Written by Mike Schulz
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After local productions of *Altar Call* in 2005 and *Yard Sale* in 2007, area playwright Melissa McBain's latest endeavor - opening April 30 at the Village of East Davenport's Village Theatre - is the solo presentation *Going Back Naked*. And if you think that's a strange title for a play, its author says she originally considered one that was even more unusual.

"I toyed with *A Slumber Party with My Dead Mother*," says McBain, who not only wrote but stars in this semi-autobiographical play. "It deals with the death of my mother, and part of it is an attempt to *conjure* her - to meet her as she was when she was a girl, and ask questions ... . It's kind of an interrogation, but there's also a kind of playfulness there. I wanted to have some fun with the idea of a 60-year-old woman interrogating her 20-year-old mother."

Given the subject matter, though, McBain deemed that original title a little *too* playful, and settled on *Going Back Naked*. "The only person that hasn't liked the title, so far, is my mother's sister," says the playwright. "I think she was horrified that I was going to take my clothes off on stage.

"Maybe when I was 20," she adds with a laugh, "but not now."

McBain's one-act will be performed opposite Chris Jansen's *Dream a Little Dream of Me* in the New Ground Theatre presentation *Going Back Naked: Two Plays by Local Playwrights*, running through May 10. ("I was flattered by that," says McBain of the use of *Going Back Naked* as the blanket title for both shows. "And it helped me withstand the criticism of my aunt.") Her solo piece finds McBain engaged in a "conversation" between herself and her mother, who passed away (at age 90) in 2007, yet the inspiration for this stage tribute actually originated more than 70 years ago, through a series of letters from the 1930s that came into the author's possession two years before her mother's passing.

"She flew here from Fresno [California]," says McBain, "and she gave me this satchel of her love letters. Hundreds and *hundreds* of love letters - three summers of a correspondence. She was trying to arrange everything so her death would not be a complication for people, and when it came time for her to part with these love letters, she made a decision to give them to me.

"She didn't say, 'Turn them into a play,'" McBain continues, "but she knew I was a playwright, and did say, 'You'll know what to do with them.'"

Initially, she didn't do anything with them except place them in a closet, where they remained until her mother's passing. A few days after the funeral, however, "I pulled them out," says McBain, "and it turned out to be the most incredible way to get through the grief process, because I learned things about my mother I never knew before. And one of them was that my mother had been secretly engaged during this period."

Arranged in mostly chronological order, the letters gave McBain a unique perspective on her mother's previously unvoiced romantic past. But they also provided insight into her youthful dreams of being a concert pianist - she performed on the radio and won a competition at Juilliard at age 13 - and McBain says that "in the midst of reading these letters, it sort of became my mother speaking to me from the grave. I was absolutely feeling, 'I am meeting a mother I never knew.'

"I mean, my mother had these letters for over 70 years, and nobody knew anything about them," she continues. "*Nothing*. I was calling up my brothers and sisters and saying, 'Did you know *this*? Did you know *that*?' We just couldn't believe it."

It became clear to McBain that her mother's pieces of correspondence - and her own discovery of them - easily lent themselves to dramatic interpretation. (The details of her mother's passing were no less dramatic: She suffered a major stroke on the day of her granddaughter's wedding, and passed away on McBain's birthday.) And at the end of 2007, McBain began work on the play that would become *Going Back Naked*, a project she believes would please her mother to no end.

"I think it's *exactly* what she would want me to do," says McBain. "She'd love that I made a story out of this. I remember her standing up at her 90th-birthday party and saying, 'Thank you all for coming. Most of you I won't see again 'til heaven. I'm looking forward to death. I've lived a great life. I'm ready to go.' I mean, what a *gift* - that flair for good exit lines."

McBain's concept for *Going Back Naked* found the character of "Melissa McBain" returning to the room where her mother had her stroke, reading from her letters, and both questioning and confronting her about decisions made in her youth. Yet the playwright says that the writing process itself was not nearly as simple as the initial decision to write. "My difficulty with it was treating the letters too much like scripture," she says. "I mean, every word of them was meaningful to *me*."

The trick, she says, was "to get out of the personal and into, 'What do I want to use on stage? What will be meaningful for an audience?'"

Two women, says the playwright, were instrumental in getting *Going Back Naked* into acceptable dramatic shape. One was her writing mentor Arlene Malinowski, a solo artist in Chicago with whom McBain has worked for years. "As Arlene pointed out to me, 'You can't read all the letters, Melissa. The audience is more interested in your relationship with your mother.' And I needed someone to say that to me. That freed me to paraphrase some of the letters, to take things from various letters and put them into *one* ... . To come up with a dramatic structure and tell a *story* .'"

And McBain says she has also received invaluable input through rehearsals with *Going Back Naked* director Susan McDonald, who previously directed McBain in her last solo outing, *Yard Sale* .

"It takes a very special person to direct a playwright in her own play," she says. "Susan can tell when I'm not getting it, or if something is unclear, and she's great about focusing on the pacing, the rhythm of the piece. You consider that when you're writing it, of course, but it's a whole different thing as an actor."

Especially, McBain believes, when you're an actor playing yourself, sharing frequently painful memories and emotions. "To deal with your feelings about your mother and your mother's death ... I don't know what's more personal than that," she says. "It is a nakedness, I think, that is *more* naked than taking your clothes off."

McBain insists, though, that *Going Back Naked* audiences have no need to dread a grim and self-indulgent experience. "I'm not gonna stand up there and be reading an epitaph," she says with a laugh. "I want the audience to see some conflict, but also humor - I've definitely put in the play the things my mother did to irritate me."

Which, she says, might make the piece more relatable to many audiences than would a wholly glowing tribute.

"When they've asked me what I'm doing now," says McBain, "so many people have told me that they couldn't *stand* their mother. They couldn't *wait* for her to die. And I'm thinking, 'Wow, this play probably wouldn't *mean* much to you then ... .' But then they're like 'No no no no no. I'd like to see the way it's *supposed* to work.'"

Going Back Naked: Two Plays by Local Playwrights *will be staged at the Village of East Davenport's Village Theatre April 30 through May 10. Performances are at 7:30 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays and at 2 p.m. on Thursdays and Sundays; for information and tickets, call (563)326-7529 or visit NewGroundTheatre.org.*

For information on this year's Quad City Playwrights' Festival - coordinated and produced by McBain - see " The Quad City Playwrights' Festival 2009, May 10 at Augustana College ."