

Written by Mike Schulz  
Wednesday, 01 February 2012 06:00

---



Those familiar with Davenport Junior Theatre might find its forthcoming production of *Mia the Melodramatic* a bit ... well ... *familiar*

. After all, the show concerns a children's theatre company that finds kids starring in and producing plays for other kids, and even comes complete with its own mascot in the form of an energetic, floppy-shoed clown.

Rest assured: Any similarities between the fictional children's theatre of *Mia the Melodramatic* and Davenport Junior Theatre itself are completely intentional.

The 2007 novel *Mia the Melodramatic* was inspired by author Eileen Boggess' own experiences with Junior Theatre, as the Davenport native was a teenage participant with the company, both on- and off-stage, from 1981 to 1985. So when Artistic Director Daniel D.P. Sheridan was considering titles for his organization's 60th-anniversary season, he says the idea to have Boggess adapt her work for the theatre was, quite simply, "a no-brainer. In my three years here, I've been particularly focused on the opportunity to tie literature to the stage, in order to get kids inspired about reading. ... And with this book written by an alum, and it being a fictional reflection on her [Boggess'] childhood in Junior Theatre ... . Those things together really drew me into wanting to translate the book to the stage."

For Daniel's wife Jessica Sheridan, a Junior Theatre instructor who also serves as *Mia the Melodramatic*'s director, the project's main appeal lay with its title character, a soon-to-be-high-school-sophomore "who finally finds a place where she's able to be herself, which is a really special thing, because some people don't *ever* find that."

And for Boggess herself, whose debuting play will enjoy its first public performance on February 18, the experience of adapting her own work for the stage – specifically the Davenport Junior Theatre stage – has been what she describes as "a real circle-of-life thing. I mean, here I was in Junior Theatre, where they have pictures all along the walls of performances going back to the

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 01 February 2012 06:00

---

'50s. And to think that my book is going to be part of that ... . It's wonderful. It's like being part of history."



**"Hey, I Could Be a Writer!"**

A resident of Urbandale, Iowa, Boggess – who has published, thus far, three youth-fiction *Mia the...*

novels – credits her initial interest in writing to “my seventh-grade teacher at Sudlow [Intermediate School]. Her name was Marie Hermie, and she would give me, like, ‘A’s in creativity and ‘C’s in grammar.”

Laughing, Boggess continues, “But she would tell me that I was a really good writer. She signed me up for a writing conference, and signed me up for advanced English in eighth grade ... . I mean, she really gave me that boost. That idea of, ‘Hey, I could be a writer!’”

Instead, at least initially, Boggess followed a career path much like Hermie’s, receiving a bachelor’s degree in elementary education and a master’s degree in middle-level education, and securing a job as a middle-school instructor. (Asked if her grammar skills eventually improved, Boggess laughs and says, “They did. I became a language-arts teacher, so I had to actually *know* my grammar.”) Yet as it turned out, a side career in writing was just around the corner.

“One day in class,” says Boggess, “I assigned my students the task of writing a short, realistic-fiction book. And they all whined, as seventh-graders do. So I said, ‘Okay, fine. I’ll write one *with* you.’

“I loved reading Paula Danzinger when I was a kid,” she continues, referencing the children’s

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 01 February 2012 06:00

---

literature author of such famed works as *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit* and *There's a Bat in Bunk Five*. “They were just really funny books with a little romance in them, and that’s just what I wanted to do. I wanted to write a book that I would’ve enjoyed when I was in junior high.”

What eventually resulted was a 155-page novel that was published, in 2006, under the title *Mia the Meek*

. “I taught at a Catholic school,” says Boggess, “and in Catholic school they go [grades] K through eight with the same kids, and after a while the kids know each other inside and out. So I began thinking of this character named Mia, who everyone knew as this shy girl. But she was going to go off to high school, and the book was going to be about all the crazy, silly things that happen to her because she’s tired of being shy” – among them experiences taken from the author’s own life.



