

11-2008

## The Lab Report, volume 02, issue 06

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### Recommended Citation

Ristau, Todd, "The Lab Report, volume 02, issue 06" (2008). *Lab Reports*. 15.  
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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 02, Issue 06 (November, 2008)

## Mellon Foundation Gives \$10 Million to Promote New Plays

The **Andrew W. Mellon Foundation**, based in New York City has this year awarded almost \$10 million in grants to organizations and theatres who are specifically dedicated to the development of new plays and playwrights.

The New York Times reports that the decision to provide this very generous support to new writing for the stage is due to a three-year study into the difficulties that work against the production of new plays.

The study indicated that direct support for playwrights and help in the creation of long-term residencies at theaters producing new plays were some of the most useful ways to support new writing. The reason for this is that far too often, playwrights complain of endless "workshops" of their plays with extremely limited production opportunities. As every playwright knows, the best way to develop a play is to put it up on its feet in a production with real actors in front of a real audience.

Todd London, of New Dramatists in New York, brought the issue of a changing field of playwriting to the Foundation five years ago, hoping that the organization would give serious thought to changing how it approached its grant making decisions.

The effort has proven successful and may start to radically change how playwrights are supported in America.

The foundation awarded \$675,000 to New Dramatists so that they can offer longer workshops and commission new plays that would then be produced by a network of theaters. \$500,000 went to Lark Play Development Center, so three new plays can be staged at four different theaters around the country within eighteen months. The Sundance Institute Theater Program, the Minneapolis-based Playwrights' Center, and 3-Legged Dog, a New York City-based nonprofit media and theater group, also received playwriting grants.

Mellon awarded grants to the

[www.nytimes.com/2008/10/21/theater/21mell.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/21/theater/21mell.html)

Public Theater, the Signature Theatre Company, Playwrights Horizons, and Lincoln Center Theater in New York; the Steppenwolf Theater Company in Chicago; and the Roadside Theater in Whitesburg, Kentucky.

While the program here at Hollins won't benefit directly from this remarkable gift of the Mellon Foundation, we're enthusiastic that it will be the start of a rising tide that will lift all boats as time passes and a new sensibility about the value of producing new plays takes hold.

The market place is a terrible measure of artistic work. This type of generosity in offsetting the costs and risks of producing new plays allow playwrights to concentrate on creating compelling stories of artistic merit rather than drafting something that is inexpensive to produce and profitable as their primary creative considerations.

Kudos!

## Student Spotlight: Nicole B. Adkins (Nikki)

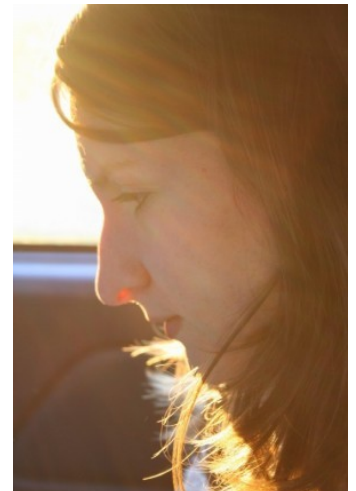
**Nicole Blair Adkins** (Nikki) has an undergraduate degree in Theatre Arts from the University of Central Oklahoma, and has studied Shakespeare at London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts. She has worked with children's theatres as a performer and teacher for several years.

Nikki and her husband have relocated to Los Angeles where she teaches theatre and creative writing to youth through the Los Angeles based arts-enrichment organization Aimee Arts Productions and can be frequently spotted as an

actor and writer at the LA branch of No Shame Theatre.

She enjoys sharing her love of theatre, writing, literature, and life with young people, and as such, is currently spending summers pursuing her MFA in Children's Literature with an emphasis in Playwriting at Hollins University in Roanoke, Virginia.

Of the Playwright's Lab and the crossover opportunities it represents, Nikki said, "I am excited to see the birth of the playwriting program, as I see the potential for a really magical furtherance of my goals here!"



[www.nicolebadkins.com](http://www.nicolebadkins.com)

# The Lab Report

Playwriting News from the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

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## Guest Spotlight: Bonnie Metzgar



**Bonnie Metzgar** is a playwright, director, dramaturg, producer, and the newest Artistic Director of About Face Theatre in Chicago. She stopped in Roanoke to work with our students on her way from South Africa to Chicago to start her new position at About Face. Her full professional bio is available at the program website.

