

ADDRESS UNKNOWN

BY JIM MURPHY

As part of Reunion Weekend festivities, the theatre production of former English Professor Kathrine Kressmann Taylor's 1938 book *Address Unknown* came alive at Kline Theatre.

"HEY, IT'S GREAT TO SEE YOU. You're lookin' good. What's up with the kids? Or the grandchildren?"

The standard Reunion Weekend greeting, delivered with a wide grin and a warm handshake, was ubiquitous this past June when alumni returned to campus to renew old friendships and rekindle "fond memories." For one well-remembered Gettysburgian, however, there was a different kind of greeting — loud applause.

Former English Professor Kathrine Kressmann Taylor made an appearance during the weekend by way of a theatre production of her 1938 book, *Address Unknown*. At the curtain call an almost full house at Kline Theatre joined in a standing ovation.

Taylor's spiritual return to campus came more than four decades after she retired from the College as an associate professor in the Department of English, but those intervening years quickly blurred for alumni like George Muschamp '66, who remember her with fondness and gratitude. "As a teacher she was always very accessible, and she was the only faculty member who attended every production I acted in as a student," said Muschamp, an adjunct professor in theatre arts and director of the Gettysburg production. "I remember she would come backstage, wearing a pink or lime-green suit and a pillbox hat, laughing her wonderfully infectious laugh and grasp my hand to tell me, 'It was just wonderful, George. Thank you.' She made you feel exclusive, like you had a unique relationship with her."

Those memories made Muschamp an enthusiastic accomplice in the effort to stage Taylor's piece as part of the Reunion Weekend festivities. The effort to bring *Address Unknown* to Gettysburg actually dates back to 2004, when the play version was produced in New York City. J. Michael



Kathrine Kressmann Taylor

Bishop '57 attended the New York production and thought it would be a good idea to bring it to campus. He enlisted classmate Bob Schultz '57, and together they developed the plan to make it part of the class's 50th reunion weekend.

Shultz studied under Taylor, and the two remained in contact after he graduated. His favorite memory of her was a moment in Italy. "You know, she moved to Italy after she retired," he said. "When I was in Europe with the Navy several years later, we arranged to meet. That's where she taught me to drink brandy. I'll never forget her telling me in that elegant way of hers, 'You don't drink it. You inhale it.' Needless to say, that was a very pleasant part of my education."

Bishop and Schultz brought their idea for a Gettysburg production of the play to Joseph Lynch '85, director of alumni relations, who asked Muschamp to direct. It became an all-Gettysburg College event when Muschamp cast Timothy Hamm '82 and John Tschop '76.

President Katherine Haley Will offered a strong "opening act" with her warm introduction and welcoming speech. A post-performance round-table discussion, featuring Gettysburg faculty whose specialties relate to the topic of Taylor's story, provided the evening with a big finish.

"Almost they worship him"

Address Unknown was written not as a theatrical piece, but as a short story or novella in the form of letters between two longtime friends, German expatriates, who are partners in a San Francisco art gallery. One of them, Martin, has recently brought his family back home to the fatherland, while his partner, Max, a Jew, remains in California. Their correspondence covers the tumultuous 16 months between November 1932 and March 1934.



Within the narrow borders of 43 pocket-size pages, Taylor found the space to be lyrical, as in Max's opening letter to Martin: "Back in Germany! How I envy you! Although I have not seen it since my school days, the spell of Unter den Linden is still strong upon me — the breadth of intellectual freedom, the discussions, the music, the light-hearted comradeship. And now the old Junker spirit, the Prussian arrogance and militarism are gone. You go to a democratic Germany, a land with deep culture and the beginnings of a fine political freedom. It will be a good life."

Tragically, that "good life" soon reveals early signs of something very different. Writing back to his friend, Martin says of Germany's new leader, Adolf Hitler: "You feel it in the streets and shops. The old despair has been thrown away like a forgotten coat. No longer the people wrap themselves in shame; they hope again.... I have seen these people of my race since I came here, and I have learned what agonies they have suffered, what years of less and less bread, of leaner bodies, of the end of hope. The quicksand of despair held them, and it was at their chins. Then just before they died a man came and pulled them out. All they know is, they will not die. They are in hysteria of deliverance, almost they worship him."

