MFA Program in Playwriting approved for launch!

Hollins University has had a tradition of excellence in creative writing since it was first founded by Charles Lewis Cocke in 1842. In addition to its world renown programs in poetry, fiction, children’s literature, screenwriting and film studies, the university has approved a new MFA program in playwriting set to launch next month.

The program has been designed by Todd Ristau, himself a distinguished graduate of the Iowa Playwright’s Workshop and the first from that program to be produced on London’s West End since Tennessee Williams.

Ristau says of his design, “I wanted to incorporate everything I liked best about the program at Iowa—the contact with visiting guest artists of the highest caliber, the freedom to find your own voice and pursue your own interests, the highest quality instruction from top notch faculty members. I also wanted to incorporate a strong commitment to creating a supportive artistic community based on cooperation rather than competition, peer mentoring, and aggressive advocacy of student work in the professional arena before graduation.”

The program is different from other traditional MFA programs in many ways. The program is in session for only six weeks each summer, from mid-June to the end of July, and takes 4-5 summers to complete the full 60 credit hours required for the degree.

Instead of a single cohort taking 3 years to pass through the program, each summer will see a new group of students arrive, with the previous year’s students acting as peer mentors, creating a genuine workshop retreat environment with the greatest possible variety of voices, perspectives, diversity, and experience levels.

Student readings, production opportunities, and internships will be important parts of the experience.

M.F.A. candidates take courses in the following focus areas: Critical Analysis, Creative Writing Workshops, Advanced Writing Workshops, Playwright’s Lab, and Thesis.

A final, comprehensive exam is required, but no language exam.

Summer 2007 guests will be detailed in upcoming issues.

Faculty Profile: Stephen Sossaman

Stephen Sossaman wrote the widely used textbook Writing Your First Play.

He is also an accomplished poet and fiction writer whose stories and poems have appeared in Paris Review, Southern Humanities Review, and other journals. In addition to teaching at Hollins, Stephen was emeritus professor of English at Westfield State College in Massachusetts, where he taught playwriting, creative writing, and literature before retiring early to write plays of his own.

He has also worked with the Veteran's Education Project in Amherst, and collaborated on the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial Fund’s film Echoes from the Wall.

Stephen is currently the facilitator of the Playwrights Lab at LiveArts theatre in Charlottesville and very active with the Earl Hamner Theatre's annual Playwright's Conference.

Stephen’s most recent production was Dostoevsky and Rykova at Play On Theatre in Charlottesville.
The Norfolk Southern Festival of New Works at Mill Mountain Theatre has a nearly two decades long tradition of offering Roanoke audiences some of the best and most exciting new plays you will see this side of Off-Broadway. In fact, many of the plays premiered at this festival have gone on to be published and produced in major professional theatres around the world.

The festival is underwritten by Norfolk Southern Railroad, and this year is offering a series of events surrounding the process of launching and creating new work including staged readings, roundtable discussions and performances. The festival ran on the Waldron Stage April 27 through May 12, 2007.

The main events of the Norfolk Southern Festival of New Works are the productions. This year, Mill Mountain Theatre produced The Fever Chart: Three Short Visions of the Middle East, by Naomi Wallace, and The Third Wish, by Todd Ristau. The two shows were presented in a repertory style.

Naomi Wallace, profiled on the next page, is considered one of the most important playwrights writing today. It was a tremendous honor to be given permission to workshop and produce this extraordinary new work and to also have the playwright in residence during the rehearsal process.

The Third Wish has among its cast members MFA playwriting candidate Kenley Smith, who will be learning about new play development from the inside by playing Gambler Number Two.

The Festival also included two staged readings: Same Egg by Lisa Schlesinger, and Am I Black Enough, Yet? by Clinton Johnston.

Same Egg featured performances by Hollins undergraduate theatre major Sunshine Manderbach and Hollins Playwright’s Lab director Todd Ristau, who is also Literary Associate for Mill Mountain theatre and helped to organize the festival.

Heidi Hostetler, another Hollins undergrad in the theatre department, stage managed the reading and helped coordinate rehearsals. She also ran lights and sound.

Am I Black Enough, Yet? includes participation from the Earl Hamner Jr. Theatre in Nelson County Virginia and is directed by Chris Baumer of Charlottesville. The play was first conceived as a series of short pieces performed as part of Black History Month at No Shame Theatre in Charlottesville.

Five panel discussions on writing and producing new work will also be presented. The panel discussions will occur on April 4, 11, 18, 25 and May 2 at 12:15 pm on the Trinkle Main Stage. The panel discussions are meant to provide some education about the process of presenting new plays.

