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NEWS

BLOGHOUSE
BUSINESS
COLUMNISTS
FRONT PAGE
LOCAL NEWS
MULTIMEDIA
NATION/WORLD
OBITUARIES
PODCASTS
POLITICS
SPECIAL REPORTS
WEATHER

FEATURES

BOOKS
COLUMNISTS
COMICS
ENTERTAINMENT
Art
Bars
Calendars
Crossword
Games & Puzzles
Movie Times
Movie Trailers
Music
Soap Operas
Theater
TV Listings
FOOD & DINING
HEALTH
LIFESTYLES
MOVIES
TRAVEL
TV LISTINGS

OPINION

COLUMNISTS
EDITORIALS
LETTERS
PERSPECTIVE
KEEFE CARTOON
MESSAGE BOARDS
WRITE FOR US

SPORTS

AVALANCHE / NHL
BRONCOS / NFL
COLLEGES
COLUMNISTS
CRUSH / AFL
EXTREMES
MAMMOTH / NLL
NUGGETS / NBA
OTHER SPORTS
PREPS
RAPIDS / MLS
ROCKIES / MLB
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theater preview

For an acting pair, fate foreshadowed a sunny love

By [John Moore](#)
Denver Post Theater Critic

When Jonathan Farwell and Deb Note were paired opposite one another for a 1994 production of "Shadowlands," he thought she was a musical-comedy diva. She thought he was "a big-time Broadway blah-blah-blah."

"She tends to gloss over my credits," the big-time blah-blah-blah recalls with a droll smile.

The memory brings a twinkle to his 73-year-old eyes, though theirs is a love story so sweet Nora Ephron might want to keep her eyes on it.

"Within three nights, we pretty much knew we were destined to be together forever," said Note, who married Farwell a year later after a Sunday matinee on the set of their second "Shadowlands" engagement.

For a decade, Farwell and Note were the Lunt and Fontanne of Ashland, Ore. Now they are the Hanks



Jonathan Farwell and his wife, Deb Note Farwell, met during a 1994 production of "Shadowlands." They open the play again tonight in Fort Collins. (Post / RJ Sangosti)

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and Ryan of Fort Collins, where tonight Colorado's new residents open their third "Shadowlands" go-round, this time for the Bas Bleu Theatre Company.

And in honor of their 10th anniversary, the pair will renew their vows on the set following the Nov. 20 matinee. Because they don't know many folks here just yet, the guest list will consist of anyone who attends that day's performance. If no one shows up, "We'll just gorge ourselves on cake and champagne," Farwell said.

In 1994, Farwell was a recent widower who had retired to Ashland. His résumé included four Broadway shows, 11 years at top regional theaters, a national tour as Salieri in "Amadeus" and a long list of TV credits. He also was the first El Gallo, back when "The Fantasticks" was a college workshop.

Note was an advertising copywriter from Modesto, Calif., who had found a second life performing for the Columbia Actors Rep 90 miles away in Sonora. She was cast as Eliza Doolittle in "My Fair Lady," and soon became known as the company's musical-comedy queen.

When British director Peter Craze offered them the roles of "Narnia" author C.S. Lewis and his wife, Jewish-American poet Joy Gresham, in William Nicholson's "Shadowlands," Farwell wanted nothing to do with it. If he were to play literature's great Christian apologist, nothing less than a serious dramatic actress would do.

So why did Farwell say yes? He did his homework, he said, and decided to take a plunge that would lead to "the plunge." "If I had little bit more of the courage of my misguided convictions, we never would have met," he said. "But I asked about her. I had references."

What happened next was like a scene out of "Pillow Talk" - or Ephron's imagination.

"We met on the first day of rehearsal," Farwell said, "and I found out later that when I walked in, Deb practically fainted."

"I can corroborate that," said Note, 21 years Farwell's junior and until then a confirmed bachelorette. "I remember thinking, 'Oh, he's ... lovely,' only I said it right out loud. I mean, my jaw must have just dropped."

"It turns out that a lot of people from the theater

were in cahoots," Note said, and not just for the two to perform together. "It was more like an assignation," Farwell added.

As visiting artists, the two were put in adjoining rooms in the home of a woman who always kept the heat down to save on electric bills. So after every night of eight-hour rehearsals, the two would go home, light a fire and snuggle under blankets, sipping hot toddies and cueing lines while sharing a footstool.

"I didn't know how far they could push this whole thing - but they pushed it pretty far," Farwell said.

Their romantic fates were sealed. "It was

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like we had known each other forever," Note said. A year later, one of Farwell's two daughters called her and said, "We have to meet you because whatever you have done to this man, we are totally in favor of it."

After a decade performing together in more than a dozen productions, the Farwells decided in August to move to Fort Collins. Bas Bleu artistic director Wendy Ishii had worked with Farwell in 1984 on TV's "All My Children." In 1995, she coerced him to come to Fort Collins to perform his one-man show, "An Evening With Mozart and Salieri," a condensation of "Amadeus" and readings from Mozart's letters, set to an orchestral quintet.

"Bas Bleu was going down at the time, and when Jonathan sold out three shows, he kept the theater alive," Ishii said.

The couple returned last year for the closing of Bas Bleu's former space, and again for its grand opening performances of "Angels in America" in its new space. They were hooked.

"The thing about Fort Collins is that the whole community is on the cultural ascent," Note said. "You can feel it, and Colorado State University just imbues the whole city with a positive energy. I tell you, it's been a totally perfect decision."

"Shadowlands" is a bittersweet, late-life romance that has a particular resonance for this couple. Lewis was teaching at Oxford when he met Grisham, a poet and fan, in 1953. He married her only as a friendly gesture, to give her British citizenship, and she died of cancer in 1960. Farwell's first wife died of breast cancer in 1990 after 35 years of marriage.

"The spine of the play is that Lewis starts out as a man of intellectual understanding without the personal experience of love, but with strong theological convictions about its meaning and function," Farwell said. "Through his relationship with Joy, he is exposed to the visceral reality of it for the first time, and it not only wakes him up to life, but shakes his faith."

All this might not seem so central to Farwell if he were playing opposite any other actress.

"That Deb and I have lived it together over an 11-year period marked by significant spiritual growth for both of us is a good part of it," he said.

Theater critic John Moore can be reached at 303-820-1056 or jmoore@denverpost.com.

"Shadowlands"

DRAMA|Bas Bleu Theatre Company, 401 Pine St., Fort Collins|Written by William Nicholson|Directed by Jonathan Farwell and Wendy Ishii|Starring Jonathan Farwell and Deb Note Farwell |THROUGH JAN. 7|7:30 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2:30 p.m. most Sundays|\$10-\$19| 970-498-8949; basbleu.org

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