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Guest Profile: Stevie Jay

Stevie Jay has been involved in the arts for over 20 years, and his experience with solo performance began in high school when he started combining monologues, music, poetry, and movement into cohesive, hour-long theatrical presentations. Stevie trained in New York City at The Lee Strasberg Theatre Institute where he also received private coaching from Sandra Seacat. Monologue writing has always been his mainstay, and in 1998, Stevie was invited to create a full-length, one-man play for the Live Arts Performance Center in Charlottesville, VA. This gave birth to his critically-acclaimed, multi-chakra extravaganza: Life Love Sex Death...and other works in progress.

This work was developed and honed for over a period of 5 years in Charlottesville, showcased twice at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, and enjoyed a month-long engagement at the Finborough Theatre in London.

Stevie Jay performed the show for packed houses at Studio Roanoke and engaged our playwriting students in a lengthy post performance discussion about creating self-referential performance pieces.

www.steviejay3.com

Student Spotlight: Steven V. Rice

Steven V. Rice doesn’t believe in doing anything halfway. Even though the program is designed to be low-residency Steven decided that he would like to move to Roanoke in order to participate more fully in the creative life of the community and to take advantage of the opportunities to get hands on experience working with our local theatres, especially Studio Roanoke.

Steven comes to us with a strong background in Arts Administration. He interviewed for the position of General Manager at Studio Roanoke and started working there in May.

Steven has been handling all of the business related aspects of the theatre, coordinating volunteers, negotiating contracts with artists and vendors, maintaining press contacts, publicity, and spearheading development efforts to raise money and public awareness for the organization. He’s forging community partnerships with other arts organizations and meeting with corporate sponsors and individual donors.

Steven is also working with the Arts Council of the Blue Ridge to include Studio Roanoke in the upcoming 40+40 Arts Festival with a special event representing some of the best performances offered by the theatre since it opened last April. Soul of the Studio will include cuttings from plays, examples of No Shame Theatre pieces and music from the Acoustic Lounge.

You can find Steven at the theatre almost every day, seated at his command station in the lobby and dreaming up new ways to make the theatre better, stronger, and more connected to its audiences than the day before.

Steven coordinated and designed the initial mailing campaign that will be timed to coincide with the upcoming season announcement.

Though he’s been kept busy at the theatre, he hasn’t neglected the real reason he came to Roanoke. Steven balances the demands of his new job with his own creative work. His play Stairs was featured in the Festival of Student Readings, he writes and performs for No Shame Theatre and directs in the Lunchbox Reading Series.
Guest Profile: Carl Hancock Rux

Carl Hancock Rux is a published poet, essayist, novelist, radio journalist, recording artist, opera librettist and playwright. His plays have been produced throughout the United States and internationally. Carl’s play Talk was the winner of seven OBIE awards. Other awards and honors include the New York Press Club Journalism Award for Entertainment News, the Herb Alpert Award in the Arts, the New York Foundation for the Arts Prize, the Bessie Schomburg Award, Fresh Poet Award, the Village Voice Literary prize, National Endowment for the Arts/Theater Communication Group Playwright in Residence fellowship, NEA Leadership Initiatives Meet the Composer Grant, the Kitchen Theater Artist Award, Rockefeller Map grant, Creative Capital Artist grant, New York Foundation for the Arts Gregory Millard fellowship, NYFA Prize, Brooklyn Arts Exchange (BAX) Arts & Artists in Progress Award and was shortlisted for the United Artist Fellowship. He is the author of the Village Voice Literary prize winning collection of poetry Pagan Operetta and the novel Asphalt. Most recently he has been serving as Head of Performance Writing at the California Institute of the Arts.

We’d have been thrilled if Carl had come to Hollins just to give a public talk as part of our guest speaker series, but we were treated to much more than that with his visit this summer.

