

## ON THE AISLE



Meredith Bean

# McMath

## Making History in Loudoun

Written by CAROL WHITE

In 1987, when Meredith Bean McMATH moved to Virginia's western Loudoun County, incomers were usually attracted to Loudoun by the quality of life in the area's quaint, rural villages – places like Hillsboro where the McMATHs settled. The rich history of the area from the colonial period to the present, combined with the beauty of the landscape, provided added attraction.

A high priority for the McMATHs was finding a good place to raise children (their son, Palmer, was born two years after the move) that would also be near enough to Chuck McMATH's work. She certainly had no premonition that 20 years later she would be the founder and artistic director of one of Loudoun's premier community theatres – the Aurora Studio Theatre – or that she would be a published novelist and prizewinning playwright.

Community theatre provides much more than fun entertainment to local audiences. The opportunity for young and old alike to be part of a theatre company, whether onstage or backstage, is richly rewarding. This has been true for Nate Jurasciek, who said he fell in love with the theatre when he worked with Aurora in high school plays. He decided on the performing arts as his college major, and after graduation he worked as a film editor in Hollywood for a year. Then he came back to Loudoun, and last year he rejoined Aurora to direct *The Odd Couple*.

Meredith frequently acts in or directs Aurora productions, such as her direction of Rodger and Hammerstein's *Cinderella*. She also does adaptations of plays as with Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, and *Arms and the Highlander*, which is an adaptation of George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man*.

Aurora has established a record of many successful productions, and they have typically performed to standing-room only audiences at the 150-seat Old Stone School Theatre in Hillsboro. Aurora also runs workshops on acting, writing plays, improvisation, and even one with the self-explanatory title, *Swords & Stunts*.

Before becoming involved in theatre, McMATH had a successful professional life as a historian, with a speciality in American Civil War history. Her last job was with the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, where she worked in the office of Public and Academic Programs and became the Museum's Intern Coordinator. Previously, she worked for the Fairfax County Park Authority creating educational pro-

grams. More significantly for her future career, she wrote and staged several plays and skits that dramatized historical events.

As soon as she had settled into her new home in Hillsboro, McMATH quickly established ties in the community. She joined the board of the Loudoun Museum and staged several living history performances, both at the Museum, and at Outlands Plantation in Leesburg. One offshoot of these plays was the documentary *Having a Ball*, which was subsequently shown on the History Channel. Another, *Between Hawk & Buzzard*, was shown on local cablevision stations in Virginia and Maryland. She based her plays and documentaries on extensive research from the archives of the Loudoun Museum, the Thomas Balch Library in Leesburg, and the Library of Congress. McMATH was particularly interested in researching how the Civil War disrupted the life of local communities. She said that sometimes even families were split between support of the Union and the Confederacy.

What was apparent, then, was that her historical plays and skits were popular with audiences and fun for the re-enactors who presented them. And as the writer, producer, director, and sometimes even an actor in the shows, she was inadvertently learning stagecraft. Still, in her own eyes, she was primarily a historian and meticulously researched the stories she was telling. In retrospect, this was the path that led McMATH to her present vocation.

Throughout her career, McMATH has written freelance articles on historical subjects as well as community life. Gale Waldron, who now manages Gallery 222 in Leesburg, said she has been a friend of McMATH for almost 20

years. These days, Waldron handles the publicity for the Aurora Theatre and is a board member, but in the early days it was McMATH who worked for Waldron. She wrote a column for *Loudoun Art Magazine*, which Waldron then owned and edited.

Waldron said that McMATH published a regular column, *The Good Neighbor*, for the magazine. "She would write about funny incidents, but her column was always upbeat and positive in its tone. People loved it. The column was full of great local stories."

She said that one of the things she has always appreciated about McMATH is her hilarious sense of humor and her upbeat take on life. It is apparent in the plays she now produces and directs at Aurora, Waldron said. "They subtly reflect Meredith's individual, highly personal style and her sense of humor."

When her son was born, McMATH's career took a new turn – she started a novel. Her son came home from the hospital on a heart monitor. She often had to stay up with him to make certain he fell back to sleep. In order to keep awake during the long nights, she began to construct stories in her mind and put them down on paper the following day. This became her first novel – which, ten years later, was published as part of a trilogy. The three novels, *Theodosia*, *Annabelle*, and *Marilla*, follow the story of a cast of characters who live during the pre-Civil War period through the end of the war. Each novel features a different young woman as heroine, and they are lively adventure stories that Nancy Drew would have recognized as spiritual kin. McMATH commented that although they were fictional, the background to each was thoroughly researched.

In 1994, she volunteered to stage a living history reading from letters by Confederate and Union soldiers and citizens who were living in Loudoun during the war.



