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## A Love Affair with Words

By Diane Claytor



Lafayette resident and author Roberta Palumbo

Roberta Palumbo loves words. She loves the written word and the spoken word. She loves reading the words and writing them. "I simply love the sound and rhythm of language," she said.

For 32 years, the Lafayette resident was a professor of literature at Holy Names University, the same Oakland university from which she graduated. She also developed and then directed the school's four year, across-the-curriculum writing program. Fifteen years ago, Palumbo retired. It appears that her life then became even busier.

While at Holy Names, Palumbo's specialty was E.M. Forester, the English novelist best known for "A Room with a View" and "A Passage to India." A frequent lecturer on Forester and his works, she continued as a guest speaker after she retired. "I now had time to do other stuff," she said, and decided to include Forester's friend, Virginia Woolf, the English writer and "one of the foremost modernists of the 20th century," to her lectures. From there, Palumbo just kept adding to her repertoire.

An avid reader of biographies, Palumbo felt Woolf's husband, Leonard, often "got a bad rap." So she decided to write something to "help Leonard gain his self-esteem." Having seen A.R. Gurney's play, "Love Letters," Palumbo was inspired. She

wrote a one act play based on real letters written by both Virginia and Leonard Woolf. "I don't know what got into me," Palumbo said. "I had no background in drama." But that didn't stop this woman who definitely likes a challenge. The play was performed at the annual International Virginia Woolf Society Conference and the 2008 Fringe Festival of Marin, a medium for new works. She wrote a second play about Virginia Woolf and again it was performed at the International Virginia Woolf Society Conference.

"The plays were well received. I figured I must be doing something right," Palumbo stated. "And I was certainly having a lot of fun." So she continued, moving on to Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, two of the most prominent English poets of the Victorian era. Using letters written by the Brownings, Palumbo wrote another one act play, "Not Death, But Love," depicting the Brownings' 20-month secret courtship in the 1840s. And this time, she directed the production that was submitted to the 2013 Fringe Festival of Marin. To Palumbo's surprise, she won best director; Molly McCarthy, portraying Elizabeth Barrett-Browning, won best actress; and the play beat out 11 others to garner the best play award.

Now the question was what should Palumbo do next. "People who saw the play about the Brownings were always asking me what happens next," she noted. "So I decided to continue the story on through their marriage."

Research on an upcoming trip to Italy led Palumbo to discover that Casa Guidi, the house the Brownings had lived in for 14 years in Florence, was now not only a museum honoring the poets but a lodging facility. "The rooms had been restored, furnishings were reproduced. Spending more than

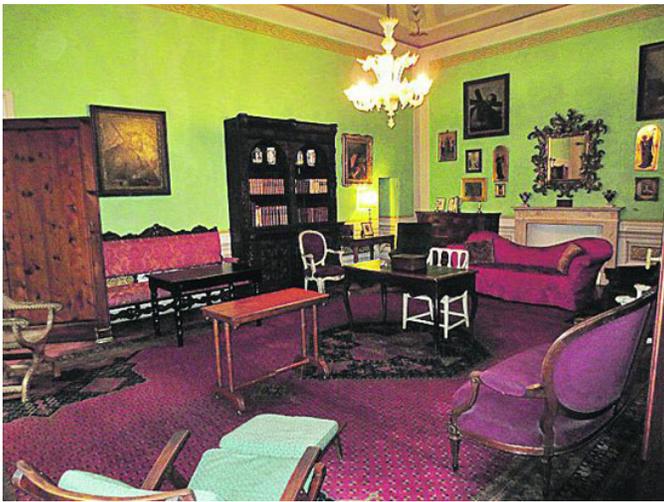
I probably should have, I immediately booked the room," Palumbo said. When she mentioned that she had authored a play about the Brownings, the reservation agent asked that she bring a copy for their library. "That meant I had to get something printed and it had to look professional." This presented the perfect opportunity to complete the story and turn it into a novella, "Robert and Elizabeth: Two Voices, One Love," described by Palumbo as a "memoir of a marriage, written by two soul mates.

"To tell this legendary love story," Palumbo explained, "I read over 500 letters and 30 biographies, choosing and condensing events and creating a narrative depicting the conflicts, difficulties and joys of Robert and Elizabeth's relationship. It's an intimate look at their life and love. By integrating my words with theirs, the language is less formal and easier to understand," she said.

With the help of Lafayette's Big Hat Press, the book was published and a copy now sits in the library of Casa Guidi. It's also available to purchase online and at Diablo Rapid Press.

Palumbo's next project is turning Robert and Elizabeth's life together into an audio drama. She said she "loves playing with the text, creating drama, thinking about inserting music and sound effects."

This retired teacher has not slowed down; she's still teaching, she said, "about literary history and more importantly, about human nature."



The Brownsings' drawing room at Casa Guidi with a facsimile of Elizabeth's low green deck chair where she often sat and composed her poetry. Photos provided

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