Written by Mike Schulz
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(*The following is the sidebar to the feature story " Love Letters: Melissa McBain Pays Tribute to Her Mother in New Ground Theatre's* Going Back Naked *.")*

In addition to playwriting and performing, Melissa McBain also teaches in Augustana College's theatre department, and currently serves as coordinator and producer for the Quad City Playwrights' Festival, an annual evening of short plays by local writers, directed and acted by Augustana students. (This year's festival will take place at Augustana's Wallenberg Hall on Sunday, May 10.)

Having initiated the festival in 1999, McBain originally intended it as a creative-writing outlet for high-schoolers, but began accepting play submissions by the general public four years ago. "My idea was to give writers a venue," says McBain, "and to be able to acknowledge and validate their works. But I also wanted to encourage them to see what actors can *do* with a script. A lot of them just don't know until they see it - they think they're carrying the weight all by themselves."

Receiving roughly 25 10-minute entries per year, five or six of the festival's submissions are selected for performance by a committee composed of McBain and the festival's student directors, who are then given, says McBain, "full control over the performances, with the understanding that they have to be true to the script - that actors and directors wouldn't change the lines."

The included playwrights, meanwhile, are informed that their pieces are being produced, but beyond that, have no participation in the staging of their works. "Unlike in professional theatre," McBain says, "they have nothing to do with the rehearsal process. It's *after* the plays, during the reception, that the playwrights get to speak with the actors and the directors. And that's always

been really exciting - to hear playwrights be thrilled with what others could do with their scripts."

This will be the last year that McBain serves as producer and coordinator for the festival, as she'll be retiring from full-time teaching this spring to spend more time on independent theatre projects. The festival will continue, however, under the leadership of theatre-department chair Jeff Coussens.

"I'm really glad that Jeff is interested in doing it," McBain says. "I actually floated the idea to the students last year - I said, 'You know, I'm thinking of giving this up' - and they said no, they didn't want that. I mean, a lot of times the actors start rehearsing at 10:30 at night. Some of them will be in a matinée that day, strike the set, and then perform the festival. This means a *lot* to them."

The lineup for May 10's Quad City Playwrights' Festival includes:

The Babysitting Club, written by Chris Jansen. Ten babysitters work on a marketing plan to lure prospective clients.

Bob & Jim Build a Doomsday Device, written by Aaron Randolph III. Two middle-aged American men wage war on the infidels.

Help Needed, written by Grant Brintnall. A therapy patient turns the tables on his psychiatrist.

How It Goes, written by Alexander Van Beek. A zookeeper and an I.T. analyst await their girlfriends' airport arrivals.

"Shhhh!", written by Michael Callahan. Three gods make a surprise appearance during a church service.

- ***Scissors***, written by William Pepper. A married couple explores their combative relationship.

The evening will also find McBain performing from her solo production *Going Back Naked*, which will have its final performance in New Ground Theatre's *Going Back Naked: New Plays by Area Playwrights* earlier that day. "My mother was a founding patron of the festival," says McBain, "and since the play is a tribute to her, it felt appropriate. And this *is* happening on Mother's Day."

The Quad City Playwrights' Festival 2009, sponsored by the Quad City Arts Dollar$ program, is free and open to the public. For more information on the May 10, 7:30 p.m. performance, call Melissa McBain at (309)794-7618.