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## The Lab Report, volume 01, issue 10

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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 10 (March, 2008)

## Am I Black Enough Yet?

*Am I Black Enough Yet?* by MFA playwright Clinton Johnston is in a regional tour in preparation for its professional premier by Charter Theatre of Washington DC.

The production features an Actor's Equity cast performing the piece for a week's run on the Waldron Stage at Mill Mountain Theatre before transferring to Live Arts in Charlottesville for a weekend followed by a week of performances at the Earl Hamner Theatre in Nelson County where it had previously participated in a developmental workshop. The Hamner Theatre is co-producing the effort in cooperation with the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University and Mill Mountain Theatre.

In the play, Johnston explores the state of blackness in America. Through the theatrical device of making everyone in the audience "honorary black folk," it opens the door for frank discussion of prejudice, assumption and discrimination. The play aims not only to examine differences, but also



Original poster art for the show was a commissioned work by Lee Moyer (www.leemoyer.com) Charter production photos by Ray

to encourage communication and a sense of community.

Johnston originally wrote *Am I Black Enough Yet?* as a series of sketches for Charlottesville's No Shame Theater.

The cast of *Am I Black Enough Yet?* includes Edward Daniels, Paige Hernandez, Patrick M. Doneghy, Sonia Justl, and Matthew Eisenberg. It is directed by George Grant, Senior Faculty member of the National Conservatory of Dramatic Arts and a teaching artist for the Shakespeare Theatre Co.

*"The strength of this piece is in its language, its humor, its humanity and its generous spirit - not in elaborate sets or visual effects. It is an enjoyably engaging evening without rancor but not without a strong viewpoint."*

—Potomac Stages Review

*"...a patchwork of poignant and satirical skits grappling with questions of ethnicity...Johnston's bold tonal shifts add surprise and texture to the piece, which is always thoughtful..."*

—Washington Post Review

<http://www.thehamnertheater.com/BlackEnough>

## Student Spotlight: Clinton A. Johnston



Clinton Johnston is a member of the theater faculty at Mary Baldwin College, holds an MFA in Directing from UVA, and has

more than a decade of experience acting and directing in local theaters. These include Live Arts, Play On!, Earl Hamner Jr. Theatre, Midsummer Players, Kitchen Sink Playback Theatre, Four County Players, Heritage Rep, Offstage, Mill Mountain Theatre, and the University of Virginia Theatre Department.

He has also been an active writer/performer for No Shame Theatre since that venue first came to Virginia and participated in the National Best of No Shame at the prestigious Piccolo Spoleto Festival in Charleston, SC.

Clinton's one-act play *Representin'* (in which he also starred) was recently part of the Hamner Theater production 6x6 - A Festival of One Acts. He directed one of the 10-minute plays in the first Overnight Sensations at Mill Mountain, and participated as playwright in last year's offering. He joins us as an MFA playwright in the coming summer session.

"The Hollins program is ideal for me," Johnston told us, "to pursue additional graduate work without having to give up my current responsibilities."

Photo by Annaliese Moyer (www.annaliesemoyer.com)

# The Lab Report

Playwriting News from the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

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## Kenley Smith, MFA Playwright, To Open Theatre Space in Roanoke

Kenley Smith only recently embarked on the study of playwriting and has already had a great deal of success with his work. Unfortunately, he has also made the hard discovery that there are very few venues for new works development in the Roanoke Valley.

Most of the existing venues in the area have very little room in their seasons for new works programming. Producing new plays by writers as yet unknown can be a significant financial risk. If not for Mill Mountain Theatre's Norfolk Southern Festival and their monthly CenterPieces readings, there would be almost no new works programming at all in our area.

Ken visited with various arts organizations to see if a significant annual donation could offset some of those risks and create more opportunities for original plays in Roanoke's existing theatres.

Surprisingly, the answer was no. The Waldron, Mill Mountain Theatre's space used for alternative programming, is in nearly constant use as a

performance venue, rehearsal hall, classroom, scene shop, and even banquet area. Adding additional programming would interfere with the already tightly managed scheduling for the space. Saying no to Ken's generous offer wasn't easy for Mill Mountain, but their existing programming had to take priority.

