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The Lab Report, volume 04, issue 07

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Playwright's Lab
at Hollins University

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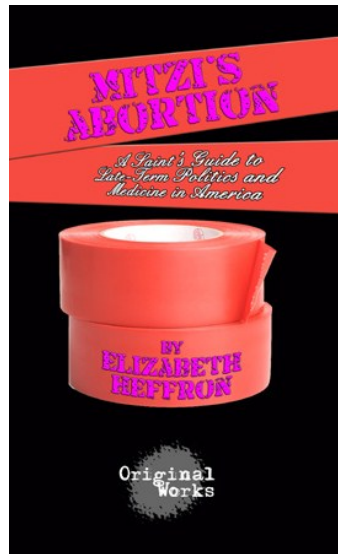


The Lab Report

Playwriting News from the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

Volume 04, Issue 07 (December, 2010)

Mitzi's Abortion by Elizabeth Heffron is published by Original Works Publishing



Elizabeth Heffron is a new playwriting student at Hollins, but is an established playwright with a string of successful productions already under her belt. Her play *Mitzi's Abortion* was read as part of the Festival of Student Readings last summer, where it was seen by

Jason Aaron Goldberg of Original Works Publishing.

"The reading last summer was terrific. And directing the reading myself was good in that it forced me to look at some things and figure out what I really meant. After the reading Jason came up to me and was very excited about the piece. We corresponded the whole Fall and he seemed pretty set on publishing the play, which he wound up doing." Heffron told us.

Prior to the publication, the play was produced in Kalamazoo as part of an event in support of Planned Parenthood.

Elizabeth said, "We waited until after that production to publish, because I had no control over that production at all and they didn't really ask me a lot of

questions, so it was great to go see it and I did end up making some changes based on the choices they made. I think it works better now"

Theatres seem to agree, as the play already has several potential productions in the offing.

With humor, intelligence and honesty, *Mitzi's Abortion* explores the questions that have shaped the national debate over abortion, and reminds us that whatever we may think we believe, some decisions are neither easy nor simple when they become ours to make. A generous and compassionate comedy with serious themes about a young woman trying to make an intensely personal decision in a system determined to make it a political one.

www.originalworksonline.com/mitzisabortion.htm

Student Spotlight: Kevin Ferguson

Kevin Ferguson has been involved in theatre in one way or another since he was in high school and has always found opportunities to apply his art and passion in socially conscious ways. He was a volunteer in a battered women's shelter where he did creative dramatics with children and abused teens. He built on that experience by taking courses in drama therapy and creative modalities, earning a degree in counseling. Kevin worked as a psychotherapist in a residential treatment center for children with extreme emotional problems before shifting careers to teach English and Drama at a small private school. It wasn't long before Kevin was tapped to be the

Chair of the English Department there.

By coming to Hollins to get his MFA in playwriting, Kevin is shifting gears again.

"I need an environment filled with other writers who can share their experiences and also appreciate mine," Kevin explained to us. "I am a playwright. While it took me thirty years to figure that out, my life has given me thirty years worth of stories to tell. Hollins is helping me hone the tools needed to tell them."

Since last summer, Kevin had the opportunity to put into practical use some of the skills he learned in his Playscript Analysis (taught by Kate Bredeson). Kevin was asked to



serve as dramaturg on a production of *Glass Menagerie* for Atlantic Stage Company in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. The small, professional company is in its third season.

We're looking forward to Kevin's return next summer.

The Lab Report

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Guest Profile: Jason Aaron Goldberg, Playwright and Publisher



Jason Goldberg is the President of Original Works Publishing, the only play publishing and licensing company dedicated entirely to bold and original plays. During his tenure at OWP he has increased the catalog to over 125 titles and secured over 300 productions for the playwrights represented there. He also led the company to become the first play publisher to release their titles as eBooks for Kindle and Google Books.

Jason is also a playwright. His play *The Confessions of Deacon Jim: a true western tale for the stage* was recently developed at the Pasadena Playhouse under the direction of Damaso Rodriguez and starred Eric Close, Jonathan Tucker and Chris Ellis.

