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Studio Roanoke Opens Ambitious First Season!

Kenley Smith took his idea of a theatre dedicated to new play development from concept to construction in record time. The MFA playwright purchased the New York Fashions building downtown only a year ago and this month, under coffee can lights and seated on rented folding chairs, Roanoke audiences saw their first Studio Roanoke offering on April 8th.

The Angel of Brooklyn, a short play by local playwright Dwayne Yancey was presented as part of the new monthly Lunchbox Reading Series.

Short pieces of 25-35 minutes presented for free at lunchtime. Playwrights are paid $25 and receive a DVD of the reading. The readings are directed and performed by local theatre artists drawn from several community theatres, colleges and universities in the area.

Best of No Shame (BONS) took the stage two days later. BONS is a twice annual showcase of some of the best received performances from the previous six months and features around 25 short pieces of all kinds. The Friday and Saturday night performances were both sold out and standing room only. The show included magic acts, Goth burlesque dance, comic monologues, dramatic scenes, poetry, and lots of musical numbers by local singers and songwriters.

Starting this month, regular No Shame will be performed at Studio Roanoke every Friday night at 11PM.

Fridays aren’t the only nights for audience generated performances. Each Tuesday Studio Roanoke will be offering a Lounge. First Tuesday of each month is a Poetry Lounge, hosted by award winning poet TJ Anderson III, the second Tuesday of each month will be a Comedy Lounge with stand-up, sketch comedy and improv. This lounge will be hosted by Big Lick Conspiracy member Ross Laguzza. The third Tuesday of each month will be the Acoustic Lounge, featuring original songs and musical compositions hosted by local music icon Chris Shepard. All the lounges will follow roughly the same format, with several featured performers going first and followed by open slots for audience members to sign up and participate. All Lounges and No Shame Theatre are $5 at the door.

The Biology Lesson and other experiments by Sandy Dietrick is Studio Roanoke’s first full production and opened April 28th. In just 20 days, Studio Roanoke’s volunteers (headed up by Jess Hilden, the new Technical Director) built platforms for raised audience seating and Barbizon installed a brand new light system and grid–complete with operating board and a new sound system.

Hollins students involved in the production included Heidi Hostetler (actor/lighting design), Meredith Levy (stage manager/light crew), Kat Osborn (props/light crew), Susanna Young (actor), Aimee Perkins (actor), Shannon Ariessohn (actor/costume design), Lianne Jackson (actor), and Horizon student Elizabeth Matthews Jones (actor). MFA playwright Sunny da Silva served as production dramaturg and helped with costume design. The production demonstrated important synergies between the undergraduate and MFA theatre programs at Hollins. Studio Roanoke provides experiential learning opportunities for all of our students.

“Your are doing a great thing by giving playwrights a home and Roanokers the opportunity to see new plays,” said Dietrick, a playwright from New York who also works for HBO/Time Warner, came to Roanoke for opening night. “And, at the risk of sounding overly sentimental, you reminded me what I’ve always loved about playwriting—the experience of having a bunch of people I don’t know, sitting together in the dark, listen to my characters share their stories. It was, honestly, inspiring.”

www.studioroanoke.org
Visiting Faculty: Jason Grote and Bonnie Metzgar

Jason Grote will be teaching an advanced playwriting workshop as well as a course on radio drama this summer.

Jason's plays include 1001, This Storm is What We Call Progress, Hamilton Township, Maria/Stuart or Platzangst, and Box Americana. His work has been presented in theatres around the world, including Clubbed Thumb, The Gje Theater (in Ljubljana, Slovenia); HERE, The Lark, New York Theatre Workshop, Page 73, Playwrights' Horizons, Portland Center Stage, Rorschach Theater, Salvage Vanguard, Soho Rep, Theater J; Theatre of NOTE, and The Working Theater to name just a few.

