

Loretta Swit of M*A*S*H brings passion to Totem Pole Playhouse

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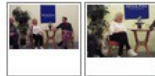
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PHOTO BY SARAH EYD

Totem Pole

Nationally acclaimed director Michael Bloom, left, M*A*S*H star Loretta Swit and Los Angeles Ovation Award winner David Engel talk about their roles in the Totem Pole season opener 'Six Dance Lessons in Six Weeks' at a press conference Tuesday. The show opens May 27.



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By SARAH EYD / N-C Correspondent | 0 comments

Years ago in a small Midwestern theater, actress Loretta Swit was rushed off stage and ushered into a bomb shelter, along with the entire audience. With less than ten minutes left of the play, Swit knew she must continue the show, in the small bomb shelter with the audience tightly packed in.

Her bomb shelter performance was a stark contrast to her award-winning television performance in the role she is best known for. Swit played Maj. Margaret "Hot Lips" Houlihan for 11 seasons on the Emmy award-winning series, M*A*S*H. Though she holds strong roots in film and television, Swit lives for the intimacy and audience interaction that small theaters provide, which is how she ended up at the Totem Pole Playhouse in Fayetteville.

Swit recalled her bomb shelter performance and several other anecdotes during a press conference Tuesday morning at Totem Pole.

"Live theater is a life experience. I love taking the audience on a journey," Swit said, while promoting her upcoming performance in "Six Dance Lessons in Six Weeks."

The play, which opens at Totem Pole on May 27, is a comedy about a retired woman living in Florida and her tumultuous, yet touching, relationship with her dance instructor. What begins as an antagonistic relationship blossoms into a beautiful friendship as the characters from very different backgrounds reveal their secrets, fears and joys while dancing the Tango, Waltz, Swing, Foxtrot, Cha-Cha.

Starring opposite Swit is six-time Los Angeles Ovation Award winner David Engel who was also present at Tuesday's press conference. Engel is a musical-theater veteran, who has starred in numerous Broadway and Off-Broadway shows.

Engel said his character in the play mirrors his true self pretty closely. "This role is pretty much who I am as a person," he said. He explained the similarities between himself and his character proved to be a challenge because it left him feeling "more exposed."

"There is so much energy from the script," Swit said of the dialogue-heavy play. "The characters are so juicy."

Swit explained she never takes on a character she does not love, and is able to portray a character she believes in anywhere. This passion has taken her all over the world from Guam to Maui and, now, south-central Pennsylvania.

Swit just arrived in Pennsylvania earlier this week from Los Angeles. Despite only meeting in person recently, Swit and Engel were able to rehearse lines and form a friendship remotely via email and phone before arriving at Totem Pole.

"We're both workaholics. We really bonded," Swit said of her friendship with Engel.

"The heart they bring to the roles is stirring," said Michael Bloom, the play's director.

Bloom is a nationally acclaimed director who ran the Tony Award-winning Cleveland Playhouse for 10 years.

Though Swit and Engel have not had a chance to explore the area yet, they both look forward to soaking up all of the area has to offer.

"I'm a city girl, my greenery is Central Park, but I love the rural areas too," Swit said. Once their grueling rehearsal schedule calms down, Engel hopes to go antiquing during his free time and also explore local wineries, namely Reid's Orchard and Winery in Gettysburg.

Engel, Swit and Bloom all stressed the importance of live theater in small communities such as Fayetteville.

"The most important thing is to feel," Swit said. "So many people are benumbed by news and world issues, so they guard themselves and stop feeling. Live theater allows an audience to feel; that's the magic."

"Totem Pole offers stars of this caliber in an intimate setting. Theater is about getting it to the masses, not just the elite," said Rowan Joseph, producing artistic director at Totem Pole. In order to bring in said masses Totem Pole offers any unsold seats 30 minutes before each show for \$10 to anyone between the ages of 16 and 22 with a valid driver's license or ID.

"Six Dances in Six Weeks," will run at the playhouse from May 27 through June 12.

For tickets or more information, visit: www.totempoleplayhouse.org.