

# BWW Interview: Ernest Thompson On The Leading Ladies He's Worked With & Reviving His THE WEST SIDE WALTZ

[broadwayworld.com/los-angeles/article/BWW-Interview-Ernest-Thompson-On-The-Leading-Ladies-Hes-Worked-With-Reviving-His-THE-WEST-SIDE-WALTZ-20220613](https://broadwayworld.com/los-angeles/article/BWW-Interview-Ernest-Thompson-On-The-Leading-Ladies-Hes-Worked-With-Reviving-His-THE-WEST-SIDE-WALTZ-20220613)

by Gil Kaan

June 13, 2022

Will Geer's Theatricum presents the world premiere of the "all new" revival of Oscar-winning playwright Ernest Thompson's *The West Side Waltz* beginning June 25, 2022. Mary Jo DuPrey directs the cast of Ellen Geer, Melora Marshall, Willow Geer, Miguel Pérez and Charles Lin.

I was most fortunate to have the playwright make some time to answer my queries.

**Thank you for taking the time for this interview, Ernest!**

**What inspired you to revive your script of *The West Side Waltz* you wrote in 1981 for Theatricum?**

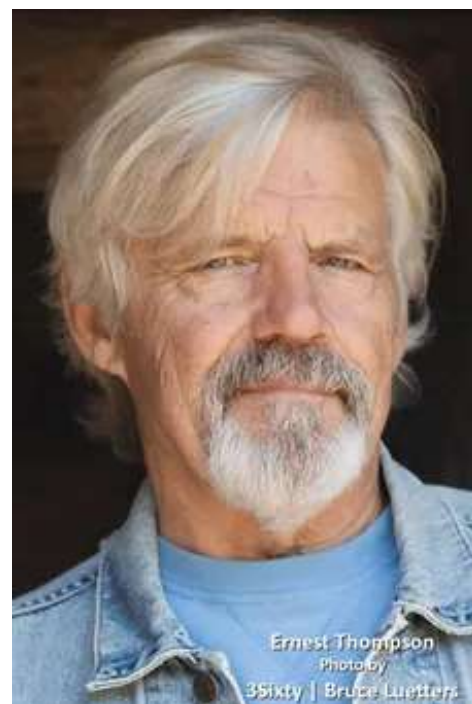
Everything in the theatre, as in life, is all about timing; the time was right for Ellen Geer to inquire about doing the play. It was actually in 1979 that I wrote it. I remember because that fall, I received a call from someone doing what I thought was a not very convincing Katharine Hepburn impression. After I'd hung up on her and she'd called back and said, "We need to talk," I had the feeling that my life was about to change.

**What cosmic forces led the Center Theatre Group to commission you to create *Waltz* in 1981?**

On Golden Pond was playing off-Broadway and Robert Fryer, Director of CTG, who, a few years earlier, had cast me in *The Time of the Cuckoo* with Jean Stapleton and Charlotte Rae, read a review in the *New Yorker* and called to ask if the writer and the actor both named Ernest Thompson were the same person. Next thing I knew, I'd been presented the George Seaton Award for Playwrights, which, happily enough, came with a cash incentive and the mandate to write anything I wanted.

**How hands-on were you in the initial *Waltz* production with Katharine Hepburn and Dorothy Loudon?**

Very. The summer that we shot *On Golden Pond*, Katharine Hepburn and I would have long, soulful chats about *The West Side Waltz*, typically over more cocktails for her than I could keep up with. She had spent months working with a fabulous pianist from Lincoln Center, learning to finger every piano composition in the play, a rare level of dedication which I greatly admired. The play's amazing director, Noel Willman, Tony winner for *A Man For All Seasons*, would come up to our New Hampshire location



and we, too, would discuss and analyze the script, often on the tennis court or out on my boat. During the lengthy rehearsal process in New York, I would fly in weekly from L.A., where *On Golden Pond* was being cut, and remained deeply engaged in the continuing development of the play.

### **Did *Waltz* tour before reaching the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on Broadway? Or after?**

Both. We opened in San Diego in late November 1980, and played mostly West Coast cities that entire season, the Ahmanson Theatre the second stop. We took the summer off, giving me a chance to refine certain scenes in the piece, and got back on the road that fall, the tour resuming in Philadelphia before its four-month run on Broadway, and going on from there to the Kennedy Center.



### **Did any audience reactions to your Katharine Hepburn and Dorothy Loudon starrer surprise you back then?**

I spent much of that time in a fog, amazed, first of all, that I'd written a play starring two icons of the American theatre and that the show was a sold-out smash everywhere we went, and well aware that there was something unfinished about the story. The Hurricane Kate Effect, I called it. There was so much Sturm und Drang associated with the production, swept along by the corresponding mad success of the *On Golden Pond* movie, that I had no perspective. I knew that that would come later; I didn't know it would be 43 years later.

