

Little House on the Prairie actress Melissa Gilbert is well acquainted with the perils of being a child star.

In fact, she notes wryly, she literally wrote the book on the subject, penning an autobiography that chronicled her teenage struggles with drugs and alcohol after she rose to fame playing Laura (Half Pint) Ingalls on the beloved TV show that ran from 1974 to 1983.

So it may come as a surprise to learn that Gilbert's co-star in the Little House musical that hits Toronto later this month is her 14-year-old son Michael Boxleitner (Gilbert's husband is Bruce Boxleitner, who starred in the '80s TV show Scarecrow and Mrs. King and, more recently, has appeared on Heroes and Chuck).

"If anyone knows the pitfalls, it's me," Gilbert, 45, says cheerfully during a telephone interview from Fayetteville, Ark., where Little House on the Prairie: The Musical recently had a run.

"This is something (Michael) really wanted to do that I have discouraged for a long time because I've always thought that my kids should just be kids ... But he's 14 years old now and he really wanted to do this and it has been an absolute joy watching him grow and learn through this process."

Michael plays the role of Willie Oleson, younger brother of town bully Nellie Oleson (a role immortalized on the TV show by Alison Arnglim).

The family connection seems particularly apropos because, back in the '70s, the role of Willie was played by another of Gilbert's relatives - her brother Jonathan.

While the TV show lives on in reruns, Gilbert says the musical, which is directed by Francesca Zambello (she did The Little Mermaid on Broadway), is more in the spirit of the Little House books by Laura Ingalls Wilder, about a family of pioneers in Minnesota.

The production, which had its premiere in August 2008 at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, features plenty of storylines that will be familiar to Little House fans - Mary loses her sight, Laura falls in love with Almanzo and, yes, Pa plays his fiddle.

This time around, however, the grown-up Gilbert takes on the role of Caroline (Ma) Ingalls (played on TV by Karen Grassle).

The part required her to sing onstage, something Gilbert - despite her lengthy career - has never done.

That considerable challenge, coupled with her son's acting debut, made for some family jitters when the curtain first rose.

"I don't know that I was nervous for (Michael), ever. I was so focused on the big job that I had ahead of me," says Gilbert.

"My husband, however, was a near-vomiting nervous wreck on opening night between having me and the boy onstage. He ... and my three older sons were in the audience. I saw them before the show and they were all white like sheets. I was calmer than they were."

They needn't have worried. The show has been embraced by nostalgic audience members, some of whom show up for performances in Little House-inspired outfits, carrying lunch pails and clad in sunbonnets.

Frequently, says Gilbert, faces in the crowd have included co-stars from the TV show.

Arnglim has attended, as have Katherine MacGregor, who starred as the high-strung Harriet Oleson on the TV show, and Richard Bull, who played her put-upon husband Nels.

Matthew Labordeaux, who played the role of adopted Ingalls brother Albert on TV, has also taken in a performance. So have various Little House crew members.

And what do they think?

"They love it," says Gilbert. "They're very proud of me ... it's their legacy too that we're able to keep alive. The more successful the musical, the more people want to watch the television series and the more their work gets viewed. It benefits everybody."

While Little House has always been popular, Gilbert says the current economic downturn has given it a special resonance.

"The television series debuted in the early '70s when the U.S. was in the worst recession it had seen ever. And here we are again," she notes.

"It's now that we need to be reminded that ... the pioneers who settled (our) two countries started with nothing and were able to build homes and communities and towns and cities. If they can do that, we can certainly make it through this."

Little House on the Prairie: The Musical runs at Toronto's Canon Theatre from Jan. 27 to Feb. 28.

Copyright (c) 2010, Waterloo Region Record. All rights reserved.