The prolific and talented young artist gave two nights of performance at Studio Roanoke in a program entitled The Muses Are Heard. Carl described the event as “an exploration of identity in a promising, yet uncertain age of race, sex and class.” Carl read excerpts from his plays and performance pieces including The No Black Male Show, Talk, Asphalt and Pagan Operetta. He concluded each performance with by a lively discussion with audience members who didn’t want to end the conversation and stayed late into the evening. In addition to the performances, Carl also held office hours on the benches outside the Wyndham Robertson Library with our playwriting students and even performed a scene from his Obie winning play Talk at No Shame Theatre.

Everyone who heard him speak at Lab agreed that Carl is one of the most engaging and generous speakers to ever visit Hollins.

How did you come to be famous for writing and performing in so many different areas?

I’m still in the process of trying to find out how to have a voice, how to have a right type of voice, and how to have a conversation with people. And I think that has as much to do with observation, and interaction as it does with making sound. I am as interested in people as they are in me—and more! And in fact, I think that the reason I’ve worked in so many fields or forms is because I was just blown away by people who make art and what they do. If I see a dance and its beautiful and wonderful I just want to get up and dance with you. If someone sings, I kind of see that not only as an invitation to listen to a beautiful voice, but to join someone in the process of singing. To sort of become part of the choir. And I think that’s what art has to be. I think it has to belong to all of us and not just to some of us. I don’t think art should be compartmentalized, something that does not invite interaction. I don’t think I care about fame...I care about paying bills, of course, but that wasn’t the point. The point was to say what I needed to say in as many ways as it needed to be said. And if that means that a poem failed me then perhaps a play could help me. And if a play failed me, then perhaps a song could help me. And if a song failed me, then maybe my body in motion could help me. I still believe that and I believe that those forms aid each other. I don’t see it as strange. This isn’t that weird for someone to be multi-disciplinary.

Any advice on writing personal or autobiographical material?

I think that if you decide there is something valuable about your own story, you can’t sacrifice your craft for your story. If it’s a good book it’s a good book, but if you want to do a self-portrait, learn how to paint. You know?

Do you have a closing statement?

No, I don’t have a closing statement...It was great. I’m just happy to be here. I had a good time. You know, it’s back to that word articulation. There’s a line in the play, Talk, to quote myself...There comes a time in your life when you discover an emptiness, you have no thought of yourself as empty and you’ve been operating as if you were not, but there comes a time in everyone’s life when you discover an emptiness and the only thing that is greater than that emptiness is your yearning to be full. And that is when, for the first time in your life, or the first time with your life, you search for a tongue, a language, a means of articulation. And that’s it.
First Annual Festival of Student Readings held at Studio Roanoke

EXPOSED!
New play readings from the Playwright’s Lab at Hollins University.

Studio Roanoke hosted the first ever Festival of Student readings this month, and it was an extremely successful event.

With the rapid growth in student enrollment, it is impossible to give every student in the program a reading slot during the regular Wednesday night sessions of Playwright’s Lab. To address the problem, we came up with a creative solution. Wednesday night readings now emphasize scripts which are still in their earliest stages and not quite ready for public readings. These readings are now done in private, closed sessions and receive feedback only from classmates and program faculty.

For the Festival, we select 10 scripts from the program which are considered close to being a final draft. These plays are then placed in reading slots during the final full weekend of the program. We help the playwrights find local actors and directors for their readings and they are given a maximum of 7 hours of total rehearsal time. The limitation of rehearsal is to ensure that actors involved in more than one reading are not over-taxed and that students are not tempted to invest so much time in preparing for the reading that they neglect their academic studies.

We also want to ensure that the emphasis is on the script and not the spectacle of the reading so we insist that these are script in hand with no props or costumes.

In addition to the feedback of other students in the program and our visiting faculty, we also bring in a group of guest professionals from various disciplines to respond to the readings and give comments to the playwrights.

This year’s festival included plays by the following MFA students: Samantha Macher, Sunny da Silva, Stephen V. Rice, Brandon DuMonde, Adam Hahn, Robert Plowman, Nikki Adkins, David Schwingle, Sean Engard, and Kenley Smith.

