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## The Lab Report, volume 01, issue 05

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Playwright's Lab  
at Hollins University

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# The Lab Report

Playwriting News from the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

Volume 01, Issue 05 (October, 2007)

## Best of No Shame

**No Shame Theatre**, as we've reported in a past issue, is an experiential learning lab where anyone and everyone can experiment with any aspect of performance that interests them.

Each Friday night at 11PM on the Waldron Stage at Mill Mountain Theatre writers, performers, and audience gather together to find out what will happen this week. There is no selection process, we simply take the first 15 pieces that walk in the door. There are only three rules: 1) pieces must be 5 minutes or less, 2) pieces must be completely original, and 3) they can't break anything—not the stage, not the performers, not the audience, and not the law. Beyond that it is all pretty much anything goes.

No Shame is the cornerstone of Mill Mountain Theatre's Underground Roanoke, their late night alternative programming series. As a

result, a lot of folks who don't want to stay out that late or who are a little nervous about untested material are delighted to discover that twice a year MMT presents No Shame at a reasonable hour in the form of **Best of No Shame**.

**BONS**, as it is referred to by regulars, is not an award show. Members of the online message board take part in polling and vote to nominate pieces that are appropriate for prime time viewing and represent what is possible at a regular No Shame. From those nominations pieces are selected to be performed at this No Shame "sampler plate" performance.

Among the audience tested pieces this month were those by program director Todd Ristau and MFA students Kenley Smith, Adam Hahn, Sunny daSilva and Clinton Johnston.

[www.noshame.org](http://www.noshame.org)

## Student Spotlight: Sunny daSilva



**Sunny daSilva** describes herself as a writer with a tireless work ethic and the energy of a battery charged to infinity. She's a wife, mother, and teacher but always and in everything, a playwright.

"When I am writing a play," Sunny says, "When I am allowing the characters that live in my brain to show me their stories, to create their alternate realities, time stands aside and I feel real."

In coming to Hollins, Sunny's main goal was to find a stimulating and supportive MFA program to help her really discover and develop herself as a playwright.

"I needed an environment that stimulates me intellectually and creatively...that pushes me to the apex of my abilities. I

need a safe environment where honest feedback and critique can be shared, argued, and discussed openly. A creative environment in which I'm not asked to mold to a certain safe norm, in which I am not asked to follow directly in another's footsteps, but veer off on a path of my own. I need an environment that focuses specifically on playwriting."

What she was looking for is exactly what we've created here in the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University, and she is exactly who we hoped would apply!

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## The Studio Theatre Space at Hollins University Gets a Face Lift!



Hollins has a new studio theatre that will be used for student productions, workshops, and presentations of touring shows by guest artists.

The Art Annex was added to the Little Theatre building in 1948 to provide space for painting, sculpture and photography classes. A third floor natural light studio was built in 1954. The annex was vacated by the Art Department in 2004 in favor of the newly built Richard Wetherill Visual Arts Center and no decision had been made on the best use of these empty rooms. In the interim, the Theatre Arts Department took up residence and determined to make good use of the space, even if those uses might prove temporary.

Former art classrooms became prop lockers, costume storage, a green room, classroom and rehearsal spaces.

On the main floor, the backstage and scene shop of the theatre department were able to expand by nearly 500% in order to provide a home to a state-of-the-art table saw, massive storage for platforms and lumber, as well as excellent build areas and

a paint shop.

The possibilities afforded by the natural light painting studio on the top floor of the annex was perhaps the most exciting for a playwriting program.

This large, empty, flexible space became a perfect classroom for teaching acting, writer as performer, directing, and other theatre courses.

The space also yielded excellent prospects as a performance area and is now used for both student productions and presentations by visiting artists.

Undergraduate playwright Rachel Nelson staged her first play, *Shut Up and Love*, in that space. Other performances included student directed plays, short pieces from classes, and even an open rehearsal for students with the professional cast of Naomi Wallace's play *Fever Chart* which opened to great success as part of the Norfolk Southern Festival of New Works at Mill Mountain Theatre later that week. The internationally renowned playwright and her equally prominent director, David Gothard, made themselves

available for discussion with our students.

