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The Lab Report, volume 04, issue 05

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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 04, Issue 05 (October, 2010)

12 Stations of the Cross by Kenley Smith

Kenley Smith graduated this year and his thesis play, *The Famous Bobby Pence* (a trilogy full length plays), will be produced in its entirety at Studio Roanoke. The first play, *Devil Sedan*, closed in June, and the second play, *12 Stations of the Cross* runs October 27 through November 7th. The third, *The New Testament*, will be directed by the playwright himself in February.

Stations is directed by Cheryl Snodgrass, an accomplished director based in Chicago and frequent guest of the Playwright's Lab.

"Kenley's play is a compelling story with rich characters and complex relationships. I was very moved by the story," says Cheryl of the play.

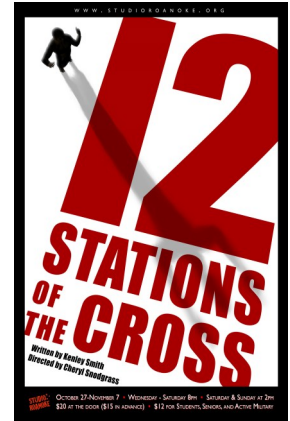
In the trilogy, a tragic event

serves as a catalyst and Bobby's brother is executed after confessing to the deed. Bobby isn't sure himself what happened that night, and suspects his brother may have died for a crime he actually committed himself. In this second play, Bobby takes a small role in a passion play to begin his path to redemption. When that part becomes something else entirely, he is forced to walk his own Via Dolorosa and confronts his dark past – and his future.

Cheryl has a long history of directing new plays, including world premiers Rebecca Gilman and Jeff Goode. Last season she directed *Rosalee Was Here*, by Maura Campbell, and will return in June, 2011 to direct *Frogger*, a new play written by MFA playwright Adam Hahn.

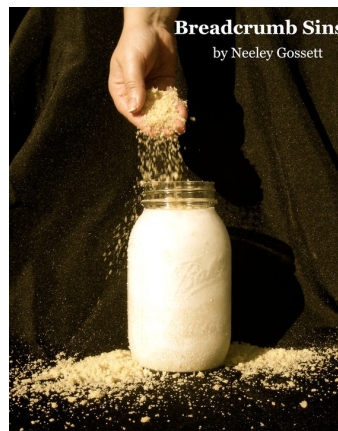
"I prefer working on new plays,"

Cheryl told us, "because the dialogue between a director, actor and playwright is very satisfying. I'm incredibly impressed by the strength and diversity of the writing in the Hollins playwriting program."



Cheryl's participation in this and past productions were made possible by funding from the New Works Initiative fund.

Breadcrumb Sins by Neeley Gossett at Manhattan Repertory Theatre



Breadcrumb Sins, written by MFA playwright Neeley Gossett, was produced last month in New York City as part of the Manhattan Repertory Theatre's Fall Playfest 2010.

Manhattan Repertory Theatre produces original new plays with little or no cost to the

participants. MRT runs seasonal play festivals, produces plays by their company members as well as returning festival artists.

Created in 2005 by Ken Wolf, (Artistic Director) and Jennifer Pierro (Director of Productions), Manhattan Repertory Theatre has produced over 500 plays, and over 2500 theatre artists have participated thus far.

Samantha Wellen, Neely's director, is fast carving out a name for herself as a developer of new plays.

"I fell in love with the *Breadcrumb Sins* and everything about Neeley's writing," Wellen said of the experience. "Neeley Gossett is a very talented playwright with

words so beautifully crafted and with a world so carefully created."

Shows in the festival have very small budgets. Neeley traveled to New York to help the director realize her work within the limits of their resources. Set, props and costumes were minimal, but reflected the beauty of the text.

Samantha worked with three other Hollins playwrights earlier this year when she directed their short pieces as part of the Leading Ladies showcase at TheatreLab in Manhattan.

"It is not hard to see that this is one of the best playwriting programs out there. I would be very happy to direct more of their work in the future," Wellen said.

www.manhattanrep.com

Guest Profile: Tanya Saracho, Playwright and Artistic Director



Tanya Saracho was born in Sinaloa, México and is a resident playwright at Chicago Dramatists and Teatro Vista, a Goodman Theater Fellow at the Ellen Stone Belic Institute for the Study of Women and Gender, an Artistic Associate with About Face Theater and the Co-Founder and former Artistic Director of Teatro Luna. Saracho is a recipient of the Ofner Prize given by the Goodman Theatre as well as a 3Arts Artists Award. Tanya is also an actor and a voice over talent.

