

## Making Fiction Out of Fact: New Ground Theatre's "Promise Ring"

Written by Mike Schulz

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It's no newsflash that playwrights often find inspiration in their personal pasts, and use young leading characters as theatrical alter egos; if you want to better understand Tennessee Williams, listen to Tom's monologues in *The Glass Menagerie*, or watch Edmund's scenes in *Long Day's Journey into Night* for greater insight into Eugene O'Neill.

When you learn that playwright Doug Collins was raised in Eldridge, Iowa, and discover that his comedic drama *Promise Ring* features a protagonist – 18-year-old Jason Cutler – who is growing up in a place very much *like* Eldridge, Iowa, it would make sense to assume the work is autobiographical. Yet for its author,

*Promise Ring*

– the latest presentation by the New Ground Theatre, being performed at the Annie Wittenmeyer Complex's Junior Theatre November 10 through 20 – is less personal than cultural autobiography; for Collins, inspiration came not from his life as a youth but from his *surroundings*

as a youth, where economic depression seemed, almost inevitably, to go hand in hand with personal depression.

*Promise Ring*, which Collins wrote in early 2004 and first saw produced, later that year, at Minneapolis' Illusion Theatre, centers around directionless youth Jason (Matt Gerard). His plans to secure a ring for his girlfriend (Hannah Campbell) cause trouble with his disapproving father (James V. Driscoll), his pot-smoking-slacker friend ( *Reader* employee – and this author's roommate – Jonathan Goodman), and a shady jewelry retailer (Pat Flaherty), and eventually lead to his accidental involvement with hidden Iowa meth labs. (Methamphetamine began gaining in popularity in the mid-'80s, and by 1989 was widely considered – along with marijuana and cocaine – one of the country's most "popular" illegal drugs.)

In many ways, Collins' script is typical coming-of-age fare, with lessons learned and the leading character, ever so slightly, finding his footing in a world he doesn't understand. But what separates *Promise Ring* from other works of its kind is Collins' ear for spiky, naturalistic dialogue, particularly that of his teenage characters, who continually look for ways to express

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themselves but haven't yet acquired the vocabulary to properly do so. Collins manages to pull off something quite tricky here; he's written a play about stasis that isn't, itself, *static*. *Promise Ring*

– on the page, at least – flows well and has moments of good, sardonic humor, and Collins' use of meth labs proves to be more than a convenient plot function; the highs and lows associated with continued meth use are mirrored in the highs and lows experienced by characters in the show.

For those who might wonder, though, just how closely *Promise Ring's* fiction mirrors Collins' youthful reality, the playwright makes assurances that the characters in his work aren't based on any from his own upbringing; there are no sneaking-out-to-the-meth-lab stories in Collins' past. ("It's me and friends all jumbled up," says the 39-year-old playwright of his show's characters. "I guess it's emotionally true but not *factually*

true.") Yet growing up in Eldridge did give Collins a unique understanding of the lives of *Promise Ring's* often-desperate figures.

"Anymore, regretfully," Collins says, "if you want to stay in a small town, there's not a lot of economic opportunities. That's just the way small towns are. Especially when I was growing up." Regarding his teen years in the early '80s, the playwright says, "That's when the whole Quad Cities economy seemed to just *sink*."

In *Promise Ring*, the leading character's stasis and depression mirror the community's *economic* stasis and depression, as Jason finds himself – much like his Iowa town – unsure of what the future holds and what his place in that future might be. "I think the character's definitely on the precipice between adolescence and adulthood, where most people really *don't* know what they want," Collins says. "When push comes to shove, he really can't do anything. And he doesn't even really have the tools to know how to deal with it."

That Jason, in *Promise Ring*, finds himself involved with meth labs as a way to secure income is, the playwright says, a sadly accurate picture of life in rural Iowa – at least as it seemed during Collins' youth.