“Some of the things Mia does are things that I did, like setting my science-lab table on fire,” Boggess says. Laughing, she adds, “You know, the teenage years can be just absolutely horrible, but they also lead to the funniest stories when you get together with high-school friends. So I just used ideas based on what had happened to me in high school, because I tended to embarrass myself constantly.”

Realizing, after the book’s completion, that “I knew what I wanted to do – I wanted to be a writer,” Boggess decided to write a follow-up to *Mia the Meek*, and found her subject matter in another experience from her teen years.

“When I was in eighth grade,” she says, “a friend of mine said she was signing up for Junior Theatre, and I was like, ‘You know, that sounds really fun!’ So I signed up, and with my first play, they cast me as the lead. I was Queen Snooty. And it really gave me confidence at a time when I needed it. Junior-high girls, obviously, need a lot of confidence.”

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 01 February 2012 06:00

---

Boggess enjoyed that first Junior Theatre experience, and continued to enjoy participating with the company for the next four years (working primarily backstage), and says she remembers her time there as “in hindsight, really the perfect job.

“Back in the '80s,” she says, “Davenport Junior Theatre had a stage crew just made up of teenagers. It’s crazy, now, to think that they let us do this, but we were in charge of *everything*. We did the props, the sets, the costumes, I taught little kids. And then every morning, we’d load up the show wagon, and we’d drive to a park, and one of us would be [Junior Theatre mascot] Showtime Pal and introduce the plays, and the rest of us would get the kids on stage. And then we’d load it up and go to *another* park, and then at the end of the day we’d get ready for the next day’s shows. It was wonderful.”

The experience, says Boggess, meant so much to her that after moving to Urbandale, “I went back to Junior Theatre for the retirement party for Bonnie Gunther,” who served as Junior Theatre’s assistant director during Boggess’ years with the organization. (Gunther retired from her subsequent position as artistic director in 2005.) “I hadn’t been back there in 20 years, but as soon as I walked in, the smell was like ... . It brought me *right back*. And I thought, ‘Oh my gosh. I have my idea for my next book. Mia is going to work at a children’s theatre.’”



**“Are You Kidding Me?”**

Titled *Mia the Melodramatic*, Boggess’ second novel found her smart, funny, humiliation-prone heroine taking a summer job at the fictional Playhouse Theatre, where she eventually makes new friends (among them company mascot Pickles the Clown), learns new skills, and finds a place where she can, at last, be the person she always wanted to be ... while still finding new ways to occasionally embarrass herself.

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 01 February 2012 06:00

---

Praised by *Midwest Book Review* for its author's "witty one-liners" and "wonderful job [of] taking an established character and stretching her in new directions," the book is, in short, Boggess' comedic remembrance of her years in Junior Theatre. But she admits to never thinking it might one day be staged  
at Junior Theatre.

"I hadn't written for three years," says Boggess. "I mean, I *had*, but I wasn't really producing anything of worth. And then ... Daniel [Sheridan] called me out of the blue. He told me he was the new artistic director at Junior Theatre, and knew that a lot of people had read the book, and said, 'I think it would make a great play. Would you like to do it?' And I said, 'Oh my gosh, are you  
*kidding me?*'"

"Over the last three seasons at Junior Theatre," says Daniel, "we've worked on several new adaptations," including 2010's presentation of classic Aesop fables and last spring's *Alice in Wonderland*, the adaptation for which he himself wrote. "And being able to continue that effort is exciting, because then we help contribute to the scope of children's theatre that's out there, and available for others to do.

"With this story," says Daniel of *Mia the Melodramatic*, "I like that it's about coming of age, and standing up for yourself, and learning what that  
*feels*  
like. I was lucky enough to find it through theatre, but other kids find it through sports, and other kids find it through a musical instrument – that ability to be themselves."

Despite having no previous experience with playwriting, Boggess says that the process of transforming her *Mia the Melodramatic* novel into a theatrical work "wasn't too difficult. My books are very episodic in nature, so the hardest part was cutting. I had to cut a  
*lot*  
, just because in the [168-page] book, I have a long time to develop the characters. In a play, they kind of have to be the characters, and the audience has to know what their personalities are, right away."

