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A poetic friendship: Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell

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Two of America's most revered poets, Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell, were introduced to each other in New York in 1947. Lowell had just published his second book of poems, "Lord Weary's Castle," and Bishop her first, "North & South." Bishop approached the evening, she later wrote, "in fear and trembling."

When Lowell arrived, in a wrinkled suit, and looking as though he needed a haircut and a new pair of shoes, she said, "I loved him at first sight."

Bishop and Lowell became lifelong friends, perhaps lovers, in a relationship that was most deeply revealed in "Word in Air: The Complete Correspondence Between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell."

While on bed rest with twins, playwright Sarah Ruhl was given the book, and an already long-standing obsession with Elizabeth Bishop expanded to include Robert Lowell and their 30-year friendship. The result was a two-person play that premiered at Yale Repertory Theatre in 2012.

Dorset Theatre Festival will present "Dear Elizabeth" July 8-23 at the Dorset Playhouse.

"So many plays are about romantic love, and that's something that's well covered in the theater," explained Adrienne Campbell-Holt, who is directing the Dorset production.

"But there's not so many stories that are about friendships," she said. "Yet, we all get on with our lives because of friendships, and friendships are so important and take so much work. I feel that the letters give us access really to so much of their lives.

"It's not a small play, it's an epic play that spans this enduring friendship that has so many twists and turns," Campbell-Holt said. "I think both of them at times pined in a romantic way, but that wasn't to be."

Bishop (1911-1979), who was highly respected though somewhat obscure during her lifetime, is now considered by many to be one of the most important American poets of the 20th century. She was a perfectionist who did not publish prolifically, only 101 poems during her lifetime. Her themes included the struggle to find a sense of belonging, and the human experiences of grief and longing.

Lowell (1917-1977), born into a Boston Brahmin family, enjoyed a more public success, even appearing on the cover of Time magazine. Although he wrote in a variety of styles on many subjects, Lowell received the National Book Award for his

1959 "Life Studies," with its uninhibited discussion of personal, family and psychological struggles. (Lowell was hospitalized several times for his bipolar illness.) He became part of the confessional poetry movement, sometimes a bone of contention with the more reserved Bishop.

"I think that there's a formality to each of them," Campbell-Holt said. "If I think about that time and what it was to be a woman poet, in the '40s, '50s and '60s, Bishop was a radical figure, and gay. As an artist today, I feel that her reticence to let herself be vulnerable in a romantic relationship with Robert had so much to do with that. She was being brave every day. I do feel like she was more eccentric inside than she committed herself to be in public."

Lowell too was a victim of his time and even his wealth, appearing to be a bit of a lothario, hard-drinking and outgoing.

"He was suffering so much on the inside," Campbell-Holt said. "So I think both of them shared real tensions between their inner lives and what they were expressing outwardly."

Campbell-Holt has her own personal connections to Lowell. He was her father's professor at Harvard for a short time during the early 1970s.

"They lived in the same residence house," Campbell-Holt said. "My father described Robert as this extremely reserved person who would barely come out of his suite in the house except to go to his poetry seminar. In the decades before that, it seemed that he was extremely social, so the pendulum was swinging widely."

Campbell-Holt also had a college friend who lived in Lowell's house in Maine, one of the places the two poets converged.

"I have been lucky in that place is very vivid to me," she said.

The Dorset production enjoys another connection. Geoff Boronda, the Dorset production's stage manager, worked on the premiere of "Dear Elizabeth" at Yale while a graduate student there.

"So he's offering gems of wisdom that Sarah Ruhl shared in that room with us," Campbell-Holt said.

Veteran New York actors Chris Henry Coffey and Andrea Syglowski are playing Lowell and Bishop. And, now in its second week of rehearsal, the production is taking shape.

"We're immersing ourselves in the poetry of these two, doing our homework," Campbell-Holt said. "These two actors, I've worked with them each separately before. Fortunately, they have this really natural, easy chemistry that helps so much."

"I'm really excited that halfway through the rehearsal process, the letters are revealing more and more to us," Campbell-Holt said.

Dorset Theatre Festival

Dorset Theatre Festival presents "Dear Elizabeth," by Sarah Ruhl, July 8-23 at the Dorset Playhouse, 104 Cheney Road in Dorset. Performances are at 7:30 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays, plus 2 p.m. matinees Wednesdays, and Saturday, July 23. Tickets are \$18-\$52; call 802-867-2223, or go online to dorsettheatrefestival.org.
