Focus on the Faculty: Art Borreca, Dramaturg

Art Borreca, in addition to being core visiting faculty here at Hollins, is co-head of the Iowa Playwrights Workshop and head of the dramaturgy program at the University of Iowa. He teaches courses in dramaturgy, dramatic literature, and theatre history there. Borreca has been described by our students as a “rock star of dramaturgy” and they aren’t wrong. He has worked as a dramaturg with a number of leading theatre artists, including Athol Fugard, Wole Soyinka, Theodora Skipitares, David Gothard, and Naomi Wallace in such venues as the Yale Repertory Theatre, New York Theatre Workshop, LaMama ETC, Oxford Stage Company in the U.K., and T.P.T. (Theatre Project Tokyo) in Japan. His articles and reviews have appeared in TDR (The Drama Review), Modern Drama, and Theatre Journal; as well as in several books, including Dramaturgy in American Theatre, What is Dramaturgy? and Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America. He is also a contributing editor of the two-volume Norton Anthology of Drama.

Borreca returns this summer to teach dramaturgy, and as resident dramaturg for the Hollins Playwrights Festival. In this role, he participated in the panel of readers that helped select the eight festival plays, and will work closely with the playwright and director teams in festival to facilitate further development of each of the scripts and give feedback on not only revisions but also advocate for best practices in the interaction between playwrights, directors and the actors.

“I’m looking forward to simultaneously teaching and engaging in dramaturgy in this way,” he told us. “It is always beneficial when students are able to observe their faculty actively participating in the application of the very methods they are learning in the classroom. I also think that this kind of all hands on deck experiential learning opportunities are what sets Hollins apart other programs and it is all terribly exciting.”

Bit.ly/2ATPFS5

Student Spotlight: Beverly Parsons

Bev Parsons is a native of Baltimore and has a Bachelor’s Degree in science and psychology as well as a Master’s Degree in social work. Parsons hasn’t got a lot of experience as a playwright, but is deeply passionate about several subjects she’s eager to write plays about.

“I’m working on two plays at the moment,” Parsons told us in her initial queries about the program at Hollins. “The first is about siblings of Vietnam Veterans, and I’m in the process of interviewing both civilian siblings and Vietnam Veterans. The other is a somewhat autobiographical, supernatural play about ancestors appearing to a family to show them where the love is hidden. I’ve been working in creative writing programs, and they’re no longer a fit for what I’m doing. I could use a supportive playwriting community, and Hollins seems like a good place for me to work on these and future projects.”

When Todd Ristau, the Program Director at Hollins responded, he said, “One of the things that makes Hollins special is that you don’t need to prove you don’t need the training in order to get in and get the training. Our program is designed to help playwrights attain their individual artistic and professional goals regardless of previous experience.”

We’re glad Parsons has made Hollins her new artistic home and we look forward to helping her gain the confidence and skill to write the plays she wants to write.
Annalisa Dias Kicks off Monday Night Guest Speaker Series

Annalisa Dias is a citizen artist, community organizer, and award-winning theatre maker working at the intersection of racial justice and care for the Earth. She is a producing playwright with The Welders, a DC playwright’s collective; and is Co-Founder of the DC Coalition for Theatre & Social Justice. Dias frequently teaches theatre of the oppressed and decolonization workshops nationally and internationally and speaks about race, identity, and performance. She is a TCG Rising Leader of Color and also works toward diversity and inclusion full time at the American Political Science Association.

“I am a devising artist and a playwright,” Dias said in describing her work. “Which means that some of my work is more traditional, which means I would sit down and write a play and then hand it off to a creative team and they would produce the work... but, in my devising work it looks more like collaborating in the room with people and developing the work improvisationally or in response to texts that already exist. So, I work in a number of different formats as a playwright, performing artist, and director.”

Each Monday night on the Waldron Stage of Mill Mountain Theatre, the Playwright’s Lab at Hollins University presents a talk by a prominent working professional theatre artist. We invited Dias to come to Hollins as part this series to begin a conversation with our students and the general public about theatre and social justice, decolonizing the American Theatre, and to answer questions about her work and The Welders Playwrights Collective model as a means of challenging systemic injustice not only in the theatre but in society in general.

She conducted a writing workshop Monday afternoon, then had a chance to explore both the campus and downtown Roanoke before her talk that evening.

“I am really fascinated by the community here in Roanoke,” Dias said of her visit. “Because, it’s much smaller than DC, obviously, but there’re so many ways that it’s interconnected. So, I’m really interested in the way that the university interacts with the town, and how Mill Mountain Theatre interacts with the university and the students. There are so many interconnections and they are so very apparent. I think in larger cities those interconnections are more opaque and harder to navigate and it is just really fascinating that people here seem to me to be so invested in the community here in Roanoke.”