Panels include the playwrights for the two festival productions, their directors, cast members, designers, Playwright’s Lab guest instructor Stephen Sossaman, Mill Mountain Theatre’s Education Director Pat Wilhelms, Artistic Director Patrick Benton, and also Maryke Barber who has an extensive background in dramaturgy and who has worked in Mill Mountain Theatre’s literary office.

For more information please visit www.millmountain.org.
Naomi Wallace, Guest Artist

Naomi Wallace’s work is widely produced in the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States. Her plays include One Flea Spare, In the Heart of America, Slaughter City, The Inland Sea, and The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek.

This month, her new trilogy The Fever Chart, receives its first public performance as part of the Norfolk Southern Festival of New Works at Mill Mountain Theatre.

Her work has received the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, the Fellowship of Southern Writers Drama Award, and an Obie Award. She is also a recipient of the MacArthur “Genius” Fellowship.

Her award-winning film Lawn Dogs is available on DVD.

Naomi continues to create new works of great power and generosity with startling frequency. The driving force in her work, according to Naomi, is to “challenge illegitimate power.” Her work speaks to the personal, the political, and the intrinsically human.

Naomi is also an excellent teacher and has inspired many playwriting students around the world.

While in residence at Mill Mountain Theatre, Naomi made several visits to Hollins University to speak with and work with students, which included an open rehearsal of her new play for Hollins undergrads in the newly renovated Studio Theatre. It was a tremendous opportunity for our theatre students to interact in such an intimate way with an internationally known playwright.

Naomi is also well known for her poetry, and gave a reading of her work as part of the Beanstalk Reading Series, a joint venture of the Creative Writing Program and the Wyndham Robertson Library to bring writers and readers together at Hollins University.

Asked to comment about the festival experience, Naomi replied, “The entire time I was there I felt so very welcomed, and appreciated. That means a lot to me as a writer.”

David Gothard, Guest Artist

Gothard began with Broadway director Mike Ockrent at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh. He was invited to Poland to work with Tadeusz Kantor during early rehearsals for The Dead Class. After the play’s legendary success, it transferred to open an empty Riverside Studios. Riverside would become London’s pioneering international theatre where the likes of Dario Fo, Samuel Beckett, and the American avant-garde worked side by side with British talent. David became Artistic Director of Riverside Studios following the departure of Peter Gill to the National Theatre of Great Britain, and was Artistic Director at the Leicester Haymarket Theatre from 1987 to 1990. American writers premiered during that time include David Hwang, Jean Claude van Itallie, Emily Mann, Sam Shepard and Todd Ristau.

David has created writing workshops in Derry, Northern Ireland and repeatedly been invited to adjudicate and teach at the Iowa Playwright’s Workshop, where worked with Naomi Wallace, W. David Hancock, and other important writers.

After resurrecting the National Theatre of Kosovo immediately after the Kosovo War, his Hamlet toured devastated cities and opened the arts program of the World Aids Conference in South Africa. His portable suitcase Hamlet, with Joseph Fiennes, toured Muslim China and Tibet, where they held the first ever theatre workshops in Llasa University.

Most recently, he’s been working as Artistic Associate for the world famous Abbey Theatre in Dublin, directing projects with Harold Pinter and Vaclav Havel, among others.
Building personal and professional relationships with these important guests is an advantage over other programs. Students can also take advantage of our creative relationship with Mill Mountain Theatre, Roanoke's professional playhouse, which provides reading, production, experiential learning, and networking opportunities before graduation—a potent formula few other programs offer.

Because the playwriting program is one of several summer graduate programs at Hollins, there are crossover opportunities with the students, visiting faculty, and guests in the related fields of screenwriting and children's literature. Finally, the city of Roanoke and the beautiful Hollins campus, located against the backdrop of the Blue Ridge and Appalachian mountains, provide a breathtaking scenic setting for one of the nation's most important centers of creative writing.

Todd Ristau, Director
Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

Just what you need.
More Drama.

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 such guest artists as Ruth Margraff, Naomi Wallace, and Mac Wellman 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.

Check out our MySpace page!
http://www.myspace.com/hollinsplaywrightslab

From the Director

Hollins University's unique six-week summer intensive schedule makes getting a graduate degree possible for students who might not have the time required for traditional yearlong programs. It allows students to pursue the degree without sacrificing personal and professional goals.

In fact, the program at Hollins is designed to support and assist students in finding professional opportunities while they are still in the program.

The summer schedule also allows us to attract a wide range of working professionals as our visiting faculty and guest artists, who guide classroom instruction, lectures, readings, performances, and discussions.