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Happy Birthday Marilyn Monroe



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Patriotic Duo Helps Us Remember Our Heritage

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Patriotic Duo Brings Betsy Ross and Ben Franklin Back To Life

BY BILL STOKES

American heroes Benjamin Franklin and Betsy Ross never lived together, but their present-day impersonators do.

Tavares residents Jeffrey Gay and his wife, Connie, met at a high school drama festival in Massachusetts, again the next year at Salem College in Massachusetts and married six years later. They moved to Central Florida and their signature show, *MurderWatch Mystery Theatre*, was produced at Walt Disney World for 20 years.

The couple's business, Dreamland Productions, is a traveling theatrical troupe that interacts with dinner theatre or various group audiences far and wide.

Several years ago, Jeffrey looked at himself in the bathroom mirror and exclaimed in horror, "God, I'm getting old! I look like Benjamin Franklin!" Voila—the character was born! Now, Jeffrey transforms himself in one-man performances into the printer, inventor and statesman.

His wife, Connie, produces "Tea with Betsy Ross" in her own solo program as the legendary flag maker. She runs music and sound effects for Jeff's appearances; he is at the board when Connie is the performer. In a matinee enjoyed recently at Lakes of Leesburg, B. Franklin circulated among his audience of 100 residents, chronicling his life, family, friends and enemies made throughout his 84 years.

Humor, drama and poignancy unquestionably brought Jeffrey's rendition of B. Franklin's humanity home to his audience. Perhaps best known for his experiments with the nature of electricity, B. Franklin also invented swim fins, medical catheters and, in 1736, organized Philadelphia's first volunteer fire department. Franklin also invented a more heat-efficient

stove (named after him) and because he felt it would help improve society, refused to accept a patent. Moreover, he promoted environmental improvements and published "Poor Richard's Almanac" under an assumed name.

Mr. Franklin served in such august political bodies as the Second Continental Congress. He was ambassador to France, helped draft the Declaration of Independence and was one of its signers. In 1790, only two months before his death, he wrote a treatise advocating the abolition of slavery.

Jeff as Ben Franklin scattered laugh-provoking zingers throughout his talk, notably in his explanation of inventing bifocal eyeglasses: "I was enjoying a book during a voyage to England. My mission was to represent Pennsylvania in its fight with descendants of the Penn family over who should represent the Colony. I found I couldn't see the horizon without changing my spectacles. Thinking it would be easier to have two-lens eyeglasses—one for distance and another for near sight—I invented bifocals." Jeff asked for a show of hands from those wearing his innovation. Many hands went up. "Ben" quipped, "You're welcome!"


The Rebirth Of Betsy Ross

Connie Gay continues: "Our clients began requesting another character to complement Jeff's Ben Franklin. A close friend of mine had, years ago, taught me to cut a five-pointed star from folded paper, so Betsy Ross seemed a natural."

She has two versions of her one-hour show: One with full sound and projected photographs, and another more intimate presentation featuring a full service afternoon tea party. She enjoys the latter because it allows her more interaction with her audiences.



Jeffrey Gay as Ben Franklin (above) and Connie Gay as Betsy Ross (bottom right).



Ben Franklin Fun Facts

1706 - Born Boston, Jan. 17, 1706.
1718 - At 12, apprenticed in brother's printing shop.
1722 - Wrote first article for brother's newspaper, signed it "Mistress Silence Dogwood."
1728 - Opens own printing shop in Philadelphia.
1730 - Married Deborah Read; starts "fire insurance" program.
1733 - Writes and publishes "Poor Richard's Almanac."
1744 - Invents Franklin stove which works better than fireplaces to heat homes.
1746 - Begins experiments with electricity. Invents lightning rod to protect homes from catching fire.
1753 - Becomes postmaster for all 13 colonies. Invents odometer to measure distance between routes.
1776 - Helps write the Declaration of Independence.
1784 - Invents bifocals.
1787 - Helps write the U.S. Constitution.
1790 - Dies at 84; over 20,000 people attend his funeral.
Source: AAA Going Places
March-April

Connie confesses she cries at points during her interpretation of Betsy Ross, "and," she said, "some of my audience sheds a tear, too." Such is the degree to which this couple's audiences become involved.

MurderWatch Mystery Theatre is a crowd pleaser after 20 years, in which group or dinner theatre audiences are ensnared in a staged whodunit and follow clues to find the "real" perpetrator. All Dreamland Productions' shows are scripted, but are open enough for performers to ad-lib an aside with the audience or to take advantage of an unexpected situation. Since all productions are enhanced by music, sound effects and props, set-up takes several hours for a one-hour show. Props are originals or replicates the couple has acquired through the years of perfecting their arts.

A telephone call to (352) 508-5523 or a visit online to www.murderwatch.com will bring an envelope of informative, colorful brochures explaining the wide scope of Dreamland Productions' interactive offerings. All their shows are available for hire by communities, clubs, restaurants and hotels. (WSS)

