

*Franco-American Institute
7, quai Chateaubriand
35000 Rennes
October 18th 2002*

Edwin W. Schloss presents

June Recital

The words of Eudora Welty

Performed by Brenda Currin



With a Fantasia on Beethoven's Fifth Piano Concerto

Performed by Philip Fortenberry

Directed by David Kaplan

Adapted from the works of Eudora Welty

by David Kaplan and Brenda Currin

Program

1. June Recital, Adagio

A Fantasia on the story of Miss Eckhart from *The Golden Apples*

2. The Battle Between Miss Julia Mortimer and Miss Lexie Renfro

Adapted from the novel *Losing Battles*

3. Why I Live at the P.O.

Adapted from the story of the same name

4. June Recital, Rondo

Stories from "The Petrified Man", "The Burning", *Delta Wedding*, "Powerhouse",

The Robber Bridegroom, and names from the collected works

Performed without intermission, approximately 80 minutes.

The short story written by Eudora Welty entitled "June Recital" is from the collection *The Golden Apples* (1949), one of her most virtuoso texts. It tells the story of Miss Eckhart, the piano teacher, about whom Miss Welty confided in her autobiographical piece, *One Writer's Beginnings* (1984), that they shared a sense of passion for their art. In the hushed intimacy of her studio, Miss Eckhart is a woman of spirit and fervour, inhabited by passion, as was Welty herself, who would point out that "a sheltered life can be a daring life as well, for all serious daring comes from within". It is this daring which has inspired this production, a daring with a Southern accent but which resonates with the fundamental notes of our shared emotions.

This play, also called *June Recital*, departs from the story of Miss Eckhart and spills over into other Welty stories and characters, some of them accompanied by *A Fantasia on Beethoven's Fifth Piano Concerto*, inspired by a Beethoven fantasia described in the original text.

Originally entitled "Sister and Miss Lexie", the production first surfaced briefly as a late-night off-Broadway attraction in 1980 and has since greatly expanded, receiving high critical acclaim over twenty years of performances. Direct from Belzoni, Mississippi, the company is granting us the pleasure and honor of appearing in Rennes, before they resume their tour of the deep south of the United States in Livingston, Alabama.

This piece is intended to evoke the world Welty created through the entire body of her fiction. It includes adaptations of the (tragi-)comic classic "Why I Live at the P.O." with its famous "Sister", an excerpt from the novel *Losing Battles* (1970), and the themes of five other short stories. Every word of it is written by Welty, stitched together in a startling way to the music of Beethoven with which it shares energy and fire.

Recited one by one as the performance unfolds, as if re-embroidered on the fabric of the text, the names of the characters populating the Weltian world become charged with a vibrant poetic intensity which gives this show its distinctive grain and texture. Playing on the infinite variation of points of view presented in her fiction, this hybrid and effusive show gives voice to a language that is joyous and tragic, direct and sinuous, a language of harmony and friction whose singular, felicitous fusions form a composition which we might well, perhaps, call the rhapsody of the South.

Theater

STAGE VIEW

MEL GUSSOW

A Dramatic Tribute to Eudora Welty

In praise of Eudora Welty, Katherine Anne Porter once wrote, "There is no blurring at the edges, but evidences of an active and disciplined imagination working firmly in a strong line of continuity, the waking faculty of daylight reason recollecting and recording the crazy logic of the dream." The title character in Miss Welty's short story, "Why I Live at the P.O.," can seem ever so reasonable. How could Sister, as she is called, share a home with her spoiled younger sibling, Stella-Rondo, who stole her beau, Mr. Whitaker, "the only man who dropped down in China Grove?" Sister's jealousy and her anger at other members of her family lead her, headlong, to settling up residence in her place of business, the "next to smallest" post office in the State of Mississippi. Listening to her monologue, we realize that there is an obsessive personality at work. Sister is a single voice of honesty in a world of self-deceivers, whose guardian angel might as well be Cousin Annie Flo, who "went to her grave denying the facts of life."

Reading "Why I Live at the P. O.," a domestic tragedy told as comedy, one is elated by the high spirits and authority of the author, encapsulating in a short story a complete family chronicle. As it happens, the story is also an eloquent one-act play, a fact that is made evident

be Miss Welty. However, through a kind of acting alchemy, she conveys the essence and the artistic generosity of the author. She proves to be, along with Miss Welty herself, an expressive interpreter of the stories. One hesitates to use the word "reader," for this is not a staged reading, but fiction adapted into monodrama. She acts out the tales, playing all the roles and filling in the narrative. It is storytelling raised to dramatic art.

