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From parents to daughter, love of theater is passed along

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WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

All the world's a stage, or so Shakespeare wrote, and in the Radcliff family it must sometimes feel like that.

Madeline Radcliff, 23, had never seen her parents act until she was 16, even though Cliff and Judy both had master's degrees in acting from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Theater is how they met, but they put their stage ambitions on hold to raise a family.

Once Cliff and Judy started acting again, starting with Cliff's 2003 appearance at the Omaha Community Playhouse in "Arsenic and Old Lace," the bug bit hard. Maddie was cast in the playhouse's 2005 production of "Annie," along with her mom, who played Miss Hannigan. Soon Maddie was acting in shows on her own.

Tonight she notches another theatrical first for her family. A full-length play she wrote, "Mountain Birds," opens at the Shelterbelt Theatre.

"I felt there wasn't enough theater that had multiple strong roles for women," Radcliff said. "I didn't want to write about something typical, like boy-girl relationships."

In "Mountain Birds," four adult sisters whose lives have gone separate ways reunite in the family cabin. They share problems, hopes and dreams. The youngest sister is a free-spirited lesbian, another is quite proper, still another is bluntly outspoken. The oldest, though, is most in turmoil and hiding something from her sisters.

Though Radcliff has one brother and no sisters, she had ready knowledge of how sisters interact from observing her mother and three aunts.

Radcliff wrote her first play, "All in All," in 2006 as a way to work through inner turmoil after her father died of a brain tumor. Her writing instructor at Metropolitan Community College, Scott Working, encouraged her to submit the play to the Great Plains Theatre Conference, and it was accepted for a play-lab reading in 2008.

The next year, "Mountain Birds" was accepted for a theater conference reading, which led to the Shelterbelt production.

Radcliff says her acting and writing complement and inform each other.

"I can look at a script from an acting perspective. And when I'm acting, I can look at dialogue as a playwright. It all sort of balances out for me."

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