The talks given by the guest speakers are not intended to be lectures, but rather a chance for the guest to talk about their life in the arts and how they got to be where they are now, with an emphasis on their early career. This inspires our students to get excited about their own early careers and to avoid the trap of placing late career expectations on early career opportunities.

Dias talked about how her background helped shape her interests and choices. She told us about being exposed to theatre, her undergraduate education and moving to LA before landing in DC, and she discussed her masters program where she studied theatre history and criticism.

“It was essentially a dramaturgy program,” Dias said. “One of the requirements was to do an internship at a professional theatre and I did mine at the Folger. One thing led to another, because work begets work, and I kept getting offered the next thing and the next thing. I had no plan, I had no idea what I was doing, and that’s the story of how I entered professional theatre... it was mostly by accident. Then I got connected to The Welders, which is based on the same model as 13P and dedicated to producing the work of the member playwrights in the collective.”

The original Welders committed to producing a play by each of the five founding members, and then planned to implode... instead, they passed the structure of the company on to a new cohort of playwrights. Dias is a part of this new, seven member cohort which has produced four of the seven plays and is in the process of taking applications for the next generation of Welders.

Dias also co-founded the DC Coalition for Theatre and Social Justice. Steeped in the approaches of Agusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, the group creates a bridge between professional theatre and activism through workshops and performances. The vision was to create forum theatre troupes in Washington, DC, doing legislative theatre.

Asked if she had advice for other artists interested in social justice, Dias replied, “What I’ve been asking myself recently and repeatedly is—who am I accountable to and how I can walk in the world with integrity and be responsible to the people and places that I am accountable to.”
Abley reflected. “I can best describe the experience as the best of Hollins distilled into four exhausting, exhilarating days. I came away with not only a renewed feeling of community, but a new perspective on what I do. I’ve been at this a long time, but these past four days made me feel as if I’m just starting on an artist’s journey in the most wonderful way.”

Four Hollins Playwrights Participate in Summer Playwriting Intensive at the Kennedy Center

Selected playwrights are then invited to come to the nation’s capital for four full days of back-to-back workshops where work is created, shared and revised in a collaborative immersive atmosphere.

Along with Garrison, a team of leading theatre professionals teaching this summer were assembled, including Jennifer Barclay, Mark Bly, Tony Cisek, Heather Helinsky, Laley Lippard, Psalmayene 24, Shirley Serotsky, Mary Hall Surface, and Karen Zacarias.

“This isn’t just another thing to do, Garrison said of the experience. “It’s a real commitment that requires each writer to test their metal. It’s a boot camp for dramatic structure, the dramatic imagination, scene work, theatricality, dramatic action, collaboration.”

Between 35-45 participants each year are chosen on the artistic merit of their work, and their reasons for wanting to attend. This year’s cohort of students at the Summer Intensive included four Hollins playwrights: Sean Abley, Kate Leslie, Sarah Cosgrove, and Shane Strawbridge.

“What I loved about all four of the writers was how committed they were to seeing the Intensive through,” Garrison said of our students. “It’s really an intense five days. You have to put your ego away, open your mind, share your creative soul and push yourself to writer out of your comfort zone. All four of these writers completely immersed themselves in the experience and we were richer for it. They’re remarkable artists.”

“For four days, from breakfast until well into the night, we studied in master classes with working theater professionals,” Abley reflected. “I can best describe the experience as the best of Hollins distilled into four exhausting, exhilarating days. I came away with not only a renewed feeling of community, but a new perspective on what I do. I’ve been at this a long time, but these past four days made me feel as if I’m just starting on an artist’s journey in the most wonderful way.”

“Before coming to Hollins for my MFA, I had only dreamed of attending the Playwriting Intensive at the Kennedy Center,” Sarah Cosgrove said of the experience. “A lot of hard work and the Hollins Playwright’s Lab helped make my dream come true.”
Workshop on Gender Equity in the American Theatre at First Lab Meeting

Megan Gogerty, writer, performer, standup comedian and visiting faculty member with the Playwright’s Lab began her presentation on gender equity with a simple statement, “Everything I’m going to tell you tonight is true.”

“It’s all backed up by stacks and stacks and stacks of studies and research that prove gender and racial inequities exist in American theatre,” she continued. “Believe me, I would like nothing more than to come in here and tell you sexism is over! We did it! But, I’m not here to pull the wool over your eyes.”

