

2-2011

The Lab Report, volume 04, issue 09

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Recommended Citation

Ristau, Todd, "The Lab Report, volume 04, issue 09" (2011). *Lab Reports*. 49.
<https://digitalcommons.hollins.edu/labreports/49>

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Playwright's Lab
at Hollins University

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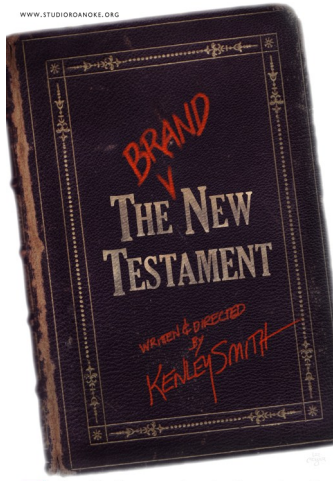
The Lab Report

Playwriting News from the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

Volume 04, Issue 09 (February, 2011)

The (Brand) New Testament by Kenley Smith opens at Studio Roanoke

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Kenley Smith directed the final installment of his trilogy, *The Famous Bobby Pence*, at Studio Roanoke this month. The play is the final chapter in the story of Bobby Pence (played in all three productions by Austin Alderman), a perpetual screw up who is now the reluctant head of a faith healing church.

Student Spotlight: Anne G'Fellers-Mason



Anne G'Fellers-Mason started making up stories and writing them down in the second grade. Now that she is an MFA playwright at Hollins, she's well on the way to making her dream of becoming a

professional writer a reality. The series, and this play in particular, is a meditation on faith that points an unfaltering finger of accusation at religion.

Devil Sedan, the first play in the trilogy was conceived and written as part of the Narrative Theory and Dramatic Structure course taught by Stephen Sossaman and taken during Kenley's first year in the program. It won awards at two different new play festivals and was produced in Nebraska as well as at Studio Roanoke under the direction of Lori Obradovich.

The second play, *Twelve Stations of the Cross*, was developed as part of an Advanced Workshop overseen by Todd Ristau as an independent study. *Twelve Stations* was also produced at Studio Roanoke, under the direction of Cheryl Snodgrass with support from the New Works Initiative.

Anne is also currently also pursuing a masters degree in history and plans to combine those two interests by creating historical plays.

Anne says, "History is more than just facts and dates. I want the world to know this. I want to provide teachers with educational scripts that will make history come alive."

The talented young playwright also has a background in technical theatre and has worked as a professional stage manager for Appalachian Repertory Theatre. Her husband, Kyle, is a professional actor and the program has certainly

This final installment was written as the capstone of not only the trilogy but Ken's thesis work. An early draft of the play was substantially revised under the guidance of visiting faculty member Jason Grote. Theatre Department Chair Ernie Zulia served as Ken's Thesis advisor.

The trilogy and its production history exemplifies how academic and professional work are intertwined in this program.



www.studioanoke.org

benefited from Anne's willingness to share her husband's talents at No Shame Theatre, Overnight Sensations, and readings of student plays while she's here during the summer session.

Anne serves on the Board of Gadfly Theatre Productions, a small theatre company in Minneapolis, MN. The theatre focuses on GLBT issues and themes and accepts submissions of new plays that fit their with their mission.

"Hollins is a very supportive environment," Ann said of the program. "You learn so much, there's all these amazing guest speakers that share their time and knowledge... It's an all around nurturing environment!"

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Guest Profile: Kenneth Dingledine

Ken Dingledine is the Publications and Operations Manager for Samuel French and reports directly to the President and CEO. He serves in an advisory position and holds the corporate title of Assistant Treasurer. He is responsible for publishing 120 to 145 new titles a year and also heads up Samuel French's print on demand subsidiary, OnStage Press.

Among his other operational functions, he is the Festival Coordinator for Samuel French's annual Short Play Festival in New York City. This Festival serves as the doorway to emerging playwrights giving them exposure for their work and culminating with the winners receiving a publishing and licensing agreement from Samuel French.

Ken is Vice President of Samuel French's subsidiary publishing company, Baker's Plays, where he sees and evaluates many new plays. He attends the South Eastern Theatre Conference each year and participates in panels on demystifying the partnership between publisher and

playwright.

We invited Ken to Hollins last summer as a Guest Responder for the Festival of Student Readings, Hosted by Studio Roanoke. Along with the other guests, Ken watched staged readings of ten new plays by our student playwrights.

Ken was extremely enthusiastic about the quality of the writing and the students in the program. He met individually with several of them and also attended No Shame Theatre.

