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The Lab Report, volume 01, issue 06

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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 06 (November, 2007)

Sarnia 19 by Adam Hahn performed at Mill Mountain Theatre

Sarnia 19 by MFA playwright Adam Hahn had a staged reading this month as part of the CenterPieces lunchtime script-in-hand reading series at Mill Mountain Theatre.

In the play, the US is a nation at war. Three American soldiers, frightened and exhausted, are lost behind enemy lines. They argue over whether to keep fighting or surrender. To the Canadians.

The all-Equity cast for the staged reading included Mill Mountain Players Aaron Keller, Luke Daigle, and Steven Gibbs. The reading was directed by Todd Ristau, Playwright's Lab Program Director and Literary Associate for Mill Mountain Theatre.

"The CenterPieces readings are a great way for a playwright to begin to build a relationship with Mill Mountain Theatre,"

Ristau said. "This reading series is the only open submission vehicle we have. I'd mentioned to Adam that based on the submissions I'd been getting, I was starting to think it wasn't possible to write something interesting that met our criteria of a 35 minute piece suitable for a general audience. Adam took the submission guidelines and proved me wrong. The reading was very well attended and people really enjoyed having something of substance to chew on at lunch."

Sarnia 19 was conceived and written by Hahn as an assignment for Stephen Sossaman's Narrative Theory and Dramatic Structure course this past summer.

CenterPieces generally have less than seven hours of rehearsal and require minimal production concerns, and favor light comic pieces with no gratuitous adult language or content. Writers are paid a royalty and receive a DVD of the performance and talkback.



Aaron Keller and Luke Daigle in *Sarnia 19*

Student Spotlight: Adam Hahn

Adam Hahn is a writer and performer now based in Los Angeles. His short plays have been produced by Prairie Fire Theatre in Iowa City, IA; City Circle Acting Company in Coralville, IA; Mill Mountain Theatre in Roanoke, VA; and Deep Dish Theater Company in Chapel Hill, NC.

Since 1999, Adam has been active in No Shame Theatre, and performed at No Shames in five states, including the "National Best of No Shame" showcases in the Piccolo Spoleto fringe festival. As a member of the Iowa City No Shame executive board, he produced the twentieth anniversary "Best Of the Best

Of No Shame" and a weeklong festival of special performances in Iowa City in October, 2006. He is currently a producer of No Shame Los Angeles.

Adam studies long-form improv at IOWest (formerly Improv Olympic), where he performs with the student troupe A Counter-Clockwork Orange. He has also performed with the Iowa City troupes Fisheye and This Machine.

As an actor, Adam has appeared in productions of the University of Iowa and in the Iowa Fringe Festival.

When asked why he is pursuing playwriting, Adam said, "I write

plays because I believe they are my best chance for discovering and communicating whatever truths about the human condition I am capable of grasping."



www.myspace.com/jerkyput

Area Highlight: Dumas Center for Artistic & Cultural Development



The Dumas Center's *mission* is profoundly inspirational:

"To be a center for collaborative non-profit organizations dedicated to providing area citizens of all races and socio-economic backgrounds—especially youth and the young at heart—opportunities to gain life-enriching appreciation and develop talent in the visual, cultural, performing and historical arts. In this center, diversity will reign."

At the Dumas, the spirit of the past is reaching for the future.

The Hotel Dumas was situated on Henry Street in Roanoke, part of the historic Gainsboro neighborhood, and was built in 1917. Its location in the heart of "The Yard," as Henry Street was known, made it the center of the vibrant cultural life of the African-American community during the first half of the 20th Century. Numerous businesses and restaurants lined the streets alongside venues such as the Club Morocco, the Ebony Club, the Horseshoe Club, and, of course, the Hotel Dumas. African-Americans often traveled hundreds of miles to partake in the rich cultural and

commercial life of Henry Street.

The Barlows, a prominent Roanoke African-American family, purchased the Hotel in 1932. During the mid-1930s, the three Barlow children, Jill, Jack, and Mack, Jr., operated "Mack Jack and Jill's Snack Shop" — a hangout for teens and portent of the youth culture that was about to sweep the United States. During the Barlow era, the Hotel also featured a smoke shop, coffee shop, ballroom, and formal dining room. A general downturn of Roanoke's economy came with the decline of railroads after World War II and with it the decline of Henry Street. Prosperous African-American families left Gainsboro for suburbs newly created from the green perimeters of the Roanoke Valley. Gainsboro became associated with the uneasy urban decline endemic to that era. One by one, Gainsboro's family-owned businesses were abandoned and the buildings gradually deteriorated. During the 1960s and 1970s, federal urban renewal schemes brought large, imposing new public housing developments and fast, new freeways, carving

the old Gainsboro into fragments. In 1975, the Hotel Dumas closed.