In her light and conversational style, Gogerty drew the faculty and student audience assembled for the first session of Lab into what felt more like an opportunity to begin a discussion than a lecture structured around Title IX, #MeToo, the wage gap or systemic racism.

“I thought it would be more useful to come at these issues sideways,” Gogerty said. “One of the questions a lot of people ask, including myself, is ‘Why is it still happening?’”

To illustrate one reason for the perpetuation of the problem, Gogerty described an anecdote from a recent joke writing workshop that illustrated a phenomenon she experiences frequently in the classroom. Despite a large number of women in the room, when she first calls for a volunteer the first hand to go up is a white man. And then the second person to volunteer is a white man. And then the third volunteer is either a third white man, or the first white man again because he’s really excited.

“It doesn’t just happen in the classroom,” Gogerty explained. “Studies have shown that white men volunteer more than other groups of people. They run for office at a higher rate. They ask for raises more often. They submit their plays more often. White men are just quicker to volunteer. And when this data is examined, the next question asked is usually, what’s wrong with the women? Do they need more self-esteem? Do they need to lean in? But, white men make up only about 30% of the American public. So, maybe the better question is not ‘What’s wrong with the 70%?’ Maybe the 70% are normal. Maybe we should be asking why are these weirdos volunteering for everything?”

She got a big laugh at this uncomfortable query.

“Please understand this is coming from a place of pure love,” Gogerty reassured the audience. “I love white men. I love them so much I married one. It’s not a place of hate. It’s just an interesting question. I’m also not talking about individuals, because of course there are women who are eager to volunteer and white men who are shy. I get that, we’re not talking about individuals, we’re examining group behavior and trying to figure out what happened to make this particular group, in general, quicker to volunteer? Where does that wellspring of confidence come from? Why do they feel, as a group, so secure that they can go into any space and feel like they belong there, that it is their space? It turns out, we have an answer.”

In short, she talked about how our society puts white men at the center of our society and focuses most of our resources on white men’s experiences. We make that 30% feel like 80% because we appear to value white men more. We value their emotions, their comfort, their experiences and their stories and this centering of the white man can be seen, felt and measured in a million different ways.

“I could talk about this centering,” Gogerty said, “but, what might be fun is to look at one of the obvious ways we can see it. Who gets to talk in the movies? Here’s a chart I want you to consider.”

The chart gave the title of every movie that had won the Oscar for Best Picture over the past 25 years with a comparison of the number of speaking roles (a part with more than 100 words) played by women and by men in each of those films.

A clear trend line supported Gogerty’s thesis.

“They ask who voted for those best pictures? The answer is that they are about 77% men and 93% white, obviously whatever those people like gets to be called best,” Gogerty said.

Her presentation on privilege continued with more statistics that were simultaneously shocking and unsurprising. After the slide show finished, Gogerty led a vigorous discussion concerning what members of the Playwright’s Lab can do about it all.

“We, here in this room, inherited all this. We didn’t invent it. But, what are we going to do about it?” she asked us. “We, right now, are already making the theatre of tomorrow. That’s on us. How do we make a theatre that fosters an environment of respect and inclusion for all?”

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GUT by Megan Wheelock Read at CenterPieces

Wheelock’s play GUT is a collection of 20 individual monologues, each no more than a page in length, giving 20 individual character’s points of view on a classic fairy tale now set in the present day and told as realistically as possible.

“The point of the exercise is more than to simply look at a contemporary adaptation of a classic fairy tale,” Ristau explained. “It is also a way to force a playwright to examine a plot from the distinct way each supporting character views the events of the play and how those events have impacted them emotionally and physically. By not being allowed to tell the story from the vantage point of any of the main characters involved in the plot, the world becomes suddenly richer and you make so many more discoveries about the story you’re trying to tell. Which is important, because you can’t reveal what you don’t know. This exercise also helps a playwright have the same joy of discovery that they hope an audience will feel when watching the play in production.”

The fairytale Wheelock chose to adapt was The Robber Bridegroom. Asked why, she replied, “I liked the idea that a small town, like the kind of town where I grew up, might go through some kind of tragedy that brings them all together but kind of also helps keep them apart. Some people want to talk about it, some don’t even want to think about it, but they all are feeling it in their gut.”

“I really loved this play when we read it in class,” Ristau said. “It was some of Megan’s best writing and not only retold the original story in a very interesting way, it also opened up a very moving perspective on the dynamics of a small, intimate community in the wake of a terrible revelation about things a community member might be capable of doing.”

