



STEVE ROBERTS'
hometown



Round House Theatre's Blake Robison shares a moment with author Alice McDermott as the two collaborate on bringing her book "Charming Billy" to the stage.

LOGAN MOCK-BUNTING

A 'Charming' Collaboration

Alice McDermott teams up with a local theater director turning her novel into a play

Alice McDermott's novel, *Charming Billy*, won the National Book Award. Blake Robison, the artistic director of the Round House Theatre, is adapting her work for the stage. And on a bright autumn afternoon, he's explaining what he's trying to accomplish.

"The greatest gift for me," Robison tells her, "will be if you come and see this play and find something in it that you didn't know was there."

McDermott's laugh glints with colors and flavors like a good red wine, and she employs it now. "OK," she warns him, "now I'm going to be looking..."

"I don't mean that I've inserted anything," Robison replies a bit defensively. "I mean that you'll see something in the interaction of the characters, through the live performance, that you never thought of."

The three of us are sitting in the lobby of the Round House on East West Highway, just off Wisconsin in Bethesda, discussing the transformation of the novel into a play. (*Charming Billy* will open on Feb. 2 and run through Feb. 20.)

McDermott is 57, a slim, sprightly mother of three who has lived in Bethesda

for most of the last 20 years. Robison is 44, sturdy and square cut, with the precise movements and diction of a former actor. He came to Round House in 2005 from the University of Tennessee. After a mutual friend introduced them several years ago, Robison picked up *Charming Billy*, a story about a lovable drunk who dies young from a fermented liver and a fractured heart.

"I had a response that you're always looking for when you read a script or a novel or a story," he recalls. "You fall in love with it."

Robison has made literary adaptations a "cornerstone" of the theater's pro-

gramming; they usually do three a year, and this season's list includes *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and *A Wrinkle in Time*. But selling McDermott on his project posed problems. As a teenager she was "the official skit writer" at Sacred Heart Academy in Hempstead, N.Y., and dreamed of a life in the theater. "I thought being a playwright was the most romantic thing you could possibly be," she says.

But McDermott soon learned that she didn't work and play well with others. She writes in private, holed up in her home office in the Bannockburn neighborhood, and doesn't even like to talk about a book until it's finished. "I've never been a collaborator," she says.

Writing a book is a high-risk, high-reward enterprise. Your name is on the cover. You get the credit when it succeeds, but you also get the blame if it flops. In plays and films, however, dozens of people contribute to the creative process, working as a team, not as individuals.

Still, McDermott was intrigued when Robison asked her out for coffee. They met at her favorite Starbucks on Sangamore, and by the end of the conversation she had signed on. When I ask why, she says she was able to separate her novel—and her ego—from Robison's interpretation. "I'm happy to say: 'Be inspired, take these characters, take this story. But it's your genre not mine. I respect what you can do, and I'm fascinated to see what will come of it.'"

The Starbucks Summit established some ground rules. The novel has a narrator, but the play will not. "We really want to be in the room with the characters," Robison says. "Breaking the fourth wall [of the theater] would be counterproductive."

And McDermott banned Irish accents. "Think Archie Bunker not Barry Fitzgerald," she jokes, but the point is important. Though she sets her work in New York's Irish-American community, where she grew up, McDermott is reaching for universal characters who transcend their origins. Lovers are lovers and drunks are drunks in any language.

("Why does anybody care about my grandmother?" a writing student once asked when I urged her to write about her

family. The answer, of course, is that we *all* have grandmothers.)

"These characters leap off the page," Robison says of McDermott's creations. "You know them, you've lived with them, they remind you of your Aunt A or your Cousin B or your Grandfather C. They have resonance for everybody."

Translating those characters to the stage can still be a tricky business. "Reading a novel is very different from experiencing a play," Robison says. "Onstage, what sort of information needs to be revealed when? You have to make strategic choices."

The director has made such choices many times, but he has never worked with an author who lives a few minutes away and visits the theater often. "We sort of agreed that I don't need to sign off on every page," McDermott says. But when Robison showed her the original script, she made some suggestions. Beef up the character of Mary, the wife of Billy's best friend, she said. And trim down the opening scene, where a character says an extended grace to begin the meal following Billy's funeral. "That's when I had to pull the Catholic thing," McDermott says. Protestants say long prayers; Catholics don't.

Robison later invited McDermott to the first read-through of the revised script. "It's been at least 10 years since I've read that damn book," she says, "but I found myself getting caught up in the story. And I couldn't tell if those were Blake's words or my words."

She recalls a particular scene when the actor playing Billy looked at Eva, his lost love. "All the things that went on in his face, and in his eyes..." she says. "There was love and longing and heartbreak. He wasn't saying a word, but it was enough to tell my story."

That's Robison's point. A live performance can light up a novelist's words. A viewer can look into an actor's face and sense new arcs and angles that a reader cannot see—even if that viewer wrote the novel herself. ■

Steve Roberts' latest book, From Every End of This Earth, has just been published in paperback. Send ideas for future columns to svroberts@aol.com.