

War Bonds: The Songs & Letters of World War II

An interview with Serena Ebhardt and David zum Brunnen

Conducted by Evelyn Morley

Q: What is “War Bonds: The Songs & Letters of World War II?”

SERENA: It’s fond memories. It’s a sentimental journey, and it’s a reminder of how we as individuals and as a country face incredible challenges and difficulties. As for the type of piece it really is, it’s a cabaret performance arranged out of letters and interviews from actual World War II veterans. The letters are interspersed with popular music from the period. It’s a historical and musical journey through a war that redefined the world.

Q: What was the inspiration for War Bonds: The Songs & Letters of World War II?

DAVID: It grew out of several things...

SERENA: David was fortunate to be able to interview his father (before his death in 2000) on videotape. A few of those hours that David was able to record include memories of his father’s World War II experiences and his service in the European Theatre of Operations. One of those memories and a series of letters that David’s father wrote to his parents from Germany were about the liberation of a concentration camp.

DAVID: We include one of those letters in the show. And out of that came the realization that there were so many stories from the war that showed the beauty of the human spirit at such a challenging time.

SERENA: We felt it was important to bring those stories to light to perhaps inform future generations of how war affects relationships – both personal and political.

DAVID: And honor that war’s veterans at the same time— all veterans, really. Also important in creating this is that Serena has always been asked to perform music from that period. Not to mention that she loves those songs! The music is lyric based and reflects the current events and emotions of the time. For quite some time, Serena’s mom had been urging her to develop something with all those wonderful tunes—before the people that remembered them weren’t around to enjoy them anymore. All of this combined to move us to create the piece. Of course, new & younger audiences enjoy many of the songs now. There seems to be a bit of resurgence in interest.

Q: What has the response been to the show?

DAVID: It’s been overwhelming! That said, we’ve been humbled by those who want to share their stories with us after each show.

SERENA: The show has taken on a life of its own – something we never imagined when we first put together the cabaret. We’ve heard so many individual stories from audience members. People who tell us that they remember the events that we talk about – they knew where they were and who was with them. We’ve had children of veterans ask if they could submit their parents’ letters for use in the production. One man even asked us to wait at the theatre after a performance so that he could go home and get his war uniform to give to us. He had no heirs and felt we might be able to use the uniform with honor in our production.

DAVID: He brought it up to me and said “I think this just might fit you better than me now” (David laughs).

SERENA: The wonderful stories we hear from audience members after a performance equal the performance itself. As David said, we’re humbled to be the conduits for such an outpouring of memories, reflection, and acknowledgement. The show is more meaningful than we ever imagined it would be. We also perform an abridged version of this show for schools. We have been surprised that the students have drawn parallels to the Iraq conflict. The questions from young audiences usually astonish us with their depth and thoughtfulness.

DAVID: Only until we began regularly performing this did we realize that this show and all that it’s about is really ‘bigger’ than us.

Q: Are you trying to make a political statement with this show?

SERENA: No— And Yes. We specifically chose not to promote any viewpoints or opinions of our own – or others. The show is not meant to take sides in any current conflict or promote any agenda.

DAVID: If there’s any political statement we make, it is that war affects relationships – personal and political – no matter what the outcome. In the past, war has been inevitable. We’ll always hope for a world without war, but it seems to be part of human nature so far. Perhaps what we’re trying to say is that the beauty of the human spirit always prevails.

SERENA: War *is* hell, but the human spirit always triumphs.

Q: What is EbzB Productions?

DAVID: We are a professional touring theatre company founded in 1998. Serena is the Artistic Director and I am the Producing Director. We’ve made a specific effort to design our productions for flexible and easy touring to all types of venues.

Q: Why did you start EbzB Productions?

SERENA: We wanted to use drama to promote integrity, self-discovery, and positive transformation of individuals and communities.

DAVID: We felt that after spending years managing professional companies (both large & small) for other visionaries and working as actors in all types of productions, that it was important for us to create stories that we felt truly needed to be told on the stage.

SERENA: Once we felt we had enough experience and a world-view of our own, we wanted to create a company that could develop and produce work we felt passionate about. We create many of our own productions, but we also produce work written by others that we feel meets our mission.

DAVID: We continue to grow, and now we employ several different associate artists at different times in our production calendar. It's a busy time.

SERENA: We have worked hard, but we have also been blessed. Additionally many of our mentors and peers in the field have contributed to our success. We are grateful.