Ristau directed the reading, which featured only one actor, Hollins directing student Lauren Brooke Ellis, and a cast of misfit stuffed toys purchased at thrift stores to represent each character.

“I wanted to present the play as though the audience were part of a support group and a trauma victim was relating the story as they understood it, using hand props to represent each of the characters,” Ristau said of his concept. “One of the characters in the play is the playwright, and that was the only one not represented by a toy. It was so much more effective than having 20 actors would have been. The horror of it felt much more real.”

Students of Hollins Playwright Publish Plays

Principia is a student-centered, future-focused coeducational day and boarding school grounded in the teachings of Christian Science.

Ehmke has taken advantage of classes she’s taken and connections she’s made through the Playwright’s Lab to enhance the curriculum and experiential learning of her own students by bringing in guest artists like our own Bob Moss and Taylor Gruenloh as well as incorporating playwriting into her lesson plans.

Some of those playwriting exercises resulted in 19 short plays for the Thanksgiving holiday that were just published by Plays to Order, a company created by another Hollins playwright, Sean Abley. The publishing company specializes in small scale commissions from schools on topics of interest to them. Abley writes those plays with roles tailored for the students who will be playing them in production.

Abley said, “I loved working with Lee Ehmke and her students on this collection. It’s been great watching her use her Hollins training to guide these young writers through the process of playwriting from idea to publication and performance ready work. They are in great hands.”

“Everything our students do in class is an authentic experience they can add to their resume,” Ehmke told us. “This business is highly competitive and I want them to have the knowledge and skills to achieve their goals.”

It appears to be working, as parents report that colleges have been impressed by Ehmke’s students and their knowledge of all facets of the theatre.

“I absolutely loved working with Sean, a total professional,” Ehmke said. “I’m so grateful to Hollins for bringing us together!”

Copies available from Plays to Order, Principia Marketplace and Amazon.
The audience roars back, “ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN!”

Sala grins and calls out, “And?”

“USUALLY DOES!”

The rules for No Shame are simple. Pieces must be original (no violations of copyright), short (5 minutes or less), and not break anything (including the law—and Todd Ristau’s heart). Beyond that, anything goes. On any given evening you might hear original songs, poetry, monologues, or rants as well as scenes, short plays, performance art, puppetry, or someone offering free hugs to anyone that needs them.

Emma Sala steps into the role of emcee for No Shame Theatre this summer session. At the stroke of 11 o’clock each Friday night, she welcomes the audience and establishes the rules of this quirky late-night venue for short original pieces of theatre.

She begins the familiar opening speech, “Good evening and welcome to No Shame Theatre, where—”

US, with franchises popping up from New York to LA and many points in between.

Ristau brought it to Roanoke through Mill Mountain Theatre in 2003, where it thrived until moving to Studio Roanoke in 2009, bouncing around to other venues until finally, permanently landing in the Hollins Upstairs Studio during our summer sessions.

Ben Jolivet Undertakes Applied Dramaturgy Independent Study

Ben Jolivet is earning a concentration in dramaturgy along with his MFA in playwriting. As a way of gaining practical experience as a new play dramaturg, Jolivet spent the summer dramaturging each of the plays that were selected for our Wednesday night Lab readings under the supervision of Art Borreca as part of an independent study in applied dramaturgy.

The plays were all very early drafts, which Jolivet read closely before the summer started.

“Working with the four Lab plays was an excellent microcosm of working with playwrights in general,” Jolivet said of his practicum. “For that reason, it was a great, immersive crash-course in new play development.”

Jolivet prepared notes on each of the plays, considering his own impressions and responses, but rather than prescriptively telling the playwrights where he felt the problems may lie, and offering solutions, he instead only presented questions and left it up to the playwright to decide if those questions were useful or even worth considering.

“Each of the four writers and the four plays could not have been more different,” Jolivet remarked. “The needs of each play were drastically different. As a dramaturg, I knew from go that I couldn’t approach these plays in the same way—and even if I thought I could, each writer demanded something different of me. I began by asking each writer what excited them about the play and what the inspiration or impetus for the play was. The answers to those questions were telling. One of the big lessons for me is that a playwright’s desire to fix their play, their willingness to engage the notes they receive, doesn’t always match their ability to bring those fixes and notes to life. But, the goal isn’t to impose my sensibilities or to solve the play for the writer. The job, as I approach it, is to be a thoughtful outsider who can help the writer get closer to the draft they want to write.”

At the end of the process, Jolivet turned in his notebook and a thoughtful self-analysis in the form of an objective essay on his process. He also led the moderated discussion following each reading.