This was in celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Loudoun Museum. In the course of her research, she came upon a fictionalized account of the true story of *The Waterford News*, a local, pro-Union newspaper published by some young Quaker women. Written by Ed Love, it had appeared in the *Ladies Home Journal* in the 1960s, with the title *The Beautiful and Anxious Maidens*. She researched the story herself and it became the basis of an original play that was produced locally three times. Mc-

Math directed this play and the most recent version, *All for the Union*, was done as a benefit for the Lincoln Preservation Foundation in 2003. The Foundation has underwritten the creation of a film, based on *All for the Union*. *Waterford's War* is the independent film currently in post-production. She has been involved in every aspect of the production, and said that producing a full-length film has required her to acquire a whole new skill set. "It has been a great challenge, but I have loved every minute. I hope it's a success so that I can get support to make a film version of *Arms and the Highlander*," she said.

McMath also co-authored the critically acclaimed

musical, *Porcher*. She was involved with the production, although it was actually produced by the Creative Youth Foundation. The artistic director and founder of the CYF, Tom Switzer, was the other author of the play. *Porcher* was based on his hometown in Altoona, Pennsylvania. In this instance he directed the play, and McMath's mother played the lead role.

McMath's mother, Maxine Bean, said that even though she had not expected her daughter to go into the theatre, there were hints of her future when she was a youth. "Meredith was always dressing up and telling stories, even as a very young child. When Meredith was in fifth grade, she wrote, produced and directed a school play and gave herself the leading part," Bean said laughing. "The only problem was that she never took the time to learn her lines and opening night was a fiasco."

In fact, even though she is a collaborator in many of her daughter's theatrical ventures today, and a member of Aurora's board of directors, Bean did not predict her own future either. As it turns out, Bean was inadvertently responsible for the change of direction in her daughter's life.

She said that when her three children were growing up, the family had a typical, middle-class lifestyle. They lived in Arlington, Virginia, and Bean was a stay-at-home mom. Her volunteer activities outside of the home were extensions of her role as the wife of a successful lawyer. Shortly after Bean's husband died in 1989, she came to live with McMath. She was only 63 years old at the time, and she wondered what to do with the rest of her life. One day, McMath asked her what she had enjoyed most before she was married, and to both their surprise, Bean immediately answered: working in the theatre.

Before her marriage, unbeknownst to any of her children, Bean - who grew up in St. Louis, Missouri - had been a child radio actress. As a young woman, she had frequently played leading roles in a local community theatre.

Shortly after the mother/daughter conversation, Maxine Bean learned about plans to bring the VSA arts, formerly Very Special Arts, theatre program for mentally disabled children to Loudoun. This was in 1990. The program was open to everyone in the community, and Bean thought this would be a way for her to be involved in a community theatre again. She volunteered to be in charge of costumes. It was a hard job because the casts were quite large, she said, and frequently McMath would pitch in to help her. [See TMA's Dec/Jan 2008 issue for a story about VSA arts and its local founders.]

Then in 1995, Bean was asked by a friend to join The Growing Stage - a family theatre that was being organized by a local actress, Dolly Stevens, who had worked in theatre professionally before the birth of her children. Stevens, along with other parents, wanted to give their young children the experience of acting in plays. The parents took supporting roles in the productions and worked backstage.

Bean said that at first she was afraid she wouldn't be able to memorize her lines, but she committed a poem to memory and decided, "OK, I'll audition." And so, she began acting again. The next year, Bean's schedule got even more crowded. She was asked to produce and direct a weekly, Sunday radio theatre show in the neighboring town of Brunswick, Maryland. Bean agreed enthusiastically

and enlisted McMath to help. This time McMath became her co-producer. McMath wrote continuities [introductory or transitional material] for the shows and some original scripts, and then began acting in the radio plays herself.

McMath says, "This is when I got hooked on the theatre." Bean and McMath produced radio theatre shows for three years, moving to Leesburg's WAGE radio after the second year. She joined her mother at The Growing Stage in 1998, and then in 1999 she became a founding member of a new theatre company, Not Just Shakespeare, Inc. McMath appeared in *Taming of the Shrew* and had the lead in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Tim Jon, who is still the artistic director of NJS, said she was wonderful to

work with. "She has such a fertile mind that she is like a walking menagerie," he said. "She can assume 15 parts, one right after the other, and each one will be different and funny." He also admires what she has accomplished with the Aurora.

By this time, McMath had trained herself for her new career. She had participated in master classes on acting, and in two workshops on playwriting. One of her plays - a ten minute, one-act play - won first prize in a Washington, D.C., competition in 2003. She said it was then that her playwriting instructor, Martin Blank, encouraged her to start her own company, which she did in 2004. She said that while she loves Shakespeare, she wanted the chance to write and produce her own plays.



The Old Opera House Theatre in historic Charles Town, WV  
presents



Friday & Saturdays  
Nov 30, December 1, 7, 8,  
14 & 15 at 8:00pm  
\$16 Adults

Sunday matinees  
December 2, 9 & 16 at  
2:30pm  
\$14.00 Adults

Thursday evenings  
December 6 & 13 at  
7:30pm  
\$12.00 Adults

Students & Children  
\$8.00 all performances

Call (304) 725-4420 or (888) 900-SHOW  
[www.oldoperahouse.org](http://www.oldoperahouse.org)