"The program at Hollins creates a highly unique and valuable learning experience," Dingledine told us. "It caters to the idea that a playwright's craft is constantly developing and an artist should weave this constant crafting into their lives, rather than separating school from real life. I witnessed students work in a wonderful mix of safety and exposure, which allows them to flourish and be challenged simultaneously."

Ken's feedback following each reading was both insightful and practical. As someone whose background inherently involves balancing artistic interests with commercial viability, he was uniquely suited to speak to our students about what they were attempting to do, how they might address problems, and what they hoped to do with their successes.

Ken told us he was also quite impressed by the quality of the guest artists invited to the Festival, which included Naomi Wallace (playwright), David Gothard (artistic director), Christopher Jones (lead drama critic from the Chicago Tribune), and Jason Aaron Goldberg (Original Works Publishing).

"It is incredibly valuable to bring theatre industry professionals to interact with student writers. This opportunity is somewhat unheard of in a program outside of New York City or Los Angeles," Ken emphasized. "Thus, the playwrights I see coming out of this program gain confidence in their craft, a strong sense of



industry networking, and a true idea of how their work communicates beyond the lab or classroom."

He also extended an invitation for our writers to connect with him whenever they are in New York and expressed interest in publishing some of the work he saw at this year's festival. We're hoping Ken will be back in Roanoke soon. His generosity and enthusiasm is inspiring.

www.samuel french.com

Out of Control, Two One-Act Plays by Maura Campbell



Maura Campbell will have a double bill showcase of two of her plays presented early next

month at the Off Center for the Dramatic Arts in Burlington, Vermont.

20/20 is a one-act which was written as part of the First Drafts class, taught by Todd Ristau. The production is being directed by Nathan Hartswick and is a family farce involving murder, betrayal and a guy from Jiffy Lube.

The second play, *Ou Topos*, was presented last December as part of the Off Center's Christmas Showcase, *Open Me Last* and was later published in the *Best 10-Minute Plays of 2010* by Smith & Kraus.

"We're presenting *Ou Topos* as a kind of staged reading," Maura said of the remounting. "I've

decided it is a hybrid of film and theatre. Most of my efforts have gone into all this crazy filming, editing and projections. It's really an experiment."

Working with her on the experiment is one of Maura's former students from Burlington College, Aron Meinhardt. He is helping her with the videography and together have shot footage in offices, bathrooms and even out on the ice of Lake Champlain.

Maura isn't sure that the experiment will be successful, but is certain it is well worth trying. She counts herself lucky to have the support for this kind of creative diversity from a theatre company she has worked with regularly and a

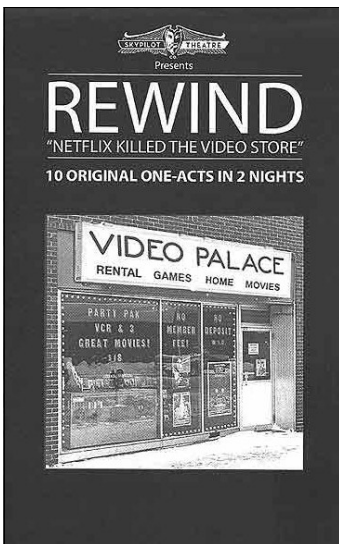
group of actors willing to incorporate changes and take risks with the material right up to the moment the show opens on March 2nd.

"I may not be at all happy with the results," the playwright said. "But, already I feel that the risk taking we've allowed ourselves to undertake is a huge learning experience. I've learned that I l'm really writing plays, not movies. In that way, it can't be considered unsuccessful no matter what happens in front of the audience."



www.offcentervt.com

SkyPilot Theatre's Showcase Features Hollins Playwrights



SkyPilot Theatre recently asked Playwright's Lab visiting faculty member Jeff Goode to become their Playwright-in-Residence and to establish a resident playwrights program for them. The group of eight writers includes three of our student playwrights (Adam Hahn, Nikki

Adkins and Samantha Macher), some local up and coming writers and even established writers like Jeff Goode, Brett Neveu and Jonathan Price.

The ensemble was asked to come up with ten short pieces set in a video store. Those plays are being presented as *Rewind: Netflix Killed the Video Store*, SkyPilot's first late night one-act showcase. The project is running at The Victory Theatre Center in Burbank, CA on weekends January through March with five plays each evening. Members of SkyPilot's acting ensemble perform in the pieces which range in subject matter from gay marriage to how to survive a zombie attack. One of the plays is even a musical with songs and dance numbers.