Q: What other kinds of shows does EbzB Productions do?

SERENA: One of the first shows we produced is our signature piece– Dr. Elliot Engel's *The Night Before Christmas Carol*. It is a popular holiday piece. David stars as the famed author Charles Dickens as well as all the other 16 characters he creates in his classic Christmas story.

DAVID: I've most recently done a piece called *Via Dolorosa* – It is a fascinating, and rather intellectual, tour of the Middle East; quite relevant to the events happening there now.

SERENA: It receives accolades everywhere it is done. The Charlotte Observer called it a highlight of a theatre festival in Asheville last year.

DAVID: Also, Serena has a cabaret called *In One Era and Out The Other: A Newsworthy Cabaret*. It is a time-travel of songs and headlines through the 20th Century. Julie Florin – who is the musical director for WAR BONDS – appears with Serena in that one, too. We also have a youth series that includes a show called *The Wrights of Passage* about the Wright Brothers in which we actually build an abstract replica of the Wright Flyer on stage – it's 21 feet long! Another popular production is *Brown v. Board of Education*. It chronicles the story of integration in the schools over the past 50 years. I've seen students and general audiences offering a standing ovation in a lot of different places at Serena's direction of Mike Wiley, who performs in it. He is really amazing to watch.

Q: What is your personal relationship to each other?

SERENA: Ah, yes. If you haven't guessed it, we are married. We met in 1986 at the University of North Carolina. We were married in 1988. We had a son in 2002. He is the "greatest achievement since our marriage" – to quote Bob Cratchit in the *Night Before Christmas Carol*.

Q: What is it like to work together?

DAVID: I'm what I consider a relatively smart man.... I know who's boss. (David points at Serena). Seriously, I trust Serena's direction implicitly. There's a reason she keeps getting asked to direct over and over again with other professional theatres, too. She delivers good work.

SERENA: Yes, well, David is my good work in progress. (David laughs, Serena laughs). I think we work together well. It can be tough – a married couple working together. But we have a respect for each other's abilities that has matured over the years.

DAVID: Wow, we have been together for practically 20 years. Did you realize that?

SERENA: (laughs) Yes, Dear. (They both laugh). It's actually wonderful. Yes, it can be difficult. It's always a work in progress. We've had to learn how to work together. We have to remember to be professional towards each other and treat each other with the same respect we would other artists. Sometimes it's easy to cut to the critical chase because we know each other so well. But we share a vision. We have different skill sets and we know what they are and we honor them.

DAVID: I couldn't have said it better. One of the most difficult things working together is that sometimes our son doesn't get either one of us because we are both on the road. Fortunately we have amazing support from our families who make sure he's cared for when have to go on the road together. We all make a good team – onstage and off.

Q: What have you done in your individual performance careers?

DAVID: Well Serena is a former "child star" akin to Bette Davis in *Whatever Happened To Baby Jane!* She started performing professionally at the age of six. She was Gretel in *The Sound of Music*. Along the way, her work took her to Europe and Off Broadway. She's done it all. I got my start a little later – landing my first professional job while in college. We've both performed in a variety of places – New York, Canada, Serena in Europe, the eastern United States – and with some great people. We are not 'stars'. We are not famous. That has never been our goal. We made the decision long ago to base our work out of North Carolina for a variety reasons (Family being a prominent one).

SERENA: One interesting aspect of our careers lately is that we were asked to train with The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (in Washington, DC) as Teaching

Artists. We're now being asked to work with students and teachers more often, which is very rewarding.

DAVID: We think it's crucial to nurture the audience of the future, among other important issues that you can address with students through the performing arts.

Q: Why do you do theatre?

DAVID: When I first started performing – and I'm thinking back when I was a kid, and then a theatre student – it was probably to get immediate attention. Over time, it's become more than that. Being involved in the performing arts and doing theatre helped create a strong bond between my father and myself that may not have existed otherwise. Additionally, I would say that I've found that by doing theatre, you can discover solutions to a myriad of things in ways that you'd never expect - and still have a lot of fun and be entertained along the way.

SERENA: Theatre has been an expression of many things for me over the years. At present I realize that it is one of the best mediums I have for communicating. It has audio, visual, kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, textual and musical aspects. It can reach every audience member regardless of how they process. I understand the Art of Theatre better than any other communication tool. I think it is the most powerful and dynamic way to share the lessons and meaning of Life.

#

EbzB Productions
ebzb@earthlink.net
www.EbzB.org