Tanya visited Hollins as one of our guest speakers in July. While at Hollins she met with students individually, performed at No Shame, led a writing workshop and gave a public talk on her life in the theatre. Here are some of the answers to questions our students put to her.

How did you get into theatre?

I've had to answer this a lot this year. Because of my accent. It's such a circle. I moved to Texas in '89, and I had a big accent. Big, thick accent that I've been trying to get rid of all my life. It was junior high when I moved to Texas and there were posters in the hallway saying "Speech and debate." But, I was like, oh, they will rid me of my accent. It's like speech therapy, I thought. So, I showed up and they handed me

Cinderella by Roald Dahl. I was a ham. I could do some voices, so it seemed natural. I didn't know what I was reading, but I could do the voices and the next thing I knew I was on the bus on the weekend at a tournament. I didn't know what I was reading but I could do the voices. Which later on, voices and accents became very important because it's how I eat now. I do voiceovers, that's how I make a big chunk of my living.

Why Chicago and not New York or Los Angeles?

I kept going to New York to see my friends starve and live in shoe boxes. And I like to eat. I can't be starving and can't be like walking everywhere. And, I like to drive. So, I was real stressed out on New York and somebody had some kind of book on Steppenwolf—you know, the Ensemble and John Malkovich. And I was, like, "Wait. I could go to this Chicago city and start my own company? And then be in the movies and be famous like John Malkovich?"

So, I seriously arrived in Chicago with two bags and I found this apartment that weekend and twelve years later I'm still in that apartment. I've lived three lifetimes in that apartment. But, the night I moved in...two girls who are upstairs, they came to welcome us and they gave us the lay of the land. They were explaining, "Over there is a Jewish family and over there's some black people that live over there, but they're OK, just don't walk over there at night. And down the street there are some Mexicans. Oh, wait...none of you are Mexican, right?"

And I had never heard the word Mexican like that. *Mexican*.

I said, "I am Mexican."

And she said, "Oh, no, the *other* kind of Mexican."

What I realized is that first night in Chicago I've been tracking for twelve years in all my work. So, complicating the image of Latina women, I think it was from that night, the fact that she didn't think that I was Latina right away and the fact that there were "other" types of Mexicans. I've been tracking that. And I have a feeling I've been tracking that forever.

But then, Chicago became a really good town for new work.

I did start a theatre company. Not Steppenwolf, it doesn't have that budget or anything, but Teatro Luna, half of the Latinas that I started working with had never done theatre. Because in our culture they tell us that actresses are prostitutes or loose women. They had never gotten training but they've always had this dream and so we formed this sisterhood where we were telling our stories and there was a freedom in that. We just started playing. We hadn't studied interview based performance, but we invented it for ourselves. We got together and it just became this really beautiful thing and I really don't think it could have happened in New York. It would have been too Caribbean. It couldn't happen in LA, it would have been too Chicano. Chicago is perfect because a quarter of the population is Latino and people go see new work. People go see anything. And they will give you a second and third try.

And in Chicago we were able to live in the margins a little bit. But we would sell out and have to turn people away. People in Chicago go see theatre. And people in Chicago see new theatre. I guess, Chicago is a great place to grow. It is good, fertile ground. The critics are really...I don't know of any other city where the critics are so supportive of new work. In fact,

they champion new work and they kind of look down on big, established things.

Come! Move to Chicago!

How did you connect with Steppenwolf?

They connected with me. I kept doing my stuff in the margins and Martha Lavey, the Artistic Director of Steppenwolf—she goes to everything. So, she kept coming to see stuff. That's one. As an actor, I also act in plays and I was in a play at the Goodman, the dramaturg happened to be the literary manager of the Goodman. One of my cast mates, my friend, was like, "Tanya, tell him you write plays!" I didn't want to be pushy, so I was like, "No, no, no, it will find me when it finds me." And she's like, "Hey, Rick! Tanya writes plays!"

So, he was like, "OK. Bring it tomorrow."

So, I brought it the next day and he read it and then he was like, "We need to talk."

And he told me he wanted to give me the Ofner Prize. It happened that fast. So then, you know, they announce it. They do press releases. Tanya Saracho, Ofner Prize! And then Steppenwolf is like, "Well, who is this Tanya Saracho? We want to take a meeting with you."

