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Overview of required texts for Summer 2007

**Theatre Experience** by Edwin Wilson is required for THEA 505.

The Collaborative Art of the Theatre is a course designed for playwrights admitted into the Lab who do not have an undergraduate theatre degree or commensurate background.

The course, and this extremely useful textbook, are designed to give a complete overview of the medium for which our students will be writing.

Wilson does a masterful job of introducing all facets of the theatre, starting with the audience. Students will finish the course with a firm understanding of the roles of each collaborator in the process of bringing their work from the page to the stage.

**Writing Your First Play** by Stephen Sossaman is the required text for THEA 520.

The book is an easy to understand, step-by-step process leading beginners from idea to finished script. The text is a blueprint for avoiding false starts, common mistakes, frustrating dead ends, and writer’s block.

With this text, the beginning writer will learn the secrets to effective structure, intriguing characters, and powerful dialogue. Experienced writers will also find the exercises and suggestions helpful in reinforcing their own good habits, helping them identify and correct bad ones.

This writing group tested guide breaks down a sometimes overwhelming and intimidating task into a logical and manageable sequence.

**Script Analysis for Actors, Directors, and Designers** by James Thomas and the Bedford Introduction to Drama edited by Lee Jacobus are both required for THEA 510.

Students should read and be familiar with the Thomas book before arriving for class, and be prepared to use the techniques of analysis to examine plays from the reading list that are included in the anthology.

The techniques for analysis presented in the Thomas book will be the same as those expected to be used by students in the Lab to evaluate and discuss the original work of their peers.

**Introduction to Drama** edited by Lee Jacobus are both required for THEA 510.

Students should read and be familiar with the Thomas book before arriving for class, and be prepared to use the techniques of analysis to examine plays from the reading list that are included in the anthology.

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**Student Spotlight: Joshua Graves**

Joshua Graves is a maverick playwright whose most recent play, Tall Pines Lodge, was produced as part of the 2007 FronteraFEST at the CITY THEATRE of Austin.

“Tall Pines Lodge” is a Minnesota-set comedy about a man whose world is thrown into chaos when he meets a mysterious woman at his family’s remote northern Wisconsin vacation home. It is a story of love, betrayal, and the all-consuming power of the wilderness. Joshua’s previous plays have been performed at the South Coast Repertory Theatre, the University of California, and the Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C.

“Tall Pines Lodge” is the culmination of years of hard work and dedication to the craft of playwriting. Joshua’s talent and passion for the stage are evident in every line of his plays, and he is a true example of what can happen when a playwright follows their dreams.

The Lab Report

Upcoming events

- Melanie Joseph at the Lab, 7PM July 9, in Talmadge Recital Hall
- Overnight Sensations at Mill Mountain Theatre, 8PM July 14
- Mac Wellman at the Lab, 7PM July 9, in Talmadge Recital Hall
- Student readings for the Lab, in Talmadge Recital Hall at 7PM on July 4, 11, 16, 21, 23, 25, and 26 Free and open to the public
- No Shame Theatre every Friday night at Mill Mountain Theatre’s Waldron Stage, 11PM

Inside this issue:

- Guest Profile: Morgan Jenness
- CenterPieces Reading Series at MMT
- Campus Highlight: The Dance Institute
- From the Director

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Morgan Jenness, Guest Artist

“Because ticket buyers and audience are two different things,” She said in her talk.

“If it’s all about convincing people to buy tickets then all they really care about is getting people’s money. Not about talking about how this play fits in with one they did two years ago that started an ongoing dialogue about the art, or what’s going on in their community, or the world, or human beings in the world. Or maybe it’s about getting grant funding. Are you comfortable getting on their grant proposal but not on their main stage?”

Morgan Jenness is passionate about developing audiences and helping emerging writers find those audiences. She also encourages playwrights to be clear about their expectations of the process and to fully understand what the theatre hopes to gain by “developing” this play they are helping you to work on.

“A lot of development programs are in service of different things,” She told our students. “A lot of development programs are in service of the grant, the funding, how it looks on the grant. When someone is offering you a carrot, turn around, because it usually means someone wants you to pull a cart, and it should be a cart that you think is worth pulling in order to get that carrot. Other development programs are in service of the audience, the development of the audience. So, you have the discussion with the audience about the play and they’ll say, well, I think it’s about this and this… but, it’s not about the playwright getting notes to incorporate, it’s about the audience fine tuning its ability to look at things and to discuss things. And I think that’s invaluable, but for the audience, and I don’t even think the playwright needs to be there for that.”

After Morgan’s presentation, a student asked, “What about incorporating feedback from a reading or a workshop?”

She thought for just a moment, and then gave her advice.