During its heyday, however, the guest list of the hotel included the greatest names in American jazz: Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Lena Horne, Dizzy Gillespie, Fats Waller, Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Ella Fitzgerald, and many others who entertained at the nearby Hotel Roanoke. Though these great African-American performers played the big hotel, they weren't allowed to stay there.

After regular shows at the Hotel Roanoke, audiences would often accompany the performers back to Henry Street for all-night jam sessions. In the wee hours, the likes of Louis Armstrong could be found in the dining room of the Hotel Dumas eating fried chicken with red kidney beans, greens and sweet potatoes before retiring to his guestroom on the third floor.

As part of a larger community effort, TAP (**Total Action Against Poverty**) began working to revitalize the Henry Street community, starting with the Dumas. The vision was to create the Dumas Center and through it, foster even higher levels of cultural awareness, appreciation and talent in the visual and performing arts. In the late 1980s, under the leadership of Mayor Noel Taylor, plans were made for a Henry Street Revival. The plan was to convert the three-block area into a dining and entertainment district celebrating Roanoke's ethnic diversity. In the early 1990s, TAP acquired the Hotel Dumas, narrowly saving it from demolition. TAP made critical repairs to the hotel, preventing its decline. The roof was

repaired; walls were reinforced; and heating and air conditioning were installed. The first floor was renovated into a modest music hall accommodating 75 guests. Since 1991, the temporary Dumas recital hall has hosted a variety of events including jazz concerts, the musical "Henry Street," public hearings, wedding receptions, neighborhood meetings, and even funeral services for the late Mrs. Barlow, the previous owner of the Hotel Dumas. The renovated space has been a great asset to the community, local neighborhood groups, civic organizations, individual artists, and TAP's programs.

Through collaborative programs and services the Dumas Center reaches increasing numbers of citizens in the region—especially youth of all cultures and races.

Dumas Drama Guild is a multi-cultural theatre troupe operating out of the Center. Since its founding in 2000, and major renovation completed in 2006, the DDG has given nearly 100 performances. In conjunction with the DDG, TAP offers **Youth on the Yard Organization**. YOYO Players provide performances and workshops for youth aimed at developing the quality and effectiveness of students' personal and public self-expression.

www.tapintohope.org



The Dumas Center on Henry Street.

Faculty Spotlight: Todd Ristau, Program Director

Todd Ristau is a distinguished alum of the Iowa Playwright's Workshop.

"At Iowa I had the great fortune to work directly with some of the best known figures in contemporary theatre," Ristau said. "I want the students at Hollins to have the same opportunity to meet and work with truly important figures in new play development. But, it isn't enough to simply trot them out and listen to their wisdom handed down from a pulpit or something. Our students need to interact with them as colleagues in an environment more like that encountered in a theatre than in a classroom. This is not going to be a place of fawning sycophants and elitist snobs with no interest in anyone's work but their own. It is more important to say what you learned from working with someone than to just be able to drop the names of these folks. The Playwright's Lab will be a place where people come to learn how to do more and better work in a collaborative

environment, not the kind of competitive atmosphere that is so destructive to our art form. That's the dream, anyway. So far, it's working out pretty well."

While at Iowa, Todd took a basic playwriting class from Aaron Johnson, and on the strength of his writing for that class was given a production slot. The first two plays he wrote were staged as a double bill of one acts, and they sold out every night. This success led to the Nicholas Meyer Undergraduate Playwriting Scholarship and his being invited to join the Graduate Playwright's Workshop even while still an undergrad. He was re-invited for each of the four remaining semesters of his undergraduate degree. At graduation, Todd was given the Barry Kemp Merit Scholarship and an invitation to remain in the Workshop to pursue his graduate degree.

Todd's plays have been performed in theatres across the US and England, including

London's West End. In 1986 he founded No Shame Theatre and oversaw its evolution into a national network of venues for new works in dozens of cities.

