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Margaret Brandon DuMonde has been a theater artist for almost forty years. She began acting at the age of nine in San Francisco. After moving to Virginia at age 12, and continuing to perform on stage, Brandon became interested in working behind the scenes. As a high school student she worked after school and on weekends at the Virginia Museum Theatre, and Summers at Dogwood Dell. She pursued a BA in Drama with an emphasis in design/tech at the University of Georgia in Athens.

Brandon moved to Atlanta after college, and worked for 7 Stages as their resident lighting designer and technical director. She also designed lights for several other theaters in the area. In 1985 she ran away to join the circus and worked for Ringling Brothers as a clown.

Brandon returned to the theater scene in Atlanta as a composer and musical director. As the resident composer for Funny That Way, she wrote the lyrics and music for several original musicals including: Homo on the Range, Het Side Story, and Out in the Woods.

When Brandon moved to Lexington, VA, she started writing plays and formed the Lexington Ensemble Theater. Most successful where Was Santa a Yankee? and The Piper Played. While in Lexington she also served as technical director at The Lenfest Center for the Arts at Washington and Lee University and stage manager for Theater at Lime Kiln.

Brandon currently resides in Frederick, MD where she works as a lighting designer and stage manager for several dance companies around the DC and Baltimore areas. She also performs as a dancer with Liz Lerman Dance Exchange.
The Lab Report
Playwriting News from the Playwright’s Lab at Hollins University

Guest Profile: Erin Courtney

Erin Courtney is playwright and affiliated artist with Clubbed Thumb in New York. She is also a member of 13P, as well as the co-founder of the Brooklyn Writer’s Space and Room 58. She currently teaches playwriting at Brooklyn College.

Erin came to Hollins this summer as part of our Guest Speaker Series. She conducted a writing workshop and then gave a public talk on her life in the arts at Studio Roanoke where she told us about her early work and the development of Clubbed Thumb. All of our talks are followed by an informal Q&A session, and these are some of the questions Erin responded to:

**When were you starting Clubbed Thumb, how do you get your funding?**

With both Clubbed Thumb and 13P, before you get a track record, you have to appeal to private donors...so, basically, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters...friends. We would write fundraising letters and we would ask people we knew for personal donations. Then, when you have a track record of one or two productions and you can show you know how to budget and you know how to get an audience and show that you get critical response then you can start applying for government grants and foundation grants. You target the foundations where you’re a suitable fit. Both Clubbed Thumb and 13P at first used an umbrella organization with not-for-profit status. If you call your state’s arts council, you can say to them “I’m starting a company but I need an umbrella organization for my not-for-profit status...” they will tell you what organizations are available. Literally, it is their job to tell you what you need to do to be able to figure out how you can make it happen.

**How was 13P started?**

Rob Handel sent out this email to 14 playwrights...only one writer chose not to join the group...and he said he was going to start this playwriting production company and would like to join it? So, I read the names of the other writers and a third of them I knew and I loved their work, and a third of them I didn’t know personally but I knew their work and I loved it. And the other third I didn’t know but I thought, they’ve got to be good, so, I like this group! So, we were all like, yeah, let’s do it, but we were all sure it was going to fail. I was the biggest naysayer because I had already been part of Clubbed Thumb and I was like, “It’s so expensive and there’s no money. Rob, you’re crazy...” So, at that meeting I was certain it wasn’t going to happen—and I had writer’s block—and then Rob says, “Everybody is going to get one slot, numbered 1-13. Write down if you want to be the 1st, 2nd, or 3rd show...write down your top three choices for when you want to go.” And every writer got their slot that they wrote...except Young Jean Lee and I both wanted to be last, because she had writer’s block too. But I had just had a second baby, so I got last.

And the P stands for playwrights, not plays. It was 13 playwrights that were invited, not 13 plays that were selected, right?

Yeah, that’s right. And also, the other part of the mission was, as some of the writers have become more famous, and so they have production opportunities, was to do this to do the play that nobody was going to want to touch...like either its subject matter is just off the charts weird or it needs twenty actors...it was an opportunity to do the play that was really near and dear to your heart but that other companies might not be excited to produce.

**Will everyone be as invested when they get to number 13 as they were with number 1?**

Well, we’re on number 8 now, so yeah! If you guys come to my show, we’ll have fireworks!

**How do you get audiences for avant garde work?**

The more you live in New York, the more your community just gets bigger and bigger and I tend to go see shows by my friends or my students...unless something really amazing is happening where I might know no one involved, but because you have this big community, word of mouth is important. But, when you can afford it, you really should make it a priority to hire a really good press agent who will get you the previews and get you the reviews and the listings. In other towns, you know, things like this is one way—doing talks and doing readings. Really, so much of it is viral, social stuff. Not necessarily like viral computer, but like spreading the word. And as people come, and they enjoy it, then the word on the street is good and they want to keep coming back.

**How do you balance being a playwright, wife, mother, teacher, and everything else?**

It’s challenging. One thing is I have no social life outside of my friends in the theatre. When I’m working on a show I see those friends and when I go to see a friend’s show I see those friends, and I really love teaching so the summer is when I write. And the parenting thing is just hard. I mean it’s hard for everybody, but it’s hard to be there and be present for your kids and also have your work life.

