7-2008

The Lab Report, volume 02, issue 02

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Recommended Citation

Ristau, Todd, "The Lab Report, volume 02, issue 02" (2008). Lab Reports. 19.

https://digitalcommons.hollins.edu/labreports/19

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Overnight Sensations at Mill Mountain Theatre

Overnight Sensations is Mill Mountain Theatre’s version of the 24 Hours Plays and an annual fundraiser done in cooperation with the Playwright’s Lab at Hollins University. This, the third offering, was the most successful yet.

Each year we randomly pair six selected playwrights with six invited directors. They randomly draw from six pre-selected casts using area actors, local celebrities, and guest artists. Additionally, at the opening reception writers randomly draw from a hat writing prompts such as a location, theme, genre, first line, and last line. Writers are allowed to look at the Trinkle Main Stage where the plays they are about to write will be performed. Mill Mountain Theatre’s props and costume departments also lay out a wide selection of interesting items that can be incorporated into the plays.

Then, at 8:30PM, the six playwrights are rushed off to the Wyndham Robertson Library to craft their 10-minute plays before 12:30AM. At 8AM the next morning, writers and directors read through the freshly minted scripts, make revisions and plan for rehearsal. At noon, the actors arrive and each cast goes off to rehearse the play until 6PM, when cues are set. At 7PM, the audience begins arriving and the curtain goes up on the show at 8PM.

Nearly all the MFA playwrights participated in some capacity—as writers, directors, or actors. Additionally, notable guest participants included playwrights Lucy Thurber, Don LaPlant, Jonathan Dorf, and April Drummond; directors John Woodson and Lenora Inez Brown; and Monica Bell, Annaliese Moyer, Raina Lewis, Ionia Zelenka, Big Lick Conspiracy, and Becky Freemal as performers.
Guest Profile: Paul Meshejian

Paul Meshejian is the Founding Artistic Director of PlayPenn. Since 1989 he has served as a company member at People’s Light and Theatre (PLTC) outside Philadelphia where he has both acted and directed. In addition to his work at PLTC, he has performed with all of Philadelphia’s major theatre companies, and has been nominated for the Barrymore award numerous times. Paul’s work has been seen on film and television. In the 1980’s he was the founding artistic director of Stage One: Collaboration, a professional theatre in Minneapolis/St. Paul devoted to new and rarely produced works. Paul is on the Acting Faculty at University of the Arts in Philadelphia and teaches at Arcadia University. He has a long history of new play development work as both actor and director in his 14-year relationship with The Playwrights Center in Minneapolis. He serves on the Board of Directors of the International Institute for Theatre Research and is a member of LMDA, Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas.

As someone who has been doing new works development for a long time, what do you think of this program?

You’ve forged something that I think will develop into a program with longevity and lasting value. Your conception of how to bring the world of the theatre to your students is well conceived and will, I believe, prove to be not only a useful model for the program but a central element in helping to shape the professional and personal lives of your students in ways that will lead them toward productive lives in the theatre.

*How do you know if a writer is a good match for PlayPenn?*

Intuition. I’m not always correct, but I explain what we’re about, and listen to playwrights’ responses, and what they want to accomplish. I ask them for ten pages up front, and from those ten I decide if I want to see the whole play or not.

*What are you looking for in the first ten pages?*

I’m interested in having my attention grabbed. All I want is to want to know more. I want to be intrigued. I want to know more about the people. I want to know more about the story. I want to know more about the language. I mean, all you have to do is hold me for ten pages.

*What bores you, then?*

When I read something that feels like the writer is trying to speak to me rather than the characters speaking to me. I want to be grabbed. Don’t ever send me ten pages from the middle of your play. I just put those in the trash. There’s no way you can grab my attention with ten pages from the middle. I want the first ten pages. Here’s what I tell my directing students. You’ve got people who came to the theatre, voluntarily, they paid money. They want to be here. They sit in anticipation. The lights go down. The curtain opens. The lights go up on the stage, and they’re watching. You’ve got them. Now, all you have to do is keep them for two hours. If you can’t keep them for ten minutes, you’re not going to keep them for two hours.

*How would you go about bringing a newer, more eclectic vision of theatre to a community that hasn’t been exposed to anything out of the mainstream?*

Well, with Studio Roanoke, I think that the first thing that you have to do is to think about who lives here, and what they do, and how they do it. I mean, the advantage you have is that you live here, and you know the area. You know what people have to deal with to go to the supermarket, what the weather is like, what the local politics are. What things people make noise about. You have an opportunity to actually have a conversation with these people, and not to stand up and tell them, “I think you’re wrong.” But to tell them “I think you’re right.” And to speak to them in terms that they understand.

I learned early on that any organization is about the person who is running it. It starts there. It has to be about the relationship between the person who is running it and the people that she or he serves. Whether that be just the people in the room or the people in the larger community, it has to be an active and ongoing relationship at work.

I mean, how many people do you know who don’t like meeting people? They don’t like going out? I mean, that’s a hard job. I think it takes a certain kind of person to want to pursue intimacy with that many people.