After graduation Todd started Midwest Center for Developing Artists, a non-profit corporation for the development of new work along with W. David Hancock, Rebecca Gilman, and Scott Stevens. MCDA produced and toured many plays and Ristau's *Fictional Episodes* was invited to the Edinburgh Festival in 1991. In 1994, MCDA co-produced with Melanie Joseph's newly formed Foundry Theatre a production of David Hancock's *The Convention of Cartography*. It won the Obie for Best New Play. Ristau also performed the lead role in the premier of Hancock's second museum play, *The Race of the Ark Tattoo*, under the direction of David Gothard, which toured the US, including Alice's Fourth Floor in New York City.

Todd has a passion for

teaching, and works with students of all ages and backgrounds. In addition to his teaching and administrative duties at Hollins, he is currently Literary Associate at Mill Mountain Theatre, and Producer of its Underground Roanoke series of programming. He is also active with Young Audiences of Virginia.

Todd has an extensive theatre background with expertise in dramatic writing, acting, directing, and design.



<http://www.ristentltd.com/professional/vita.html>

Wild Geese by MFA playwright Maura Campbell opens in New York



Maura Campbell's play, *Wild Geese*, had its world premier this month at the Manhattan Repertory Theatre in New York

City as part of their Fall Play Festival.

The play is about four women who struggle with personal and sexual identity in the 1980's, charting what she calls "the workplace revolution" that saw women making the migration into employment areas previously dominated by men.

The play was produced by Vermont based MOXIE Productions and directed by Monica Callan of the Waterberry Center. Brian Scott, a performer with Blue Man Group was featured in the cast.

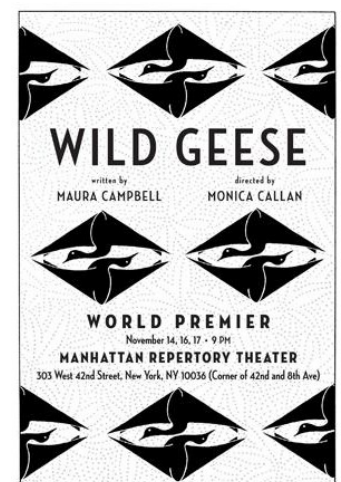
"*Wild Geese* is about how life unfolds, it is a celebration of the predictable—and how the

unpredictable really lives in the predictable," Maura said of her script. "This play marks a shift in my writing from plot driven stories to character driven stories. For my sensibilities and background, this play is experimental and I am excited about continuing this kind of exploration in the future as I progress through the program at Hollins."

Wild Geese was the writing sample Maura submitted with her application to the MFA program in playwriting at Hollins. The writing showed exceptional promise. Characteristic of all her work, it is funny, human, and insightful.

We're very confident that hers

will be a voice frequently heard in American theatres for years to come.



<http://www.mauracampbellplaywright.com/>

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Check out our MySpace page!

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

From the Director: Submission Tip #4

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.

Read and follow submission guidelines.

I can't tell you how important this is, and how many playwrights don't do it.

For my part, if you can't be bothered to read our submission guidelines, I don't see why I should be bothered to read your play. That may sound pretty harsh, but a theatre is a very busy place with limited staff and limited resources. They didn't

ask you to submit your play, they gave you permission to. Part of that permission was the understanding that you weren't going to waste anyone's time by sending a play that you'd know they aren't going to consider if you'd read the guidelines. Instead, they are going to use their time to read the plays that do conform to the guidelines.

It would be a very rare, and very foolish, theatre who didn't include submission guidelines in their submission notices. If you can't find the guidelines, or you don't really know for sure that they actually take submissions, write them a nice letter or email asking what the submission guidelines are *before* you send your play.

If they write back and tell you that they don't accept unsolicited scripts, don't send them one. Don't ask to be solicited either. That never works. Ever.

Submission guidelines are created very carefully by theatres, and for a very good reason. They want to only get submissions that might fill specific areas of programming they have left blank for new works development. Thus, theatres tend to specify things like length, content, language, subject matter, roles, types of characters, age ranges, production concerns, whether or not they do musicals, adaptations, children's plays and so on.

If your play isn't what a theatre wants, don't get angry at them. Just keep looking until you find the guidelines that fit your play. Then, send it off with confidence!



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