"I never realized how hard it is to give away money," Ken chuckled over his frustration at having his offer of restricted funds for new works programming turned down.



Theatre Without Compromise

Undaunted, Ken took the bold step of buying a property and starting a theatre dedicated to incubating new plays and the playwrights who write them.

The property is at 30 Campbell Ave., right in the heart of

downtown Roanoke.

The plan is to convert it to a 50-75 seat black box where plays written in the Playwright's Lab could be produced using guest directors affiliated with the program from major theatre centers around the country with local actors and students from Hollins.

"From the perspective of a playwriting program, nothing could be better news," Todd Ristau said of the project. "I think that Ken's contribution to the rapidly growing Roanoke arts community will have a very positive impact for decades to come. It will really increase our reputation nationally as the perfect place to develop new plays. I think it will also help develop new audiences, helping all the arts organizations in town. Collaboration and cooperation is so much more



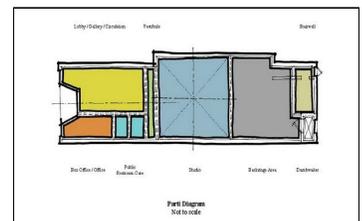
Bringing Off Broadway style theatre to Roanoke

rewarding than competition."

The Playwright's Lab will continue its ongoing creative relationship with Mill Mountain Theatre and our students will still be able to take advantage of existing production and reading opportunities there. Talks are currently underway to explore ways in which Studio Roanoke, Hollins University, and Mill Mountain Theatre can team up to provide expanded new works programming to our community without increasing the risk or overtaxing the resources of any individual organization.

We'll report more details as they develop. In the meantime, contact us at the Playwrights Lab to find out how you can help support this project and the opportunities it will bring.

Email: [tristau@hollins.edu](mailto:tristau@hollins.edu)



<http://www.roanoke.com/insideout/arts/index/wb/151930>

## Dreamtime, by Maura Campbell read in New York



*Dreamtime*, a new play by Maura Campbell was presented as a staged reading at Champlain College on Sunday, March 2.

The play was completed as part of last summer's coursework in the Playwright's Lab, and has been selected to be received a full production as part of the 2008 Norfolk Southern Festival of New Works at Mill Mountain Theatre in May of this year. The purpose of this reading was to help the writer get a more fully finished final draft

before the play goes into production in the festival.

"Coming to Hollins was the best move I've ever made," Maura said. "I so loved it there and learned so much. And good things have been happening ever since I came home. I will support this program and the people involved in it always."

*Dreamtime* focuses on the disturbed fantasies of two teenaged boys which result in their loss of innocence and the murder of two Dartmouth

professors and was inspired by the infamous murder case in 2001.

The staged reading featured Clarke Jordan, Mary Scripps, Colin Cramer, Jack Conroy, Monica Callan, Kevin Christopher and G. Richard Ames.

The Mill Mountain production will feature an Equity cast and be directed by Todd Ristau. It runs May 7th through the 18th.

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

## Faculty Profile: Jonathan Dorf



Jonathan Dorf is a playwright and screenwriter whose plays have been produced in more than thirty-five states, as well as in Canada, Europe, Asia, Australia and New Zealand.

He has been a finalist for the Actors Theatre of Louisville Heideman Award, the Hyperion One Act Award, the Weinberger Playwright Residency and the Interact and Charlotte Rep New Play festivals, and he has worked with such companies as the Walnut Street Theatre, Playwrights Theatre of New Jersey, Ensemble Studio Theatre - LA, Moving Arts and the Pittsburgh New Works Festival.

More than a dozen of his plays

are published by such companies as Brooklyn Publishers, Eldridge Publishing, Playscripts and Original Works, with monologues published in collections by Meriwether and Smith & Kraus.

He is the resident playwriting expert for Final Draft (for whom he created the playwriting "Ask the Expert" in the latest release, FD 7) and The Writers Store (creator of Playwriting101.com and playwriting instructor at Writers University).

Jonathan is the co-chair of the Alliance of Los Angeles Playwrights and the former managing director of the Philadelphia Dramatists Center.

