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Writer continues a family tradition

A conversation with Harvard resident and playwright Bob Eiland, who held a public reading of his new play at the Harvard Public Library this month.

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Post Parlance

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Post: *When did you come to Harvard and why?*

Eiland: We moved to Harvard a year ago. My wife's sister lives in town and I used to live in Bolton for 17 years.

Post: *What was your childhood like? Did anything point to who you are now?*

Eiland: I was born a poor black boy in the South. What's that from? *The Jerk* with Steve Martin. My parents founded two different community theaters. There were six of us in the family and we all participated.

Post: *It was a family thing.*

Eiland: I was five in my first production. My parents were always in productions/media until they were not of a capacity to do so. My dad ran a television station and then he and my mom bought an alternative rock radio station in Florida.

Post: *Did you go to school for theater?*

Eiland: I started out a drama major at Tufts, but switched to English.

Post: *What did you do for work?*

Eiland: I went into publishing for a brief time as an editor but didn't care for it, and then went into social work and loved it but it didn't pay much. I transitioned into personnel placement where I do retainer-based executive search for high tech.

Post: *When did you start writing plays?*

Eiland: Forever. Stupid little plays when I was a kid. My oldest brother wrote a play that our Cub Scout troop performed and I directed when I was probably eight.

Post: *Tell me about your two published plays.*

Eiland: “Philosophical Differences” won honorable mention in a Writer’s Digest script competition and was chosen to be a part of the New Playwrights Festival by the Stageloft Repertory Theater in Sturbridge. We took it through a similar process and did a staged reading and performance. Later it was published by JAC Publishing and Promotions (www.jacneed.com), which also publishes “Super Cooper”.

Post: *Did the second one have a reading?*

Eiland: For *Super Cooper* I did an at-home reading. As a playwright it helps so much to hear it and ideally to see it as close to production format as possible.

Post: *Are they similar to Star Bright or different?*

Eiland: I would classify all three of them loosely as dramadies. Parenting issues infuse all three. In “Philosophical Differences” two people meet serendipitously. The man falls in love with the woman, who turns out to be gay. They become friends and what they have in common is the desire to have children. The driving force behind *Philosophical Differences* is the drive to become a parent.

Post: *And Super Cooper?*

Eiland: The conceit of “Super Cooper” is that Superman is real. He’s a shlumpy, balding little Jewish guy in a small Midwestern town who has no idea that he is Superman. His adoptive parents made the choice to lie to him about where he came from – to “mainstream” him. As he is about to turn 30, they can’t suppress his powers any longer and he finds he is not who he thought he is. This is an adoption story taken to its most extreme, goofiest limits.

Post: *And Star Bright?*

Eiland: “Star Bright” is a very obvious adoption-related story. In addition to parenting, they all concern themselves with certain social issues. For the record, I wrote “Philosophical Differences” before the movie “Chasing Amy” ever came out.

Post: *Where did you get the idea for “Star Bright”?*

Eiland: I’m an adoptive parent of two children. I have a four-year-old girl who was adopted domestically. We traveled to be with her and her birth mother for her birth. But she was late. I went through what every adoptive parent must go through: Is the birth mother going to change her mind? I had this fantasy about the particulars of how she was going to change her mind and it became a scene in my head. Then during my daughter’s naming ceremony, her five-year-old cousin said, “I know how this baby got here. She was a star in the heavens looking down on the Earth trying to find the perfect mommy and daddy and then flew down into this baby’s body.” The set for the play is a medical clinic with stars overhead. I throw all the action into various complications and nobody knows how or whether it will work out.

Post: *There were actors from Harvard in the reading.*

Eiland: Yes. Very gifted actors. Michael McGarty, who runs the Harvard Community Theater and is the head of the school’s drama department, and Martha Brooks who is the Vice President of the HCT and teaches in Harvard. I asked Michael to cast some roles and he brought in Lily Narbonne, Jack Fellows, Olivia Enriquez and Martha. Also, this wouldn’t have happened without Mary Wilson at the Harvard Public Library.

Post: *How did it go?*

Eiland: We had a really robust discussion and people seemed very engaged. And I got a lot out of it for the next draft. I'm not putting this success on the script; I'm putting it on the cast. They were amazing.

Post: *How long did it take to write it?*

Eiland: I started it four years ago; now it's ready for a final draft, and then submission for publication.

Post: *Any more writing plans?*

Eiland: I have many ideas for plays, one that continues my adoption-related theme, and a novel.

Post: *What is your favorite part of being a playwright?*

Eiland: For me, writing a play starts in the playwright's head and goes through the fingers, the keyboard, to the paper, to the paper, and it's not realized until it is enacted. What comes out on stage is also the interpretation and vision of the director and actors. The playwright gets to provide the foundation for the collaborative process in which people are being creative as a result of something he or she started.

Post: *Would you like to comment on Harvard?*

Eiland: We love Harvard. The community, our friends and neighbors, the beauty of the area, Halloween, the participatory town meeting, a lot of intellectual and passionate people.

Post: *Do you have any theater-related stories you would like to share?*

Eiland: When my father was 79, he won a playwriting contest for his one-person show called "The Most Dangerous Woman," about the historical figure Mother Jones, the union organizer. His show got published and produced off-Broadway with a Broadway actress playing the role. We all went to see it. Then his health started faltering. Two years later I got to direct that play in Sturbridge. It was not just an honor, but a sense of connectedness to my dad, to the theatrical tradition in our family, and to the people and times he, my actress, my crew and I brought to life each evening through telling a poignant, often funny story on the stage. He passed away as we were going into rehearsals, but my mom saw it on video. I hope that my daughter and my son will have a similar feeling of connectedness to something that has grown out of their upbringing, and to a tradition that is larger than any one of us.