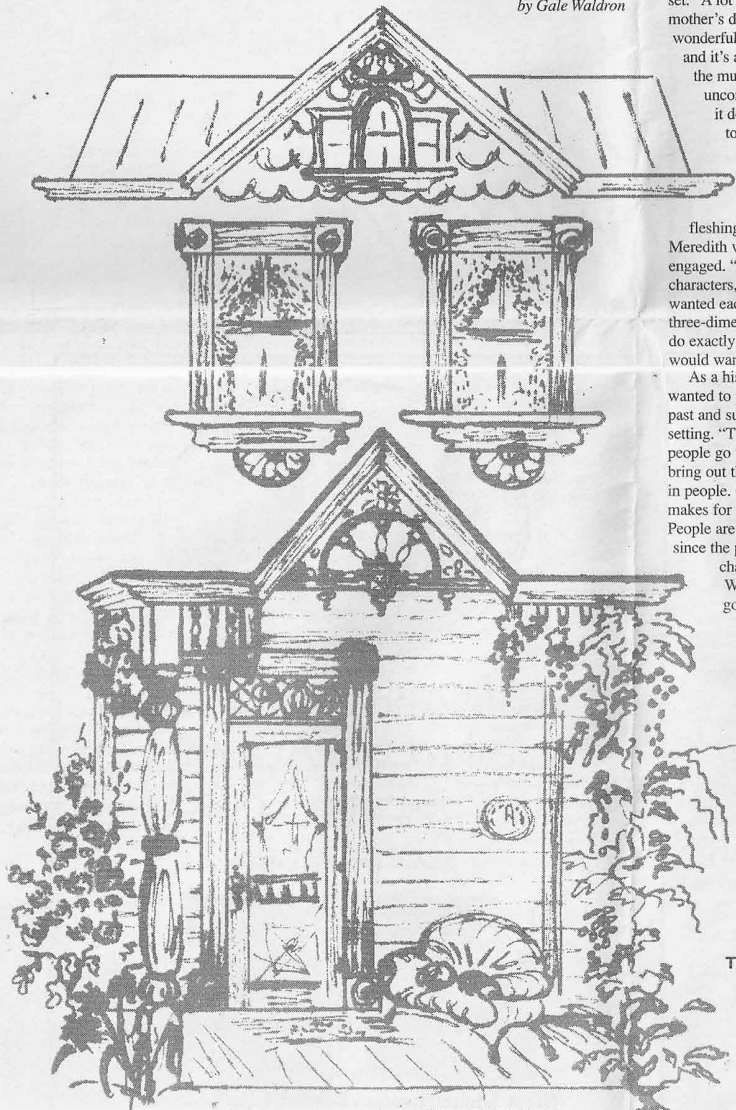


On the Front Porch Steps

by Gale Waldron



Tom and I were standing in this kitchen, and mom came in and said 'I've been reading 300 Tips for the Kitchen and I'm on number 10.' Tom turned to me and said, 'That's a Miss Violet moment. Are you writing it down?' And I said 'Yes, I am. It's going into the play.'"

The play is *Porches*, written by Tom Sweitzer and Meredith Bean McMath, and mom is Maxine Bean, Meredith's mother—or Miss Violet as you will soon come to know her. It is a musical play about the triumph of the human spirit and it was the idea of Tom Sweitzer, the 26-year old drama teacher at the Hill School who is already recognized in the community for his talent and energy. Tom wrote the play and the music last summer in a Pennsylvania cabin when he had some time after summer stock theatre to think about his mother and growing up. He wrote a first draft and descriptions of the characters.

"It's from the heart," admits Tom, who is from Altoona, Pennsylvania, where the play is set. "A lot of *Porches* has to do with my mother's death. It's a tribute to her and all the wonderful and beautiful things she stood for; and it's about moving on in life. Writing the music and the play were almost an unconscious act," he added. After he got it down on paper, Tom asked Meredith to read the draft.

"Tom said to me, 'I have music for this and a draft. Are you interested in fleshing this out?'" Meredith was immediately engaged. "I fell in love with the characters, every one of them. I wanted each of them to become three-dimensional. I wanted to do exactly what he hoped I would want to do."

As a historian, Meredith wanted to place the play in the past and suggested a war setting. "The conflicts that people go through during war bring out the best and the worst in people. Conflict is what makes for good story telling. People are drawn to it. And, since the play dealt with change, I thought WWII would be a good way to pull it all together." Tom's thoughts ran along the same lines. "I like the 1940s. That was a time when Altoona was a railroad city and the railroad was the source of everything. Wartime is full

of uncertainty and change and Altoona sets the stage for the choices the characters are going to make," he explains. "The play depicts the tension of the war as it parallels the tension between the neighbors. It shows the fragility of life." Meredith adds, "Altoonians are hard working people whose story you want to tell, to honor their lives. You get a glimpse of what civilians had to go through during the war; what they were doing to support the war effort, and how people constantly move on, how death is really integral to life."

