

'Grace & Glorie' brings laughs, heart to Shuler

By Tim Keller

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RATON – Grace Stiles is a cantankerous 90-year-old widow and cancer patient who checks herself out of the hospital so she can die alone in a cabin on her beloved Southern homestead. Gloria Whitmore is a New York City businesswoman with an MBA from Harvard; displaced to rural Virginia with a trunk full of heartbreak and guilt, she becomes a volunteer hospice worker. Gloria takes on Grace as her patient and an unlikely friendship develops.

When the Kaleidoscope Players' production of "Grace & Glorie" arrives on the Shuler Theater stage Thursday (July 24) night, it'll be the latest in a long line of productions spanning the U.S. and the world—since its 1991 Virginia premier, it's been translated into several languages. Matters of life and death give the play depth and meaning, while a city sophisticate caring for a stubborn farm woman provides persistent laughter. Director Tom Evans says it's the funniest play of the Shuler Theater's summer repertory season, a slate weighted heavily to comedies.

Evans and his wife, actress Barbara Farrar, have been involved with "Grace & Glorie" from its inception when playwright Tom Ziegler brought it to The Shenandoah Valley Playwrights Retreat in the late 1980s. "We loved it immediately," Evans says. "We rehearsed it for twelve hours and did the first staged reading. From there, Barbara has played Grace in productions all around the country."

Estelle Parsons was cast as Grace in New York City, but Parsons missed shows while away on movie and TV jobs. Farrar was her stand-in, playing Grace off-Broadway in 32 of the production's 165 Times Square performances. Hallmark Hall of Fame made a movie starring Gena Rowlands and Diane Lane as Grace and Glorie. Farrar last played the role on stage ten years ago.



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Barbara Farrar and Nora Leahy (from left) discuss a will in a "Grace & Glorie" rehearsal last week. The mismatched "country mouse/city mouse" pair provoke plenty of laughter in a story deep with heart and meaning. Comet photo by Tim Keller

Nora Leahy last played Gloria ten months ago in an Indiana production also directed by Evans. “This time is fun,” Leahy says, “because Barbara and I have each done the play before with different partners.” Like the characters slowly developing a friendship, the actresses have learned to work closely, to build a comedy together.

“I’ve told Tom Ziegler that this is my favorite character ever,” stage veteran Farrar says, adding, “I’m never going to outgrow the part!” Grace insists on calling Gloria by the nickname Glorie. It’s not an easy fit for the younger woman, who struggles to help Grace amid the culture shock of a Manhattan sophisticate trying to cook on a woodstove or get water with a pump. “It’s a comedy with a lot of heart,” Leahy says.

Director Evans adds, “It’s a down-home folks play, with people you know and can care about. The characters will remind you of your relatives.” The heart and soul comes from the two women’s developing friendship and their talks of life and death. Grace says, “Death is as much a part of life as being born.” But no one dies in the play, resolutely a comedy to the end.

“Grace & Glorie” will be presented at the Shuler Theater Thursday through Saturday nights this week and next, July 24-26 and July 31-August 2, at 7:30 p.m. Sunday matinees will be presented July 27 and August 3 at 2:30 p.m. Information and general admission tickets are available at the Shuler Theater, 131 N. 2nd St., (575) 445-4746.