order. I sometimes have to plead the fifth on memory, but please, I know that you don't hesitate to tell me when I'm saying something for the third or fourth time, but I hope no more than that. Hey, right now, I'd like you to look over, if you would, onto the buffet, and what are you seeing, in detail?

Jason: I see in detail a series of pen-and-ink portraits done of people that I do not recognize.

Lynn: But they're actors and actresses.

Jason: Actors and actresses; there is one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten of these pen-and-inks, roughly about ten-by-fifteen-inches.

Lynn: So, they're good-sized; wonderful. That's enough. Thank you, you can put it back now, thank you, [laughs].

James: You can tell they're from the 90s; the haircuts.

Lynn: Yes, that's very true; that's very true. James is identifying---being a pictorial archaeologist---looking at the haircuts. Yes, this is all from the 90s. When we first started in '94, we did not have money for photography, and I asked a rare actor or actress to

come to the Gilbert with their black-and-white, glossy head shots with their resumes on the back; all those professional things. We didn't have much of that then; a few did, as I remember. But when we were first starting, I said, "We have to have a lobby of the theater."

Picture this: We're in the house for those first eight years. During good weather, I would put an easel or two out on the front porch and display these drawings of these actors who were in the current play. Well, who did these? Her name was Eleanor Howell and she was an art teacher; she taught my grandson wonderful stuff. She was wonderful; delightful personality. I loved going over to her house with my grandchildren. I just found Christian's drawing of him. He was in "Midsummer Night's Dream" with his sibs, as they say, Ashley and Maxwell; wonderful, playing the parts of fairies. So, we had their sketches made. If you were in a play, you got a sketch.

So, Eleanor would come over here and take one person at a time. When we were rehearsing downstairs, when it was inside the house at the Black Box, she would bring somebody up here and sketch and talk with them. I remember I sat in on some of those over the years and she would start doing some of these. It was all free-hand; she didn't use photos or anything. And she would ask them questions about themselves and so she got some animation in their faces and information about them, and could kind of incorporate those things, as artists do, as far as personality. So, she captured---one of Marcela Casals was so good, she stole it from me. [Jason laughs] Though she did admit it later when it was too late to get it back.

So, we loved those first eight years. We had dozens of them done, and when it was a play, we had two people, two sketches on the front porch. Sometimes it was a larger cast; Shakespeare and so on. She would sit out in the gazebo and we have pictures of her sitting there, fifteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen years ago, twenty years ago.

James: You mean you didn't have somebody draw her drawing these?

Lynn: We certainly should have, or at least---we do have some photos of it, thank God. And that's where we got these black-and-white---it's charcoal, I suppose, some of them. And saved most of them---the ones that weren't stolen---and I'm so grateful for them. And the ones I pulled tonight I have on the sideboard for us all to look at. Mary's still here, I'm so glad, and James looking. This is the cast of "Vital Signs."

We're going to get to "Vital Signs" in just a moment, but first I want to talk about another event at the Gilbert, which was called the "Gilbert Gathering." We had to get all this literary stuff around here; the Gilbert Gallery, and once-a-year, in the late summer, we would get everybody together---everybody who was in town or whatever---and come to the backyard and to the Gilbert Garden for a party.

And here, I'm looking at an announcement of the new season. If you look at this one, Jason, you'll see me standing out there. It's dark, but the garden lights are on, and I'm standing there at an easel, presenting the season for '98-'99. That was when we did "The Club" in the garden. We've talked about that already, I believe. And then we did "Vital Signs." That's the one we're going to talk about later. And let me get my magnifying glass; here it is. And I'm going to put on my glasses---this is too sad for words---[Jason



chuckles]. Well, as luck would have it, I can't discern the season. It was a wonderful season; take my word for it.

James: What season was it ?

Lynn: It was '98-'99. "The Club." Oh, I should have written this out.

Jason: Let me try. I'm taking a look at this wonderful picture; '98-'99, "The Club," "Vital Signs," "Fool for Love" . . .

Lynn: Oh, okay. We'll get to that some week.

Jason: "One-acts in g-a-r-d-e-n"-something.

James: "President Eisenhower Married Somebody Else."

Lynn: That's one we took to the state competition.

James: "Simply 'Mazin'," "The Bear's House," "Veronica Ganz."

Lynn: That's all the '98-'99 season?

James: Yes.

Lynn: Those are children's plays.

James: Well, for '98-'99, it lists "The Club," "Vital Signs," "Fool for Love," "Simply 'Mazin'," "President Eisenhower Married Somebody Else," and then at the bottom, it says, "The Bear's House," "Veronica Ganz."

Lynn: That was an extra-long season. Those were---my wonderful friend. I was a children's librarian and one of my favorite children's authors was Marilyn Sachs, and she gave us permission to adapt---she adapted them for us---some of her books for children; you know, school kids; and we adapted them and did them in the garden and my grandchildren were in those also.

Anyway, so what a year that was! It was an absolutely marvelous year. But I want to talk just specifically about the Gathering. It was more fun. And there I am, in a shirt and tie and my vest. I don't wear vests much anymore. I have about a dozen of them; I should give them away. But there we are in the garden with probably fifty people, and then we always had a humorous thing, I like to think. One year, some muscular guys took off their shirts and made a sedan chair. And they put bamboo poles on their shoulders---were you there, James?

