

## **Program Notes: The Mrs Dewinters**

My co-creator Lesley Sawhill and I welcome you to the world of *The Mrs Dewinters*. The play is based on a conversation I had with my late mother in law, Amy Shadeed Burdick. It was April of 2022 on the eve of the funeral of one of her best friends. At the time, she was 95 and had been living with Alzheimer's for quite a few years. She was a vibrant, detail oriented person with incredible coping mechanisms that helped her live fairly independently in her own home until her 90s. At the time of our conversation, her language had started to deteriorate, but her ability to express her feelings about aging, death, her passion for theater, and life-long regrets in language unique to her brain and age was so remarkable that my husband and I started recording our conversations with her. Here are some of the places we went in our talks.

### **Wellsville, NY**

Wellsville was, in Amy's youth, a booming oil town located in the "southern tier" of New York State, bordering Pennsylvania. It was the home of *Sinclair Oil* (the company with the dinosaur as its logo.) In the late 1950s a catastrophic fire caused Sinclair to close its Wellsville refinery and set up shop in Texas, the new frontier of oil production at the time.

### **A New York Actress**

Amy was passionate about theater, but chose fashion marketing for her course of study at Stevens, an all women's college in Missouri. A high school drama teacher discouraged her parents from allowing her to study acting, stating that Amy didn't have what it took to be a professional. Neither did he apparently, nor do I think he had much teaching talent. Amy went to New York City after college and was on "the executive training squad" at Abraham and Strauss. She specialized in producing and directing fashion shows.

### **The Second Mrs. De Winter**

After living and working in New York for several years, Amy decided to return to Wellsville to take an administrative job at Sinclair Oil. There she met and married her husband, Jack, a high school physics teacher and graduate student. Amy was an integral part of the local community theater: The Nancy Howe Players. I found dozens of programs and scripts from that era. Amy acted, directed, and produced. Jack was right there on the programs as well, doing sound, lights, and bit parts. Amy's "shining hour" happened when she played the role of "the second Mrs. De Winter" in the play *Rebecca*. It was a triumph which caused her parents to rethink their decision not to allow her to become an actress. The play is about a bookish young woman of meager means. She is not named in the play or story, but is referred to as "the Second Mrs. De Winter" after becoming the wife of a widower who, we later find out, killed his first wife. No spoilers, though Amy used the word "nymphomaniac" to describe the character Rebecca, the first Mrs. De Winter.

### **The College**

Jack and Amy moved to Syracuse in the late 1950s. Jack got his PhD in Physics and Amy worked as an administrative assistant at the admissions office where, yes, she had a pink telephone and a pink typewriter. She helped famous Orangemen such as Jim Brown matriculate and stay on course. In the early 1960s, New York's State University system was developing its small teacher training outposts into full fledged colleges thanks to Nelson Rockefeller, Governor of New York at the time. Jack got a post at the State University of New York College at New Paltz, a small town in the Hudson Valley of New York. Amy started a community theater group there called "90 Miles Off Broadway." An organization that still produces plays.

### **Alzheimer's and Dementia**

The purpose of this play is to put a spotlight on the real people behind the diagnosis and to give caregivers a window into the possibilities for joy and laughter in the midst of this devastating disease. Yeah. I guess. But what's really behind the Mrs Dewinters? What was my real purpose in working through this same conversation

over and over again in rehearsal with my partner Lesley? It was to unpack my complex relationship with a woman I have known since I was 21 years old. Unlike Amy, I defied discouragement and majored in theater at New Paltz, where I met her son, my husband John. During our courtship I moved to New York City to become a New York Actress and failed miserably after only a few months. I ended up spending some time in a psych ward for depression and anxiety (they didn't have the good drugs like they do now or I'd have been given a prescription and therapy and sent on my way.) Amy took me in, was kind to me, and looked after me like a second mom. She loved to tell me about her experiences in the theater—over and over again. I was polite but silently judgemental and dismissive. I was NOTHING like her with my performance art and experimental theater background. I wanted nothing to do with love stories and drama. Theatre, I was sure, existed to edify and enlighten. This play helped me see that the beauty of theater is in its stories. A good story does it all. So I hope you like this story.