His one act comedy *Stone, Parchment, Saber; or, Hamlet: Episode I – The Phantom Menace* toured through Texas middle and high schools in April and May 2011 through a production with North Central Texas College.

In the film world Jason has had the pleasure of working with

many industry vets and up and comers. Among them are Wes Craven, Nick Cassavetes, Martin Brest, Bruce Willis, Christina Ricci, Ben Affleck, Nicolas Cage, Emile Hirsh, Ben Foster, Jesse Eisenberg, and Sharon Stone.

Jason's current screenplays in development include *For Greece*, *The Door to Déjà vu*, *Untitled Vamp Doc* and a film version of *Deacon Jim*. Currently Jason is developing his new full length play *The Three E's*.

We were very excited to have Jason come to Hollins this year as a Guest Responder for the Festival of Student Readings. His interactions with the students, his insightful feedback and encouragement were of tremendous value to not only the MFA playwrights who had readings in the festival but everyone enrolled in the program.

"I was enticed to come to Hollins because of Todd Ristau and Jeff Goode," Goldberg told us. "We publish some of Jeff's plays at Original Works and I knew Jeff

was teaching here this summer. The idea of a six-week intensive masters program in playwriting really intrigued me because I was only familiar with standard year long programs. When I got here, the work was already so advanced and wonderful I found two plays that we picked up for Original Works immediately and we already have multiple productions for one of them booked across the country."

The two plays were *The Arctic Circle (and a recipe for Swedish pancakes)* by Samantha Macher and *Mitzi's Abortion* by Elizabeth Heffron. One publication requirements by Original Works is that a play being considered must have had a production that ran for at least six performances in a legitimate theatre. Sam's play has a standing offer of publication from Jason, but must first get the necessary production.

"At Hollins I'm meeting playwrights that are already actively writing and involved in the theatre and coming here to further their craft, continue to grow and that is a wonderful thing to see young professionals already moving forward with their careers, taking big strides, and doing it in a six-week intensive is really interesting," Jason said.

As a publisher, Jason keeps his eye on lots of different sources of new work and that includes playwriting programs around the country. He is impressed by the things that set Hollins apart from other programs he's familiar with.

"The freedom that I've seen in the work here at Hollins is really interesting," Goldberg observed. "Often in an MFA program the education that you're getting

might push you in a certain direction with your work and the plays we've seen in the festival are all unique and interesting. There wasn't anything common about them."

Jason, along with the other guests responders at the festival not only commented in the public discussions after the readings, but took time out to meet individually with our students at coffee shops and over dinner in downtown eateries. The students weren't shy about asking for advice and our guests weren't hesitant about giving that advice both frankly and firmly.

"Read lots of plays," Jason advised. "And not just your friends' plays. Read published plays. Be aware of your contemporaries. You don't want to think you're telling a really original story when it's already been done by three other people."



Jason has kept in constant communication with the program and has been a real advocate for the students his company is publishing. We look forward to a long and mutually beneficial relationship with him and hope Jason will return frequently as a guest responder for the festival!

www.originalworksonline.com
Original Works THE HOME FOR BOLD & ORIGINAL NEW PLAYS

Open Me Last, Three Short Plays by Maura Campbell

Maura Campbell was among the first cohort of playwrights when we created the playwriting program at Hollins University. She came to us with over 30 plays. Since starting the program, that number has only steadily increased.

Open Me Last is the title of a collection of three short plays written by this prolific playwright to be presented as a holiday event that benefits Committee On Temporary Shelter (www.cotsonline.org) in Burlington, Vermont. The plays were presented at the Off Center for the Dramatic Arts.

"I'd written a play called *Ou Topos* and I'd sent a scene from it to a ten-minute play anthology and it was accepted for publication... the problem was that it needed to have been produced in 2010," Maura explained. "So, I quickly

put together this Christmas variety show as an opportunity meet the requirement of producing this play and it was really wonderful... and the play is now going into The Best Ten-Minute Plays of 2010, published by Smith & Kraus."

The first play, *Christmas Corner*, is an exchange between two people at a bus stop: a Santa (who is doing court-ordered volunteer work) and the widow of a rabbi. They're both having a bad day, and they share a moment that restores their spirits in a conversation that in another universe might have become a love story.

