

The Homecoming Preview

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The Homecoming is a homecoming of sorts for Dr. Gene Martin, 65, pastor of First Baptist Church in Snow Hill. It takes him back to the place of his childhood and much of his adult life and back to the days of visiting the Hamner family.

Earl Hamner Jr. wrote the novella, "The Homecoming," which was adapted into a script that aired in 1971 on CBS. It was so well received that it led to the creation of the television series, *The Waltons*, which debuted in 1972.

Martin has fond memories of the Hamner family. Though he never met Earl, he did know his mother and two sisters. The Hamner family was an "average, hard working, not rich family," Martin recalls. "They were always gracious, kind, folksy people . . ."

When *The Waltons* TV series became popular, Hamner's mother opened the home to the public.

"It became almost like a museum," Martin says. "People came from all over."

Fans of *The Waltons* may be interested to know that the Baldwin sisters were real people, and there was actually a Godsey general store.

"That was a little country store where everyone went to get eggs and milk," Martin says.

The Hamners lived between Charlottesville and Lovingson, Va. Martin lived in Amherst, about 13 miles away. Amherst was Martin's home from birth until 1988 when the former banker entered seminary.

"I raised my children there," he says. "It's a beautiful area."

When Martin heard that Center Stage was going to do *The Homecoming*, he wanted to play the part of Grandpa Homer, the family patriarch. He auditioned and was cast.

"It's fun to play Grandpa," he says. "It takes you back to memories and back to the era."

Though the role is a small one, the 40-year theater veteran says it's an important role that adds color to the production.

Playing his wife is Mary McMurtrey. The 60-year-old Goldsboro resident has been a fan of theater since she was a teen-ager, but this is the first time she has been involved in a production. Her sister, Nancy Mayo of Goldsboro, encouraged her to audition, and she did.

Ms. McMurtrey was worried that, because she had no acting experience, she would not be cast. But, after the audition, she felt like the part was hers. She was at WAGES, where she helps with the Head Start program, when she received a call from Homecoming director Cathy Stelly, who told her she had the role.

“I jumped up and down with joy,” Ms. McMurtrey says. “I told everybody.”

She says that, among the people who have learned that she's in the play is her doctor, Hector Pedraza, who told her he plans to be in the audience.

As rehearsals continue, Ms. McMurtrey says she is becoming Gramma Ida.

“As I get more comfortable with my lines, I'm taking on more of the personality of this character,” she says. “This person that I'm playing is a part of me.”

Ms. McMurtrey values theater, saying it helps people understand life. And she is pleased that *The Homecoming* is a play that uses symbols. For example, when the grandparents and grandchildren are decorating their Christmas tree, Ida hands Homer a dried rose to add to the decorations. It is a rose he gave her during their first Christmas and represents their love which led to the creation of their family.

The Homecoming takes place on Christmas Eve during the Depression. The father (Keith Barnes) has not returned home from work at his normal time, and the mother (Shirley Proctor) is concerned. As Clay-Boy (Vincent Bridgers) looks for his father, he comes to see him in a different light, says Mrs. Stelly. By talking to people in the community, he learns that his father is a respected and much-loved person.

The Homecoming is a family-oriented show, Mrs. Stelly says, and includes several children in its cast.

It also features a set by Cheyenne Corbitt which will include the Spencers' home, a restaurant, a church and a neighbor's house.

Cast members include: Susan Bowen, Cameron Carawan, John Cosgrove, Kelly Cosgrove, Ryan Cosgrove, Logan Edenfield, Steven Edenfield, Mike Garren, Nancy Garren, Kelly Heath and Tracy Henthorn.

Also, Jonas Jones, Sarah Kelly, Belinda King, Noelle Konich, Rachel Kreisle, Gene Martin, Mary Lou Park, Janneke Parrish, Gregory Martin, David Meraz, Reynold Meraz, Cassidy Morris and Brian Shoop.

The production crew includes: Michael Corbitt, producer; Anne Angelo, stage manager; Cheyenne Corbitt, lights; and Sandra Evans, costume designer.