

Playwright Meg Miroshnik Interviewed by Luna Resident Dramaturg Kaitlin Stilwell

KS: I love the story about the genesis of this play: how it was inspired by a photograph of your grandfather, and how the first draft came out of a "bake off" exercise that Paula Vogel assigned with Title IX sports and Don Juan as your ingredients. Can you talk a little bit more about the play you thought you would be writing when you set out, and what you discovered about the story along the way? How much did those two ingredients shape the play we see now?

MM: My siblings and I went to the same high school that my mom had attended and we were very aware of the fact that when my mom went there, the only athletic outlet for girls was cheerleading. I knew about the generation in which competitive girls sports just did not exist. What I didn't realize was that just a generation earlier, high school girls basketball had flourished all around the country. And, in fact, as I discovered later, my mother's father had taught high school and coached a team for two years in his twenties. I knew I wanted to investigate how and why the sport disappeared, but it wasn't until I was assigned the bakeoff that I knew how to begin writing. The Don Juan element was the most important part of the assignment to me since it freed me up to step away from my grandfather's story entirely. The only thing I knew when I started writing was that a man with a past and a girl with a secret would be coming to town.

KS: You obviously did a lot of research around the play, but you also made a choice to step away from complete historical accuracy. Why was this choice important to you in telling this story?

MM: When I set out to write the play, I wanted to investigate the real social and cultural forces that stamped out high school girls sports for an entire generation. But I wanted to give myself license to tell the story in a compact and dramatic way--to elide events and conflate characters and create mythical towns. A big consideration for me was language: I wanted to write in a sparse, accessible language that would reflect the hardscrabble landscape of the play. I think if I'd written strictly period dialogue, it would've felt much more formal than these characters should be. And I also think that slang doesn't age well; most period slang feels corny, not spiky and electric.

The basketball is another place where I stepped away from the history a bit: girls' rules created zones on the court, had single-dribble rules, etc. Since this kind of play wouldn't be particularly dynamic onstage, we hear from Haunt Johnny that barnstormers like Babe are playing men now and that tall girls are in demand. Johnny is passing on a more physical game than the team might have played a few years earlier.

I was also thinking that taking the play out of a strictly period setting would make room for a production to cast the roles more expansively.

KS: I first read a draft of *The Tall Girls* in 2011, and the play has changed in many small but significant ways since then. What have been the most significant discoveries you made as the play developed?

MM: The most important changes in my view surround the basketball. In earlier drafts, there were additional new basketballs introduced into the story later in the play. I realized through workshopping the play that it was important that there only be one perfect new basketball in the play. When that beautiful oxblood basketball disappears from Poor Prairie, all hope goes with it.

KS: One of the most striking things about the play for me is that despite being set 80 years ago, it has so many modern reverberations. How has writing this play changed your views on women's sport and the challenges that women still face?

MM: There's a point in the play when the girls start to play in what they call "scanty" uniforms in an effort to sell tickets. I think this tension between the value of a female athlete's athletic prowess vs the extent to which she conforms to conventional standards of beauty is something we definitely still struggle with as a culture. The recent attention to the disparity between Serena Williams and Maria Sharapova's endorsements is one of many examples.