

Celebrating Patton

By John Darling For the Tidings

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With a loving, three-hour spectacle of song, dance, acting skits and testimonials, some 500 friends Monday honored Shirley Patton on her 60th anniversary of arriving in Ashland and beginning a long career with Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

Patton came in 1958 from Stanford University, got off the bus and was met and picked up by her lifelong beloved, Bill Patton — and began 33 years on the OSF stage. At 81, her acting continues at Camelot Theater in Talent and as host of Jefferson Public Radio's historical "As It Was" show.

Bill Patton, longtime executive director of OSF, died in 2011. They married in 1958 and had three children.

The "Sixty Years of Giving" lovefest — and surprise party — at Southern Oregon University's Music Recital Hall featured performances and music by dear friends and colleagues, some going back as far as Patton's OSF work.

At the end, Patton arose from her front-row seat and told the audience, "Every face I see here is the face of love."

Event producer and lifelong friend Peg Rubin, a fellow OSF actor also going back to the 1950s, set the keynote, saying, "Shirley is the most glorious person to be on the stage with. She's this bubble of joy that bursts forth in such unexpected ways."

Her life and work were captured, said Rubin, when Patton played Portia in "The Merchant of Venice," proclaiming, "'How far that little candle throws its beams! So shines a good deed in a naughty world.'"

In a post-event interview, Rubin said, "She is the living breath and essence of unrelenting goodness. It's so good to be in her life."

Patton was lauded for her vision and works offstage, including her church work, with the First Presbyterian Church, welcoming foreign students into her home, performing with friends weekly at area retirement homes, helping in Haiti, protesting wars at the Nevada Nuclear Test Site and as a Woman in Black, volunteering as the night watch at the winter homeless shelter, working with other area theaters and many more.

“She spent her 50th birthday at the Nevada Test Site,” said fellow peace activist Dot Fisher-Smith. “At every demonstration, there she was, steady as the stars. You were the pole that held up the flag.”

Her son Will Patton of Portland said, “This is a major moment in the life of this community and this town. People often say my mother is an Oregon treasure. This night has been absolutely fantastic and it’s amazing everyone could keep it a secret until it happened.”

Singing and playing guitar to “Hallelujah,” Gerry Dignan explains he stripped all the words except the tune and title and penned new often rib-tickling new lines about Patton, adding “She’s helped us through the dark of our nights and given a light to so many, to help pull us out.”

Jim Edmundson, OSF actor and director for 38 seasons, said, “We’re all drunk on love ... She stands in the flame of her own dreams.”

Former OSF artistic director Paul Nicholson noted her “unprecedented kindness at the festival, your wisdom, support and, above all, your heart. You led by the example of your graciousness, inspiring me with optimistic faith in our achievement.”

Often lended support by Patton, Ashland playwright Diane Nichols noted, “She always makes everyone feel they are the only person in the room — listening with such a warm, open heart.”

David Wick, executive director of the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission, noted, “She embodies our values of compassion, accountability and respect.”

“I’m speechless. This was authentic Shirley, kind, a beneficent force of nature,” said life coach Elizabeth Austin.

“It’s a deep, abiding love that embraces our community,” says Annie Hoy of the Ashland Food Co-op. Jeff Golden presented a hilarious sketch from his role as Zorba at Camelot Theater.

Ashland soprano Pauline Sullivan, who dazzled with songs of Bach, Dvorak and Strauss, noted Patton’s “extraordinary compassion, listening skills and tremendous hospitality.”

Pat Patton, OSF’s long-ago associate artistic director (started at OSF in 1964), said, “This is such a wonderful theatrical event, being able to see how much her life has impacted us all.”

A specially created program for the event notes that Patton played over 60 roles at OSF, ending in 1990. Her favorite was Viola in “Twelfth Night.”

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