We know all too well the history that followed, which Taylor played out against the personal story of Martin's ill-fated love affair with Max's sister, Griselle. The affair ended long ago, but

Griselle remains a vivid presence to both her brother and her former lover. She is an actress who makes the mistake of publicly declaring herself a Jew from a Berlin stage. Outraged Nazis in the audience pursue her from the stage and into hiding. She is on the run, and finally makes her way to Martin's home with "a bunch of storm troopers right behind her." Martin, now a local official in the Nazi government, turns her away — and into the hands of the storm troopers.

Max's subsequent letters to his sister are returned from Germany unopened, the envelope marked, "Address Unknown." He learns the details of her fate only after he asks Martin's help in finding her. Martin's rationale: "What could I do?" Meanwhile, Martin's letters are becoming remote, even hostile. He finally demands that Max stop writing altogether because, "every word that comes to the house is censored." Martin can have no contact with a Jew, "except to receive money."

At this point Taylor's character, Max, devises a strategy for a small moral victory on behalf of all Nazi victims. Rather than end the correspondence, Max continues to write a series of short letters referring to imaginary orders of 1,500 paint brushes, a fictitious Young Painters' League, paintings (Van Gogh 15 by 103, red; Poussin 20 by 90 blue and yellow), references to a fictitious Uncle Solomon, a suggestion that Martin take his family to Zurich, and other items that would arouse the suspicions of any conscientious censor looking for subversive codes. Ever more desperate, Martin implores Max to stop writing the letters that are placing Martin and his family in peril with the Nazis. Max continues to write until, finally, one of his letters to Martin is returned unopened, the envelope marked, "Address Unknown."

Max has lost a friend, but won a battle.

"Best piece of the month"

Taylor wrote *Address Unknown* in 1935, then spent three years trying to get the piece published. Along the way it was

rejected by the likes of *Esquire*, *Harper's*, and *Atlantic* magazines before it found a home in the November 1938 issue of *Story Magazine*. The editors of *Story Magazine*, however, deemed the story "too strong to appear under the name of a woman," and assigned Kathrine the masculine pseudonym of Kressmann Taylor, which she used professionally for the rest of her life.

Rejection is all too familiar to — and frustrating for — creative writers. In Taylor's case, however, the delay actually proved fortuitous. As a consequence, *Address Unknown* was published against the backdrop of "Kristallnacht" ("Crystal Night" or "Night of Broken Glass") — the night of Nov. 9, 1938, when Nazi civilians and SA storm troopers throughout Germany smashed shop windows of Jewish merchants, ransacked and set fire to synagogues, and sent as many as 30,000 Jews to concentration camps. The incident revealed the violent face of Nazi anti-Semitism, and Kristallnacht is considered the beginning of the Holocaust.

American response was instant and intense. The United States recalled its ambassador from Germany, and American newspapers trumpeted the outrage in bold page-one headlines. *Address Unknown*, greeted by readers as a wickedly clever piece of anti-Nazi fiction, quickly produced a frenzy of accolades.

Newspaper columnist Walter Winchell, then one of America's leading opinion makers, hailed *Address Unknown* as "the best piece of the month, something you shouldn't miss." *Reader's Digest* included the story in its January issue, the first piece of fiction it had ever published. Later in 1939, Simon & Shuster published a book version of the piece, and the *New York Times* declared in a review: "This modern story is perfection itself. It is the most effective indictment of Nazism to appear in fiction."

The success continued. In 1944 Columbia Pictures turned the story into a full-length motion picture starring Paul Lukas and Morris Karnovsky. And more recently, in 1995, *Address Unknown* was reissued to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the liberation of the con-

An informal discussion following the presentation of *Address Unknown* included a broad spectrum of faculty and guests.



centration camps. Subsequently, the book was translated into 20 languages. In Israel, the Hebrew edition was a best-seller and was adapted for the stage. Similar productions have been staged in Europe and New York, including the production seen by Michael Bishop.

Not surprisingly, *Address Unknown* was unwelcome in Nazi Germany. An early Dutch translation, published in 1939, disappeared from library shelves after Germany invaded Holland. But in a wry nod to the changing tides of history, the book is now required reading in German schools.

What every good teacher wants

Following the success of *Address Unknown*, Taylor continued writing and published in 1942 a second novel, *Until That Day*, about Nazi Germany. In 1947 she and her husband moved to Gettysburg with their young son, Douglas. Once Gettysburg College realized the accomplishments of this new resident, she was offered a position on the faculty, where she remained for 20 years teaching creative writing and Foundations of Western Literature. At her 10th anniversary the Class of '57 bestowed on her a rare accolade: The College yearbook, *Spectrum*, was dedicated to her. A two-page spread included a formal portrait on the left-hand page and a dedication statement along with four candid photos on the right-hand page.