He is also a member of the Dramatists Guild of America and the Los Angeles-based Ariadne Group.

For screen, he has written three produced shorts

(*Throwaways*, dir. David Marmor, *Disconnect* and *Reunion*, dir. Harley Cross), as well as a number of feature scripts.

He is the author of *Young Playwrights 101*, a book for young playwrights and those who teach them, and conducts workshops at schools and festivals across the US.



**Jon's book is an excellent resource for writers and teachers**

Jonathan holds a BA in Dramatic Writing and Literature from Harvard University where he graduated magna cum laude. Dorf graduated from UCLA with an MFA in Playwriting. As a student he studied with William Alfred, Robert Brustein, Adrienne Kennedy, Gregory Gunter and

Tony Kubiak.

Jon is the recipient of the Hal Kanter Comedy Writing Award and Marty Klein Comedy Writing Award. He was literary intern at The Geffen Playhouse, where he studied with Leon Katz, John Glone, Velina Hasu Houston, Edit Villarreal and Hanay Geiogamah.

We're very excited about Jonathan Dorf joining our visiting faculty this summer to teach two sections of an upper level course in writing for young audiences as well as Narrative Theory and Structure, our foundational course in playwriting for incoming MFA candidates.

Jonathan will also be writing for the upcoming Overnight Sensations at Mill Mountain Theatre, and we're looking forward to working with him on the stage as well as the classroom.

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

<http://youngplaywrights101.com/>

## Virginia Festival of the Book



Stephen Sossaman moderates a panel on playwriting that included playwrights Doug Grissom, Todd Ristau and Keith Bridges, as well as Theatre Coordinator Betty Hales at the VFB in 2007.

The 14th annual Virginia Festival of the Book held this month in Charlottesville was among the best attended in

Festival history with 23,580 in attendance and crowds surging to 900 for a single event. The VFB was pleased to see its five

day celebration of books and literacy doing exactly what it is meant to do: bringing readers together with authors to discuss the topics that touch and inform our lives.

This is the second year that the Live Arts Playwright's Lab, founded by Todd Ristau and currently headed by Stephen Sossaman, held a panel called *From Page to Stage to Page* discussing the process of writing a script, shepherding it through production, and then publication.

It was at last year's panel that Keith Bridges learned of the playwriting program at Hollins

and that discovery led to his application to become a playwriting student at Hollins. This year's panel was, if anything, even more successful than the first.

"It was great to have a panel on playwriting," said Nancy Damon, the festival's Program Director. "It is a very important area in the realm of writing!"

Theatre professionals at this year's panel included Stephen Sossaman, Todd Ristau, and Jack Shea. It was again hosted by the Live Arts Playwrights Lab.

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

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

## 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 #8

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.

**Don't make the envelope difficult to open, and don't submit anything but your play, a resume, and a cover letter.**

This is actually two tips in one. The thing about the envelopes is really just a pet peeve. I know your script is precious cargo, but it isn't likely anyone will steal it or that it will fall out of a normally sealed envelope in transit if you use a new one. Excessive tape only makes the person who will read your play

cranky before they get to the first page because they had to search around for scissors or some other way to break the air tight seal. That doesn't help anyone. In a post 9-11 world, it might even get your script flagged at the Post Office for additional inspection. Excessive tape is actually a red flag for possible hazardous content .

I kid you not.

As to the other thing, all I really want to read is your script.

If you have reviews or production photos, or other supporting materials you'd like to share with the theatre, it is perfectly fine to mention they are available upon request in your cover letter. The theatre doesn't really want to know how

the play was done by someone else, we want to imagine how we will do it ourselves.

A resume is OK to include, because it will tell us a lot about you and your experience, and that's useful information to have. It won't persuade us to do a play we don't like though, no matter how many credits you have on your CV.

Please leave out of the envelope anything but your script, your cover letter, and your resume. I've gotten all sorts of strange things in submission packets, including an inexplicable full color Xerox of a peacock and a 5 page check list of plays in 9 point font asking me to

pick which I'd like to have sent. I have enough plays on my desk without filling out a questionnaire. Just send me your best play.

That's your best bet.



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