The Lab Report, volume 02, issue 12

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The Lab Report
Playwriting News from the Playwright’s Lab at Hollins University
Volume 02, Issue 12 (May, 2009)

Confirmed Guests for Summer 2009

We’re very excited about this summer’s guest speakers, which include:

Erin Courtney: A published, produced and award winning playwright currently teaching playwriting at Brooklyn College and an affiliated artist with Clubbed Thumb. She is also a member of 13P, as well as the co-founder of the Brooklyn Writer’s Space and Room 58.

Stevie Jay: Performance artist doing original work for over 20 years. Stevie Jay will present his solo performance piece Life Love Sex Death...and other works in progress at Studio Roanoke.

Robert Harris Moss: Bob ran the Edward Albee Playwrights' Unit from 1970-71, founded and ran Playwrights Horizons from 1971 to 1981, and was the Artistic Director of the Hangar Theatre from 1983 to 1996. In the Fall of 1996, he became the Artistic Director of Syracuse Stage, and ran that theater until last year. He ran the Playwrights Horizons Theatre School (an affiliate school of the NYU Tisch School of the Arts for more than ten years.

Carl Hancock Rux: A published poet, essayist, novelist and playwright produced throughout the United States and internationally. Carl will be performing for two nights at Studio Roanoke this summer.

Jeffrey Sweet: Playwright, screenwriter, lyricist, critic, journalist, teacher, theatre historian, and sometime songwriter and director, as well as the author of The Dramatist’s Toolkit and Solving Your Script. Sweet serves as a member of the Council of the Dramatists Guild, is a member of Ensemble Studio Theatre, and is an alumnus of New Dramatists.

Also this summer: publisher Ken Dingledine (DPS), directors Cheryl Snodgrass, and Joel Banno, playwright Larry Pontius, and dramaturg Rebecca Rugg.

It does sometimes happen that there are unexpected changes in scheduling, so please check our website for all current information and for full professional bios.

Student Spotlight: Ben R. Williams

Ben R. Williams is a poet, novelist, and 2007 graduate of Roanoke College. Ben recently published a collection of his poems and No Shame pieces in a volume titled Hard Times for Ugly Men.

Since 2006 he has been a regular writer/performer at No Shame Theatre at MMT, and through that venue he demonstrated a real talent for writing for the stage and will be entering the graduate playwriting program at Hollins University this summer.

His first full length play, Ant Farm, was selected for full production as part of the 2009 Norfolk Southern Festival of New Works at Mill Mountain Theatre. Due to that theatre’s recent closing, the production was cancelled. Fortunately, opening of Studio Roanoke has allowed the production to continue, although in a different space and without an Equity cast. Ant Farm opened this month in the new theatre to capacity crowds and very good critical responses.

“My experience with Ant Farm at Studio Roanoke was one of the best experiences of my life,” said the novelist turned playwright. “For the past three years, I’ve been attending No Shame Theatre in downtown Roanoke, and it’s had an immense positive effect on my life, and kindled an interest in writing for the stage. However, I realize that I know very little of the practical realities of writing for the stage, and it is my firm belief that the skills I’ll gain through the program at Hollins will serve to strengthen whatever abilities I currently possess.”
Ant Farm by Ben R. Williams

Ant Farm is a darkly comic play about a handful of small town survivors of a mysterious cataclysm who are holed up in a bomb shelter under a gun store. There’s the gun store owner, his 15 year old granddaughter who doesn’t speak, the elderly waitress from the diner next door, the guy who runs the bookstore on the other side of the gun shop, and one of the bookstore’s customers. Together, this small group wrestles with what, if anything, it might mean to be the last people left on Earth.

Playwright Ben R. Williams joins the Playwright’s Lab as a new MFA student this summer. Asked what inspired the concept for the play, he told us, “You see an ant farm, one of those unholy looking ones with an glaringly artificial gel replacing the sand, and you peek into the futile lives of the occupants, trying to form a reality out of a falsely created circumstance. So are the characters lives displayed on stage in this play. We watch their backs are to the wall and it all hits the fan, that’s when you find out what people really are underneath,” Williams said.

Ant Farm, Studio Roanoke’s second full production in as many months, was originally slated to be produced as part of the Norfolk Southern Festival of New Works at Mill Mountain Theatre. However, that theatre’s closing meant finding a new venue. For Williams, it might have worked out for the best.

Director Todd Ristau explained, “It would have been great for Ben to have his first play produced by a major regional theatre with a professional cast, but in some ways, moving the production to Studio Roanoke seems to better suit the play,” Ristau explained.

The more intimate setting, the roughness of the space all really contributed to the feeling that the audience was also trapped in the bomb shelter along with the cast of characters. And I think that Ben felt more comfortable and less intimidated in rehearsal than he might have at Mill Mountain—so that helped it be a better learning experience for him as an emerging playwright.”

The cast included no professional actors, but all had experience in local theatres and were deeply committed to working with the playwright to help him realize his play in production.

“We were there differences between what I first imagined and what I saw on stage? Yes, and this version was much better,” Williams said on opening night. “All of the changes made were for the better and Studio Roanoke did an awesome job. The space worked fantastically. As a playwright, you couldn’t really ask for a better environment to work in or better people to work with.”
Neeley Gossett’s Internship at the Alliance Theatre

Alliance Theatre of Atlanta, GA is part of the Robert W. Woodruff Arts Center and winner of the 2007 Regional Tony Award. The Alliance Theatre Company (originally the Atlanta Municipal Theatre) staged its first production in 1968 and has become a major force in developing original plays and nurturing emerging playwrights. The company produces 10 productions each year on their main stage and studio theatre, as well as offering numerous productions for young audiences.

