

Leap of Faith: Playcrafters Presents the Biblical Musical "Hard to Believe," Opening September 10

Written by Mike Schulz
Monday, 30 August 2010 06:00



"I think Playcrafters has traditionally had the reputation of being a stodgy old theatre that only does six comedies a year, " says Tom Morrow, a frequent actor and director for Moline's venerable Barn Theatre.

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And admittedly, we do a lot of comedies. But every once in a while, we try to stick our necks out and do something else.

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That they do. In addition to the titles produced in conjunction with Playcrafters' 2009 "Diversity Initiative "

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Lorraine Hansberry

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A Raisin in the Sun
and August Wilson

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Fences

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other recent

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something else

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s have included 2005

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Altar Call

, a debuting, religiously themed drama written by local playwright Melissa McBain, and 2008

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Promises, Promises

, one of only a handful of musicals the theatre has produced during its 81-year history.

And on September 10, the Playcrafters Barn Theatre will actually present something of a blend of these latter two works - a debuting, religiously themed musical - when it premieres *Hard to*

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Believe, a song-filled re-telling of the Biblical story of Job, directed by Morrow, and written and composed by Tim Stoller and Jonathan Turner. Previously staged, in workshop form, at Rock Island's defunct Green Room Theatre in 2008 and Davenport's Zion Lutheran Church in 2009, Turner says that "the whole theme of the show is about the challenges of faith, and maintaining your faith in the face of all this tragedy."

Hard to Believe is also the first original work by area authors that Playcrafters has produced since *Altar Call*, and Turner, for one, knows how fortunate he and his collaborator are to find their show on the theatre's 2010 schedule - especially considering their competition for the slot.

"Weren't we up against a show by [legendary musical duo] Kander & Ebb?" Turner asks Morrow during a recent interview.

"Weren't they one of the other choices?"

"Yeah, I think so," says Morrow.

Turner laughs. "No pressure *there*."

The concept for *Hard to Believe* began with Stoller, a former associate pastor at Zion Lutheran Church currently pursuing a religious-studies Ph.D. at the University of Iowa.

"I had the idea for it way back around '93 or '94,

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he says.
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You know, I was thinking: The story of Job. The tale of universal suffering. It
screams
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musical.
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"It was the challenge that was appealing," Stoller adds with a laugh. "Can I think of how to do this? So I just started writing lyrics, and slowly some dialogue."

Yet even after years of writing, Stoller still needed someone to compose the show's score, and found an ideal candidate for the job after meeting Turner at Zion in 2000, and discovering that he had credits as a composer.



"I was getting to know Jonathan a little," says Stoller, "and I asked him one day, 'Would you ever have an interest in writing music for a musical?' And he said, 'Wow, that's always been kind of a dream of mine. What'd you have in mind?' 'Well, I've actually got one *started* already.'"

Turner, an arts and entertainment reporter for the *Rock Island Argus/Moline Dispatch* and frequent performer at the River Music Experience

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s coffeehouse Mojo
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s, welcomed the opportunity, and was particularly happy to learn that Stoller had already completed a hefty share of the work.

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Tim did most of the lyrics himself,
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he says,
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and I set them to music. And for me, as a songwriter, that
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s a lot easier than coming up with the melody, or coming up with some music, and trying to stick lyrics to that. I get inspired a lot quicker and easier to an existing lyric.

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Stoller, meanwhile, says that much of his inspiration for the themes in *Hard to Believe*, as the show currently stands, came years after the musical

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s inception.

"One of the things that I think really resurrected it for me was 9/11," he says, "because of some of the, in my opinion, crappy responses to how people were dealing with the experience. You know, people were trying to find somebody to blame for why it happened, or suggesting that because the United States - in some people's minds - was going down the toilet, *that's* why it happened. And that kind of stuff, I think, is just ridiculous.

"It's not necessarily because you did something bad that bad things happen," Stoller continues. "It's not because you're proud. What if you just can't come *up* with the reason? What if, in the end, you just don't *have* one?"

What are you going to do? And I think what the show says is that you've got a choice to make: You can get on with life, or you can sit around and wait for the answer."

As they both lived in different cities - and, from 2003 to 2008, took a hiatus after Stoller accepted a position as a pastor in Albia, Iowa - Turner says their work on the musical

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wasn

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t like the Gershwin brothers sitting right next to each other. Most of the

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collaboration

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was was kind of on our own. I would play songs over the phone, or send him tapes, as I would finish the songs, and we would just meet every now and then.

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Eventually, the duo also secured the talents of arranger Justin Hill, who created the show

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s orchestrations. (

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I
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ve never actually met him in person,
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says Turner with a laugh.
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Just e-mail correspondence.
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Finally, a working draft of the piece - originally titled *What About Job?* - was completed, and performed in a staged reading at the Green Room Theatre in the fall of 2008. Stoller says the response was "quite overwhelmingly good," although it was clear to both him and Turner that there was room for improvement.

"One of the main things we learned was that it was too long at that point," Stoller says of the initial, two-and-a-half-hour presentation.

"We did some cutting, and when we did the version for Zion [in the spring of 2009], I was thinking,

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You know, it
still
feels a little long to me.

"A number of the lines were more like mini-speeches," says Turner of the dialogue, which has been subsequently trimmed. "I don't know if you

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d call them sermonettes, but Tim is obviously used to writing in the pastoral style.

Yet even before final edits were made and the show's title was changed, the musical was accepted as one of the six shows chosen for Playcrafters

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2010 season, a decision aided by the staged-reading participation of Morrow and *Hard to Believe* producer Greg Bouljon, both of whom were also members of the theatre's 2009 play-reading committee.



"Greg brought it to their attention," Morrow says of the apparently (and surprisingly) simple process of getting *Hard to Believe* on the schedule. "And Tim and Jonathan submitted it to the board, and the board liked it, and we ended up voting for it. It just got approved."

As for his decision to direct the show, Morrow, with tongue in cheek, says,

I was actually in the very first reading that they had, and I played Satan, and I figured,

Well, if I can play Satan and be the bad guy, I can be the *director* and be the bad guy.

Morrow adds, though, that directing a debuting production "is certainly challenging, because you can't steal [ideas] from *previous* versions you saw. And knowing the authors are there makes it a little *more* challenging, because you know they

re going to see it, so you say,

Well, I can

t really change anything because I don

t think they

d like that.

When the author

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s somewhere in New York and will never see the show, you know,
anything
goes.
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Serving as the show's music director, Turner has been at every rehearsal since late July, and says, "This is really a dream come true for me, and something I really always wanted to do. As a composer, you're obviously used to singing alone or playing alone, and just to have people there to interpret your songs is a thrill."
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He also believes that *Hard to Believe* succeeds "as a powerful piece of theatre, and not just a religious story - not geared just for churches or certain denominations. When we did this at Zion, I said a few words at the beginning that with the whole financial crisis, the housing crisis, unemployment, wars, and everything that
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s going on, I think people can really identify with this story. You know, you don't have to have lost your family members or have gone through the scope of tragedy that Job has to wrestle with some of the same issues."
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Stoller concurs. "The Bible isn't, in many ways, a book of answers so much as one that makes you ask the right questions. And so, with this show, it's not that I'm saying,

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Here

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s the right answer. Here

'
s how to look at things. Clergy-approved.
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It's about,

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What questions are people going to go home with? What are they going to wrestle with?
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That

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s what

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s more important.

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Hard to Believe runs at the Playcrafters Barn Theatre September 10 through 19, with performances at 7:30 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays, and 3 p.m. on Sundays. Tickets are \$10, and can be reserved by calling (309)762-0330 or visiting Playcrafters.com.