

Local News

Gillettes return to Connecticut stage

By Karen Rider
Correspondent

“Sherlock Holmes, as Doyle described him in the original 60 mystery books, did not dress in the fashion that we have come to associate with the character. It was Connecticut’s own aristocrat of the stage, William Gillette, who brought the sleuth to life,” explained Harold Niver, donning the curved pipe, cap, cape and oversized magnifying lens that have become trademarks in the portrayal of Sherlock Holmes on stage and screen.

Niver and his wife, Theodora, are residents of Rocky Hill. They travel the country and internationally portraying Will and his wife, Helen. In their most recent performance at the Webb-Deane Stevens museum in Wethersfield, the Gillettes — ah, the Nivers — shared the life and times of the actor with an audience of 25 people.

At once the most respected stage actor of his day, Gillette, a Hartford native, was a creative genius. He invented methods to improve set design and special effects for the stage, many of which were later used in radio dramas. He established the well-known theatrical “bringing-up” and “dimming-down” the lights still used in contemporary theater. He was the first proponent of under-acting on the stage—a vastly different approach from that of English actors of the day.

“Though he was known to be quite the flirt, Will was instantly smitten with me,” said coiffed Theodora Niver, who is entrancing in her portrayal of Helen Gillette. Her smile is as brilliant as the flapper-era garb that swept around her petite frame during the performance.

A rather boisterous gal, Helen spoke her mind—a rare for a woman of these times. But that was part of the attraction for Will. The two had a swift courtship and married within a few months. Sadly, they were married just six years when Helen died of a ruptured appendix while traveling on rail between New York and Cos Cob, Connecticut.

“Will kept the promise he made to me on my death bed. He never remarried, though he was only 34 years old at the time of my death,” Theodora said in her portrayal of Helen.

Harold Niver describes the deep depression that sent Gillette running from the stage. He retreated to a cottage in Tryon, North Carolina. Eventually, “I found a way to resurrect Helen,” Gillette (Niver) explained, “when I started writing again, I assigned Helen’s characteristics — her hair, her personality, her demeanor—to the leading lady and I chose actresses who resembled her.”

Gillette is equally as well known for his eccentric home on the Connecticut River. “Seventh Sister,” Gillette’s retirement home, is open to visitors at Gillette Castle State Park in East Haddam.

“I never referred to my home as a castle,” Gillette (Niver) quipped. “That’s a media fabrication. I simply liked the architectural features of the castles along the Rhine River, which I visited, and chose to incorporate into the design of my retirement home.”

Will Gillette was quite an engineer, as well. He designed the miniature railroad that circled the property and drafted the plans for his boat, the Aunt Polly. In their performance, Niver also discusses Will’s affinity for cats and nature, in



Submitted photos

Harold Niver and his wife, Theodora, residents of Rocky Hill, recently portrayed William Gillette and his wife, Helen, at the Webb-Deane Stevens museum in Wethersfield.

general. He was a generous man, having shared his considerable earnings with local charities and those in need. He rarely gave interviews and what is known about the man is derived mostly from his personal correspondence.

The Nivers perform

“*Sherlock Holmes: Fact or Fiction*” for libraries, schools, book groups and organizations, and often greet visitors at Gillette Castle. To book a program, contact Harold or Theodora Niver at (860) 721-7682 or hniver@juno.com.