**Any advice on growing as a writer?**

Every year you pick up more things, going to grad school was a huge part of it for me. And you become friends with more playwrights and keep talking...talking...talking!
Rosalee Was Here by Maura Campbell at Studio Roanoke

The three women are the only characters in the play. They alternately encourage and undermine each other, changing positions of power as the dynamics of their relationships change. Despite the challenges and potential for burnout, Molly tries to help Rosalee struggle with issues of personal identity and freedom.

Inspired by actual events, Maura draws upon her own experiences as a teacher’s aide working with troubled teens. She has crafted a moving, often very funny, commentary on the insanity of any system that doesn’t account for its own flaws and imperfections.

The play was first read in Playwright’s Lab last year with Gina Laguzza in the title role. She returned to the role for this full production—Studio Roanoke’s third in as many months. Also performing in the play were Gina’s Step-Mother, Kris Laguza (Holiday) and Margie Dube (Molly). The production was directed by guest professional director Cheryl Snodgrass, who flew in from Chicago for the project.

“I was so lucky to have a director like Cheryl Snodgrass who has interest and talent in developing new work,” said the playwright. “Her energetic and compassionate direction of this very personal story showed me its strengths and also where the text needed work. Further revisions of the play resulted in a third production and eventual publication. Rosalee is a play that has truly grown up and I owe Cheryl Snodgrass a huge debt for that.”

Maura was part of our first cohort of students who began the program in 2007, already the author of more than thirty plays. Her academic studies have not slowed her down—if anything, they have accelerated her career path. Since starting the program Maura has been produced at Mill Mountain Theatre, the Manhattan Repertory Theatre, and an previous production of Rosalee Was Here was featured earlier this year as part of the New York City International Fringe Festival under the direction of Toby Thelin, who is also a student in the MFA playwriting program at Hollins University.

Guest Profile: Cheryl Snodgrass

Cheryl Snodgrass is a Jeff Recommended director based in Chicago who focuses primarily on the production of new works. Last year she came to Roanoke to direct the reading of Love Loves a Pornographer, by Jeff Goode, for the Discovery Reading Series at Mill Mountain Theatre. The reading was timed so that students and faculty in the playwriting program could attend and interact with the guest professionals, which included Snodgrass, Jeff Goode, as well as stage and film actor Toby Huss.

Cheryl has worked extensively with playwright Jeff Goode, as a director, actor, and as a producer. She directed the premier productions of Poona the Fuckdog and The Eight: reindeer monologues among others. She’s directed and/or produced works by Rebecca Gilman, Brett Neveu and Todd Ristau. Her most recent productions were the Jeff recommended Die! Mommie, Die! and Haywire! with Hell in a Handbag Productions. She has recently presented a reading The Emancipation of Alabaster McGill at The SPOT in Chicago and just wrapped up collaboration with David Cerda for the remounting of the very successful Poseidon! An Upside Down Musical with productions already scheduled in Chicago, Cincinnati and San Diego. Cheryl has been a guest artist at Lawrence University. She’s a founding member of No Shame Theater, The Unusual Cabaret, Les Enfants du Mains, and C’est Destine.

Snodgrass returned to Roanoke this year to direct Rosalee Was Here, by MFA playwright Maura Campbell.

“I loved working on Rosalee,” Snodgrass said, “The cast was very small which allowed a rich relationship to develop amongst the women. Maura’s script felt very personal and the actors responded to that by giving of themselves and reaching deep to find the width and breadth of the characters. They wanted to tell these stories and fell in love with characters they were playing.”

Cheryl will be returning in the fall to direct Donny and the Monsters at Studio Roanoke and it is very likely that our students can look forward to many more opportunities to work with her in the future.

The director concluded, “I very much look forward to coming back to direct another show here. It is always iffy to walk into pre-cast shows but I have found that Todd has always given me the actors I need to tell the story the playwright has written. I am delighted to return to Studio Roanoke and to continue working with Hollins playwrights whether in Roanoke or anywhere else.”
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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: Our Biggest Summer Yet!

This summer marks the third year of the program’s existence, and we have had tremendous success so far.

I think the thing I like hearing most is how surprised people are that we are only entering our third year. People presume that based on the accomplishments of our students, quality of our guest artists, reputation of our visiting faculty that we must have been doing this for a decade or more.

Well, we must be getting it right. Two summers ago we had 9 students arrive for classes in June of 2007. This summer we’ve more than doubled that number.

This summer we welcome twelve new graduate students from a broad variety of backgrounds.

We’re thrilled to have distinguished professionals like Bonnie Metzgar and Jason Grote joining our visiting faculty and we’re delighted that our guest speakers will be giving their public talks not on campus in an unused concert hall but in the auditorium of a downtown theatre space owned and operated by one of our own MFA students.

Kenley Smith, who will finish his coursework this year and become our first graduate of the program, has won awards for his writing and has actually opened his own theatre dedicated to new play development. Other students are getting produced around the nation and being considered for publication.

We’ll also be using that space for public presentations by guest artists Stevie Jay and Carl Hancock Rux.

We are also restructuring our reading schedule for Lab so that we can feature 10 readings at the end of the summer in a festival of student work with invited guest professional responders that include representatives from Playwright’s Horizons, the Dramatists Guild, and Dramatists Play Service.

It is going to be another fantastic summer, and without a doubt, our biggest and best summer yet.

Todd Ristau, Director