

Written by Mike Schulz

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Describing composer William Finn's *Elegies: A Song Cycle*, the first presentation by the Quad Cities' new theatrical company the Riverbend Theatre Collective, artistic director Allison Collins-Elflin says of the show, "It's quirky, it's fun, it's upbeat"

Yet it's also a considerable risk for a fledgling theatrical organization's first outing, as the subject of the Tony-winning composer's quirky, fun, upbeat musical revue is, as its title suggests, death. "An elegy is a hymn of praise for someone who has passed on," states Collins-Elflin, "and *Elegies* is about all the people William Finn knew that he's lost."

First produced at New York's Lincoln Center in 2003, and premiering locally at the Village of East Davenport's Village Theatre on May 16, *Elegies* is Finn's ode to deceased friends and family members, and Collins-Elflin - a Moline native who also directs and co-stars in the production - concedes that "a lot of the songs are

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really heartbreaking.

"William Finn is a gay composer with many, many friends who passed away from AIDS," continues Collins-Elflin, who is donating 10 percent of *Elegies'* profits to the area not-for-profit AIDS Project Quad Cities. "But the show also deals with his mother, who passed away from lung cancer, and Peggy Hewitt, an actress in New York who passed away from ovarian cancer, and there's one section at the end - maybe four songs or so - that deals with losing people in 9/11."

Despite its subject matter, Riverbend's artistic director insists that *Elegies* - acclaimed by the *New York Times*

for its "playful lyrics bursting with internal rhymes" - is anything but morbid. "The really great thing about it," says Collins-Elflin, "is that you think, 'Oh my gosh, it's a show about people *dying*

... ,' but some of the songs are just
so

hysterically funny." (Which shouldn't surprise those familiar with Finn's work in *The 25th*

Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee

, or his witty Broadway musical

Falsettos,

for which he won 1992 Tonys for Best Original Score and Book of a Musical.)

Still, a production that invites audiences to laugh while presenting musical meditations on death isn't exactly the norm for area audiences, and venturing beyond the norm, says Collins-Elflin, is her goal for the Riverbend Theatre Collective. "We want to be able to give the Quad Cities a type of theatre that people maybe haven't seen yet. We don't want to do the big, Music Guild-type of huge hits. We want to do contemporary, intimate shows, with, like, a piano and a cello and a violin, you know?"

Breaking Hearts, Tickling Ribs: The Riverbend Theatre Collective Debuts with "Elegies: A Song Cycle"

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<http://www.riverbendtheatrecollective.com>