"When I was there," he says, "we had so many people leave, and there were no opportunities, there were no jobs. The only opportunity to make money, and quickly, and if you didn't want to go through the proper channels, was meth. Because you can go out in the middle of a field, buy a bunch of cold medicine ... ."

(Collins adds, "It's harder to do now, from what I understand," saying – hopefully in jest – "There goes my son's college fund.")

Although *Promise Ring's* settings and situations are largely fictional, the playwright will concede that one detail did come specifically from the Eldridge of his youth, as the decision to

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make the character of Jason's father a barber was based on a shop Collins once knew well.

Saying "I wanted to have a public place" among the play's settings, Collins reveals, "I kept thinking of Gene's Haircuts. That was, like, one of the main social bases in Eldridge." Memories of Gene's – still located in Eldridge, at 118 North Franklin Street – led to imagining how the shop might play a role in Collins' Iowa tale, and before long, Jason's father had "found" his profession.

"All of a sudden," says the playwright. "it made sense. It was, like, 'He's a *barber*.'"

These days, during trips from Minnesota to visit his parents – who, like Gene's Haircuts, can still be found in Eldridge – Collins is continually surprised by the changes in his hometown. "It's really weird going back there now," says Collins, "because it's not like it was ever a dump at all, but Eldridge is a nice place to live now."

It was the playwright's connection to Eldridge that first caught the attention of New Ground Theatre Artistic Director Chris Jansen. Last year, after registering New Ground in the theatrical bible *The Dramatist's Sourcebook* – a go-to guide for playwrights on where and how to submit their works – Jansen says that she was "avalanched with scripts," and that *Promise Ring* was one of the first she received.

She admits that Collins being an Eldridge native "immediately jumped out at me," yet adds that it was the quality of his work that truly impressed her, so much so that in addition to securing the show for New Ground's 2005-6 season, Jansen opted to direct the production herself.

"The script is really great," Jansen says. "He writes so well for young adults. He has a fabulous ear for dialogue, and his wit is so subtle. It's like an attitudinal thing."

For the former Eldridge resident, the process of submitting *Promise Ring* to New Ground and having it accepted for the current season was gratifying. And quick. "I was flipping through *The Dramatist's Sourcebook*," says Collins, "and I saw a listing for Bettendorf, Iowa. And I was, like, 'Hey *hey*!' So I sent it down there and she just e-mailed back and said they were gonna do it. It was the nicest e-mail I ever got.

"So much of playwriting," he continues, "is hurry-up-and-wait. You just send out your 40 packets (of scripts) and then get your 36 rejection letters, and then you get a couple that are interested. And that's what keeps you goin'."

The author plans on being back in the area for the show's opening weekend, but don't be surprised if you don't see him there. "I'm usually the playwright who's in the back, walking up and down, pacing," he admits. In past productions of his shows, says Collins, "Actors would say, 'I don't know why you're so upset.' And I'd say, 'Well, you're up there, you're doin' something, you have a *task*. The only thing I can focus on is what you're doing,

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and I can't *control* that.' I know playwrights who say, 'Oh, yeah, I'll sit there in the front row' and blah blah blah. And I'll be like, 'Good for you. That ain't gonna be me.' 'Cause I can't. I wish I *could* ."

Despite the jitters he's anticipating, Collins admits to being "very excited" about his show's area debut, and finds it amusing that the connections between his Eldridge origins and *Promise Ring* continue even in regards to the venue it's being performed in – Davenport's Junior Theatre was the brainchild of Mary Fluhrer Nighswander, who, Collins reveals, was both the grandmother of a friend from high school

*and* "lived right down the street" when he was growing up.

Collins says, with a laugh, "You forget that, when you're back home, everyone's related to *somebody* you know."

*Promise Ring will be performed on Thursdays through Sundays at Davenport's Junior Theatre, November 10 through 20. Showtimes are 7:30 p.m. on Thursdays through Saturdays and 2 p.m. on Sundays, and tickets are available by calling (563)326-7529.*