Tom and Meredith worked on the rewrites while Meredith did the history research. Then, last fall, they traveled to the railroad museum in Altoona to get information about WWII and the town. The curator there, Cummins McNitt, steered Meredith to the oral histories that had been given by the women who had worked for the railroad during WWII. "We got a lot of juicy facts that we wrote into the play," Meredith promises.

"Things kept falling into place," she recounts. "We found out that Altoona, Pennsylvania, was the Railroad Capitol of the World in the 1940s. It was a huge booming town that German spies had identified to cripple the entire rail system providing military goods." Meredith shuffled WWII history into the play to bring out the strong points the play makes in dealing with



PHOTO BY KATHY KUPKA

Above, Maxine rehearses a scene.

The play's setting is a community in Altoona, Pennsylvania, Sweitzer's hometown.

Illustrations/Set Design by Laurie Farnsworth



Loudoun ART



PHOTO BY KATHY KUPKA

death and change. "That's when we got the idea of using news announcements. Ted Holland, an historian in Altoona, did research for us and sent me a whole list of newspaper snips from May and June of 1944 and I was able to go down that list and pick and choose. It's wonderful stuff. It's overseas and it's Altoona. The radio announcements about the war really bring it home."

A central character in *Porches* is Miss Violet, and Tom, Meredith, and Maxine know her well. Relates Tom, "The character came easily because I knew Maxine. I precast her for the role." He further explains, "Miss Violet is the most nurturing human being; she's the town nurturer. Violet is loving, giving, openness and truth. She opens up all the doors for her neighbors and opens their hearts so they can care and love. Both Maxine and Violet are otherworldly. They 'go off' into other places. They make you feel good. They're gentle and humorous and have great strength. They've triumphed over many things. The best acting," concludes Tom, "comes from people who are very real, and Maxine has it. She's at home with herself."

Maxine claims that she fully relates to her

character. "Miss Violet nurtures with food and with attention. She's a character who says what's on her mind." Maxine relates to that too. "At 74, I say things to people I wouldn't have dreamed of saying even ten years ago. There's a certain freedom that goes along with age." In some ways, Maxine admits, it's not a difficult role for her to play.

"Miss Violet is going to be a lot funnier than I thought she would be," laughs Maxine. "I have a great deal of fun in life. You know, she's got a bit of dementia."

To prepare for the play, Maxine is in training. She swims each afternoon before rehearsal, and then closes herself off in her room to read the entire script. Then she says her lines out loud. By the time the play comes around in April, she'll know every line.

No newcomer to Loudoun theatre, Maxine co-founded with Jean Gold *The Regional Alliance of Theatres*, a group of actors, directors, producers and playwrights dedicated to the art of live radio performance. She has performed in several roles with *Growing Stage Productions* and has been a force behind the *Very Special Arts* programs. As a child living in St. Louis, Maxine loved the theatre. "My mother wanted all of us to

develop a sense of presence and be comfortable with ourselves, so she had us take elocution lessons. And we would say a piece at family events whenever we were asked. My sisters would cry, but I ate it up. I loved it." Her first role was on a weekly radio show in St. Louis. "I was a country girl named Petunia and I was 9 years old. As far as I remember, I just read the scripts cold." In college, she performed in amateur radio theatre and drama while she majored in zoology, another one of her passions.

Porches is an inspirational play under Tom Sweitzer's very gifted direction. His talents include teaching, directing, acting, and singing, all of which he accomplishes with exceptional flair. In all, Tom has written twelve plays and about 50 musical numbers. Many of you will remember *Treasures*, *The Musical Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, which Tom co-wrote with Dolly Stevens for *The Growing Stage*.

And now that the editing is finished, Meredith McMath is creating the costumes for *Porches*. A columnist for *Loudoun ART* and a well-known local historian, Meredith has authored three historic fiction novels and

Left, Meredith and Tom work out a detail in the script.

several living history plays. Her first two-act play, *The Waterford Girls*, is a testament to her talent for breathing life into history. She recently co-created with Joni Crane a history video company called "Run, Rabbit, Run Productions, Inc." For her next play, *The Die is Cast, the Cast Must Die*, Tom will create the music and play a leading role. "We work well together," smiles Meredith.

Indeed they do. *Porches* is a real victory.

**Porches opens on April 16
at the Hill Playhouse.**

Performance dates are

April 16-18 and April 23-25.

Box Office: 540-687-6150



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