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## The Lab Report, volume 03, issue 08

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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 03, Issue 08 (January, 2010)

## House of Atreus by Sean Engard

Sean Engard, first year MFA playwright, began his most recent play as an in-class exercise last summer.

Sean explains, "In Playscript Analysis, Bonnie Metzgar tasked us with writing our own Greek tragedy—but in only 5 pages. We'd just studied *Agamemnon* so that play was fresh in my mind. Often in a Greek play the action happens offstage, so I decided to tell the story from inside the palace."

The assignment was read for fellow students, faculty and guest artist Jeffrey Sweet in the outdoor amphitheatre behind the Dance Institute. Fueled by the response, those first five pages grew into a full-length script Sean submitted to a new play contest at Fullerton College.

In Engard's version of Aeschylus' tragedy the focus is on Clytemnestra and her head servant, Hypathia. This servant, a character Engard created to help tell the story, is torn between the honor of obedience and desire for the respect that

only comes from freedom.

Focusing on these two strong female characters and using a Chorus of female servants conspiring to overthrow the king and assume power themselves is why the playwright sees *Atreus* as a feminist play.

"Fullerton selected *House of Atreus* to receive a staged reading with a guest director," Engard said. "They were interested because of the strong female characters, classical language, and because the project would be a unique way to provide their students with a deeper analysis

of *Agamemnon*."

The rehearsal process at Fullerton College, working with the guest director and getting audience feedback were invaluable tools in getting the text ready for a more fully realized production later in the year.

"The rehearsal process helped me in rewriting," said Engard. "I expanded the ending and strengthened the characters."

After the success of the reading at Fullerton, *House of Atreus* is slated for a full production at Orange Coast College (Engard's alma mater) in November.



Reading *House of Atreus* for Playscript Analysis last summer

## Student Spotlight: Sean Engard



Sean Engard is an actor, director, poet, and playwright. He received his AA in Theatre Arts from Orange Coast College, his BA in Theatre

Education from Cal State Fullerton, and is also a graduate of the South Coast Repertory Professional Conservatory.

"I'd been searching around for a program and this one struck me as the most interesting because of things like No Shame Theatre and the affiliation with Studio Roanoke," Engard told us.

Sean has published a book of poetry entitled *Socially Inept* and a collection of short original pieces called *Timeless Theater*. He has had two full

length plays produced (*Air Born* and *Nobody Loves a Telemarketer*) along with numerous one acts and monologues. Sean is a member of the Dramatist's Guild and the Orange County Playwrights Alliance, a founding member of SWAG (Script Writing Artisans Group), ComedyKaze (a stand-up/sketch/improv troupe), and the newly formed Monkey Wrench Collective theatre company in Fullerton. He was named the Daily Pilot's Man of the Year in Theatre for 2007.

[facebook.com/sean.engard](http://facebook.com/sean.engard)

# The Lab Report

Playwriting News from the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

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## Roanoke Regional Writer's Conference Held at Hollins University



**The Roanoke Regional Writers Conference** is the brainchild of local editor Dan Smith. This year saw the third annual conference again hosted by Hollins University.

The annual conference is aimed at vocational and avocational writers who want to become better at their craft and to network with other writers from the region. All areas of creative writing are included: poetry, fiction, non-fiction and playwriting.

"The conference was unqualified success in every respect," Dan wrote participants after the event. In all, there were 24 classes and two forums conducted over the weekend gathering of writers.

Keynote speaker for the conference was NPR essayist Janis Jaquith of Charlottesville. Among those teaching classes was MFA playwright Kenley Smith. Kenley holds an MA in Creative Writing from Hollins University and is the first graduate of the Playwright's Lab.

Other presenters included Blue Ridge Country editor Cara Modisett, Leisure Publishing Editor in Chief Kurt Rheinheimer, two-time Pulitzer Prize nominee Rex Bowman, local historian and columnist Darrell Laurant of Lynchburg, writer-educators Roland Lazenby and Jeanne Larsen, former Omni Magazine

editor Keith Ferrell (who has written 18 books), poet Melanie Almeder, author and educator Doug Cumming (The Southern Press: Literary Legacies and the Challenge of Modernity), and filmmaker Sara Elizabeth Timmins of Smith Mountain Lake.

