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 On Golden Pond in Oklahoma City - Theatre Review

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At the Civic Center Music Hall - January 2-7, 2007

**Guide Rating - ★★★★★**

There have been some great productions at the Civic Center Music Hall in the past couple of years, most of them musicals. That's no surprise, of course, since musicals tend to be the biggest crowd-pleasers, on New York's Broadway and on OKC's Walker.

### On Golden Pond - Theatre Review

However, the [Celebrity Attractions](#) production of *On Golden Pond* with Tom Bosley and Michael Learned sets a new standard for theatrical enjoyment in OKC with nary a lyric.

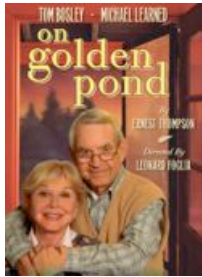
#### Headline Names

Oklahoma City theatre-goers are a fairly savvy bunch. We may not know the full Broadway history of each and every show, but we all recognized the names Tom Bosley and Michael Learned the moment they appeared on the theatrical calendar alongside the title *On Golden Pond*, Ernest Thompson's play that became the multiple Academy Award-winning film.

Bosley, of course, is known for his role as Howard Cunningham on TV's *Happy Days* and the title character on *Father Dowling Mysteries*. Learned made a name for herself winning 3 Emmy Awards as Olivia Walton on *The Waltons*. And on opening night, the stars received a boisterous applause from the Civic Center crowd.

The two may be recognizable for their television work, but they are quite comfortable in the intimate theatrical setting, pulling the audience into the story with their wit and charm.

#### The Story is the Star



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Despite the stars' notoriety and stage likability, that savvy OKC crowd needs more. It's the story of *On Golden Pond* that keeps us going long after that initial appreciative cheer quiets. Very humorous despite a dialogue pattern that skates a bit too close to that sitcom "one-liners" style at times, Thompson's play has deceptive depth and enough subtle tenderness to melt the hardest hearts.

The beginning of summer in Maine has brought Norman and Ethel Thayer to their seasonal home along the shores of the title body of water, an annual tradition for the couple. But this visit has a different feel to it. Norman is near to celebrating his 80th birthday after all, and mortality has become to creep into the Thayers' consciousness.

The summer is long, though, and there's plenty of time for Parcheesi, berry-picking, biscuits and coffee with Charlie the mailman and more. No need to dwell too much on the difficulties of life other than the mosquitoes and moths that surround the lakeside cottage. That is until Chelsea, their 40-something daughter they haven't seen in 8 years, arrives with a boyfriend and his 13 year old son.

You see, like all families, the Thayers have had their ups and downs, lingering tensions from the past and unspoken, unresolved quarrels. Time just isn't that short until it's nearly gone, and the past is woven into our very souls.

#### Snapshot of Life

Although there's plenty at risk emotionally here upon the banks of Golden Pond, it's a deceptive snapshot of life. A rustic cabin set design with rock fireplace and wood-carved stair railings places the audience at outdoor relaxation ease. The magnificently-crafted light design spills the backdrop with the colors of the morning sun, the midnight moon and every glimmer and mist above the lake.

The depth of the story, the richness of the characters and the power behind Thompson's message leak out only on occasion, never hammered home and often subtly masked by Norman's quick quips. With the exception of one awkward outburst in the 1st Act, Norman suddenly crying out his fear of losing small bits of his memory, the play refuses to pester you with its potency.

It's an understated realism, often uncommon on the stage. And it's a virtue of a playwright that knows the audience *will* identify with the struggles of his characters without telling them how to do so.

#### No Longer the Names



Photo by Rob Levine

Both Bosley and Learned get lost in those characters. It isn't long before we forget we even put our hands together for their Hollywood history. It isn't long before they are Norman and Ethel, an aging couple as layered as the story itself. They're likable and sympathetic despite their flaws. And they're not easily categorized character types like you see so often.

Bosley's Norman is gruff and sarcastic, always a crafty retort popping from his tongue. His body may not work as it once did and he may forget the way to the old road where the berries lie, but his timing is as sharp as ever. He's a "poop" as often called by his wife and daughter, and he's also quite a bigot. But with each verbose utterance, we begin to realize more and more it's masking something, or perhaps *many* things.

See Norman is afraid. He's afraid of the past and afraid of the future. He's afraid of dying, and he's afraid of living. Bosley plays Norman with a beautifully subtle vulnerability, just enough that we forgive him his mistakes, both the ones we see and the ones we know happened many years ago. Norman's a lot like us, or he's a lot like our fathers, or he's a lot like our grandfathers. We know his stubbornness because we know how much easier it is to be stubborn.

Because of that, Bosley has the audience on his side from the start. His role is, after all, the one with the vast majority of the laugh lines. But it's Michael Learned who has the more difficult task here, one she pulls off with incredible skill.

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