

ROMANTIC OVERTURES

MORE THAN FOUR DECADES AFTER THEY GAVE THE WORLD THE QUINTESSENTIAL FILM TEAR-JERKER, RYAN O'NEAL AND ALI MACGRAW REUNITE ONSTAGE FOR A DIFFERENT TAKE ON LOVE... AND HEARTACHE.

By Nila Do Simon

Forty-five years after the tour-de-force romantic film *Love Story* launched their careers, performers Ryan O'Neal and Ali MacGraw are reuniting to tell another saga of passion and romance—this time live onstage. Now both in their 70s, the actors are headlining *Love Letters*, a two-character play that's as emotionally charged as the aforementioned movie that made them household names (and Academy Award nominees).

Love Letters goes through the lives of the proper, straight-laced Andrew Makepeace Ladd III (O'Neal) and his childhood friend, the free-spirited artist Melissa Gardner (MacGraw), as they find each other, lose each other and find themselves again. Written by A.R. "Pete" Gurney as a story about first loves and second chances, the play unfolds entirely through personal letters and cards exchanged between the characters from childhood to some time in their 50s. The spotlight shines on O'Neal and MacGraw as they sit side by side onstage reading the emotionally charged notes.

"Using letters was a genius idea by Gurney," says director Gregory Mosher, who also oversaw the play's recent Broadway revival in 2014. "In letters, you often really express your deepest feelings. What you might never say in a restaurant or sitting in a living room, you might pour out in a letter. You can love people in letters; you can hurt people in letters—and they do all that in the play." The production marks the first time O'Neal and MacGraw have acted together since 1970's *Love Story*, a movie the American Film Institute has deemed one of the most romantic stories of American cinema, so expectations are high to say the least. The idea of reuniting the two stars in this national tour came to the producers when they saw the couple in a 2014 where-are-they-now article and photo shoot in *The Hollywood*

Reporter and noticed their natural chemistry.

For O'Neal, working with MacGraw again brought back 45 years of emotions and solidified a connection he'd had with the actress since they first met. "Déjà vu. That's what I felt [when] I first read the script,"

he says. "It's like time stood still. I've always had a terrible crush on Ali. She has always had a special place in my life."

With so much history between the two stars, director



"Déjà vu. That's what I felt [when] I first read the script. It's like **TIME STOOD STILL**. I've always had a **TERRIBLE CRUSH** on Ali. She has always had a **SPECIAL PLACE** in my life."
—Ryan O'Neal

Mosher's main task was to reel in his actors' emotions to present the audience with a controlled, moving tale that still felt spontaneous. "It was [about] not getting in the way of this story," he says, "not distracting from the emotional connection between the two people."

Theatergoers should expect a heavy dose of heart-tugging drama. "It's a real tear-jerker," adds O'Neal. "I'm not one to cry, but every time I read it, I start crying. I'd advise bringing tissues to the show." July 21-26, times vary, \$40-\$90, Broward Center for the Performing Arts, 201 SW Fifth Ave., Fort Lauderdale, 954.462.0222, browardcenter.org

PHOTO BY AUSTIN HARGRAVE