For the second straight year, the writer's conference gave a scholarship to a student writer enrolled in the Horizon program at Hollins University. April Drummond was last year's recipient, and this year Elizabeth Matthews Jones was the recipient of the \$1000 award.

Dan said, "From my perspective, the conference was quite good and the atmosphere supportive and almost electric."

Todd Ristau, the head of the Playwright's Lab, presented panels on writing for the stage at each of the previous conferences, which were well attended and quite popular. He had been scheduled to do so again this year, but due to a family medical emergency, Ristau was unable to attend and suggested to Kenley Smith (no relation to Dan Smith) as a replacement.

The MFA playwright Kenley Smith was well already known to conference organizer Dan Smith, who covered the opening of

Studio Roanoke and reviewed some of Kenley's plays performed there.

Kenley was also eager for the challenge and the chance to get some practical classroom experience before beginning a teaching stint at nearby Randolph College where he will join the theatre faculty in the Spring semester.

"Dan Smith always does a wonderful job with the writer's conference," Kenley said of the event. "It was great to see so many local writers interested in drama. With all of their questions, they hardly left time for writing exercises. That's not a complaint, by any means; it's gratifying to have an audience that's so engaged."

Though Kenley has participated on panels in the past, such as at the South Eastern Theatre Conference and the National Roundtable of MFA Playwriting Programs hosted by Matthew Maguire at Fordham University last year, this was his first time presenting a workshop at the RRWC.

"It's really an introductory overview," Smith said, describing the workshop. "You have a little over an hour to convey maybe a little history of drama and how this form works. It was really nice to see a whole room full of people interested in the dramatic form. There were

writers of all stripes there...poets, short story writers and so on, so my task was to go in and explain how playwriting really differs from other types of writing. The sense of how this form doesn't live on the page, but on the stage."

Writing in literary forms tends to be a solitary exercise from start to finish, but because playwriting is about creating a blueprint for a performance, a plan for an event with many other artists collaborating to bring the text to life on the stage, Kenley felt it was very important to communicate that fundamental difference.

"The initial part of the process is solitary," Smith said. "You go off and write by yourself, but then what you've written is going to have to be in someone else's mouth. Interpreted by them. You have to prepare new playwrights to understand that their words are going to be colored by so many other people and other factors...actors interpreting it, directors coming up with a concept...it can be hard to give up control and accept that you are providing a framework and not the finished product."

Ken planned to include writing exercises, but the people were so involved and curious that the question and answer session took up most of the time allotted for the presentation.



[http://www.hollins.edu/events/writers\\_conference/index.shtml](http://www.hollins.edu/events/writers_conference/index.shtml)

## Kenley Smith to teach playwriting at Randolph College



vacancy, Todd Ristau was contacted about the possibility of helping them find a qualified temporary appointment to fill the position.

"I thought of Ken immediately," Ristau said. "He's been a great student and because he also holds an MA in Creative Writing, he would be an ideal choice to teach a cross listed course like this that will have students coming at playwriting from both performance and literary backgrounds."

**Kenley Smith** was a member of the very first cohort of students in the MFA playwriting program at Hollins University. He is also the first person to graduate from the Playwright's Lab and will be teaching playwriting this term at Randolph College in Lynchburg, VA.

Randolph has a playwriting course, cross listed between the theatre and English departments and due to a

Kenley Smith told us, "Think the ink is even dry on my diploma yet and I was going over to interview with Ken Parks."

Ken Parks is the chair of the theatre department at Randolph. The department is small but has very good facilities with a black box theatre and a reputation for putting up quality shows. Parks was very excited about Kenley joining the faculty

and offered him the position.

"I'm very happy to be joining the faculty at Randolph," Kenley said. "When I look at what's happening there I see a lot of potential to use some of the things I've learned in class, from being associated with Studio Roanoke and also from No Shame."