Laughing, she says, "Obviously, it's a play for children, so it can't be three hours long." (Like nearly all Junior Theatre shows, the company's *Mia the Melodramatic* will run just under an hour.)

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 01 February 2012 06:00

---

In addition to the trimming of material, though, a few other aspects needed to be addressed during the adaptation process, among them changes in the cultural landscape. “When *Mia the Melodramatic* was published,” says Boggess, “teenagers e-mailed each other. Now they text. So I had to update the technology Mia and [her boyfriend] Tim used to communicate with each other.”



“Some things did need updating,” says show director Jessica Sheridan, “like some of the references, and certain musical artists that are mentioned, and things like that. But we did want to keep the characters as true to who they originally were as possible, and Eileen was *totally* cool with whatever changes needed to be made. She was the first one to be like, ‘Hey, I don’t write plays; I write books. So let’s figure out how to get this up on its feet and in front of audiences.’”

It was also important to ensure that *Mia the Melodramatic* – given the book’s humorous look at the mishaps that can befall an organization run almost entirely by kids – not be seen as any kind of direct spoof on the organization staging the play.

“Going into the process,” says Daniel, “we considered that this could be seen as a kind of send-up, an inside joke, about what it’s like to be at Junior Theatre. Yes, it’s a fictional account of Eileen’s experiences at Junior Theatre, and there are things in it that I can relate to. But we also wanted to recognize the fact that Junior Theatre has changed *so much* over the last 30 years since she was here. We didn’t want to confuse anybody by presenting ourselves as something we’re not.

“So we really tried to stay focused on the story that we had in front of us,” he continues, “and telling this one unique story. That way, when the play does, hopefully, leave here and go somewhere else, it’ll be universal – because its *themes* are universal – and it’ll translate well for other theatres.”

“I think what happens [in *Mia the Melodramatic*] is very similar to the way a children’s theatre works in general,” says Jessica, “but we made sure to take out anything that could be a

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 01 February 2012 06:00

---

wink-wink-nudge-nudge to people who've been to Junior Theatre. We wanted it to be a play that could be appealing to Junior Theatre kids and alums, but also to people who'd never stepped foot in the building before. And that's what I hope we ended up doing."

Boggess, for one, is eager to see what results, and will be available to sign copies of her novel at all of the show's public performances. (Through a grant from the Riverboat Development Authority, 750 copies of *Mia the Melodramatic* will be given to youths attending the show, with copies of Lea Wilcox's *Falling for Rapunzel* available for readers too young for Boggess' book.)

"I'm so excited," says Boggess of the upcoming performances, "and so excited to see the talent that's there now. I couldn't believe it when I heard how many kids [63 in total] auditioned for my play. When I was there, [Junior Theatre founder] Mary Fluhrer Nighswander – who was this little, four-foot-10 powerhouse of woman – would just come up to us and be like, 'Okay, you're *this* part, you're *this* part ... .' We didn't have anything like the numbers they have now."

One aspect of Junior Theatre that *hasn't* changed over the years, however, is the presence of clown mascot Showtime Pal, whose costume Boggess occasionally donned when she was a teenager ... and she'll do so again for one performance during *Mia the Melodramatic*'s February run. According to Daniel, "Eileen says she doesn't get to do much acting anymore, so I thought it would be fun for her to put on the suit again."

Boggess, meanwhile, says that she's game for another stab at warming up the Junior Theatre crowd, even though, as she says with a laugh, "My skin isn't quite as used to the makeup. And I'm not quite as bouncy as I was in high school. So this might be interesting."

*Mia the Melodramatic runs February 18 through 26, with Saturdays performances at 1 and 4 p.m. and Sunday performances at 2 p.m. Tickets are \$5 at the door for ages three and older,*

## Stage to Page to Stage: Author Eileen Boggess Brings Her Junior Theatre Experiences to Life – at Davenport

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 01 February 2012 06:00

---

*and more information on the show is available at*  
[e.com](#)

[DavenportJuniorTheatr](#)

*For more on author Eileen Boggess, visit* [EileenBoggess.com](#) .