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The song of David

Okemos native Michael Lluberes calls his show 'The Boy in the Bathroom' 'an intimate musical' about isolation

by [James Sanford](#)



Ben Cassidy has the title role in Peppermint Creek Theatre Co.'s production of Michael Lluberes' "The Boy in the Bathroom," the story of a graduate student wrestling with obsessive-compulsive disorder.

There's nothing unusual about a musical being produced in the Lansing area. But a musical that's actually set in the Lansing area? That's a rarity.

The show in question is "The Boy in the Bathroom," with book and lyrics by Okemos native Michael Lluberes and music and additional lyrics by Joe Maloney. Peppermint Creek Theatre Co. presents the Midwest premiere of "Boy," starting Thursday.

"It's an intimate musical — it's more like 'The Glass Menagerie' than 'Mamma Mia!,'" said Lluberes in a phone interview. "It's funny and sad at the same time, which is what I think everything good should be."

Don't expect chorus lines or choirs: "Boy," directed by Peppermint Creek artistic director Chad Badgero, has a cast of three actors.

Plus, Michigan itself, added Lluberes, a 1997 Okemos High School graduate.

"Michigan is really the fourth character in the play. These people could only come from Michigan. They talk about Michigan, and Michigan becomes very much what the show is about."

It's also about obsessive-compulsive disorder, the psychological condition that drives David (Ben Cassidy) out of graduate school and into the bathroom of his mother's home. Pam (Colleen Bethea), who has been a single mom since David was 7, does her best to deal with his condition — pancakes and tortillas are often slipped through the narrow space at the bottom of the door — but she is eventually forced to turn to neighbor Julie (Emily McKay) for help.

Although they can't see each other, Julie and David build a rapport and slowly begin to fall in love.

"The nonstop progression of the play moves smoothly and sneaks its way out of lighthearted comedy and into introspective allegory," wrote New York Theatre.com critic Dianna Tucker Baritot. "Maloney and Lluberes have collaborated on and created a funny, beautiful, solid piece of theater."

Lluberes was inspired to write "Boy" after seeing a story in the news about 15 years ago. "It was about a guy who locked himself in a bathroom and washed his hands over and over," he said. "I thought, 'Obsessive-compulsive disorder: What an interesting idea.' So I went to composer Joe Maloney and I thought we could collaborate on this show together.

"As it turned out, I was less interested in OCD than the idea that someone could be so afraid they would lock themselves away for a year — and how would they get out of there?"

"In this world now, after Sept. 11, there exist a lot reasons for people to be afraid, whether it's all in your head or whether it's happening outside your door."

Everyone in “Boy” is fenced in somehow. While David grapples with OCD, Julie builds a personalized prison of her own through her fear of moving out of Michigan. Pam, who is recuperating from an accident, is trapped indoors.

“I think everybody has something in them that can identify with the idea of locking themselves away for a day,” Lluberes said. “What if that turns into a week? What if it turns into a year?”

Unlike his characters, Lluberes did make his way out of Michigan, heading first to the North Carolina School of the Arts and then to New York, where he initially focused on an acting career (he was part of the national tour of “Dirty Dancing: The Musical”).

These days, he’s concentrating on directing and writing: His latest work, “Peter Pan: The Boy Who Hated Mothers,” had a reading at the Kennedy Center’s Page-To-Stage Festival last September, and opens Feb. 8 at Washington’s No Rules Theatre Co.

“It’s a really dark adaptation of the story,” Lluberes said, adding with a laugh that “arrested childhood” seems to be a recurring theme in his plays: “If the boy isn’t stuck in the bathroom, I guess he’s trying to get out of the bathroom and into Neverland.”