In preparing his syllabus and plan for assignments, Kenley is looking to get his students working in short forms but that doesn't mean they'll be writing skits or sketch comedy.

"You can write a one-minute play, or a five-minute play with the basic structure and characterization of a longer work," Smith said. "What I've learned as a playwright at Hollins and beyond is that you don't know what you have until you actually hear it...whether in a basic table reading or even better in a rehearsal. So, one of the goals I have going into this course as a teacher is to get as much of the writing they do out of the

classroom and into a theatre setting as possible. I'm hoping to have some of the actors from the community in Lynchburg to come into the class and help out with readings."

Smith plans to have his students write pieces for No Shame Theatre as their final recital.

Smith said, "With any luck, we can bus them to Studio Roanoke, and they can have their own little premieres."



[.randolphcollege.edu/theatre](http://randolphcollege.edu/theatre)

## Rosalee Was Here by Maura Campbell in Vermont



**Rosalee Was Here**, by MFA playwright Maura Campbell, has been widely produced, with productions in the New York International Fringe Festival (under the direction of MFA playwright Toby Thelin), at Studio Roanoke (directed by Chicago director Cheryl Snodgrass) and

last year directed by Maura Campbell herself for the Green Candle Theatre Company in Burlington, Vermont.

That production has been revived this month to participate in the Lost Nation Winterfest which showcases

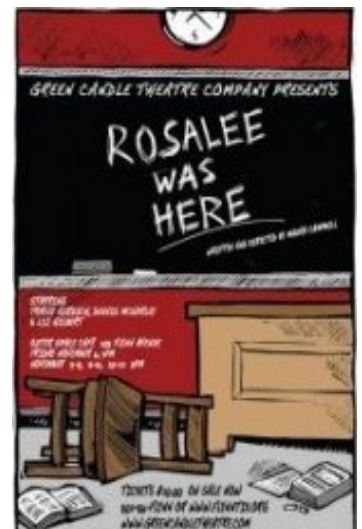
the best from other Vermont performing groups from all over the state.

The multi-media production dealing with the difficulties of a problem middle school student, the school aide assigned to monitor her and the Principal trying to keep everything under control is a sometimes funny and sometimes brutal look at what happens when children are treated as criminals.

"The play isn't about what Rosalee did," Campbell says. "It's about how she has been treated and how these three characters can work together to find a way out of this mess society has created for them."

The production in its initial run at the Outer Space Café was extremely successful, with the Burlington Free Press described Liz

Gilbert's (Rosalee) performance as "remarkable...brimming with rage and angst and moments of incredible sweetness and subtlety."



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

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### From the Director: Why Buying Advance Tickets is Important

If you're reading this, you are probably supportive of small theatres that do new plays.

Supportive means spreading good word of mouth, donating money when you can, and buying tickets to see their shows.

All of those expressions of support are incredibly important, but I want to focus on ticket buying in a way you might not have thought about.

If you know you're going to see a play, I can't begin to express how important it is to buy your ticket in advance. Even better if you buy a season ticket.

Why?

Well, for you, it is often at a discount. Believe me, no

theatre would discount a ticket if they didn't think they got value in return.

A lot of effort goes into mounting a play, especially a new play. The playwright, director, designers, actors, technicians, staff—all want people to see their work. That's the real reason they have done it...often without compensation as volunteers. Buying advance tickets lets them know people are coming to see the show that night. Think how demoralizing it is to stand in the lobby the night of a performance and wondering if anyone is going to show up. Advance reservations lets them avoid that worry.

Also, theatre is a lot like farming. In order to plant, you borrow this year against next year's crop.

Look at it this way—buying your ticket on the night of the show means your ticket is probably going to offset debt taken out to buy sets, props and costumes and the guy in the lobby checking his watch isn't thinking about what they've created, but whether or not he'll make his nut or go broke. If you bought your ticket in advance, that money offset expenses in advance and helped avoid debt.

The closer a show is to breaking even before opening night, the more the people involved can focus on what they are doing than how they can afford to do it. Advance sales are a budget's best friend and really help keep a theatre's doors open.



**Todd Ristau, Director**