

'Bird Millman' playwright inspired by local history

Ben Timberlake
Canyon Current

Next month's Fremont County Civic Theater production of "Bird Millman" will be a coming home of sorts for the Cañon City-raised Vaudeville figure. But it will be a true return home for playwright August Mergelman.

A 1993 graduate of Cañon City High School, Mergelman has been working on the musical in one way or another for nine years. Most of the work has come in the last three years, though.

The seed of the musical was planted when Mergelman about Millman and her Cañon City roots in a newspaper article.

"Not a lot has been written about her," Mergelman said. Much of his research came from the Western History section of the Denver Public Library, as well as Dixie Willson's "Where the World Folds Up at Night."

Mergelman staged a reading of a previous version of the play, "The Millman Trio," at Fremont Civic Theater in 2001.

Then he reworked the script to highlight the Bird character and her love story. He teamed with composer Sam Stokes during summer 2001 when they both attended Central Missouri State University in Warrensburg. They were both also working



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Playwright August Mergelman follows the script during a rehearsal for "Bird Millman." The musical, which Mergelman has worked on in one form or another for nine years, premieres April 11 at Washington Elementary School. Composer Sam



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Stokes accompanies the cast of "Bird Millman" at rehearsal. Stokes lives in Missouri, so he wasn't a big part of the rehearsal process, he said. The cast and director of the musical made some necessary minor changes to songs that he wrote with Mergelman.

As a playwright, "you can say what you want to say," Mergelman said. "As an actor, you say what the playwright wants you to say."

But his experience as an actor has proven essential to writing. "It takes an actor's brain to write good dialogue," he said.

Mergelman said the musical can help people rediscover local history as well as witness growing artistic talent in the area.

Mergelman hopes to see the musical staged at other venues, possibly in Mason City, Iowa, home of Meredith Willson.

Mergelman said he would re-incorporate the Meredith Willson character into the play for a production there. It could be a long-running show there," he said.

Mergelman currently works as a substitute teacher for elementary and high schools. His next theatrical project is writing and performing a one-man 12-minute play at the Royal Gorge Bridge and Park's Plaza theater about the building of the bridge.

Though he hopes to produce theater elsewhere, Mergelman's roots keep him tethered to Fremont County. "I'll be in and out of here for the rest of my life," he said. "(Cañon City) may not always be my address, but it will always be my home."

at the Central Missouri Repertory Company.

The revision turned certain episodes into songs. "It's like they were waiting to be made into songs," Mergelman said.

"August and I spent several weeks discussing the script and how we wanted to fit the music in," Stokes said. "We work really well as a team."

This is the first full-length show for which Stokes has composed. "It's pretty amazing," he said. "I'm glad to see it happen."

The 101-page script covers the period between 1890 and 1940, with the major portion focusing on the 1920s and Bird's "most meaningful marriage" to a Joseph O'Day, a wealthy Bostonian.

Mergelman incorporated Cañon City characters like Ute Indians and "Old Mose," a legendary grizzly bear.

"Every town needs its heroes," Mergelman said. Bird can be one for Cañon City, he said.

"This is the most home-spun thing I've done," Mergelman said of the musical's traditional presentation. "The rest of (my work) is pretty out there."

And the musical has received better production than his other efforts, he said. The buildup to opening night has been exciting, Mergelman said. "It's like a wedding," he said. "It feels really good."

Mergelman credits the

show's recent development to director Tom Ledbetter's guidance and the cast's interpretation of the script. "The cast gets it," he said.

The production brings a reward greater than simply seeing his script acted, Mergelman said. "It's seeing the work of everybody," he said.

It's something of a family affair for Mergelman; his father has painted sets and his stepfather acts in the show.

The play illustrates three themes, each attached to a character: Bird reveals turn-of-the-century societal expectations of women, Mr. Millman reveals those expectations of men, and Mrs. Millman illustrates the pro-

jection of one's self outside one's sphere through her demonization of Native Americans.

"All the songs fit really well into the three big themes," Stokes said.

