



# Bennington Banner

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## **Never too late to read these 'Love Letters'**

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BENNINGTON — When actors Betsy Palmer and Carleton Carpenter take the stage at Oldcastle Theatre Company this weekend, it will be the first time the two octogenarians have ever shared the stage together.

It will also be only the second or third time that the two will be performing "Love Letters" together. Rehearsals for the two-night show, a benefit for Oldcastle's upcoming 2008 season, are scheduled to take place only two days before the show.

"He (Carpenter) doesn't want to rehearse till we do it up there," said Palmer, over the telephone from her home in New York. "I wanted to really work with Carleton before now, but I don't know. Actors are funny. I'm sure he feels that since it's something you read, it will probably be a cinch, but it's far more than that. A lot of people do it that way, but I don't."

Palmer has been familiar with "Love Letters" for some time now, having done the play numerous times in the past, at one point even being directed by the play's author, A.R. Gurney. The piece is entirely new to Carpenter, a Bennington native who last appeared in Oldcastle's "On Golden Pond" last year.

"I think I'm the only actor who hasn't done

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it," Carpenter said. "It's a beautiful play; Gurney's done it at Oldcastle before, but I never happened to see it. And I love Betsy Palmer; she's glorious, a real gem."

According to Carpenter, he wanted to wait on rehearsals until Oldcastle Executive Director Eric Peterson could direct the two. "I thought we'd nest and gestate," Carpenter said. "I'd prefer, as Eric would too, that we do it with him, let him give us what direction there will be. I will be familiar with it, but less is more."

Palmer, 81, should be familiar to two generations, but not for the same reasons. The older generation will recognize the Chicago native from the game show, "I've Got a Secret,"

while the younger crowd of horror movie buffs will remember Palmer's turn as the murderous Jason's mother in the original "Friday the 13th."

Palmer's career has spanned 68 years of TV, film and Broadway acting. She said it is "ironic" that she has come to be known for a game show and a horror movie, the latter of which she doesn't even like that much.

"I've only seen the film twice," Palmer said, referring to 'Friday the 13th.' "But I'll get mail from all over the world every week, a good 10 to 13 requests for photographs. And now they're running my old show on the Gameshow Network."

As far as her career goes, Palmer is most at home on the stage. "My preference is the living stage; I absolutely adore it," Palmer said.

Carpenter was born in Bennington in 1926. His acting career began on Broadway when he was only 18. He has since been on TV and movies, including "Three Little Words" and "Two Weeks With Love."

With both Palmer and Carpenter having had such long acting careers, it seems strange that their paths have not crossed at least once before. Even Carpenter expressed some disbelief. The two did have some connection, as Palmer acted in the movie "Mr. Roberts," while Carpenter starred in the stage version, playing the role Jack Lemmon does in the film.

"I'm not sure we'd ever worked together before," Carpenter said. "It's strange, there's the 'Mr. Roberts' connection ... she was doing the movie, and I was doing the play in Chicago."

"Love Letters" follows its two lead characters, Andrew and Melissa, from their meeting in the third grade until the couple are in their 60s.

"They never look at each other, they sit side by side and read letters," Carpenter said. "It goes through their whole lifetime together."

Stage props are sparse, with only a couple chairs and a table to separate the two actors. The two take turns reading letters back and forth. With so little stage action and set design, a theater company or school can put on a production of "Love Letters" for very little money, which is part of the appeal, according to Palmer.

When "Love Letters" was originally produced on Broadway, it starred two big-name actors each week. Christopher Walken, Christopher Reeve, George Hearn, William Hurt and Marsha Mason were all featured in the production during different weeks.

Palmer first worked with Gurney on the play with actor Robert Reid. "He and I did it for a year and a half all over the country. It was the last thing he did before he died," Palmer said.

According to Palmer, Gurney originally wrote "Love Letters" as more of an acting exercise.

"It's a very, very wonderful vehicle," Palmer said. "How (Gurney) came to write it is interesting; he did it as an exercise thing ... instead of speaking (at an event), he did something as an entertainment for the audience. He got hold of an actress and did it."

Any two actors can do the play, said Palmer, but people want to see the big names. "People want to see who it is they want to see," Palmer said. "It's simple. You sit, and if you're a caring and thoughtful actor, you can really make a good show out of it."

Carpenter is most looking forward to working with Palmer in the production. "Betsy and I are the same age. To me, she looks the same as she did in 'Mr. Roberts.' I do not look the same," Carpenter said.

Palmer has been starring in "Love Letters" for almost her entire career, but she never gets sick of it, she said.

"I never get bored doing this, it's never the same," Palmer said. "As far as the character is concerned, she's grown over the years with me. I'm never bored with her."

"Love Letters" will be performed Saturday, April 19, at 8 p.m., and Sunday, April 20, at 2 p.m. Tickets are \$34 and \$15, and can be purchased by calling 447-0564.