Both Naomi and David remarked on the wonderful potential of this former art classroom as a studio theatre space because it so closely resembled the kind of theatre Peter Brook describes in his classic text, *The Empty Space*.

John Forsman, Technical Director of the Theatre Department, agreed but had reservations about continuing to use the space as is.

In spite of the flexibility and frequent use of the studio, John felt it had an ersatz and improvised quality insufficient for a space dedicated to supporting productions of the quality he wanted Hollins to be known for—productions that will increase in frequency with a new MFA playwriting program just getting underway.

John Forsman is a perfectionist, and if something has potential, he won't rest until it that potential is as fully realized as it can be.

On his own initiative and without

additional compensation, John undertook a summer project as grueling as it was exciting. He single-handedly renovated the upstairs studio complete with lighting grid and instruments, audience seating platforms, projection system with automated screen, light booth, sound system, storage areas for props and set pieces, backstage area, and a dressing room. There is even a separate conference room for design and pre-production meetings!

All this was done knowing full well that the Theatre Department's use of these art annex spaces might only be temporary. John was aware that everything he was doing might have to be removed at a moment's notice, but if this was going to be a theatre under his supervision (even if only for a short time) then it was going to be the best theatre it possibly could be.

We think he succeeded, and so does the University. We get to get to keep it!



The creative team of *Fever Chart* in the old studio space before renovation.

## Faculty Spotlight: John Forsman, Hollins Theatre's Technical Director



**John Forsman** is the Hollins University Department of Theatre's new Technical Director. He comes to us from Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, where he was Assistant Technical Director. Since 2006 John has overseen all the department's mainstage and student productions, and taught a variety of courses providing instruction in backstage production skills for the undergraduate program.

"I'm actually really glad to be here at Hollins," John said in a phone interview—he's a man of few words and it's hard to get him to slow down long enough to say them. "I love the freedom to

create that a smaller institution like this affords me. I like problem solving and I really enjoy working with the students, sharing my skills and watching them grow in theirs."

John holds an MFA from the University of Virginia and a BFA from Nebraska Wesleyan University.

John has worked in a variety of theatres across the country. In addition to his time at Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, he also was stage crew supervisor at the Santa Fe Opera in New Mexico.

Ernie Zulia, Chair of the Theatre Department reflected, "When John was recommended to Hollins by his former faculty at UVA, he was just wrapping up a successful stint as assistant technical director at one of the most acclaimed regional theatres in the country. He also had just worked on his first Broadway bound show."

Ernie had only recently taken over the theatre department

from David Dvorsak, who had headed the theatre program at Hollins for fourteen years. Every aspect of the program was being reinvented and Ernie knew he needed a good team to make the transition successful.

The previous Staff TD had also departed Hollins unexpectedly, and Zulia was determined to fill the slot quickly with a highly qualified person that possessing both professional and academic experience. Queries to his colleagues at other institutions resulted in John's name being put forward. Ernie contacted him and requested a resume.

Ernie liked what he saw, and met with John to discuss the position at Hollins and to get a sense of this early career TD's interest in the joining the faculty and staff.

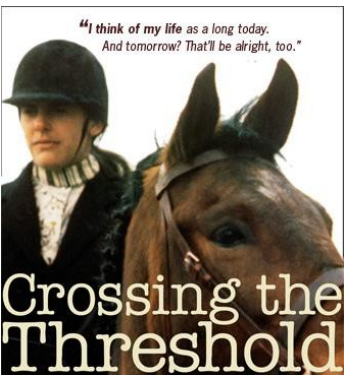
"Although our small but mighty theatre department was a far cry from either of his prior experiences," Zulia said, "It seemed obvious that John would be a great fit for Hollins. His passion for building great things, his innovative spirit, ability to

stretch budget allowances and create amazing sets beyond expectations and limitations would fit right into the Hollins Theatre explosion."