### What brought you to Hollins?

I guess why I'm really here is because Todd Ristau started this amazing program for MFA writers and I'm here because I want to see how it works and I want to be part of it.

### What do you think so far?

Well, it seems really intense, to tell you the truth. If you think about an MFA program that's spread out over a year, and there's a lot of time to do the creative work as well as the academic work here, what you can tell, is that people are really involved in both at the same time. And you can see that mostly in the rigor of how people talk about the plays and how the work that they are

doing in terms of the reading is feeding into the creative work.

### Is it a good preparation for the profession?

Well, I don't really think that MFA programs prepare anyone for anything. You know, I think that MFA programs...the great thing that they do is they give people opportunity to put their writing at the center of what they're doing and to focus really, really fiercely on their work. And also to develop a relationship with a group of colleagues. And I think the thing that makes this program very, very different from any other program is the way that it's structured. Writers can take as many summers and years as they need to finish the program and it means that every year the community of writers is going to grow. And, so, in the traditional MFA program, let's say you have ten writers who, at any one time, are going to be there and be your community. Well, this program, already, this is the second year and there feels like there are thirteen or fourteen people. Next year there's going to be twenty. And the year after that...it will continue to grow and the colleague base will be...you know, that circle of people who are around you will be larger and the family of artists coming through here...it's going to very quickly become...it will probably have a large impact in terms of American theatre in general.



### Does an MFA have value, then?

It depends on if you want to teach. If you're getting your MFA because you want to teach, that is a whole set of things. Do you want to teach in the academic world or do you want to teach practical things to artists? Those are really different things. If you really want to teach, you have to figure out at a certain point how to get some experience teaching, see if it is what you really like, learn the kinds of skills of putting together a syllabus and everything else. But there is no secret reading list that people are supposed to have read. You know, it doesn't really work that way. I really believe more in a discipline of learning and that can mean that every fifth year you re-read all of Shakespeare. You spend a year and you read all of Shakespeare again. You know, you've changed, so read it all again. You know, that you have a commitment to the passionate inquiry that continues your whole life, not just when you're in grad school. You know, grad school is the beginning and then you continue that the rest of your life. It's that serious.

### What are the biggest challenges you face as an artist?

Well, you know, I recently became a mom. I'm raising a baby, and so, there's really nothing bigger than a 6-month old infant that will humble you in the face of anything. So, I would say, the challenge to balance...having a balanced life, which, you know, and we theatre artists are not known for having a balanced life. That's my big challenge.

### How do you know if you're on the right path?

You know, I would say that we often have these ideas about who we are that are totally wrong. And, it's not until we go

to do...it is in the moment when we go to act, to do a task or to achieve something...that's when you really find out what you're good at. You think you know what you like and in fact, when you do it, it makes you miserable. I've been really fortunate to work. I've always worked really hard and I've learned what I do well by working. Even if you're working in the production department and you're a writer, those things about the day-to-day shit work of getting things done are things you really need to know about yourself so when you become an artistic director 15 years later you know how to manage people. You know how you like to be managed and talked to and communicated with.

### Any words of warning?

You'll find out, the longer you stay in and you consider yourself an artist, the fewer and fewer people you'll notice are along with you. Because there's huge attrition. It's a very difficult life to be in the arts. Very difficult for many reasons. Not the least of which is the kind exploration we do inside of ourselves. It's really brutal. So, a lot of people will drop out. It's a small community when you've been doing it for 20 years.



aboutfacetheatre.com

## Roanoke and No Shame Theatre Get International Coverage

### Young America

### Gary Young in small town America



filmed the following week that are quite good, as well as Young's interview with Ristau about Roanoke's theatre, our audiences, and having No Shame.

"I loved the coverage Gary gave our arts community, and also enjoyed getting to know him personally. There is really nothing as much fun as introducing a stranger to your community when you can see that the interest is genuine and positive," Ristau said. "I really do love Roanoke, and how this blue collar town supports and embraces the arts as a part of our community culture. There is no town vs. gown antagonism between locals and our universities, and because everyone takes part in that cultural life equally. We're a town that goes to the theatre, goes to hear music, goes to museums, and thinks that our shared cultural life is important enough to be right at the heart of our downtown."



