

1-2008

The Lab Report, volume 01, issue 08

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Recommended Citation

Ristau, Todd, "The Lab Report, volume 01, issue 08" (2008). *Lab Reports*. 13.
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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 08 (January, 2008)

The Playwright's Lab Hosts Luncheon in New York

Todd Ristau, Director of the Playwright's Lab, took advantage of the winter holiday to travel and promote the Lab. He drove from Roanoke to Chicago, stopping in theatres that do new works along the way to drop off materials and make connections. In Chicago he met with playwright Jeff Goode, whose play *7 Santas* was premiering at the Bailiwick, and secured a promise from Jeff that he'd come to Hollins as a guest artist next summer. Todd also had dinner with Lenora Inez Brown, of DePaul's Theatre School, to talk about teaching a dramaturgy course in Summer 2008.

From Chicago he drove Cleveland to meet with Mike Geither of CSU, from Cleveland to Pittsburgh for the KCACTF Region 2 conference, then back to Roanoke to catch a train to Philadelphia to meet with PlayPenn director Paul Meshejian and New Paradise Laboratories General Manager Inger Hatlen. Then, by rail, to New York City for a Playwriting Lunch Summit he'd arranged through MFA playwright Toby Thelin.

"I knew I was going to be in New York for only a week, and there was no way to meet individually with everyone I hoped to discuss the program with," Todd said. "Toby had the great idea of hosting a luncheon at The Playwright Tavern. Everyone thought it was a fantastic idea, and we had some really great people there, all of whom are now enthusiastic supporters of what we're doing at Hollins."

The luncheon attendees included some of the most interesting names connected to new works living in New York City today. In total, there were between 25 and 30 guests at the luncheon. Among the prominent attendees who gave strong indications they'd be coming to Hollins as future guest artists or visiting faculty were Sheila Callaghan, Brendan Connelly, Erin Courtney, Lisa D'Amour, Morgan Gould, Jason Grote, Pam MacKinnon, Emily Morse, Larry Pontius, Ron Riley, Brian Scott, Jeffrey Sweet, Lucy Thurber and Gary Winter. Morgan Jenness gave first hand testimony to her experience as

a guest artist last summer. MFA playwrights Maura Campbell and Toby Thelin were also on hand to speak to being students in this unique playwriting program.

Guests were very impressed with the program, and surprised to learn that it is only approaching its second year because it had already established such a strong and widespread reputation among theatre professionals involved in developing new writing for the stage.



Photo of the Playwright Tavern by Dave Hong
<http://davehong.yelp.com>

Student Spotlight: Maura Campbell



Maura Campbell, who lives in Vermont, has had more than thirty plays produced in her home state, regionally and also

internationally in venues ranging from school auditoriums to professional theatres. Maura was the winner of the 2005 Vermont Playwright Award, and 2005 winner of the American Contemporary Playwright Award. She was twice awarded with Best Play of the Year by the Vermont Association of Theaters and Theater Agents.

"I didn't finish my undergraduate degree until I was 41," Maura told us in her application. "I had four children and was, by all accounts, a successful business woman, but it was when my children were denied

roles in community plays that I became a playwright, director, and producer virtually overnight. I've done well, won acclaim in my home state and even abroad, but I want to be challenged. I am ambitious. I want to grow as an artist. The program at Hollins will help me do this, and the degree will afford me more and better opportunities to teach. I feel an incredible obligation to share what I know, and what I will discover."

We are confident that Maura will achieve all her goals and that her voice will be heard both loudly and widely.

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

Dramaturgy Summit at KCACTF in Pittsburgh

KCACTF

<http://www.kcactf2.org/dramaturgy.html>

The KCACTF Region II conference was hosted this month by Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh.

Knowing that a dramaturgy course would be an important part of the coming summer curriculum in the Playwright's Lab, Todd Ristau made a point of attending this conference because it included a special focus on dramaturgy. Two prominent dramaturgs, Dr. Robyn Quick, Associate Professor of Theatre Studies at Towson University, and Dr. Mark Charney, Director of Theatre and Professor of Playwriting at Clemson University, would be leading focused sessions in the role of dramaturgs, and in particular

how to make the relationship between dramaturg, playwright, and director a successful one.