Monologues sometimes fail simply because they do not have an evocative story to tell, or because they are most alive when encountered between hard covers. The English actor Tim Pigott-Smith, inspired by his involvement in the television adaptation of "The Jewel in the Crown," commissioned a one-man play about India, drawn from Francis Yeats-Brown's book, "Tales of a Bengal Lancer." Though Mr. Pigott-Smith is an intelligent actor, the material proved to be — in its London version — undemonstrative and esoteric, at least to American ears. The monodrama seemed to have more to do with the English dress code than with the drama of Bengal lancers in India. It is unlikely that Englishmen would feel similarly unsettled at an evening of Eudora Welty. For all her regional roots, she is a world writer.

There is a basic difference in the quality of writers chosen for dramatization. The several recent attempts at anthologizing the work of Dorothy Parker on stage have failed, at least partly, because of Mrs. Parker's own artistic limitations. Her cleverness made her a quotable character in her period, but it does not ensure that she can be a rewarding subject for an evening in the theater. On the other hand, Miss Welty, along with William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor, is important enough as a writer to warrant such attention. Coincidentally, all three derive from a Southern heritage, which is itself abundant theatrical source material.

In the manner of her subject, Miss Currin's show achieves the generic through the clarification of the specific, beginning with the objects that act as scenery. The post office is represented by a small beehive of mail slots (the members of Sister's family are, after all, "the main people" in the town of China Grove), a handful of postcards (people who write their "utmost secrets on penny postcards" deserve to have them read by the public), an electric fan, a Westinghouse radio, a fly swatter, a ukulele and Mason jars of green tomato pickle and other condiments. The orderly aggregation of meaningful objects is the basis for the "peace" that Sister finds, alone, in the post office.

Inhabiting the environment is a most congenial actress, first seen in silhouette, carefully ironing an American flag. Fresh-faced and dressed in homespun clothes, Miss Currin cuts a lovely but decidedly unglamorous figure, and her informal approach caresses the written word into conversational theater. She gives the appearance of making up the stories as she tells them. Though she is not

virtuosic at altering her voice, she is an actress with an apparently limitless understanding of her material. In fact, one wishes that she had taken the time to tell more stories.

The program indicates that Miss Currin and Mr. Kaplan have adapted three Welty stories, including "Why I Live at the P.O.," for television. One carryover from the show is the regret that the work of this major American author has not been adapted with greater frequency on stage, film or television. There have been isolated instances in the theater — the adaptation some years ago of the short novel, "The Ponder Heart"; the musical, "The Robber Bridegroom"; and, last season, Larry Ketron's dramatization of the short story, "The Hitch-Hikers." Each of the three remained faithful to the original and, in so doing, became flavorful individual works of theater.

In his version of "The Hitch-Hikers," Mr. Ketron managed to expand the story without shattering its fragility. Fidelity went beyond mere imitation. Mr. Ketron is one of a number of playwrights who, in their own plays, are at least indirectly indebted to Miss Welty. Such Ketron works as "Trading Post" and "Asian Shade," Beth Henley's "Crimes of the Heart"; Romulus Linney's "Tennessee" and "Holy Ghosts" and Jane Martin's "Talking With" all have, in the manner of Miss Welty, an appreciation of the humanity of small-town American life and the lyric quality of common speech.

While dealing with eccentricity, none of these playwrights patronizes the people of the provinces. Because each is writing about a localized culture, it would be easy to categorize them as regionalists. Rather they are playwrights of America's heartland. They write about those who, in Miss Welty's words, are repeatedly forced to be "equal to circumstances." Despite the diversity of the geography (from Deep South to border states), characters in their work could participate in an open colloquy. Miss Henley's Old Granddaddy (dying in the hospital in "Crimes in the Heart") would have a great deal to say to Papa-Daddy, the patriarch of "Why I Live at the P.O." Miss Martin's aging woman who luxuriates in the warmth

of the light of lamps is a kin to the lonely Miss Lexie. The sisters waiting for their brother to die in Mr. Linney's comedy, "Goodbye Howard," could be gossips right out of Miss Welty's "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies."