James: No.

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Lynn: And a chair on it, and I was sitting there in a turban. And I came in like this; like a king.

James: Sorry I missed that!

Lynn: [Laughs] Anyway, it was lots of fun.

James: You didn't get any photos of that?

Lynn: I haven't found any.

James: Oh, man.

Lynn: But those were great days. The Gilbert Gathering, then we had awards---oh, we had joke awards! None of them were serious. Now, the Pryer Awards these days; the patrons vote on actors and actresses.

James: The winners will tear up.

Lynn: The winners will tear up, but at the Gilbert Gathering, actors nearly got mad. [Laughter]

James: I have one of those awards at my home hung up on a wall.

Lynn: Do you remember what it said?

James: Um, I think it was something about, uh, me improvising; something about, uh, being, I guess, being quick-witted, which, obviously, that hasn't lasted.

Lynn: Or was it dim-witted?

Jason/James: Oooohhh [laughter].

James: Lynn with the zingers!

Lynn: These kind of things are what happened at the awards. And then I was roasted once; in that sedan chair one. I was roasted and I didn't take it very well. [Laughter]

Jason: And you teared up.

Lynn: No, I left and went up to my bedroom and went to bed. [Laughter] Anyway, we also had an award called the "Gilbert and Sullivan Award," but it had nothing to do with the famous writers; librettists, composers. I had to do---it was given every year to the most cooperative and friendly neighbor.

Jason/James: Ooh . . .

Lynn: And I shan't say one more word about that. [Laughter] Gilbert and Sullivan Awards---no, those were great days. And we should do it again. You know, the Pryer Awards is a celebration, but anyway, I guess you can't go home again.

James: I know; the Gilbert Gallery Awards, I looked forward to those every year. They became larger and larger to the point where, with the last ones, people who really had nothing to do, had never been to a show, just heard, "There's a great party going on at the Pryer house!" and they'd show up.

Lynn: [Laughs] I think that's why we stopped them.

James: Yeah.

Lynn: So, anyway, everything comes to an end sooner or later.

James: And usually, Lynn and Bob would end up going to sleep long before people actually left.

Lynn: Well, did I mention this? When I got tired of things going on too long, I would go and put on my beautiful saffron robe---silk, saffron robe I got in Thailand, in Bangkok---and I'd put it on and come down and just kind of make a turn through the crowd. And time was when---"Oh, my God, when Lynn comes down in the robe, we're supposed to leave."

That was the signal. [Laughter]

Well, after awhile, that didn't work, either. I'd come through and they'd say, "God, look, he's getting undressed." [Laughter] So, it didn't work, so we had to stop. So there it is.

Well, let's move right along, and not a minute too soon, to "Vital Signs." Now, this is one of those plays. Bob Dees had a career as a professional actor in film and theater and voice-over and so on, there in Texas. And he made one final appearance and it was soon after we were together in the late '90s, and it was "Vital Signs." And he was in this play with mostly women. And you see his picture there. It's against the window, Jason, to the far right. Want to go get it, Jason? And that's a sketch of Bob, and Jason, as an archivist, I put my fingerprints all over everything. He's appalled at how I do not take care of things.

Anyway, Bob; this is when he still had hair. [Laughter]. But this turned out to be Bob's last theatrical event. So I called him over this afternoon---I was getting ready for tonight---and I said, "Tell me what you remember about "Vital Signs." Well, there was a long pause and he couldn't remember anything. So, there it is; no help there. But I remember a time . . .

James: That's actually why he got out of acting! [Laughter]

Lynn: But as I look over the people who were in this---it was by Jane Martin---it was the non de plume for a man who was one of America's greatest artistic directors at the theater in Tennessee---please forgive me, Jane. Anyway, forget that. This is Jane Martin; I love her stuff. We've done some of her other work. This is called "a montage of women's life



experiences." And looking at those women---there's Linda Riddle, a great personality on radio known as Wendy; Jane Moran to the far right there---I must get her on the show---one of our finest actresses. When we did Emily Dickinson's story, "The Belle of Amherst," she was marvelous in that one-woman show. Then to the right there is Flo Cohen, who was a founder with her husband of the dinner theater here in town, just closed before I got here twenty-plus years ago. So, what a group of people. Ann Tosco recently left us; wonderful actress.

So, "Vital Signs," even though they were not vital enough for me to remember anything about the plot, Jason. I know it's too pathetic for words. But, I know it was good. [Laughs] If any of our listeners---the history section of our evening has taken a nose-dive here when your blathering artistic director can't remember much. Except they were *good!*

Now, I'm going to turn the tables on you and I'm going to let you ask me a question---about anything at all. We did this earlier in our evening.

James: How's the turning of the tables of this; it's all dedicated to you? [Laughter]

Lynn: [Laughs] No, but these are things that I want to share. Now, I'm allowing you to ask me anything; anything and everything. And I'm going to let James in on it, too, and Mary. She did it earlier, but do you have a question, Jason?

