

Quad City Arts Presents World-Premiere Play

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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Most people hated the Interstate 74 bridge construction, but theatre actress and director Melissa McBain loved it. Being stuck on the bridge gave her an opportunity to chat regularly with journalist and author Stephen G. Bloom about *Shoedog*, the play he co-wrote. The piece will get its world premiere this weekend with three performances at Quad City Arts, with McBain directing.

“We had our ‘bridge talks,’” McBain said. During those discussions, McBain and Bloom would talk about revisions to the play. And not just a word here or a word there. The two cut lines, eliminated one character, and kept others out of the second act.

Working with a playwright on a production of his or her work isn’t new for McBain, but she’s never collaborated with an author of Bloom’s repute. His book *Postville: A Clash of Cultures in Heartland America* detailed a group of Hasidic Jews who settled in the small Iowa town of Postville. *Publishers Weekly* called it “an illuminating meditation on contemporary U.S. culture and what it means to be an American.”

Bloom, a journalism professor at the University of Iowa, co-wrote the play with Brian Cronk, a former colleague and now an editor at the *Wall Street Journal*. Performances of *Shoedog* were originally meant to be part of Bloom’s October visit to the Quad Cities, during which he gave one workshop and three presentations. (Bloom and Cronk will attend the Saturday performance of the play.)

The play is set in the world of dying independent shoe stores and features slick salesman (or “shoedog”) Murray. The owner’s son, Elliot, is fascinated by the con game of sales but is also pulled by obligations to his father.

Several components of the play hooked McBain. “I liked immediately the direct address to the audience” by the older version of Elliot, she said. She was also fascinated by “the way men talk about women when we’re not around.” Sometimes, though, the salesmen are talking about their

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patrons *in front* of them. “They’re speaking in coded language,” McBain said.

The interpersonal dynamics were also interesting. “There’s almost a kind of dance between the star salesman and the owner,” McBain said. “They’re both selling to the other.”

If that sounds a bit like David Mamet’s *Glengarry Glen Ross* fused with the nostalgia of Neil Simon, Bloom would be flattered, McBain said. At first, the play seemed like a comedy, but its dramatic elements have grown more prominent in her mind.

McBain said she’s been surprised at how open both the cast and Bloom have been to changes and ideas. Unlike most local theatre productions with a fixed script, *Shoedog* has gone through a lot of revisions.

McBain and Bloom have “gone through several drafts of the script” since July, she said. “Every rehearsal I’ve come in with new re-writes.” The performers have appreciated that the changes. “They look at it and say, ‘Yeah, this is even better,’” she said.

Bloom has also been agreeable, receptive to whatever McBain has thrown at him. “He’s endured a lot of suggestions,” she said.

The process has given the cast, the director, and the playwright a taste of how new plays get produced in bigger cities. “That *is* professional theatre,” McBain said.

The revisions aren’t the only elements that have made this production unusual for a local production. McBain said the play was originally offered to several local theatre venues, but they couldn’t do it because of scheduling conflicts. “Now I’m somebody with no theatre to put on a play,” McBain said.

So the north side of the Quad City Arts first-floor gallery is being used as a “found” space, which has presented several logistical issues, such as the need to strike the set each night after rehearsal. “It’s been the most challenging thing, but that makes it exciting, too,” McBain said.

Shoedog will be performed Friday and Saturday at 7:30 p.m. and Sunday at 3 p.m. Friday’s performance is free, and tickets to Saturday’s and Sunday’s performances are \$7 for adults. To order tickets, call (309)793-1213 extension 109.