**Dr. Mark Charney,
Playwright,
Director,
Dramaturg**

"When I was elected a member of the National Selection Team in 2003," Mark told us, "I traveled to all eight festivals, not only to see and evaluate 92 plays in an attempt to choose 4-5 to be advanced to the national festival, but also to begin a dramaturgy initiative nation wide. My trip to Region II this month was an attempt to see how that region had

worked with dramaturgy, and what they may need from me, and I facilitated several workshops on dramaturgy. I was delighted to see that Region II was one of the stronger regions in terms of dramaturgy. They had not only focused upon the students, but were beginning to distinguish between dramaturgy for new plays and from established ones. I met Todd Ristau then, who attended many of the sessions, and his interest in dramaturgy directly related to his interest in new plays. He enlivened the discussions, and brought to the program a fine understanding of the needs and conflicts of the dramaturg."

Ristau responded, "The sessions and the discussions that followed were highly instructive. So often you only hear stories about difficult collaborations between playwright and director. It was fascinating to get a better understanding of the important role a dramaturg can play not only in the production process,

but actually in the writing process as well. It can be invaluable to have a person whose sole role is to ask difficult questions of the writer, or the director, that might not occur to them because they are so close to the material."

Charney, who is also Artistic Director of WordBRIDGE Playwright's Laboratory, has been an enthusiastic supporter of the program at Hollins from its inception.

"From what I could tell," Mark said, "the playwriting program at Hollins University takes dramaturgy very seriously as an important aspect of learning to develop plays, especially to establish a strong voice for the playwright to the director and the designers. It was heartening to see that this playwriting program takes dramaturgy and the needs of the playwright so seriously."

<http://www.wordbridge.org/>

What is Dramaturgy?

Dramaturgy is a mysterious profession. Most other disciplines in the theatre have pretty well defined and accepted definitions, but ask 20 people what a dramaturg is and you'll likely get just as many opinions—less those who have no idea what dramaturgy is, of course. People even argue about whether or not the spelling has an e at the end (*dramaturge*) making it pronounced with a hard or soft "g" sound.

Leon Katz defined it this way: "The goal of dramaturgy is to resolve the antipathy between the intellectual and the

practical in the theatre, fusing the two into an organic whole."

Essentially, the role of the dramaturg is to make interdisciplinary connections to facilitate a play's realization in production. Put more simply, a dramaturg works toward a melding of theory and practice.

Mary Resing, of Active Cultures, has said that the three things a dramaturg must do are:

- 1) **Bring the world of the play to the world of the artist.**
- 2) **Bring the world of the play to the world of the audience.**
- 3) **Be responsible for making**

sure all production elements in the play are telling the same story (beyond mere fact checking).

Trouble with dramaturgs can arise when a director feels that they don't need a dramaturg because if they are doing their job, there isn't anything left for the dramaturg to do, and unfortunately, that's what they end up having them do—nothing. If a director feels this way, they don't really understand what a gift working with a dramaturg can be. Especially when working on a new play.

A good dramaturg must be tactful, yet forceful in their

efforts. They will accomplish their goals primarily by asking questions, which can make an insecure playwright or director nervous. If everyone is clear from the beginning of the process that the dramaturg is there to ask questions that the playwright or the director would not ask themselves, and that those questions are intended to benefit the play and not undermine anyone's authority nor cast the expertise of either the writer or the director into doubt, then things will go much smoother in rehearsal.

www.dramaturgy.net

Faculty Profile: Lenora Inez Brown



Lenora Inez Brown heads the dramaturgy program at The Theatre School at DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois.

When we went looking for someone to teach the introductory dramaturgy course that will be taught this summer, Lenora was on every list of recommendations we received. We are pleased to announce that she will be joining us for the 2008 Summer Session.

Just to let you know why she has come so highly recommended, we wanted to

share with you a partial list of her extensive credits.

Lenora been a dramaturg for theatres across the country including the Goodman Theatre, Steppenwolf Theatre, The Court Theatre, Chicago Dramatists, and Congo Square Theatre Company.

In addition, she works nationally at a variety of new play workshops including South Coast Rep's Pacific Playwright's Festival, Alabama Shakespeare Festival's Southern Writer's Festival (three festivals) and the Kennedy Center's New Visions/New Voices (four festivals).

She has been active in KC/ACTF since serving as a National Team member in 2000. She advises students interested in participating in the national program and has led workshops on dramaturgy at the regional festivals. She served as the dramaturg for the

Dear America series, which involved six playwrights adapting Scholastic novels to the stage, including Naomi Iizuka, Jerome Hairston, Julie Jensen and Mary Hall Surface.