Honors include an Ovation Award from The Denver Post; the Page 73 Playwriting Fellowship; an NEA Grant via Soho Rep; a NYSCA Grant; a Sloan Commission; and “Best New Play” (for 1001) from Denver's alternative weekly, Westword. 1001 was also included in critics’ year-end top ten lists in Time Out New York, The Rocky Mountain News, and The Boulder Daily Camera.

He teaches playwriting and screenwriting at Rutgers University, is a member of PEN and New Dramatists, and was a contributor to Comedy Central's "Indecision 2008" blog.

www.jasongrote.com

Bonnie Metzgar is an award-winning producer, director, playwright, and dramaturg. Before becoming Artistic Director of About Face Theatre in Chicago, she was a professor and director of the graduate playwriting program at Brown University as well as Artistic Director of Brown’s New Plays Festival.

Bonnie was co-creator and producer of the 365 Festival—a national festival based on 365 Days/365 Plays, a yearlong play cycle written by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Suzan Lori Parks. Metzgar was the artistic leader for this landmark international event, a shared global premiere by hundreds of theaters, universities and art spaces throughout the U.S. and abroad. Time Magazine named the 365 Festival one of its top ten theater events in 2006.

Metzgar was Associate Artistic Director of Curious Theatre Company in Denver from 2004 to 2007 and The Denver Post named her its 2006 Colorado Theater Person of the Year. Bonnie served on the literary committee of the National New Play Network. She was also Associate Producer at the Joseph Papp Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival under George C. Wolfe from 1995 to 2003 where she was founding producer of Joe’s Pub, responsible for creating the now world-famous venue.

Lie with Me by Keith Bridges opens in Los Angeles

Lie with Me. by MFA playwright Keith Bridges, was the inaugural production for the Mutineer Theatre Company, opening last month. This world premiere was directed by Joe Banno, former artistic director of the Source Theatre in DC.

Keith's play is a frank and oddly comic story about people who can't seem to help the damage that they inflict on one another. Sexual secrets and psychological collusion are revealed when the family matriarch falls ill.

The play received great reviews. Here are a sample of the notices:

"An impressive debut. The play's enormous strength lies in its smart, well-observed dialogue. The performances are truer than true." LA Weekly GO

"Wicked ironic humor threaded throughout...providing a great balance...extremely complex and nuanced piece as their inaugural production...intriguing. Fascinating examination of the family dynamic...manages to ring true on all the right notes." La Splash

"Bridges creates a psychological tragedy equal to Oedipus, but also with a few comic moments." SoCal

The play is scheduled to be remounted as a co-production of Mutineer and Charter Theatres in Washington DC later this year.

www.mutineertheatre.com

The Lab Report
Playwriting News from the 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: Your Letter of Interest

In a lot of ways, your letter of interest is at least as important as your writing sample. Of course we want to accept writers with demonstrated facility in form and craft. We’re looking for interesting ideas, interesting characters, and a passion for writing that will carry you through all the demands of an MFA program.

At the end of the day, though, it won’t be your plays that go to classes, participate in discussions, interact with our faculty, guests, and other students. You will be. Your writing sample introduces your work to us, your letter of interest introduces you.

That’s pretty important stuff, there. Lots of pressure, but the only good introduction is an honest one. In short, be yourself. Trying to be anyone or anything else is more work than it is worth.

Before you pick a school, you should have been selective in that choice—you should know why you want to go there, have specific goals and a plan for how the program you are applying to can help you meet those goals. All that should be in your letter of interest.

How else are we going to know anything about your passion for writing, how much you looked into our program whether your expectations of the program are realistic? Your letter of interest is the best tool we have (outside of an actual interview) to help decide whether or not the school and the student will be a good team for the next 3-5 years.

An MFA is a huge investment in time and finances, but the university is taking a gamble too!

Choosing a cohort of students is like casting a play. Talent is important, but so is knowing the ensemble will work well together, be mutually supportive and be good ambassadors for the institution. And if you don’t get in, that means nothing more than the path to your success lies in another direction. Ask hard questions of yourself and the institution. We’ll do the same—and that is going to be a very good and useful conversation to have regardless of the outcome.

Todd Ristau, Director