UC SANTA BARBARA
THE Current

July 17, 2017
Jim Medina

Bound by Words

In 1970, two of America's greatest writers — Eudora Welty and Ross Macdonald — embarked on a friendship largely through letters that blossomed into a devoted relationship.

Their association is recounted in a new play, "Meanwhile There Are Letters," by the Irish novelist, playwright and screenwriter Declan Hughes. The play, which will be presented in process, is an unexpected bonus to the UC Santa Barbara LAUNCH PAD Summer Reading Series at UCSB.

"Meanwhile There Are Letters" chronicles a 12-year correspondence that began when Macdonald, whose real name was Kenneth Millar, wrote a letter to Welty, praising her novel, "Losing Battles." A year later, Macdonald — borrowing a tactic from his critically acclaimed Lew Archer detective novels — staked out the lobby of the Algonquin Hotel in New York to meet Welty, an award-winning author, records show.

When Macdonald left New York two days later, he wrote Welty: "I feel an unaccustomed sorrow not to be able to continue our friendship viva voce, and in the flesh, but these are the chances of life." Though they didn't have a love affair as far as anyone knows, the two writers shared an intense connection. But their relationship was limited by distance and circumstance: Welty lived in Jackson, Mississippi; Macdonald lived with his wife — renowned mystery writer Margaret Millar — in Santa Barbara. (Kenneth Millar used a pen name to distinguish himself from his prolific wife.)

The play — based on the book, “Meanwhile There Are Letters: The Correspondence of Eudora Welty and Ross Macdonald,” (Skyhorse Publishing Inc. 2015) — will be directed by Risa Brainin, professor and chair of the Department of Theater and Dance. Since 2005, Brainin has served as artistic director the UCSB theater program that brings together professional playwrights, guest artists and students to develop plays — in the form of works in progress staged as readings — both during the year and in the summer.

The LAUNCH PAD Summer Reading Series kicks off Thursday, July 20, with “Through the Eye of a Needle,” Jami Brandli’s working class family drama/comedy about the Keen family dealing with the death of their daughter, Dana, a Navy corpsman who was killed in Iraq.

“Meanwhile There Are Letters” is the fourth and final play in the series. The production came out of the blue when Brainin received an email from Stephen White, a film producer, who was interested in finding a venue to develop the play.

“I thought, well, this sounds fantastic because of Ross MacDonald's connection to Santa Barbara,” Brainin said, “and I have been a big fan of Eudora Welty.” White further noted the Margaret Millar Charitable Trust commissioned Hughes to develop a play from the book.

“The letters are deeply personal and moving,” White said. “By chance, I had recently read an insightful essay by Hughes on Margaret Millar’s classic novel, ‘A Stranger In My Grave.’ I reached out to Hughes and asked if he would be interested to read the abridgement of the book with an eye towards adapting it for the stage. He graciously agreed.”

A compilation of more than 300 letters that Welty and Macdonald exchanged between 1970 and 1982, the book — edited by Suzanne Marrs and Tom Nolan — points out that Welty wrote the bulk of correspondence in later years because Macdonald’s health declined from Alzheimer’s disease. “Those letters reveal the loving friendship of two writers, a single woman in Mississippi and a married man in California, whose unique bond at once observed the proprieties and expanded boundaries of how close two kindred, creative people might become through thought, will, and the written word,” the editors wrote. Macdonald died in 1983.

Though noting this project is “really quite exciting,” Brainin said she doesn’t have a favorite when it comes to this season’s four plays. “The goal — as the title suggests

— is to launch a play and a playwright," she added. "We've had great success with plays going on from LAUNCH PAD to a professional theater company. Playwrights like the program because they have the chance to develop their plays at UCSB in a very safe environment with young people who are really talented and excited to learn and grow."

This summer features a diverse story lineup. In addition to Hughes' "Meanwhile There Are Letters" and Brandli's "Through the Eye of a Needle," the series includes James Still's "New World" that is set in 1637 in Plymouth Colony on Cape Cod, where the founders strive to protect their religious community from growing economic forces; Anne Garcia-Romero's "The Daffy Dame," which centers on a Latina theatre professor directing a 1613 Spanish Golden Age comedy.

Free and open to the public, the plays run on consecutive Thursdays, July 20, July 27, Aug. 3 and Aug. 10, at 7:30 p.m. in the UCSB Studio Theater. More information is available at www.theaterdance.ucsb.edu/launchpad. A second performance of "Meanwhile There Are Letters" will be held at 7 p.m. Friday, Aug. 11, at The Community Arts Workshop in Santa Barbara.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.