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Play shows other side of Wallace

MONTGOMERY — Her bust stands inside the state Capitol, a silent slice of carved stone, staring straight ahead.

Gov. Lurleen Wallace never attained the notoriety of her spouse, George Wallace. She never had the chance.

But at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, playwright Barbara Lebow and actress Monica Bell are breathing life into Lurleen. And with the production could come a new level of respect for Alabama's one and only woman governor.

As for Lurleen's husband, Ms. Lebow's play strips the last layer off a life that sparked both love and hatred. This time, it's clear Wallace deserves no ovation.

With information gleaned from George Wallace biographies, newspaper clips and interviews with Lurleen's friends and family, Ms. Lebow pieced together the tale of a woman virtually abandoned as her husband climbed toward the top office in Alabama.

While George hobnobbed from Barbour County to Montgomery, Lurleen was alone with the children, living hand-to-mouth and wearing hand-me-downs. When she learned of her husband's exploits with other women, she swallowed hard and carried on.

At least once she threatened to take the children and leave for good, a move that would have branded her and demolished George's fast-moving political career. Instead of running to her

and begging forgiveness, George sent brother, Gerald, his tipping, traveling sidekick, to request that she come home.

George's flaws as a family man have come up before. But they've never been displayed before a crowd in such startling fashion.

Could it really have been that bad in the Wallace house? Many attending Tuesday's performance didn't doubt it.

Jere Beasley, the well-known trial lawyer and former lieutenant governor, recalls seeing Lurleen and her children around Clayton when he was in high school.

Beasley's mother ran a tiny grocery store in town, and he remembers Lurleen buying the sparest of supplies to feed the family.

Even Peggy Kennedy, one of the four Wallace children, didn't challenge the portrayals. She told a reporter Tuesday that the play showed both her parents as human beings. "My father loved her very, very much, even though sometimes it didn't seem that way. That was just his personality," Mrs. Kennedy wept through parts of the play.

Mary Jo Ventress, one of Lurleen's closest friends, confirmed that Lurleen contemplated divorce. "Of course, it was on her mind, whether it was the right thing to do, what was the best for her family," she said. "She never did leave him."

On the contrary, when George couldn't succeed himself as governor, he pitched first lady Lurleen as his replacement.

Then he and his cronies changed their minds. But an increasingly assertive Lurleen said she was going to run anyway. She got more votes than George did four years earlier.

The campaign was a revelation for Lurleen. Terrified at first, she swiftly warmed to the trail. After her victory, she pushed through landmark legislation to improve the state's mental health facilities and state parks.

Her death to cancer in 1968, less than halfway through her term, sent much of the state into mourning. Even George failed to draw the same crowds last year when his body lay in state at the Capitol — right under Lurleen's marble visage.

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