### **What tweaks have you made to your 1979 script for your current *Theatricum* production?**

I call it a Deconstruction, not because I've put dynamite to the script but because, with the relative, shall we say, wisdom that sometimes comes with time and distance, I gave myself the freedom to ask the questions I couldn't or couldn't hear four decades ago. For instance, when I wrote the piece, AIDS was mostly a scary rumor. By the time we finished our tour, in the summer of 1982, AIDS didn't have a name yet, other than Queer Cancer. Now, the dumb gay jokes that apparently seemed amusing in the early '80s, have been replaced by the gravitas of that horrifying scourge, and AIDS has become a grounding, offstage counterpoint to the hilarity of the play. A similar deepening of all the relationships among the five vibrant characters has followed. I'm grateful for the invitation to have revisited *The West Side Waltz* and excited to share with a new audience a provocative evening in the theatre and one much closer to the author's original intent.

### **Had you worked with any of the *Theatricum*'s cast or creatives before?**

No, that's another one of those amazing Surprise Bag wonders I've been blessed with my entire career, from working as a young actor with legends like Cyril Ritchard and Alexis Smith on stage and then, as a writer and then director, with the Fondas and Jack Lemmon, Julie Andrews and Christopher Plummer, Robert Downey, Jr., Kirk Douglas. It's a long list, including something like 25 fellow Oscar winners or nominees, and, just as gratifying, some of the finest actors I've known, not famous but should be.

**What would your three-line pitch of Waltz be?**

The West Side Waltz is the story of three women of three generations, "left alone," in the words of the Dorothy Loudon/Liza Minnelli/ and now Melora Marshall character, "by death or by choice or strange circumstance." I'd meant it to be a sort of flip side to On Golden Pond, exploring the lives of people not blessed with the enduring solace of having someone be there to provide love and comfort. With music as the metaphor.



Melora Marshall & Ellen Geer  
Photo by Ian Flanders

**You directed the TV version of Waltz in 1995. Were Shirley MacLaine and Liza Minnelli your first choice for Margaret Mary Elderdice and Cara Varnum, respectively?**

I'd met Shirley on opening night of my play A Sense of Humor, also at the Ahmanson, and knew that she'd be terrific casting for Margaret Mary in the movie. I'd offered Cara to Kathy Bates but she had her eye on Mr. Goo, the homeless woman referred to but never seen in the play and a vivid force in the movie. And who wouldn't leap to work with Liza? The real surprise was Jennifer Grey who came in to read Robin Bird and blew us all away.

**What motivated you to start your Write On Golden Pond workshops for writers and offer private coaching to actors and public speakers at your farm in rural New Hampshire?**

Sharing the love. I've always been moved by other people's indomitable dream of expressing their inner creativity, often repressed or squelched. I firmly believe that every one of us is an artist and I take pride in encouraging my fellow writers and actors in any way I can. The Write On Golden Pond workshops, like the Rescind Recidivism prison writing program my wife and I have established, are designed to provide a safe haven for writers of any genre or discipline or experience to come to a weekend-long boot camp and dream the dream.

**Is there one major principle you impress on all your writing and acting students?**

Telling the truth, finding the essence of every character whether it's one you're writing or one you're playing, be fearless, take chances, fall on your face and get back up.

**What do you remember of the Oscar ceremony in 1982 when your name was announced as winner Best Writing, Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium for**



Willow Geer, Melora Marshall & Ellen Geer  
Photo by Victoria Hillyard



**On Golden Pond?**

A sense of relief; got that out of the way. I remember my date Diana Ross giving me a kiss. I remember running to retrieve my statuette from Jerzy Kosiński, as if it were a limited-time offer.

**What did you want to be growing up: Writer? Director? Actor? Songwriter?**

Phys. Ed. teacher maybe, farmer. But storytelling always came naturally to me. And that's how I look at all of what I do, as different ways of telling stories, whether it's a play or a screenplay, a three-minute song or a 400-page novel.

**What's in the near future for Ernest Thompson?**

I was happily directing myself in my new play *Ask/Answer* when Omicron closed us down. I'm looking forward to getting back to it and to directing a national tour of *On Golden Pond* starring Lesley Ann Warren and Barry Bostwick and getting my play *Some Parts Missing* cast, but right now everything is about my novel *The Book of Maps*, coming out in late October, the most immersive, consuming and gratifying experience I've ever had as a storyteller.

**Thank you again, Ernest! I look forward to seeing your latest works.**

For tickets to the live performances of *The West Side Waltz* through October 1, 2022; click on the button below: