

'Lurleen' comes alive in ASF play

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"Lurleen," the play by Barbara Lebow, gives Alabamians insight into the state's beloved, first woman governor.

The opening Friday night performance of the world premiere tells us more than we wanted to know about Gov. George Wallace's personal relationship with his wife.

Playgoers must remember this is an "artistic interpretation" of Gov. Lurleen Burns Wallace's life. It's fiction, yet there is more truth revealed, perhaps, than the Wallaces' Barbour County friends want to know. Even so, "Lurleen" is a play those who knew her or felt they knew her through her much-publicized political life will want to see at Alabama Shakespeare Festival March 26-July 24.

The play, of course, is about Lurleen Wallace, the Clayton housewife, who became Alabama's first female governor after being over-shadowed by her husband's phenomenal political career. She became the sixth Barbour countian to be elected governor.

It's a sad play, evoking memories of her early death of cancer in May, 1968, at age 41. It brings to mind that weekend Gov. Lurleen Wallace lay in state in the capitol rotunda. Jefferson Davis was the only other person so honored. Thirty thousand people passed through the rotunda to pay their last respects to Lurleen Wallace.

The play's closing scenes are touching and telling. Her father, Henry Burns, played by Phillip Pleasants, tells his sick daughter: "He (George Wallace) and the whole state of Alabama are worried about you."

"You always loved me the best you knew how," Lurleen tells George on her death bed.

Earlier, she tells her brother-in-law Gerald Wallace, "He can't help himself. It's like a—a sickness." If indeed he did neglect his family, this best describes George Wallace.

Those who knew the Wallaces will find the play brings back vivid



Monica Bell, as Lurleen Wallace, captures her warmth and love of the outdoors in this scene with her father, Henry Burns, portrayed well by veteran actor Phillip Pleasants. (Photo special to The Tribune)

memories—some bittersweet. It's highly entertaining and brings the days between 1942-1968 back to life for an evening. Through the playwright's extensive research and her artistic talent the audience relives those poignant years.

Thanks to Lebow, the truth—through her fiction—is revealed how the former dime store clerk, who never graduated from college kept the home fires burning and reared their four children while her husband politicked from one end of the state to the other.

She was more than a puppet or figurehead her husband envisioned when she ran for governor. At one point in time, he wasn't her "number one advisor" any more. She was her own woman, and Alabama was better off for it.

The mentally ill were better

served because of her compassion.

The cast is outstanding. Conan McCarty, surprisingly, couldn't find George Wallace's recorded television appearances on "Meet the Press" etc. as he prepared for the role. Yet, his mannerisms, his stage persona and his short stature give the audience a convincing characterization of this giant of Alabama politics.

Likewise, George's younger brother, Gerald, comes to life in Chris Mixon's performance. The actor looks like Gerald Wallace looked during his years as a student at the University of Alabama.

He was a loyal brother but he obviously appreciated Lurleen's role as a long-suffering wife and mother. "You're never anyone but you," Gerald tells her during a family crisis.

Right or wrong, the play has George Wallace changing his mind, opposing Lurleen's running for governor. This suggests while the idea to run was George's, in the end she campaigned willingly.

"I could be the boss," Lurleen Wallace tells her mother. "Your Daddy needs me to do this," she tells the children, who aren't seen on the stage.

Indeed, "Lurleen" tells more graphic details than we want to know, but regrettably the fiction has more than an element of truth. Read Stephan Leshner's *George Wallace: American Populist and The Politics of Rage* by Dan T. Carter for historical facts.

To purchase tickets, call the ASF box office toll free at 1-800-844-4273.

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