

CRAZY
MAMA



Sharon Scott Williams' *Crazy Mama* Stakes the stage at the Rubicon Theatre

"Sharon races home from school a couple days after her 8th birthday to beat her teenage brother Spikey to the last slice of birthday cake. When she enters the kitchen, she finds her mother wielding a knife. As the Sheriff escorts her mother away, the deputy tells Sharon that her mama is 'not right in the head.'"

So begins the official synopsis for *Crazy Mama: A True Story of Love & Madness*, a one-woman autobiographical play written by Ojai's own Sharon Scott Williams.

With Sharon's husband, *Happy Days* alum Anson Williams, as director, and actor Linda Purl at the helm — playing 16 different characters throughout a decades-long timeline of tumult and triumph — *Crazy Mama* is set to take the stage at Rubicon Theatre in Ventura from March 26 to April 6.

For Sharon — a prolific Realtor known throughout Ojai as Sharon MaHarry — debuting the raw reality of her upbringing onstage is a full-circle moment.

"When you have the kind of upbringing that I had, with my schizophrenic mother, you have a lot of challenges that other kids don't have. ... You grow up quickly," Sharon said. "Reading and writing have been my comfort for my whole life. When I was going through all this with my mother, you know, that's where I would go. I had a vanity in my bedroom that had a little skirt on it; I would crawl in there behind the skirt with my books and read because I felt safe in there, like a cocoon."

Sharon, who grew up in Roanoke, Virginia, has "always" been a writer — "I was writing songs when I was in first grade," she revealed. Writing was not only a coping mechanism, but also a skill through which she could connect

with her mother's interests in the good moments. She said: "My mom was a very creative person and read constantly when she wasn't in one of her mental episodes. Of all the things that she possessed, her books were her most favorite possessions. ... She had set her sights on memorizing the Encyclopedia Britannica. ... She was highly verbal also, but unfortunately, because of her mental illness, she was never able to do what she should have been able to do."

Sharon nurtured her writing prowess to build a successful life, and credits her father for being one of her greatest ports in the storm. "I had a great dad, who is incredibly responsible and took care of my mother through all of her challenging, challenging times, and me and my brother," Sharon said.

"I was just really lucky ... and my dad, unlike a lot of men back in those days, kept reminding me that I could

do anything I wanted. And that was really not what girls were hearing back then. ... I was really driven by my dad's standards to do the best I could do at whatever I decided to do."

While at Roanoke College, earning a bachelor's degree in English, Sharon did some modeling, and through that, networked with advertisers to keep writing a part of her career. Starting out as a copywriter, she eventually became the first female creative director at Young & Rubicam — an advertising agency that *Mad Men* used as creative inspiration. But it was in Ojai, where Sharon started her real estate career over 20 years ago, that she found her true calling to creative catharsis — specifically, at a writers' retreat with script consultant Dara Marks, also of Ojai.

"I owe it all to Dara, I have to say," Sharon shared, describing that writers' retreat as "almost like a therapy

session for four days. And it was incredible. And I realized at that time that I, really, for my own mental health, needed to write the story. I needed to get it down on paper, what had happened to me and my mom. ... It just started to pour out of me, all of these things that I remembered and ... had blocked out all these years."



by **MIMI WALKER**

Photo provided

Her coming-of-age musings eventually became a 300-page memoir, though it was never officially published; years later, Anson read it.

"He started reading my memoir – probably to decide whether he really wanted to marry me or not," Sharon laughed.

"I had to vet the heck out of her!" Anson replied. But shortly after reading the whole story, Anson told Sharon: "This is a play. ... This is a one-woman show. You need to do an adaptation of this memoir as a stage play." With the help of Anson and Dara, it was adapted for the stage in about six weeks.

Anson said that during test readings at Ojai Underground Exchange, "We're watching the audience, and they're not moving. They're just not moving. And I've never had a standing ovation in



Director Anson Williams
Photo provided

intermission for reading. So we knew we had something pretty amazing."

A theater producer who attended one of those readings was taken enough that he called Rubicon Theatre, and before Anson and Sharon knew it, *Crazy Mama* was on the theater schedule. In advance of the show's run here in the 805, staged readings of *Crazy Mama*, with Lee



Linda Purl, Anson Williams' former *Happy Days* costar, plays 16 roles in *Crazy Mama*.

Photo: Matt Baker

Purcell as the lead, took place April 12 to 14, 2024, at Bethel Woods Center for the Arts in Bethel, New York – the same site as 1969's Woodstock.

On casting Linda Purl for the Rubicon run, Anson said: "You know, Linda took over for Vanessa Redgrave in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, the one-woman Joan Didion show ... Linda is now doing a tour de force in *Crazy Mama*. She's playing 16 characters ... from children, to police officers, to a psychotic breakdown, mother, to a father, to a brother, to the kids. Everything with subtext ... a woman spending 40 years to see if she'll ever get her mother back."

Sharon's mother passed away when Sharon was 54 – 46 years after that pivotal breakdown. "So all those years, I just kept praying and hoping and believing that she would somehow come back to me as my real mom," Sharon said.

Sharon elaborated: "What we're trying to do is destigmatize mental illness as much as we can. I mean, it's very difficult, but I remember my dad used to say: 'Honey, you gotta understand, it's a chemical imbalance. It's like diabetes – it just doesn't look like it.'

"Hopefully we can help to make them see inside the person who's afflicted, and have more empathy for them."

"One thing I really want to get across, because, even though it's (about) mental illness, it is such an entertaining play. It

makes it special. I mean, you laugh, you howl, you cry ... but it's so damn inspiring. It opens up every window, every door," Anson said. "We found out, just through readings before we sold it, how much this affects the audience in a very positive way. Everyone has ... a mom and something's happening ... they reinterpret it their way. It is such a healing experience."

Sharon added: "I really felt like it was important, because a lot of people suffer through this. ... It shows you how families can make or break people in a situation like this. I was super lucky that I had really great people, my dad, my grandmother, my aunt, and then I had another aunt who is in the story – there's some very funny, awful things that she did! ... My dad was a very funny guy, and so he tried to find the humor in the situation, and so that was one way we got through it."

Anson said the end of the play "shakes you up in the most positive, hopeful, magical way. And I will tell you this, this whole play leads up to one last line. You will never, ever forget that line. Ever. It will become part of your life."

He added: "And to see how this family, instead of destroying each other, they loved each other more. Love got them through it. Hope got them through it. ... It's an underdog story where you win. Everyone walks out of this theater opened up ... sharing their feelings, sharing their stories, and it just pays it forward to really show you're not alone."

Anson expressed his pride toward his wife's vulnerability: "She's finally getting her just rewards for her talent. And it's just the beginning. ... It's wonderful to see that she has her time now." ■

***Crazy Mama* AT Rubicon Theatre**

WHERE: 1006 E. Main St., Ventura

WHEN: Wednesdays through Sundays,
March 26 to April 6

TICKETS: Visit rubicontheatre.org
or call 805-667-2900



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