



**BY ANTHONY STOECKERT**  
NEWJERSEYNEWSROOM.COM

For millions of people, Melissa Gilbert will always be Laura Ingalls, the feisty young girl who grew up in Walnut Grove, Minn. with her parents and sisters during the 1800s on the beloved television series "Little House on the Prairie."

So Kara Lindsay has some big shoes to fill in playing Laura in the new Little House musical at the Paper Mill Playhouse in Millburn through Oct. 10. Adding to that pressure is co-starring in the show with Gilbert, the original Laura, herself.

The arrangement could have been terrible. What if Gilbert were a real-life Nellie Oleson, setting an evil stare on Lindsay and criticizing her every move? Luckily for Lindsay, that hasn't been the case.

"She's so wonderful, she's so kind and really inviting," Lindsay says of Gilbert, who's playing Laura's "Ma" in the show. "She would never be like, 'Well I did it this way, so you should do it this way.' She's very encouraging to me, and encourages me to discover Laura, and have my chance."

Based on the Little House novels written by the real Laura Ingalls Wilder, the show's book was written by Rachel Sheinkin, a Tony winner for "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee." The music was written by Rachel Portman (who won an Oscar for her score to the movie "Emma") and the lyrics are by Donna Di Novelli. It's directed by Francesca Zambello, who helmed "The Little Mermaid" on Broadway.



Wilder wrote nine books about her frontier life, starting with 1932's "Little House in the Big Woods." Although not purely biographical (the author wrote them in the third person), they're based on people and events from her childhood. Their stories about family members who grow closer as they face adversity remain popular today.

"They're so wonderful and so wholesome, and I wish that I had read those rather than the R.L. Stine 'Goosebumps' books," Lindsay says. "Why would I read stupid - and not really scary - books? But that's what our generation was into. I know the 'Little House' books have continued to be popular, but for some reason my friends were reading 'Goosebumps,' so I did."

Using the novels as source material has helped Lindsay discover how to play Laura. "Laura wrote those books, so obviously she knows herself," Lindsay says. "In the books she was very spunky, and that's exactly what (Sheinkin) pulled from. Everything is based on the books."

The musical tells the story of the Ingalls family's journey west in the hopes of creating a better life. They battle a brutal winter, fires and forge friendships with neighbors. It also closely follows Laura's growth as a young tomboy to an independent woman. And of course, there's Nellie (played by Kate Loprest) the rich girl who seems to exist only to make Laura's life miserable.

"You can tell (Laura) was a feisty girl, and that's pretty awesome," Lindsay says. "She was such a pioneer during those pioneer times, to be a woman and so independent, and not afraid to step out from the norm. Women weren't supposed to work outside because they're dainty, but she didn't give a crap about that."

The show is coming to Paper Mill after premiering at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. Paper Mill's staging will see several new songs and a rewritten first act. Lindsay cites one of the new songs, "Thunder" as her favorite.

When asked why people still love these characters after more than 70 years, first as a series of a book, then on television, Lindsay says a lot of it has to do with a connection to Laura.

"She's kind of the ugly ducking, she's the outcast, then she becomes the beautiful swan," she says. "It's inspiring for kids that they can be like that too. They can out-do the Nellie in their lives and be confident to be themselves."

*Little House on the Prairie, The Musical is at the Paper Mill Playhouse, 22 Brookside Drive, Millburn, through Oct. 10. Performances: Wed. 7 p.m. (no Oct 7 performance), Thurs., Sat. 1:30, 7, Fri. 7 p.m., Sun. 1:30, 7 p.m. Tickets cost \$25-\$92. For information, call (973) 376-4343 or go to [www.papermill.org](http://www.papermill.org).*

**JOIN NEWJERSEYNEWSROOM.COM:**

[IN OUR NEWSROOM](#)

[ON FACEBOOK](#)

[ON TWITTER](#)