For me, the first rule is you have to know who you’re speaking to and you have to have utter and deep respect for them. You have to require of yourself that you see all the people that you come into contact with as human beings who are struggling on this earth just like you are. Most of what we do, we do out of fear, and your theatre is going to try to alleviate some of that fear.
**Affiliated Organizations: PlayPenn**

PlayPenn is an annual conference for the development of new plays, the advancement of new voices in the theatre both locally in Philadelphia and nationally, and the cross-fertilization of writers, directors, dramaturgs and actors.

PlayPenn gives time and attention to playwrights from around the nation whose work is poised for a developmental workshop environment. Each summer PlayPenn hosts a two-week conference, inviting playwrights to develop new plays in a collaborative workshop environment. In order to encourage active revision and rewriting during the period of the conference, PlayPenn provides professional actors, directors and dramaturgs with space, technical and administrative resources and ample time to use them.

The process culminates in a series of staged readings to be presented to members of the local, regional and national professional theatre communities and to the community at large.

PlayPenn is a new play development conference. The goal of the conference is the development of plays, through a process of collaboration, experimentation, rehearsal and rewriting rather than fully realized productions of finished works.

By focusing on playwrights’ needs PlayPenn makes the fundamental work of the theatre possible without the constraints and pressures of production, promotion and commercial consideration.

By providing a laboratory and the necessary tools for playwrights, PlayPenn has potential to lead to the most progressive and substantive results for playwrights’ work.

PlayPenn’s process is helping to develop the next generation of playwrights for Philadelphia, the region and the nation.

This year’s conference featured eight staged readings and multiple symposiums with panelists that included Gary Garrison, Terry Nolen, Lucy Thurber, Celise Kalke, Todd London, and Karen Hartman.

The conference overlaps our summer session at Hollins each year. This year’s conference began on July 18th and ran through the 27th. Paul Meshejian, PlayPenn’s Artistic Director, took time out of his busy schedule preparing for the conference to come to our campus only two weeks before his conference began. We couldn’t have asked for a greater demonstration of his support for the Playwright’s Lab and his passion for new works development.

Paul wrote us, “I was thrilled at the chance to get to know Hollins and expand my world. I think what you’re doing is terrific and important and that goes for Studio Roanoke, too. Thank you for including me in what I think of as the early stages of the program. I found my time there stimulating and provocative, from without and within.”

We felt the same way about Paul! We’re working to make certain that PlayPenn and the Playwright’s Lab have a long and mutually rewarding relationship.

[www.playpenn.org](http://www.playpenn.org)

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**Area Highlight: Blackfriars Theatre in Staunton**

The American Shakespeare Center (ASC) has become a cultural treasure for Virginia and an international resource for scholars and students of all ages.

Each summer we book tickets for our MFA playwriting students and at least one of our guests to attend a performance. This summer we took Paul Meshejian and Randy Rollison along with us to see Twelfth Night (with a stop at Foamhenge along the way).

A quarter of a million people—50,000 of them students—have enjoyed Shakespeare in his “natural habitat” since the Blackfriars Playhouse opened in 2001.

The ASC puts you in the center of the action by leaving the lights on.

Lit by chandeliers and wall sconces, the Blackfriars Playhouse allows the actors to see the audience and include you in the world of plays. The actors in your midst turn you into the court of King Lear, Richard II’s army, and Hamlet’s confidant.

The playhouse is open fifty-two weeks a year for its acclaimed performances, making booking a ticket very easy to do. You can also attend lectures, the Blackfriars Conference, Shakespeare’s birthday celebration, and many more events that unite us as a community in Shakespeare’s Theatre of the Imagination.

10 South Market Street
Staunton, VA, 24401
Box Office: [1-877-MUCHADO](tel:1-877-MUCHADO)

[www.americanshakespearecenter.com](http://www.americanshakespearecenter.com)
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.

From the Director: Thanking the people and businesses that support the arts

One of the things that is most taxing about working in the not-for-profit world is the constant need to ask people for their support.

Nobody likes asking other people for money, but without that constant cup rattling, most arts organizations would disappear.

Unfortunately, because the need for more funding is so great, most of us doing the rattling don’t spend nearly as much time as we should on the thanking...we’re too busy rattling. Nor do we do enough to encourage the people who attend arts events to think about thanking the people who provide the tremendously important financial support needed to make the events they are attending possible.

Sure, we point out the corporate logos on the poster. We include a thank you in the curtain speech and then get everyone in the audience to clap their hands for the sponsors—but right before the show people are focused on the show. We don’t really want them thinking about the sponsors during the performance.

Still, those extremely generous donors really do deserve some heartfelt consideration from audiences and participants.

If you enjoy participating in or seeing arts events, I’d like you consider thanking the people and businesses that make those events possible. If a company like Norfolk Southern Railroad underwrites something like the Festival of New Works, send them a letter thanking them for doing it. A letter from someone representing the general public will mean quite a bit more to them than a thank you from the development office of the theatre who rattled the cup. After all, they’re doing it for you more than for the theatre, because you’re the one the theatre puts on the show for.

And all those shop and restaurant owners don’t need to put posters in their windows for plays. When you see a store with a poster advertising a play, ask to see the manager and thank them for their support of the arts in your community. If you really want the message to strike home, buy something from them while you do it.

If they know what they’re doing matters, they’ll keep on doing it!

Todd Ristau, Director
Playwright’s Lab at Hollins University