MFA playwrights Samantha Macher and Adam Hahn both wrote for *Rewind*.

Hahn said, "This is an exciting opportunity to work with the entire expanded acting company and to make theatre."

Hahn wrote two plays for the show. *Will My Daughter Like This Movie* (directed by SkyPilot Artistic Director Bob Rusch) is a collection of conversations between video store clerks and several patrons looking to rent a movie for teen daughters. *I Wouldn't Mind Seeing This Again* (directed by Greg Machlin) has interlocking monologues in which patrons explain why their companions have to see specific movies.

Samantha Macher, who wrote *Beautiful Princess Megan Tries To Get Fired From The Video Palace* (directed by Liz Shannon Miller) is also enthusiastic about participating. "It was a really great show, with great playwrights... I mean, all the playwrights at SkyPilot are really fantastic!"

Jeff Goode's contribution was *Rapture and Lamaze*, directed by Julianne Homokay. He said of the event, "Rewind has been a terrific opportunity to introduce the company to the new playwrights who will be working together to develop the next season."

SkyPilot Theatre Company is a non-profit organization dedicated to fostering new relationships with provocative playwrights and striving to develop the most compelling, challenging and humorous new plays for the Los Angeles theatre going audience.



skypilottheatre.com

Neeley Gossett To Participate in Ethel Woolson Lab

Neeley Gossett, who is finishing up her last year in the Playwright's Lab has a new honor to add to her rapidly growing resume.

Neely has been invited to participate in Working Title Playwright's Ethel Woolson Lab in Atlanta, GA.

Ethel Woolson, for whom the lab is named, was major benefactor and supporter of the arts during her life. The EWL provides up to four readings of competitively selected plays written by playwrights affiliated with Working Title Playwrights. Each selected play is given a 15- to 30-hour developmental workshop over the course of one week, culminating in a rehearsed, staged reading for the public. The playwrights of the selected plays work closely with WTP's current dramaturg-



in-residence. Each play will have a director and cast who are working local professionals.

This year, only three plays were selected, making it an even greater honor that Gossett's *Breath Like A Bandage* was chosen.

www.neeleygossett.com

Royal Shiree's *dun been thru it*



Royal Shiree, one of our MFA playwrights, performed her one-woman play *dun been thru it* last month at Randolph College, in Lynchburg, VA.

Royal is well respected in the region for her solo performances. Royal wrote, directed, choreographed and performed all the characters in this project.

The play speaks to the social climate of the late 1950's & early 60's and draws heavily on the performative nature of her father's dynamic preaching style.

Royal told us, "I write social commentaries. As writers, we pull from our own experiences, whether directly, indirectly, or voyeuristically. The stories and characters in *Dun Been Through It* are also snatched from headlines and internet research. I channeled my father, who was a minister, several people and events from my childhood, and pure imagination."

"What I like about the program at Hollins is that it gives me the opportunity to learn about writing that I have never experienced before," the writer and performer told us. "It strongly encourages me to push my own artistic boundaries."

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: Are There Really Too Many Theatres?

I remember the attacks on the National Endowment for the Arts in the 80's and 90's for using public funds to support controversial art. Funding was decimated, amendments put forward to ban the funding of offensive art, and it was moved to eliminate all fellowships to individual artists—just to be on the safe side in avoiding accidentally funding something naughty with tax dollars.

That the NEA survived all that is something of a miracle when presidential candidates were running on promises to “shut down the NEA and fumigate the building.”

This month, it was like a flashback to that earlier time when new proposed cuts to the NEA were announced as part of

Obama's federal budget for 2012. The truly shocking thing wasn't the cuts themselves, but the comments in the Washington Post that came from NEA Chairman Rocco Landesman in defense of those cuts.

"There are too many theaters," he said.

"Look," he explained. *"You can either increase demand or decrease supply. Demand is not going to increase. So it is time to think about decreasing supply."*

I'm not certain supply side economic theories work in general, but I know they don't work when applied to the arts.

I'm also certain that when the Chairman of the organization charged with the preservation of

excellence in American art says we have too much of it and claims too few people want it, you'll only encourage those who seek to eliminate federal arts funding entirely.

I get that we are living in very difficult economic times. I get that we need to look closely at allocation of resources and to use those resources responsibly.

I also get that changing how we support the arts is as difficult a conversation to initiate as it is necessary to have. However, that conversation gets even harder to engage in when the person leading it begins by seeming to advocate theatre death panels.



Todd Ristau, Director