

Sigourney Weaver Gets New York Talking With Mrs. Farnsworth

By Iris Wiener

On a quiet street in a small space in Tribeca lies a theater that holds a gem of a story unknown to many. In 1996, director Jim Simpson founded The Flea, a theater meant to get under the skin of all of its inhabitants- audiences and actors alike. In the tiny space, visitors get up close and personal with the storytellers, making for a special off-off Broadway experience. In his efforts to bring large talent to his creation, he enlists the acting talents of unknown working artists, while frequently integrating them with more familiar showmanship-including that of his twenty-year wife, Sigourney Weaver.

The Flea is the current home of A.R. Gurney's political comedy *Mrs. Farnsworth*, with Weaver starring as the title character. Reprising her role after a sold-out run with John Lithgow in April, she brings her flair back to the intriguing *Mrs. Farnsworth* through the presidential election for a limited engagement ending November 6. "It's great fun to do, I love doing this play. I love to be doing a comedy and to be in such close contact with the audience. Usually there's kind of a fourth wall in plays and there isn't one in this, so I particularly love that aspect of it," she says while preparing for one of her first evening performances.

Mrs. Farnsworth brings The Flea the story of a very proper, well-educated Connecticut wife and mother, Margery

Farnsworth. She signs up for a writing course with the intent of penning a tell-all book about President Bush, with whom she has shared a shady past. Instructor Gordon Bell (Danny Burstein) is all too happy to help Mrs. Farnsworth get the truth out. Forrest Farnsworth (Gerry Bamman) enters only to present quite a different view of their collected history and politics.

In what is obviously an integral time when it comes to political statements, New York theater fans have responded to the meaty topic with light hearts and objectivity.

"I think people are so grateful to be able to laugh about any of this, because we're all in so much pain about what's happening in Iraq, and everyone is so polarized. It's great for everyone to be able to come in the theater, republicans and democrats, and laugh about it and hear Gurney's point, which is that our country will survive this," Weaver says proudly. "We will bounce back, we have survived inadequate presidents before. I think it's very important for us to hear that now. Obviously I'm a democrat," she adds. "It's a good thing for us to hear that our country is stronger and more vital than the folly of any one administration. Our views deserve to be heard. We're not unpatriotic; we're being patriotic by speaking up!" she says.

Mrs. Farnsworth is a natural fit for Weaver. She enters the play in a burst of frenzy and excitement, of which the leading lady brilliantly shares with her audience.

"She's so dear," says the actress of her character. "It's funny because I keep remembering people I knew, and they would definitely say, 'Oh my goodness, there's a shade of her in Mrs. Farnsworth!' No stranger to acting, the *Alien* and *Working Girl* star has proven her range time and time again. "It's very unconscious, and it's not my head doing any of it, it's more my stomach," she says of her work in *Mrs. Farnsworth*. "I know an extremely kind



Mrs. Farnsworth: Sigourney Weaver

and nice woman who also has sort of a secret spunk. She was the original inspiration. But at a certain point, I think you have to step out of the way and let the character that Gurney has written just take over. She sort of runs it." Weaver swears that each performance is unique from all others, with much credit given to director and husband Simpson. "He's such a good director. He casts really well and lets the actors just get on with it. He's extremely fluid in the way he directs things, he's very natural. It was his idea to have it to be just a bare bones theater, just to feel like you're really in a writing class," she says of the semi-interactive atmosphere. "Some nights Mrs. Farnsworth is more desperate, and some nights she's more mischievous. But she's

always dear and passionate, and all the characters in this play are touching, charming, truthful and wise."

Weaver credits Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn as her influences in all of her acting. "I was fortunate enough to know them quite well, and I must think about them everyday. They would always look for quality scripts, they always had fun doing what they did. They were devoted to it and very disciplined about it, and they didn't take themselves too seriously." Despite the vast amount of work she has done on screen, including this year's *The Village*, Weaver is happiest when on stage. "I think the theater continues to inspire me as an actor. The film experience is hard and very intense. You have a great time working with a lot of wonderful actors, but then you're dispersed. I think going into the theater day after day after day is a very sweet experience," says the Tony Award nominee for her Broadway role in *Hurlyburly*. "I love to see everyone everyday personally. No matter what's going on in your life, you show up before curtain and get ready to present this story to people and you tell it from beginning to end, and people kind of leave with a little of this story inside of them."

As her work in *Mrs. Farnsworth* gets under way, Weaver encourages everyone to partake in the experience, no matter what their political views may be. "It's a relief to be able to laugh and to be able to hear different points of view expressed with humor and passion, and it's exhilarating for us to do it." The Flea is diverse and innovative, and she would love to see Long Islanders enjoy what they have to offer. "We not only have new plays, but we also have classic plays, sometimes we have music and poetry and fabulous dance. Just go to www.theflea.org, and when you come to the city come check it out, you're a part of our community and we'd love for you to come and participate." ■