**Gary Young** is a columnist and feature writer for the UK newspaper The Guardian. He is based in New York and spent time in Roanoke leading up to the national elections covering the perspective of Small Town America.

"You can only ever skim the surface but the cultural stuff struck me within the first few days of being there and never went away," Young said of his visit to Roanoke.

Gary came to a performance of No Shame, which he described as sometimes "more cringe than fringe."

One of the aspects of Roanoke that he found most surprising was the dynamic arts culture that is interwoven throughout the community.

"For a town of this size (96,000) Roanoke has an impressive cultural life. It boasts a symphony, an opera, an arthouse cinema, several art galleries and museums of art, transport, science, transportation and history as well as one dedicated to the photography of Winston Link and another to African-American life in the town," wrote Young in his article.

The night he attended No Shame might not have been one of the stronger offerings of the anything goes venue, but did include Playwright's Lab Program Director Todd Ristau and University Librarian Joan Ruelle performing a parody of the Biden/Palin debate, a puppet monkey modeled after George Bush smoking ganja in a Rastafarian's hat, and Ben R. Williams giving a recap of his night spent watching the debates on TV.

For one of the articles and podcasts in his series, he focused specifically on how the political turmoil of the elections was impacting the Roanoke arts scene and then reflected back by it.

Young's podcast features additional pieces from No Shame

[www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/oct/23/barack-obama-art-roanoke-virginia](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/oct/23/barack-obama-art-roanoke-virginia)

### Area Highlight: Taubman Museum of Art



The Taubman Museum of Art opened its new building to the public on November 8. The 81,000 square foot structure is the first purpose-built art museum ever constructed in the city and a significant step in the further development of the

region as an arts destination of national and international stature. The building was designed by Los Angeles architect Randall Stout, principal of Randall Stout Architects, Inc. and a noted proponent of sustainable

"green" architecture. A dramatic composition of flowing, layered forms in steel, patinated zinc and high performance glass, the building pays sculptural tribute to the famous Blue Ridge mountains that frame the city and shape the region's spirit. The Taubman will be the architect's first major freestanding museum.

The facility is situated on Salem Avenue, between Market Street and Williamson Road, bounded by railway tracks at one of the most visible intersections in downtown Roanoke.

"The Taubman Museum of Art is both a physical gateway to our city and a metaphorical gateway to its future as an important arts destination for the entire region," said Heywood Fralin, past

president of the museum's board of trustees. "Our purpose is to make a great American place—a place so rich in unique, relevant programs and collections, and so vivid in its relationship to the history and soul of the Blue Ridge, that it becomes a 'must see' destination for people everywhere."

In addition to a large number of public talks and workshops planned to be hosted at the museum, it will also be home to Roanoke Children's Theatre.

The Taubman Museum of Art is named for lead patrons U.S. Ambassador to Romania Nicholas F. Taubman and his wife, Mrs. Eugenia L. Taubman.

[taubmanmuseum.org](http://taubmanmuseum.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: Picking the Right MFA Program for You

Picking the right graduate program is one of the most important choices you will ever make.

Before you send in your application, take some time to plot your path with as much care as you might in drafting a play. You're the protagonist here, so take some time to really think about what your objective is in earning your degree.

Are you getting an MFA because you want to teach, or because you want additional training in the craft. I know, you may want both, but which is more important? If teaching is your goal, then choose a school that will be able to give you meaningful opportunities to teach undergraduates as a TA.

Do you want to meet with and work closely with guest professionals in the field? Then look to see what guests have come to the school and ask if they will be back. Ask what kind of interaction you'll get with those guests—lectures or workshops?

As a playwright, readings and productions are two of the most important tools available to you while in school. Ask hard questions about how often you will get to hear your work, see it on stage, and what opportunities there are to work with student actors and directors.

Are you looking for a community of fellow writers, or an opportunity to hone your skills in a competitive atmosphere that will prepare you for competing in

the market place? Ask about the culture and creative climate before you join it.

Are you hoping your school will be a conduit to publication and production off campus? Ask about the advocacy role your potential program plays in terms of helping you get professional credits or internships.

The bottom line is, your MFA experience is going to be a combination of what you bring to the table and what the program offers. The more you each know about each other the more likely that relationship is going to be positive, productive, and rewarding.

Ask. Consider. Decide.



**Todd Ristau, Director**