Over the years, the Alliance has produced more than 40 World Premiers, many of which have gone on to further productions in New York or peer regional theatres.

The Alliance is home of the annual Kendeda Graduate Playwright Competition, a one-of-a-kind national competition designed to transition student playwrights to the world of professional theatre. The program is led by Celise Kalke (Director of New Projects at the Alliance and selected by American Theatre Magazine this year as one of the top American Theatre of the Future).

While Celise was visiting campus as a guest artist last summer, Neeley Gossett (one of our MFA playwrights) introduced herself as an Atlanta area writer. Their conversations resulted in an invitation to conduct an internship in dramaturgy at the Alliance.

Neeley has been working closely with Celise and the Alliance staff since January and finishes this remarkable experiential learning opportunity this month with a wealth of practical professional experience. She went beyond the typical duties of working in the literary office tasked with reading and reviewing scripts—Neeley was invited to sit in and participate in staff meetings and served as the dramaturg for the world premiere of Class of 3000. She also did extensive research for the premiere of the world premiere of 26 Miles.

Neeley also helped research possible shows for upcoming seasons at the Alliance, assisting in the recommendations of the literary office. She even gave a presentation on the principles of dramaturgy to local teachers.

By not only being exposed to, but becoming part of the internal workings of a major new play center, Neeley is much better prepared to pursue her goals as a playwright and dramaturg after graduation.

Adam Hahn Commissioned by Kaiser Permanente’s Educational Theatre Program

Adam Hahn, who was among the first cohort of MFA playwrights at the Lab, has been commissioned by Kaiser Permanente to revise the script of a play that is touring California elementary schools.

Kaiser’s Educational Theatre Programs has a unique mission of promoting mental and physical health through youth theatre. The organization produces educational materials and several plays addressing health topics: programs to promote healthy diet and exercise, sex-ed themed plays, and non-violence. Hahn was commissioned to make changes to the script for PEACE Signs, which teaches non-violent conflict resolution.

Hahn explained that one of his classes at Hollins was instrumental in winning the commission. “I was commissioned partially on the basis of a play I had written for Jon Dorf’s Theatre for Young Audiences class. The representative from Kaiser was interested in working with me, but she’d only read a draft of Dear Abe. Dear Abe is definitely not for young audiences. Thanks to that class, I had practice writing for kids and a sample script to prove it.”

Hahn found the subject matter of PEACE Signs attractive. “It deals with such heavy topics: not just violence in school, but also the kind of problems that a lot of kids face at home. There’s a character in the play who lives with parents in an abusive relationship. When this show tours elementary schools, there are students in every audience who are in exactly that situation, and this might be the only time in the entire school year that it’s addressed.” As a former substitute teacher, Hahn has, “seen that when kids get in trouble in school, it’s often because they just don’t have tools at their disposal to resolve conflicts with each other, or to deal with whatever they’re facing at home. Kaiser planned this show to provide students with those tools.”

Hahn says that “PEACE Signs is educational, but it would fail if it weren’t also enjoyable. It’s musical, theatrical, and funny. I asked myself questions as an educator (What’s the lesson of this scene? If a student is only going to remember one or two sentences from the entire play, what should those be?) and as an entertainer (Are students crammed into a gymnasium going to be paying attention? Would I want to sit through this?). I’m looking for teachable moments, and I’m looking for chances to make characters talk like Snoop Dogg. I’m proud of the scenes that give honest, useful advice, as well as the scenes that I think are going to make fourth-graders crack up.”
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From the Director: How We Select Our Guests and Visiting Faculty

One of the greatest strengths of our program is our visiting faculty and guest artists. Our unique schedule allows some of the best known names in new play development to participate in ways that wouldn’t be possible in traditional programs. Busy working professionals can fit in six weeks of teaching much easier than five months.

We ask our MFAs who they would be interested in meeting and learning from, as well as what types of courses they feel they need in their plan of study. If we’re doing a class on American Women Playwrights, we’re going to bring in people like Erin Courtney and Naomi Wallace. If we’re doing a course on Experimental Playwriting we’re going to bring in Ruth Margraff and W. David Hancock. We bring in experts representing every aspect of professional theatre—playwrights, agents, directors, artistic directors, dramaturgs, producers, composers, agents, publishers, designers actors and lots of other disciplines.

We invite individuals who’ve made an impact on modern theatre with their own work who also have a proven record of successful and inspirational teaching or a history of helping emerging talents find their voice and be heard by a wider audience.

A successful community shares a common philosophy and enthusiasm for the mission it embodies, so we want visiting faculty and guest artists who will be good ambassadors for the program. What our guests and faculty say about Hollins has a huge impact on who is willing to come in the future.

We look at more than resume and reputation—we look for those who are eager to join our community, and excited about helping it grow.

Often, we’ll invite someone as a guest responder for the festival of student readings. If that goes well, we might invite them back as a guest speaker, and then (if it fits our curriculum) we may invite them back for a summer of teaching. We don’t want people who are trying to find work, we want people who will help us create new work together.

Todd Ristau, Director