Jason: Why did you select "Vital Signs" out of all plays?

Lynn: Because it's the next thing in the binder.

Jason: Oh, ha-ha!

Lynn: And we're going straight through that damn binder. No, no, don't pick it up! I don't want to even attempt to do anything more with it, except when it happened, it was good, and these wonderful people were in it, and Jane Martin was the playwright. No, you said, "Go through that two-foot-thick scrapbook," and we're *doin'* it!

Jason: Very good.

Lynn: If you don't like it, too bad!

Jason: How many more of these do you have?

Lynn: I'll count them sometime.

Jason: This is really good. Just beautiful.

Lynn: No, it's a treasure, just a treasure. James, do you have a question for me?

James: Sure. What was your favorite play by Jane Martin?

Lynn: Well, she did one about women roller-skaters that was absolutely---

Mary: Oooo . . .

Lynn: Yes, Mary, you were roller-skating in a play last year. It was hil-*arious*; "Cementville," I think it was called. And I wanted to do that, but it was just too much for us. But it was absolute---these women were as *tough as nails*, to make an original simile.

James: So, this was like roller-derby.

Lynn: Roller-derby, right. And they would come in, and God, tattoos all over and their manager - they let their manager---

James: Rhonda, I can hear this being pitched to her from . . .

Lynn: No, I never pitched---we thought about doing it years ago when I was in charge and I got chicken about it, but all-women cast, except for the poor and hapless manager, a man. But he was really a wonderful playwright. Question for me, Mary.

Mary: Oh, goodness. Okay, well, when you were talking about what we'd like to do on Broadway and things that I'd like to happen, I would say, how would you go about starting a theater, but I'm really happy just jumping into Gilbert.

Lynn: Why did I start it? Is that it? Why did I start it? Because I wanted---this has been my "third act." My first act was growing up; second act was my career and family and all; third act has been pushing twenty-five years in Fayetteville. So, I wanted a meaningful third act. And I did not want to be bored, and that has certainly provided that.

Mary: But my question was, "What's the secret to getting all these people to show up and do wonderful things?"

Lynn: Well, the secret was: Trust that any group of people, anywhere; everybody loves stories. Of course, it provides a place to tell these stories. Then, people who like telling stories, whether it's playwright, lights or whatever; actors, actresses will hear about it, word-of-mouth, and seek you out. So, this has become very trite, this field of dreams; build a diamond and they will come. And that's exactly what happened. Thank you for asking that. Jason?

Jason: My question is: What was the last play that you were an actor in?

Lynn: Well, I've done two things here. Out of a hundred and twenty plays, I was in one called "The Guardian." I was in it in Berkeley, California. We reprised it here as an original script. It's a one-act; it was part of a one-act evening.

Jason: When?

Lynn: Fifteen years ago. "The Guardian" was about---we all know these gay men who glom onto famous people and frequently are not altruistic about it. Bea Lillie had such a person. Uh, wonderful Martha Raye.

James: Martha Raye!

Lynn: Yeah, Martha Raye was much loved by everybody at Fort Bragg and she's buried here. And her living room or playroom of her Hollywood house was recreated with the furniture here. But what I'm saying is that she---in her last, later years---some gay man started---what these gay men do is they know everything about the star's career; they somehow are introduced to them, and then they suddenly become indispensable to these aging stars. And they praise them and they wait on them hand and foot, and one of the key ingredients is they alienate them from their families. And that's what happened to Martha Raye. This man, who she ended up marrying, did a character assassination on her daughter---and this would happen; it was very common. There are dozens of people, mainly women. But it happened to one man, Groucho Marx, as well. This is really a different story. But these famous women, different ones, these gay men latch onto them. They're taking care of them, but it's not in a very helpful way.

Anyway, so this play was that theme, called "The Guardian." And, um, and I was the man, it was a London stage star. And when the curtain goes up, she is just comatose in bed. We need to do this again. James, did you see it?

James: Yes . . .

Lynn: Karen---I can't remember last names tonight. We just saw her yesterday. Karen was the woman. She's in bed, and she doesn't move the entire play. But as far as the world knows, she's still all right, and I took a phone call and said, "Oh, she's fine. Well, no, she can't come to the phone; she's practicing her song, she's reviewing a dance," and here she's just like this [not moving]. And then finally, she really does die. Now, I'm not going to say one more thing about it. We really should do this one again. It's marvelous.

James: You did that in 2001, I think, or 2002.

Lynn: Was it? Just before we closed here.

James: Right.

Lynn: We closed here in 2002.

James: Well, it was a night of one-acts and I was in the other show, "Half-formed Angels Falling from the Sky," and "The Guardian" was the other show.



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Lynn: That's when that was. You were seventeen and it was your first play here. Of course, anything to do with us, you were marvelous. But it was an evening of one-acts. "The Guardian." We should do it again, and, anyway, I didn't mean to blather on, Jason.

Jason: No, no. It was fifteen years ago. What would it take to get you back on stage?

Lynn: Well, it would have to be---you'd have to hold the cue cards! [Laughter]

[Music trails out]