Ou Topos is not very holiday-oriented—it's a darker. It is a sci-fi-esque play about a future society where "undesirables" are removed. It's an interview of a woman who may be marked for "removal." The woman is pleading her case not only to

save herself, but her children as well.

The final play, *Open Me Last*, is a two-act play about a homeless woman who has broken into a storage facility to find temporary shelter. In the shed, the woman finds a large number of unopened Christmas presents and holiday decorations. She imagines a child who might have died before Christmas and so she proceeds to setup Christmas in the storage shed for this little girl.

"The story is a Christmas miracle, a really powerful piece," Maura said. "It was a perfect vehicle to use as a fundraising event for COTS, a non-profit organization that takes care of homeless people. We're hoping it can be an annual event."

The three-play showcase was part of a much larger event conducted in a kind of variety show format with a popular local actor was the Master of Ceremonies telling

stories of Christmases as a child growing up in New York between each of the different performances.

"It was all just wonderful and there was so much community involvement that I'm certain we'll be doing this again next year," Maura told us.



mauracampbellplaywright.com

Un-Holy Night: Five Short and Charming Irreverent Christmas Plays for High Schoolers by Samantha Macher



Samantha Macher, one of our MFA playwrights, currently teaches at Latin, Philosophy and World Religions at Middleburg Academy. She is also the faculty advisor for the Playwriting Club.

This year, because of her success as a playwright and encouragement of her students to get involved in creating their own performance pieces, Sam

was asked to come up with something original for the Christmas show this year.

The result was *Un-Holy Night: Five Short and Charming Irreverent Christmas Plays for High Schoolers*.

"The drama director at the school, Laurelyn Morrison, is great," Macher told us. "And she's really interested in new plays as a way to expose the students to things other than *Romeo and Juliet*. It is also what excites her as an actress. And she's the choir director and she wanted to include them too, so I asked about the songs they were singing for the choir concert. She gave me a list and I wrote five plays that corresponded with each song."

The short pieces were then

rehearsed and performed by the students under Morrison's direction to good reviews. The school hopes to re-mount the production again next year.

Middleburg Academy is an independent, co-educational, college preparatory high school in Middleburg, Virginia. Middleburg Academy students enjoy excellent programs in both the visual and performing arts. Students participate in community exhibitions, competitions, museum visits, field trips and concerts. Over five hundred students have exhibited their art at the Byrne Gallery in Middleburg, with many also benefiting from gallery internships. Students visit museums in Washington, D.C., as well as those outside the state such as MOMA in New York and The Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh.

The Theatre Department offers a broad curriculum covering acting, improvisation, scenic design, directing, and playwriting. Students perform two mainstage shows per year. The students also organize and manage their own comedy and improvisation troupe.



middleburgacademy.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: Think of the Arts When Thinking About Year End Giving

It was the night before Christmas and all through the house... you're scurrying looking for the receipts and letters from the various donations you've made over the year and wondering if there is still time to find a few more deserving charities to donate to before the end of the tax year.

Well, maybe not, but there are plenty of arts organizations out there hoping to start the next tax year with a good chunk of unearned income to offset any shortfall on the earned income side of the ledger.

I know, because I've run a few in my day and right now the highest priority on my charitable giving list is the New Works Initiative at Hollins University.

Each month, I personally put \$100 into this important fund and encourage others to contribute whatever they can afford.

All the contributions are fully tax deductible and go into a special fund designated for helping to pay for productions of plays associated with the MFA program in playwriting. We've used that money to bring in guest professional directors, pay for set construction, props, costumes and posters for plays by our students over the past two years.

You get great value for your contribution. You get a tax deduction, and that money goes into a fund where it doesn't simply draw interest, but creates interesting projects. The money

gets spent, so it helps the local economy when we buy paint, lumber, or services. The shows we put up provide vital experiential learning opportunities for our students and members of our local community who would otherwise never have the ability to work with guest directors from New York, Chicago, DC or Los Angeles.

You don't have to give to our arts organization, or really, to any arts organization this month, but we hope that you will. We live in a time when all too often people think art should function like a business. The arts are a business, but their business is art. They can't focus on that if they're having to worry about making a profit.



Todd Ristau, Director