Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 26 April 2005 18:00

The time: the present invaded by the past. The setting: sanctuaries in the southwest desert. The play: *Altar Call*. And the playwright: Melissa McBain, who has appropriated one of the country's most volatile current debates – where the church stands on the subject of homosexuality – as her play's subject.

As the publicity fliers note, *Altar Call*, which makes its world premiere on Friday, May 6, at the Playcrafters Barn Theatre in Moline, focuses on Maggie, "a minister's daughter trapped between the needs of her gay son and the demands of her father's church." Without giving away plot secrets, McBain describes the production as being "about how scripture has been used to marginalize Maggie and assign her a 'proper place,'" and McBain expects that the work will both entertain audiences and make them think, allowing them "to find empathy for others and increase their knowledge of what others go through."

Yet McBain fully realizes that the production's subject matter, with its exploration of how a woman's love for her gay son collides with the beliefs that her Baptist father instilled in her, has the propensity to seriously divide audiences, and has planned accordingly; after *Altar Call*'s three Sunday matinees, the Barn Theatre will host panel discussions that audiences are invited to participate in, allowing them, as McBain hopes, "to argue about the characters and their choices instead of yelling at each
other
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McBain, who holds a master's in English from Arizona State and a doctorate in theatre from Penn State, is a familiar presence to those who frequent area theatre. After moving here from Pennsylvania in August of 1991, she became an instructor and director at Augustana College in Rock Island, and has subsequently directed and performed in shows for the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre, the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse, and, of course, Playcrafters. Yet she has also been active as a playwright, and is now embarking on her most personal work to date, which, she says, "is about the forces of three men – a father, a husband, and a son – on this one woman."

While McBain admits that some of the inspiration for *Altar Call* stems from her own life, she's hesitant to reveal too much about where reality ends and fiction takes over. "Writers are always trying to connect the dots between your life and the art instead of just dealing with the art, yet I understand it," she admits. "I mean, that's the hook, isn't it? 'Where did this come from?' I am a minister's daughter, I was a doctor's wife. And yet I want to be fair to my family and not make the discussion and the focus all about them and what's real in it [the play] and what's invented."

As far as her own family is concerned, she adds, "I will have family members here and they, no doubt, will see moments onstage or hear dialogue and go, 'Oh, I know where she got that,' or 'I know where that came from.' The tough part is being truthful to the *character*. If you're trying to protect your family, trying to protect the history, then you're pulling your punches."

Once it was clear that *Altar Call* would be part of Playcrafters' 2005 season, after having been previewed through two workshops and local concert readings, choosing a production staff became of the utmost importance.

With numerous directing credits to her name, McBain considered helming the production herself, but eventually decided against it. "I wanted someone I could trust, somebody who would bring another set of eyes and ears to the work and say, 'Why not this?' I needed someone dependable and organized, and someone who was strong enough to argue with me. That's just going to serve the play."

She found an ideal choice in Melissa Coulter – the artistic director of Ghostlight Theatre and director of such local productions as *A Christmas Carol* and a recent benefit performance of *The Vagina Monologues* – whom McBain had worked with at Augustana College. "Melissa is creative, very knowledgeable, and very strong, and I listen to her," McBain says of her collaborator. "She's brought a lot to the play."

Hiring an inspired senic designer was also a necessity. "It was very important that I had the right set for the play," McBain says, "and I was lucky to get Susan Holgersson. She is a fabulous set designer. She looks for the essence of the play, and when I decided to set the play in Arizona, she really took off with that. I love the Southwest palette she came up with. She even painted the stained-glass window in the set; her father did the carpentry and she painted it. So we've got a stained-glass window that my set designer made."

For audiences perhaps more accustomed to Playcrafters' presentation of lighter fare – the remainder of its 2005 season includes the comedies *Enchanted April* and *The Nerd*, as well as a stage version of *It's a Wonderful Life* – *Altar Call* stands as a serious, dramatic departure. Was there any question about the show being, perhaps, too radical a choice for the venue?

"Well, of course, I don't want to think the show is *heavy* – there are a lot of light-hearted moments in it as well – but it is a departure, I think, for Playcrafters, and there was ample discussion about it. But I think it's a bold thing for them to do. It's not the typical thing. I think that you need to bring the audience along; you give them what they want, and also give them something that they don't *know* they want. Or need." McBain acknowledges that creating new audiences, and producing new plays, is key to the survival of any theatrical venue. "If you're just trying to hold on to your base and you're not building for the future, it's gonna die. So, yeah, it's an exciting thing for them to do."

McBain hopes that audiences appreciate *Altar Call* as both a drama and, quite possibly, something more. "I want them to be drawn into the story," she says. "This isn't a sermon. It's a theatrical piece. If I wanted to write a sermon or an essay, I would have; if I wanted to write an autobiography, I would have. So, primarily, I want this to be an engaging theatrical experience where they empathize with the characters and the situation.

"But having the panel discussions was very important to me, too, because the issue of homosexuality and the church is dividing our nation and dividing families. I wanted to provide a forum, after the matinees, where people could, and would, interrogate their assumptions about the origin of scripture and the birth of sexual orientations. I mean, many people say they *want* to be accepting, but the Bible says X, Y, and Z. That's why I put together the panels with an Old and New Testament scholar, a psychologist, and a gay activitist, who will briefly respond to the play, and allow the audience to discuss what they've seen, and how they felt about it. It's an opportunity to give people the
language
, to give them a forum. Instead of it being personalized – a mother and son arguing about homosexuality and the church, for instance – you can have them talk about the characters on stage."

And the future of *Altar Call* isn't limited to the current Playcrafters production; there are talks about a touring production, through the Liberty Education Forum in Washington, D.C. "I saw this man [from the Forum] on television," McBain recalls. "He talked about coming to the heartland to deal with issues of homosexuality, and how the discussion had to move beyond California and New York. So I wrote him a letter and said, 'You've reached into the heartland, and I'm reaching back. I've written this play. Are you interested in reading it?"

For McBain, the Forum's quick reply was, to put it mildly, surprising. "I didn't have a proposal ready. I wasn't really going after money; I was just hoping they'd get the word out, and I could leverage this production into a subsequent one. So I told them. 'I want a graphic artist; I want money for advertising; I need promotional materials.' So they gave me their graphic artist. What a gift. To write a letter to somebody on TV and then have them ... ." She trails off. "You know, they said they were looking for *me*, that they had decided that they wanted to do something, perhaps with entertainment, in the heartland, and they just couldn't believe it. The timing couldn't have been better."

For tickets to or more information about Altar Call, *visit* *(http://www.playcrafters.com)* .