'The Lost Boy' finds contemporary resonances in a 19th-century kidnapping case

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By Marty Hughley, The Oregonian

In 2002, Oregonians were transfixed by the story of Ashley Pond and Miranda Gaddis, two missing Oregon City girls whose bodies were found in the backyard of an ex-convict named Ward Weaver. The aftermath of the crime unfolded right along the route that Portland playwright Sue Mach took to her job at Clackamas Community College.

"I'd drive past, and right off Highway 213 there was a fence with stuffed animals and flowers stuck in it that people were leaving in memory of the girls," she recalls. "There were FBI agents walking around, and across the street was the media, the reporters and their news vans.

"I remember thinking that it had a circus-like aspect to it."

Mach heard Paula Fass, a noted historian from the University of California–Berkeley, talk about the case on a TV show and assert that more children in the United States die because of lack of health insurance than from violent crime, but that the media focus on more attention-grabbing stories. Fass pointed to the 1874 kidnapping of a Philadelphia boy named Charley Ross as an early example of child abduction whetting the public's appetite for a blend of sympathetic feeling and voyeurism.

Adding an edge to all this for Mach was that she'd recently given birth to her daughter, Nora. Heeding the notion that writers should write about what they fear the most, Mach began to write about the Ross case, both to address her own feelings of vulnerability as a parent and to make sense of the social dynamics of sensationalism.

That writing became her play "The Lost Boy," which opens Friday at Artists Repertory Theatre with a cast led by Michael Fisher-Welsh and Duffy Epstein.

Artistic director Allen Nause says the story's historical roots are compelling but that the play also has contemporary resonances.

"This was the first kidnapping for ransom in the U.S., predating the Lindberg case by about 60 years," he says. "It's fascinating how the media, promotion and advertising, even the circus world, played into the case. There were 5,000 newspapers in the country at that time -- it was a very competitive field -- and that reminded me of this crazy world of the Internet."

Mach's early drafts emphasized the involvement of circus impresario P.T. Barnum, who at one
point offered to pay the Ross family to appear in his travelling shows. The Artists Rep production includes circus-influenced scenic design; Barnum and Tom Thumb are part of the action; and juggling and acrobatics are part of the stage business.

But screenwriter Gill Dennis ("Walk the Line"), who Mach considers her writing mentor, convinced her that the deeper essence of the story lay in two couples -- the Ross boy's parents, and the two men who abduct him -- and the issues of trust that arise within and between them.

Mach admits that she's struggled with the ending: the historical Charley Ross case never was solved. "I've re-written that ending 50 times," she says.

Nonetheless, she's crafted a highly theatrical take on the story, full of suspense and colorful detail.

"There's never a place where this thing slows down," Nause says of the production. "At every moment, we're raising the stakes."

-- Marty Hughley

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