“All-in-all, the experience was rewarding,” Jolivet said. “With a background in adult learning, I’m hyper aware that the best learning is experiential—so to really get in the trenches and apply work from other classes in a real-world way is the best possible method of internalizing and development of those skills.”

“Ben’s analysis of the scripts was particularly exacting and detailed,” Borreca observed. “This was partly the result of committing all his thinking to paper, but it is also a reflection of how thorough, sensitive, and insightful his mind is in thinking dramaturgically.”
Audition Workshop Led by Lauren Brooke Ellis

Nearly a dozen actors took part, including students and members of the local Roanoke theatre community with experience ranging from absolute beginners to actors who have held an Equity card for more than 30 years. “I was excited to put into practice some of what I’ve learned in the directing program the past two years at Hollins,” Ellis told us. “And, at the same time, help to our performance certificate cohort conduct an audition workshop on the Sunday before the summer session officially opened. The goal was to answer questions about auditions and provide feedback to actors on their audition pieces in advance of the Unified Local Auditions that were held the following weekend.

Unified Local Auditions Draws Local Actors and Directors

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Addition to the student performers, playwrights, directors and faculty, the auditions are open to the general pool of actors in our region. We also invite representatives from all of the area theatres to send people who are interested in casting for shows throughout the year.

All Hollins Playwrights Festival casting is done from these auditions, so in order to be part of that casting pool, actors MUST audition. Interested actors request a time slot and email us a short bio listing special skills along with a headshot, or at least a recent snapshot, and an acting resume if the actor has one. Actors of all skill and experience levels are welcome to audition.

After the auditions, to facilitate connecting performance opportunities and local actors, we post the photos on the Roanoke Actors and Directors Facebook Page.

Actors who audition will also be entered into our database and may be contacted to be readers or performers in all of our summer events, including Lab readings and Overnight Sensations, or other reading and production opportunities as they arise.

“We want to promote a culture of auditioning where our students, and by extension the local community of actors, think of auditions as a normal part of an actor’s life,” Todd Ristau, Program Director said. “To see it as a chance to share how they have grown since their last audition, not as a high stakes version of being picked for kickball teams.”

Bob Moss, who is an icon of Off-Off Broadway, reminded the actors, “Everyone in the room has a problem and we all are hoping you can help us solve it!”

Over the years this event has been a way for actors, directors and playwrights to introduces themselves to each other and build a stronger community. And, it is excellent preparation for our students to know best practices when they are casting for a professional production.
Playwright’s Lab at Hollins University

Todd Ristau, Director
Graduate Program in Playwriting
Hollins University
Box 9602
Roanoke, VA 24020
Phone: 540.362.6386
Fax: 540.362.6465
E-mail: tristau@hollins.edu

Playwright’s Lab at Hollins University

At Hollins, we get work done.

Find us on Facebook!

Learn the craft of writing dramatic works and study the collaborative art of theatre during our six-week intensive schedule—and earn an M.F.A. in playwriting in just a few summers. You’ll work closely with working professional theatre artists and form professional relationships that can lead to reading and production opportunities before graduation—a potent formula few other programs offer.

For application materials, please call (540) 362-6326 or visit on the web at www.hollins.edu/grad/playwriting for more information.

From the Director: Welcome First Year Students!

From the Director: Welcome First Year Students!

One of the most exciting things about the rush leading up to the start of the summer session is getting to know the cohort of first year students.

We don’t have a structure with “classes” of students—no second, third, fourth, fifth or even seventh year students here. Only returning students and first years, and we put such an emphasis on peer mentoring that first years are embraced, not excluded, from anything.

Still, we’re such a unique program that it’s hard to really get how it all works until you are here, learning as you go.

That can be pretty daunting. So, we’ve developed a couple of strategies to address it.

One, I’ve got an open door policy that begins from the moment you make your first inquiry about coming to Hollins, for any of our three programs. Every prospective student is given my personal cell phone number, is offered a chance to be my Facebook friend, and told to email or call with any question at any time...but if it can wait till morning, exercise a little judgement.

We also have a private Facebook Group called Playwrights of Awesometown where newly accepted students can join in a conversation with returning students, graduates and even faculty and guest artists. They immediately feel they have become part of a community of creative people who are much more interested in collaboration than competition, and they can ask anything from how hard is the course content of a class to where are the good restaurants downtown?

And, first years all take a required course taught by me, their program director. This gives them a chance to bond as a group, ask me questions as they arise, and I can check in on how they’re acclimating, to this strange new world.

Welcome home, folks.