

# BLOOMINGTON IN A BINGE

## .22 Caliber Mouth at the Bloomington Playwrights Project

It's not uncommon to find actors stretching before rehearsing, but when a director is found loosening the thighs and calves, it's a pretty safe bet the show being rehearsed isn't *Steel Magnolias*.

This was the case with director John Kinzer as he prepared for a rehearsal of *.22 Caliber Mouth*, Lauren Robert's latest musical set to open the Bloomington Playwrights Project's new season later this month. After hearing a little about this on-the-edge musical ride, it becomes clear why both mental and physical stretching is advisable. This isn't *Steel Magnolias*. Far from it. This isn't even *Steel Magnolias* with music, which, grant it, would be a bit freaky, but let's not go there.

*.22 Caliber Mouth* is the product of a year-long collaboration between Robert and BPP artistic director Richard Perez. Robert brought Perez a couple of monologues that served as the genesis of the piece. Perez was immediately struck by Robert's writing, and the two met weekly to hone, scrub, and polish the script into what they hope is a dynamic theatrical work.

"It's hard to describe because it's not your typical musical," said Perez, who also stars in the production. "People aren't going to be leaving the theater whistling, I don't think."

"It's not the type of material you're accustomed to seeing in a stage musical," agreed Kinzer. "You're more likely to see it in straight plays or independent films."

Though careful not to give away too much plot or reveal any of the script's embedded secrets, Robert and Kinzer offered some helpful hints.

The story follows a woman named Deane, played by Robert herself, as she reinvents society following a nervous breakdown and subsequent institutionalization. Since being diagnosed as manic-depressive, Deane has strived to function on her own out in the world.

"She's very bright and sophisticated," points out Robert. "But all those things have always been mitigated by her struggle."

"It's sort of the antithesis of the Fred Astaire type musical, dressed in tuxedos and living on the high end of society," added Kinzer. "This is the low end of society. It's New York. It's urban. It's living on the edge."

Deane can't help but be drawn to characters she can empathize with, including a mysterious love interest named Colin and a transvestite named Carmel. Like Deane, each of the other four characters are desperately seeking their niche in life, and the love and acceptance to make that niche worthwhile.

Robert juggles many talents with this production. She wrote *.22 Caliber Mouth*, composed the music, and, as mentioned, plays the lead role. This performer-playwright, singer-songwriter is from New York City, but she's no stranger to the Bloomington theater scene. Audiences may remember Robert from her 1999 hit musical at the BPP, *Making It*. She admitted to being concerned about the different tones of the two pieces, *.22 Caliber Mouth* being much darker than *Making It*, but she credits the skill and proficiency of her cast and crew with easing those fears. Robert is confident that *.22 Caliber* will speak on its own terms.

"People who appreciate this play will be people who appreciate the truth," said Robert. "I think truth is transformational, one of the most powerful things on earth. Anyone who has an appetite for that will be attracted to these characters and where they take us. It looks at subjects that a lot of people don't like to look at. It delves into places that are very different from what we're used to seeing."

This marks the first BPP season to be fully slated under the leadership of Perez. Seeking to put his stamp on the season, Perez said he wanted to start with *.22 Caliber Mouth*. It is a

slight, somewhat brave, departure for the theater. It's the season-opener, its content is daring, and musicals are not something the BPP has done a lot of in the past.

"It's the first musical, outside a Christmas or holiday thing, that I know the BPP has done," said Perez. "Stylistically, it's going to be very different."

Though *.22 Caliber's* subject matter won't make it into many Saturday morning cartoons, Robert says it shouldn't alienate people. Instead, she hopes it will bring them closer together.

"After the play, I want people to feel more a member of the human family," Robert said. "I want them to realize that they're not that different from these five characters. There are elements in their secrets, their urges, and their yearnings that are in us all."

—Jonathan Heltich

*.22 Caliber Mouth* opens September 19 and runs through October 5. Shows are Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays at 8pm and Sundays at 2pm. Tickets are \$15 General Admission and \$12 Students and Seniors. Call 355-9001 to make reservations.