Any advice?

Friends are a mafia, you have to have a mafia. You have to have a community that nurtures you and supports you and cheers you on and yes, at times, checks you and keeps you honest. Start a writing group. With Teatro Luna I formed this artistic circle that was ready to nurture pages and new concepts. It was a great place to grow as an artist who devised work.

Best of No Shame



No Shame Theatre is a weekly late-night venue for the production and presentation of

short original performance pieces. During the summer it is an important experiential learning lab for our students to “learn by doing” by getting their work up in front of a live audience. The rules are simple: pieces must be original, under five minutes, and not break anything (including the law). The result is eclectic, exciting, and often outrageous.

Twice each year 25 pieces that got the strongest audience reactions over the last six months are performed in a showcase called Best of No Shame (BONS) in front of packed, enthusiastic houses.

October’s BONS featured the work of several of our student playwrights, in addition to a variety of local writers and performers.

MFA playwrights Darlene Fedele, Adam Hahn, Clinton Johnston, Samantha Macher, and Chad Runyon all had pieces performed in the show.

Offerings from our students included puppetry, a musical with piano accompaniment, as well as monologues about love, civil rights, and King Kong.

Best of No Shame accomplished its mission, to prove that at this venue anything can happen...and usually does!



www.noshame.org

The Poe Plays: The Selected Dissected Works of Edgar Allan Poe by Sean Engard



Sean Engard is an accomplished actor, director, poet, and just completed his second summer session as part of the Playwright’s Lab. He’s also a graduate of the South Coast Repertory: Professional Conservatory and an Orange Coast College alumnus.

Sean recently collaborated with a group of southern California playwrights to adapt several of Edgar Allen Poe’s most macabre short stories and poems into a creatively creepy stage play that is perfectly suited for the Halloween season and presented as part of the Fullerton Shadows Theatre



Festival 2010.

The festival is a month long celebration of fantasy, horror and science fiction which included over 120 events at eight different venues.

Engard wrote more than half of the eight short adaptations selected for the production, which was directed by David Chorley. These new plays put an inventive spin on the classic tales. *The Raven* is the name of a space shuttle, *The Tell Tale Heart* is told from two different perspectives and other shorts include same sex couples, interpretive dance, projections on a screen, and substituting weed for wine.

Sean is a member of the DGA



(Dramatist's Guild of America) and the OCPA (Orange County Playwrights Alliance). His play *House of Atreus* will be produced next month at his alma mater, Orange Coast College Drama Lab. Engard is slated to direct this production himself.

STAGES theatre is Fullerton’s oldest storefront theatre and since 1992 their mission has been to present a broad spectrum of the very best of contemporary and classic plays that speak to audiences of all backgrounds. A significant part of their work is to provide an arena for new works and to foster the development of those works in a supportive and inspiring workplace.



<http://www.stagesoc.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 for more information.

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From the Director: The New Works Initiative, Making Student Productions Possible

The Playwright's Lab at Hollins University is working with arts organizations across the country to find ways to assist our students in getting their work in front of live audiences at legitimate theatres.

Our students have had readings and productions in major theatre centers like Los Angeles, Washington DC, and Manhattan, as well as smaller regional theatres in places like here in Roanoke, VA and Burlington, VT.

In many cases the biggest barrier to producing new work is finding adequate funding—not only for production costs, but for allowing the playwright to travel to a city where their work is being done and to participate in rehearsals as an active collaborator.

Obviously, as responsible stewards of our program's financial resources—which includes student tuition—our budget must remain dedicated to supporting our academics. However, The Playwright's Lab feels it is an important part of our mission to sponsor our student writers when opportunities to realize their work on stage arise. That's why we have established a separate fund for the sole purpose of offsetting costs associated with the production and presentation of plays by or involving our students.

The New Works Initiative was created in 2008 and has already helped provide production assistance and travel costs for dozens of student readings and productions in legitimate

theatres. It has made it possible for our student writers to work with guest professional directors and provided support to for them to work as actors, dramaturgs, and designers on plays by important guest writers associated with the program like Lucy Thurber, Jeff Goode, and W. David Hancock.

To make your tax-deductible contribution to this important fund, go on line to:

www.hollins.edu/giveonline

Be sure to click on "other" and designate the gift as being for the **New Works Initiative**.

THANK YOU!!!



Todd Ristau, Director