Ernie wasn't disappointed. John's technical expertise in pneumatics, hydraulics and computer driven scenery would find use in the ambitious productions of full scale musicals that Ernie has staged in the Little Theatre.

Ernie told us, "John's ability to creatively recycle materials has really served the budget constraints. When it came to creating a new studio theatre space, we collaborated on a basic layout, and then John went wild. He single-handedly built a charming black box theatre from available materials that he found throughout the building. I'm constantly impressed by his ability to work with what is available. From highly sophisticated technology to the simplest basics, John Forsman is able to meet all the needs and challenges of Hollins Theatre."

## Crossing the Threshold by Maura Campbell



Maura Campbell's play, *Crossing the Threshold*, will be produced by the Very Merry Theatre of Burlington, Vermont in October with additional performances in other venues including Waterfront Theatre and area schools.

*Crossing the Threshold* is a true story about overcoming limitations placed by others and the redemptive power of love and friends. Sarah Howell, born with cerebral palsy, was ostracized and abused at home and at school. At the age of 15, Sarah was given an undernourished year-old Morgan horse she named Ringo. The dramatic adaptation focuses on their unique relationship, and Sarah's subsequent achievements as a rider, wife, and mother.

The production is based on the autobiographical manuscript, *Crossing the Threshold*, by Sarah Skarrow. It is directed by Don Wright and features a multi-generational cast.

Maura said of the process, "I was asked to write a play based on the life story of Sarah Skarrow, who was born with cerebral palsy and grew up during a time when it was barely understood. I've done my best to dramatize the incredible relationship that Sarah had with her horse, Ringo, who lived for more than thirty years. The producers requested that the play be easy to produce and suitable for actors between the ages of 10 and 20. Other than the license I took that gives human voices to the animals in this play, it is faithful to the events that Sarah describes in her memoir."

The production also features original Music by Bill Mullins and

lyrics by Don Wright.



Scene from Very Merry Theatre's *Crossing the Threshold*. This scene is a recreation of the Beatles phenomenon of the 1960's. Photo by Donna Iverson

[mauracampbellplaywright.com](http://mauracampbellplaywright.com)

## Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

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For application materials, please call (540) 362-6326 or visit on the web at [www.hollins.edu/grad/playwriting](http://www.hollins.edu/grad/playwriting) for more information.

Check out our MySpace page!

<http://www.myspace.com/hollinsplaywrightslab>

### From the Director: Submission Tip #3

In addition to my role as Program Director, I'm also the Literary Associate at a professional theatre. This means I read (and reject) a lot of plays. For the next few issues, I'll be presenting tips to take some mystery and agony out of the submission process.

#### Number your pages.

For those using a scriptwriting software program like *Final Draft*, formatting is really easy to do. A click of a few buttons and you don't need to worry about orphans, page numbers, margins or any of that other stuff that can add hours of frustration getting your script ready for submission.

If you're formatting manually with a generic word processing

program or (like when I started writing) a typewriter, then page numbering can be a lot more difficult but no less important.

You might think that since your script is in a good binder page numbers aren't important—if it gets dropped, knocked to the floor, or a strong wind blows through the literary office nobody will have to put it back together. You're wrong. Page numbers are important for more than just protecting against mishap.

The most important aspect of page numbering is so that your reader can quickly determine an approximate running time.

Reading and production slots tend to have fairly rigid time constraints. For example, our

lunchtime reading series is from noon to 1PM. To give the audience 15 minutes to get settled, and allow 15 minutes of discussion after the reading, the play can't be longer than around a half hour.

Very often theatres use the rule of thumb that one page of dialogue is one minute of stage time in order to make an educated guess about running times. That's why we ask for 25-35 pages and stick to it religiously. There isn't much point in reading a script that is 40 pages or more, because it has no chance of getting selected no matter how good it might be.

And, honestly, I don't have

time to count your pages for you. Page numbers show you are both courteous and professional. Two things you want to be as a writer.



**Todd Ristau, Director**  
Playwright's Lab at Hollins University