She said, “OK, so, you have a play, and you go to one theatre, and that theatre is very political, and with the best of intentions they encourage the political aspects of your play, because that’s what they care about and that’s their priority. And if you care about those aspects too, that’s well and good…and then that theatre decides they aren’t going to do your play. Thank you very much, lovely experience, goodbye. So, you take it to another theatre that really cares about the emotionality of the relationships. So, you say, OK, that’s certainly something I do care about, so you change it and now you have this play that is sort of this amalgamation of these two things, and it is starting to lose all the reasons you wanted to write it. And it still isn’t produced, so then you go to another theatre that says they like things with a bit more punch and theatricality, so can you punch it up with more theatricality? And at a certain point you ask what were my original impulses? And I don’t disagree with this, I mean, there’s a certain amount of collaboration between you and the theatre that is going to produce your play…they presumably know their audience…and I think that’s fair, if they are going to commit to actually doing the play and if you’re going to be part of that. But the problem is, writers kind of go off and do all these rewrites hoping that the theatre is going to commit to a production and at a certain point I think you can lose what was really at the center of what the play is for you, that central intentionality. So, a lot of times if I feel like a script is lost, I will ask the writer for the very original draft of the play to see what that first burst was.”

(Top photo of Morgan Jenness taken by Ellis Gaskell during a Theater Resources Unlimited panel discussion. Used with permission.)
CenterPieces Reading Series at Mill Mountain Theatre

The CenterPieces Lunchtime Reading Series is part of the tradition of new works development at Mill Mountain Theatre.

Once a month, on a Wednesday afternoon, the public is invited to come to the theatre with a brown bag lunch and hear a new play read between 12:15 and 1:00.

The plays are minimally produced, and usually done script in hand. Traditionally, CenterPiece readings are given a maximum of seven hours of rehearsal and are directed by members of the Mill Mountain staff or local directors with some experience working with new plays. Actors often include professional actors who are performing in the current main stage production, as well as members of the MMT internship program or local actors from our pool of talented players.

Actors and directors are paid, and playwrights are compensated for the use of their materials with a $50 stipend, and a video recording of the reading, which includes the post performance discussion that follows.

CenterPieces has an open submission policy for scripts, and there is an estimated six-month turn around time for a response.

Submitted scripts should be properly formatted, and appropriate for a lunchtime general audience. Preference is given to small casts (5 or less), light comic fare without excessive profanity, violence or controversial subject matter.

Playwrights who are selected for CenterPiece readings can use this as an entryway to building the kind of relationship with the theatre which may result in invitations to submit longer and more challenging fare for consideration in the Norfolk Southern Festival of New Works, Discovery Reading Series, or production in the regular season.

CenterPieces is Mill Mountain Theatre's only open submission program, all other submissions, including the Norfolk Southern Festival of New Works, are by invitation or agent referral only.

To send your 30-35 minute CenterPiece submission, mail your script, brief cover letter, resume and any supporting materials to:

The Dance Institute

The Dance Institute is a beautiful old farmhouse directly across Route 11 from campus. During the normal academic year, graduate Dance students live in the house, which is rented for this purpose by Donna Faye Burchfield, Co-Chair of the Hollins Dance Department and Artistic Director of the Hollins University/American Dance Festival MFA program.

By special arrangement with Donna Faye, the Playwright’s Lab sublets the house during the summer months, while members of the Dance program are in residence at the American Dance Festival in North Carolina. This allows the playwriting program to house one or two visiting faculty members along with one or two student program assistants each summer. In addition, one room is reserved for guest speakers who come into town each weekend.

Occupants have their own room, with shared kitchen and bathroom facilities. The house is air conditioned, has hardwood floors, wireless internet, and cable television hookup. It is also (modestly) furnished.

Student assistants, selected for their professionalism and ability to transport and assist guests and faculty, receive their housing in compensation for the added responsibilities. They also benefit from the opportunity to interact with visiting professionals in a very different setting than the classroom.

Proximity to campus and spacious accommodations make this an ideal housing option. Many thanks to Donna Faye and Hollins Dance for making this possible!
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.

From the Director: Submission Tips

In addition to my work at Hollins University, I am also the Literary Associate at Mill Mountain Theatre. AT MMT, we have a submission by invitation only policy for nearly all our programming. The exception is our CenterPieces lunchtime reading series (described in this issue).

A large part of my job in the literary office is reading the flood of scripts that playwrights send to the theatre in hopes of being selected for one of only seven to ten reading slots per year.

I reject an average of 10 to 20 scripts per week as I search for the ones that I can send up to the Artistic Director for a final thumbs up or thumbs down.

A lot more goes into the choice of a script than whether or not the play is any good. Often, we might have several very good scripts that simply don’t meet the guidelines, or scripts that we’re very interested in doing but other considerations keep us from green lighting them.

Considerations like: having a good mix of comedy and drama across the choices for the series, availability of actors that would work in the roles as written, resources demanded by the text, or whether or not we have an appropriate director to match with the play. These issues have as much to do with play selection as the quality of the writing. I really try to stress that a rejection of a play is not necessarily a vote of no confidence in the script or in the writer.

When I’ve gone to conferences or served on panels, the number one question I get is “What can I do to improve my chances of selection?”

My answer is always this simple, “Put as much effort into the submission process as you put into the writing process.”

To help, over the next few issues of the Lab Report, I’m going to give some space to submission tips for writers.

Sending out your work can be expensive, frustrating, and even discouraging. I hope that these helpful hints will take some of the mystery (and potential agony) out of that process.

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

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Playwright’s Lab at Hollins University