The dedication read: "This is the teacher. The Understanding Mind... which grasps the heritage of the past, distills it into the pulsating beat of the present and expands the meaning of what is now so that there is belief and pattern in the future. The Creative

Mind...that touches chaos, then forms and gives order, burning with a mystic fire, bringing light and beauty, perceptive, discriminating and unfettered. The Understanding Heart...giving of itself and never losing its integrity, constant in its warmth and sympathy, always ready, strong, trusting. To Mrs. Kathrine Kressmann Taylor — To All Teachers Is This Yearbook Dedicated."

The student who wrote that dedication was Carol (Traynor) Williams '57, who was a delighted member of the audience at the Kline Theatre performance during her 50th Reunion celebration. Following Gettysburg, Williams went on to become a professor of humanities at Roosevelt University in Illinois and the author of five books. She is currently a reporter for the *Bar Harbor Times* in Maine. The student reflects the teacher.

Student and teacher also developed a close friendship that lasted until Taylor's death in 1966. Following the performance of *Address Unknown*, Williams recalled a significant moment early in their relationship: "I was still trying to figure out what major to take when I took Kathrine's creative writing class in second semester of my sopho-

more year. She read my first assignment to the class, and I was hooked. Afterward I said to her, 'OK, so what does someone who wants to write major in?' And she said in her perfectly elegant way, 'Of course, darling, English.' So I majored in English."

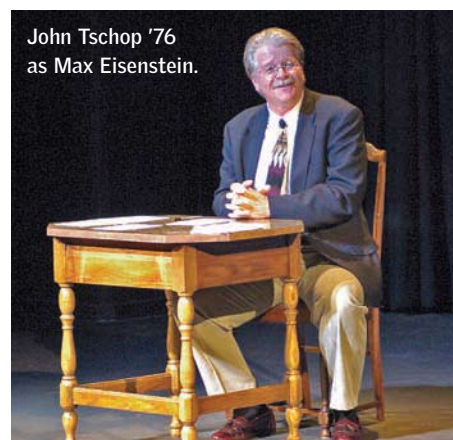
A special guest at the staging was Charles Douglas Taylor, Kathrine's son, who had helped the College secure the rights to produce the piece. Known as Doug, he greeted old friends he had not seen in several decades. "This is where I grew up," he said. "Last night I walked around downtown, looking at old scenes, recalling old memories. It's ten years since my last visit, and this represents quite a homecoming."

Of course, the centerpiece of that homecoming was the staging of his mother's story, and afterward Doug Taylor raved: "I've seen this performed in Hebrew and French, in New York and here, and this production stands up against any of them." He then related the chilling, real-life origin of the story as his mother had witnessed it back in 1932.

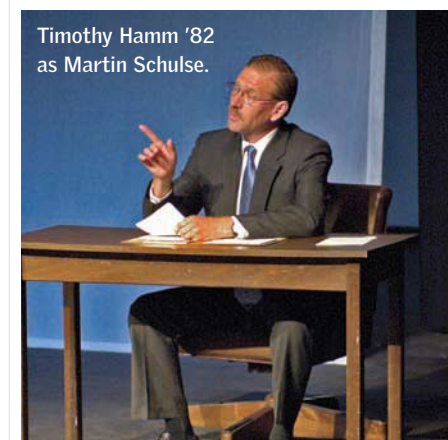
"A German couple, friends of my parents, had left San Francisco to return home," Doug Taylor said. "Now they were back in California on vacation, and in a chance moment, an old friend and neighbor saw them on the street. He was a Jew. He ran up to them, arms open for a big reunion, and they passed him by, completely ignoring him, emphatically rejecting him. My mother saw it happen. She was shaken by it, and she began doing the research that led to *Address Unknown*."

Following the Gettysburg staging, Doug Taylor participated in the question-and-answer session, which lasted nearly as long as the production itself. Rather than reaching any definitive ending point, the dialogue dissolved into clusters of people gathered on the stage continuing their discussions of this point or that. During these conversations, one could overhear political, philosophical, ethical, and moral issues being explored, as current events were held up to the perspective of history.

Once again Taylor had gotten her audience thinking — something every good teacher tries to do. ■



John Tschop '76 as Max Eisenstein.



Timothy Hamm '82 as Martin Schulse.