

Helen Marketti's Music Corner



By Helen R.
Marketti



An Interview with Michael Learned

Many of us will remember sitting with our families to watch The Waltons each week during the 1970s and repeating the catch phrase "Good night, John-Boy" which was a television staple. Michael Learned played Olivia Walton on the television series. The show is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. Michael's career has spanned into stage productions on Broadway and Daytime television. She is a four-time Emmy Winner, People's Choice Award recipient and a multiple Golden Globes nominee.



She can be seen in the recently released film, Second Acts which is being shown at national and international film festivals. The film is about two people from different backgrounds who fall in love in spite of the pressures from an unjust society

"One of my favorite movies growing up was, Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm (1938) starring Shirley Temple. I just loved that movie. I lived on a farm as a child. I had a pet goat and named it Rebecca," remembers Michael. "Katherine Hepburn has always been someone that I have admired as an actress. I recall sitting at a table for an event several years ago with June Allyson, Jane Russel, Esther Williams and Margaret O'Brien. I had watched all of their movies when I was a teenager and here I was sitting at a table with these icons. I felt like I was in a dream. They were so down to earth and still looked fabulous."

Michael explains her time living on a farm. "For a while we lived on what was called a gentleman's farm in Connecticut. It was a 21-acre property that had been previously owned by landscapers. I thought it was a paradise. We had one cow, a couple of pigs, plus goats, dogs and cats."

She continues, "My father started working for the CIA while we were still living on the farm. He would be gone during the week and would return on weekends. I had recently found out that he was part of the Secret Service during WWII."

Michael's first ambition for the stage was to become a ballerina. "I attended the Arts Educational School in London for dance," said Michael. "One of the teachers took me aside and said that I really wasn't a very good dancer and I should think about becoming an actress instead. So, then I became a Drama student which was the beginning of my career."

The role of Olivia Walton came at a perfect time in Michael's life. "I had been working at the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco. It was a fabulous experience. There were two theaters. I remember in one theater we would be performing a Shakespeare play and, in the theater, next door we would be doing a Neil Simon play," said Michael. "I was going through a divorce at the time which was very painful. I knew I had to find something where I would be able to support my 3 children. I decided to go to Los Angeles to audition for the part of a farm woman who was in her 40s. I didn't feel I was right for the part because I was 32 years old and had short blond hair but I believe God was on my shoulder because I got the part! It truly was a gift in many ways."

Michael said she used to watch the episodes at home with her own children. She has encountered many people during her career who have a special place in their hearts for The Waltons. "Everyone can relate to a family unit in some way," said Michael. "I remember visiting a Veteran's hospital and a nurse asked me to return from the hallway to a veteran's room because he had started crying when he realized who I was. He loved The Waltons and watching the show brought him great comfort."

Michael still keeps in touch with

cast members from the show. "Richard Thomas (John-Boy Walton) and I are very close and still keep in touch. Ralph Waite (John Walton Sr.) and I were very close until he passed away. I am still close to his widow Linda. We all got along with each other on the show and that made coming to work an easy experience. I believe I would have been miserable if I had been in a television series where people did not get along with each other. I was blessed. Being on The Waltons gave me a second family."



Projects and performing are continuously in the works for Michael. "I love to work. I find it fun. Now that I am older, I do not have anything tugging at me. I will be going to Canada over the summer to do a stage production of, On Golden Pond. Several years ago, I did the play with Tom Bosley (Howard Cunningham from Happy Days):"

Finally, when asked what keeps her inspired, Michael replied, "Inspiration is God-given. I am not sure you can define it. You just know it when it happens. Sometimes it can happen onstage where you and the audience are in a bubble of magic together."

It was truly a privilege to interview Michael Learned. We can relive our own memories from a great, family-oriented television show and make those connections in our daily lives.

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