Lenora has been a Dramaturg and Director of New Play Development for three regional theatres: Madison Repertory Theatre in Madison, WI, Crossroads Theatre Company in New Brunswick, NJ, and Syracuse Stage in Syracuse, NY. As the dramaturg for Crossroads Theatre Company she worked on *It Ain't Nothing But The Blues*, which went to Broadway and received a Tony nomination for best Musical. That same year Crossroads received the 1999 Tony Award for Outstanding Regional Theatre.

Lenora also worked for Theatre Communications Group in the publications department as an

associate editor for *American Theatre*.

In 2002 she served on the NEA Theatre granting panel. She currently sits on the ASSITEJ/USA Board and serves as Chair of the Ann Shaw Fellowship Committee.

Lenora holds a B.A. in art history from Dartmouth College and an M.F.A. in dramaturgy from the Yale School of Drama.

THEA 511: Dramaturgy will be an intensive study in theoretical and practical approaches to the realization of text on the stage. Historical research, criticism, play analysis, conceptualization for production, cutting, adaptation, literary management, evaluation of text, advocacy of new writers, audience development, arts education and other topics are all touched upon in this survey of the work of a dramaturg.

http://theatreschool.depaul.edu/faculty_staff.php?id=95

Roanoke Regional Writers Conference: Playwriting Session



The Roanoke Regional Writer's Conference at the Jefferson Center ran January 25th and 26th. It was the first of what is hoped to be an annual conclave of writers and those interested in writing and included some of the best professional scribblers and

editors in the region. They all came together in a spirit of enthusiasm and generosity to share their skill and expertise with those who aspire to write better.

The impressive lineup of speakers, panelists and presenters of workshops included Sharyn McCrumb, Kurt Rheinheimer, Nelson Harris, Elizabeth Barbour, Keith Ferrell, Sandy Smith, Cara Modisett, Donna Dille, Kathy Surace, Janis Jaquith, Rex Bowman, Sara Cox, Tom Field, Darrell Laurent, Karen Adams, John Montgomery, Tyler Godsey, Tommy Denton, and conference organizer Dan Smith.

Sharyn McCrumb, best selling author, was featured novelist



Todd Ristau, Director of the Graduate Program in Playwriting at Hollins University, was asked to present a workshop on playwriting at the conference. The session was very well attended and received, resulting in an invitation to sit in on the final end-of-conference panel discussion with the other

notables in attendance.

"Todd's class added something special to the line up," Dan Smith said of the playwriting workshop. "You could tell by the enthusiasm of the 130 people in attendance at the conference that the entire affair was quite a success. We're hoping to do it again next year and I hope that Todd will be part of Round II."

Plans are under way for Hollins University to be a major sponsor of the next conference, which will be hosted on our campus on January 23-24 of 2009. Check the website below for details!

<http://www.hollins.edu/news-events/writers/writers.htm>

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 for more information.

Check out our MySpace page!

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

From the Director: Submission Tip #6

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.

Use a standard format.

When someone is holding your baby in their hands and has the power to decide whether or not it lives or dies...you don't want to make them cranky.

Alright, that's a little hyperbole. But, I can tell you—as someone who reads a lot of plays—anything that makes reading those plays easier is golden, and anything that makes it harder is lead.

Most literary offices are staffed with underpaid or unpaid volunteer readers who are months behind in the piles of plays they have to read and respond to. Under those conditions, anything that makes a play harder to read also makes it less likely to be read.

Using a standard format allows for much speedier reading. Not using a standard format either indicates that the writer doesn't care about conventions or that they are inexperienced enough not to know those conventions exist. Either signals that no matter how good the play, the playwright might be difficult to work with.

Probably the worst offender is someone who center justifies not just the character names but

everything else, so that the whole play looks like a poem.

Strange fonts, illustrations, and peculiar paper are not the best ways to get noticed as a writer.

The best way to get noticed is to have the first 10 pages of your play be a really exciting example of excellent writing.

If you are using Final Draft script writing software, **DO NOT** format your script as a screenplay. There are at least three **STAGE PLAY** formats in the program. When you create a new document, use the pull down menu and select one of them. They are there for a reason.

If you are unfamiliar with standard formatting, I recommend getting a copy of *Writing Your First Play*, by Stephen Sossaman. It is an excellent primer.



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