Musicals of the 1960s and 1970s most influenced Mergelman's script, though he included modern theatrics, he said. The music mimics the style of the period, which is somewhat unusual, he said.

Mergelman's greatest playwright influences include Tennessee Williams, Bertolt Brecht, Tony Kushner and Alan J. Lerner.

Although Mergelman once wanted to be an actor most, he found a greater ability to express himself as an author.

'Birds' of a feather play together

Erin L. Flaugh
Canyon Current

Getting joy out of entertaining a crowd is what two area actresses have in common with a Cañon City circus performer who lived more than 110 years ago.

Kylie Kahnke and Cheri Heinz are playing Bird Millman, best known for her high-wire acts with the Ringling Bros. & Barnum & Bailey Circus in the early 1900s. The play "Bird Millman" was written by local writer August Mergelman and is being performed by the Fremont Civic Theater (FCT) April 11 through 14.

"To Cañon City Bird is important because she became famous, not because she was the president or a senator, but because she made a lot of people very happy," said Heinz, who plays Bird as an adult.

Heinz first started acting in sixth grade with the part of Annie Oakley. "She is the only other real person I have ever portrayed," she said.

Since then, Heinz has been involved with performing in one way or another. In college she majored in theater and after



Erin L. Flaugh/Canyon Current

Kylie Kahnke (left) and Cheri Heinz (right) both play famous Cañon City circus performer, Bird Millman, in the upcoming play "Bird Millman" being put on by the Fremont Civic Theater.

moving to Cañon City, she became involved with FCT, acting in numerous plays and directing another.

Heinz first heard of Bird, whose real name was Jennadean, while working at the St. Cloud Hotel.

"There was a scrapbook on the front counter that had Bird in it because she was from Cañon City. I became fascinated by it," said Heinz.

Fifteen-year-old Kahnke, who plays Bird as a young

girl, was unaware of the famous tight-rope walker before trying out for the play.

As an actress, dancer, and singer, Kahnke said she likes to perform, even though this play is the "first time I've ever sung completely by myself on stage." Unlike Bird, Kahnke said she would not be willing to walk across a wire less than a 1/2 inch wide. In the play Kahnke "walks the tight rope," which is actually a board made to look like a small wire.

Even though Bird was brave enough to balance on a tiny wire stories above the ground, she was often known as a shy woman. "I can't imagine her being shy," said Heinz, describing Bird as a flirt. "She was married three times, but she was definitely a lady with a lot of class."

Heinz said that if Bird was alive today that she would "probably be giving speeches and doing little teas. She would definitely still be entertaining."



Edward Adamic painted Bird Millman.

Bird portrayed in paint

Jackie Leatherman
Canyon Current

During a time when the Charleston dominated the dance floor and show girls encouraged "the new woman," one Cañon City tight-rope walker was walking the wire to fame.

And one local artist is out to capture her in his art.

"I had an infatuation long before the play. I just knew of her," said Edward J. Adamic, local artist. He recently created a pastel painting portraying Bird Millman, an early 20th century entertainer that arose from Cañon City.

A play about Bird's life will be put on by the Fremont Civic Theater in April. Adamic is playing the part of Professor Longhair in the play. "She is just the greatest artist. She is Cañon City's most famous person," he said, describing the woman who was well known for entertaining on a tight-rope wire.

The painting shows Bird walking across Cañon City's downtown Main Street, in between Third and Fourth Streets.

Rocky Mountain Public Broadcasting System (PBS) will be auctioning the artwork in April.

Adamic said he likes Millman, because "she has that edge about her." He explained that she grew up Catholic, had three husbands and that any woman part of the Ziegfeld Follies and walking a wire was not an average woman.

"She was a liberal person and spoke up for things she believed in," he said.

"It's like painting my neighborhood," he said.

Fremont County citizens will be able to find t-shirts with Millman on them around town soon.

The PBS auction will be televised live at 6 p.m. on Friday and Saturday, April 19 and 20.