Guest responders included playwright Larry Pontius (representing the Dramatists Guild), playwright and publisher Craig Pospisil (Dramatists Play Service), Director Joe Banno (former Artistic Director of the Source Theatre in DC), dramaturg Kate Bredeson and director Robert Harris Moss (Founder of Playwrights Horizons). Visiting faculty Bonnie Metzgar and Jason Grote also attended and gave responses to the plays.

The readings were all free and open to the public and designed as much to help develop plays as to have Kate Bredeson and Rebecca Rugg give a joint presentation on the art of dramaturgy as part of our Guest Speaker Series.

The festival of readings is a perfect extension of Studio Roanoke’s mission and we look forward to many such mutually beneficial collaborations in the future.

Rebecca Rugg and Kate Bredeson Talk Dramaturgy

Dramaturgy might be difficult to define, but been proven to be indescribably helpful in every step in the process of taking a script from the moment of inspiration to successfully mounted production. A dramaturg can participate in this process, working with the playwright, director, actor, designers, production team, publicity office, and all other parties investing in bringing the play to life and sharing it with an audience. They conduct research, ask questions, provide information and help to make sure all elements of the production are telling the same story.

There can be a lot of resistance to the role of the dramaturg, because playwrights might fear too much outside influence or directors might feel that if they are doing their job well a dramaturg is unnecessary.

Most of the tension results from a poor understanding of the dramaturg’s role and the lack of a shared language for incorporating this extremely useful participant into the collaborative process.

Because we know that our playwrights will not only be faced with the prospect of working with a dramaturg in the future, but also because playwrights who find work in the literary office of a theatre often find themselves thrust into the role of a dramaturg, we have incorporated into our curriculum a course in dramaturgy and sought out some of the best dramaturgs working today to come and demystify dramaturgy for our students. This summer we were very fortunate to have Kate Bredeson and Rebecca Rugg give a joint presentation on the art of dramaturgy as part of our Guest Speaker Series.

Rebecca Rugg has served as the Associate Chair of Playwriting for the Yale School of Drama since 2005. At the Joseph Papp Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival she was Dramaturg and Director of New Projects.

Kate Bredeson is an Assistant Professor of Theatre at Reed College, and freelance dramaturg who served as Resident Dramaturg at Chicago’s Court Theatre and was also a Lecturer in Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Chicago. She has been invited back to Hollins next summer to teach dramaturgy and playscript analysis.
Playwright’s Lab at Hollins University

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From the Director: Summer Recap 2009

Well, it has been a pretty impressive summer session. A dozen brand new MFA students arrived on campus. One of our students opened a theatre that in only three months has already produced three plays, 13 readings, 3 musical events, 3 comedy events, 3 poetry events, and a handful of special performances that included Best of No Shame, Stevie Jay and Carl Hancock Rux. We’ve had Bonnie Metzgar and Jason Grote come as visiting faculty and some pretty impressive guest speakers. Our students organized their own readings of new plays, and generated suitcases full of new scripts. Those in the First Drafts class each wrote six brand new full length plays!

Our students wrote and performed each weekend for No Shame Theatre and we even had some of our noteworthy guests participate as writers and performers right alongside them. Carl Hancock Rux performed a cutting from his OBIE award winning play Talk, and Larry Pontius wrote a piece that featured not only myself but several MFA students, Craig Pospisil from Dramatists Play Service, and Playwrights Horizon founder Robert Harris Moss.

I’m so energized by the constant creative activity of the program during the summer session that I don’t even think about the fact that I’m teaching four classes, organizing all the events, and providing support for the other faculty.

And before the summer session is even over, we’re already planning and preparing for the next year’s session.

Students have told me that they want to explore adapting work from other mediums, try writing musicals, and learn more about dramaturgy. We’ve invited former guest speakers Jeff Goode and Kate Bredeson to come next year to tackle those subjects and I’ll be teaching a class on banned plays. We’re looking forward to more guest speakers and guest performers and an expanded roster of guest responders for next year’s Festival of Student Readings.

This year was the best yet, but it won’t be the best ever!