The legitimate progenitor of all these writers is Chekhov, and it is no surprise that he is one of Miss Welty's personal favorites. Though separated by time and nationality, both share a sensibility and a feeling that hinterland shapes character. As Maureen Howard has said about Miss Welty, "She is a Southerner as Chekhov was a Russian, because place provides them with reality — a reality as difficult, mysterious and impermanent as life." Unlike Chekhov, Miss Welty has devoted herself to writing fiction, but there is within her work a natural theatricality, as amply demonstrated in Miss Currin's empathetic performance.



Brenda Currin proves to be an expressive interpreter of the author's stories.

when the actress, Brenda Currin, brings it to life on stage. Miss Currin is the adapter, along with her director, David Kaplan, of an anthology entitled "Sister and Miss Lexie," a dramatic rendition of, and tribute to, the art of Eudora Welty (at the Second Stage).

While one has certain reservations about other selections in the anthology (an excerpt from the novel "Losing Battles" is not really self-sustaining, and the show both opens and closes with a parade of names from Welty works), there is no question about Miss Currin's symbiosis with her literary subject. She is Sister, Stella-Rondo, Mima (who "weighs 200 pounds and has real tiny feet"), Lexie the spinster, Julia Mortimer, the schoolteacher so devoted to education that she "put an end to good fishin'," and all the other colorful characters she might choose to play, including Miss Welty.

Unlike Hal Holbrook recreating Mark Twain as a stage performer, Miss Currin does not really pretend to

CRITICAL NOTICES FOR OVER TWENTY YEARS OF PERFORMANCES

The New York Times

"Miss Currin remains a wonder... Miss Currin's voice, body and spirit are completely inhabited by the small town eccentrics and Gothic demons that haunt the southern imagination of the writer Eudora Welty." *Frank Rich, 1985*

The Boston Herald

"Magnificent... A symphony of names and phrases and scenes from Welty's works. Spoken rhythmically over Beethoven's Fifth Piano Concerto, the words tip off her tongue and blend like harmonic chords." *Terry Byrne, 1989*

Chicago Sun-Times

"Sister has a human glow... Wild and unexpected flashes of emotion are what Welty is about – and Currin's blithe and delicate attack gives them a surprising intensity." *Hedy Weiss, 1985*

The Philadelphia Inquirer

"A finely detailed and pungently flavored accountThe short story 'Why I live at the P.O.' emerges as a comic tangle." *William B. Collins, 1988*

The New York Post

"An irresistible invitation to share that sweet madness ... Currin's impersonations of Welty's vibrant characters take their life from the musicality of her voice – which roams the scale in pursuit of a sister's narcissistic whine and a father's patriarchal rumble. But the deeper delight of her characterizations lies in their mischievous humor and unsentimental brand of humanism." *Marilyn Stasio, 1980*

The New York Times

"The actress has tapped right into the writer's stream of consciousness ...The words pour out of her like music." *Frank Rich, 1980*

The Bergen County Record

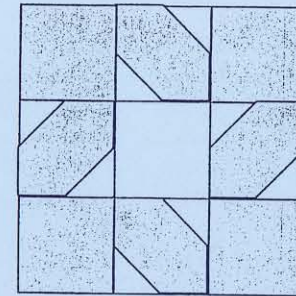
"Delightful ... Simply marvelous the way she makes the viewer see in the mind's eye the daffy characters that people Welty's tales." *Peter Wynne, 1985*

The Village Voice

"That uncanny mixture of intelligence, exuberance, and just a little shyness ... Brenda Currin's acting can be as quiet and edgy as the Eudora Welty stories she enacts. Both hide a caustic wit under an artless, tender façade." *Robert Massa, 1980*

New York Magazine

"Miss Currin looks, move and sounds sovereignly right ... Miss Currin does very well by the jilted suavely rancorous Sister of the post-office story, who sustains and torments her kinfolk even as she is sustained and tormented by them." *John Simon, 1985*



"A stitch in time saves nine."

Edwin W. Schloss (producer) is the producer of the recordings of *Corkscrews*, *Tallelujah*, *The World of Ruth Draper*. On Broadway he has produced *Kiss me Kate* and *Buried Child*.

Brenda Currin (vocals) is the twice crowned Obie Award Winner, known for her roles in *The World According to Garp*, *In Cold Blood* and other films.

Phillip Fortenberry (piano) has played in the orchestras and recordings of the Broadway show *Side Show* and *Forbidden Play 1990*.

David Kaplan (director) stages classic theater around the world: *King Lear* in Uzbekistan, *Auntie Mame* in Russia.