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The Lab Report
Playwriting News from the Playwright’s Lab at Hollins University
Volume 03, Issue 03 (August, 2009)

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Shade of the Trees by Kenley Smith

Kenley Smith. MFA playwright, wrote his Civil War themed drama as part of the Writing for Young Audiences class taught by Jonathan Dorf during the summer of 2008.

“Shade of the Trees has moments of being rip-roaringly funny, and yet at the same time, it’s a profoundly moving and skillful examination of the human cost of a turbulent time in American history,” Dorf said of the play at the time.

That early draft was given a staged reading last year at Green Memorial United Methodist Church as part of their Summer Dinner Theatre series designed to spark interesting conversations.

Using that feedback, Kenley further revised and expanded Shade. The new script was produced at Studio Roanoke this month as the opening play of the theatre’s new season.

Pat Wihelms, local director and Artistic Director of the Roanoke Children’s Theatre, directed both the original reading and this production.

“It’s been wonderful working with Pat again,” said the playwright, “I took one of her classes at Mill Mountain Theatre six years ago, and it was one of the reasons I began to consider writing for the stage.”

The Playwright’s Lab co-produced the play through a fund called the New Works Initiative which was created to support production and presentation of plays coming out of the playwriting program.

Pat Wilhelms is the Artistic Director of Roanoke Children’s Theatre, which has found a home inside the brand new Taubman Museum of Art in downtown Roanoke, Virginia. Before founding this important and innovative new theatre for young audiences, Pat was the Director of Education and Outreach at Mill Mountain Theatre for 10 years, directing shows that toured to schools all across Virginia.

Pat was Kenley Smith’s first choice when he had the opportunity to stage a performance of his play Shade of the Trees for the Greene Memorial United Methodist Church’s Summer Dinner Theatre last year. She was the only person he considered to direct the expanded production at Studio Roanoke this month.

Pat’s expertise working with actors of all ages, as well as bringing new plays to the stage, made her the perfect choice and we look forward to pairing our playwrights writing plays for young audiences with her exciting new theater company for future creative partnerships!
Guest Profile: Bob Moss

Robert Harris Moss ran the Edward Albee Playwrights' Unit from 1970-71. He founded and ran Playwrights Horizons from 1971 to 1991. He was the Artistic Director of the Hangar Theatre in Ithaca, New York from 1983 to 1996. In the Fall of 1996, he became the Artistic Director of Syracuse Stage, and ran that theater until January 2008. In the summer of 2008, Moss took the reins of the Hangar again, as they searched for another new Artistic Director. He ran the Playwrights Horizons Theatre School (an affiliate school of the NYU Tisch School of the Arts for more than ten years. Bob has guest directed at theatres across the country, Prior to all his directing and running of theaters, Bob was an active stage manager, a career that culminated with the APA Repertory Company in residence at the Lyceum Theater on Broadway.

We were delighted to have Bob agree to come visit our campus this past summer—not only as part of our Guest Speaker Series but as a guest responder for the Festival of Student Readings held at Studio Roanoke.

He talked about the founding of Playwrights Horizons and the path of his life in the arts.

Who is Bob Moss?

There are two impulses that I think describe me because they were formative. In the middle of Howard's End by E.M. Forster the heroine has this amazing realization, she realizes that the world is essentially a romance. And when I read that I had to put the book down for a moment. I so deeply understood that although I had never thought about it. The world is essentially a romance. The other quote is from the movie Holiday. Katharine Hepburn's father is trying to stop her from going off with Cary Grant and she says to her father, "Stop me. Try and stop me." And that was certainly what I said to my parents, and what I said to anybody who tried to stop me from whatever idiot, insane thing I was trying to do.

You were part of the birth of Off-Off Broadway, weren't you?

Edward Albee, very graciously, had a little theatre that was devoted to American playwrights. And the mood in New York, or the zeitgeist if you will, at the time was that there needed to be places where playwrights had a chance to work on their material without the pressures of Broadway. Whether those pressures ever actually go away, I think is up for discussion, but there needed to be this other place and so the Cino was born, Ellen Stewart, the Church at St. Marks, the Judson Church—all these places were starting up and Edward, in his incredible generosity, began something called The Playwrights Unit. Nobody got paid but artists could work on their plays, actors could be brought in and directors and what have you...I directed a number of plays there once I left stage managing, and in 1970 Edward asked me if I would run the theatre for him. And it was an astonishing offer. And of course, I accepted, having never done such a thing. But on Day One, I was like, "This is what I'm going to be doing the rest of my life." And at the end of the first year...I tell you I was so happy. I'd actually directed a couple of the plays myself, but it wasn't about me as a director, I was there to help other people...and at the end of the end of the Spring, Edward decided...and it's a whole other conversation that we can have about why...he decided not to continue the Playwrights Unit. I never asked him why, but I can imagine there were certain other things that were happening in his life, so he was closing the theatre. And I was heartbroken, because I had finally found my vocation, this was it, this was what I wanted to do. So, at the last speech, during the last play, I included in my remarks that this was, in fact, the end of the Playwright's Unit.

What happened?

It turns out that a woman had been in the audience at one of the shows, Louise Roberts, one of those wonderful, insane New York crazy people who had given her life to dance. Somewhere in the middle of the summer I got a phone call from this woman who I'd never met and she asked me if I would come up and meet her at the Clark Center for the Performing Arts, which was a dance school on the second floor of the YWCA. There was one room on the second floor that was too small for a dance class and Louise wanted me to do, really was to recommend some playwrights who could put plays on in that little room. And without taking a breath, I said, "Oh...oh...nothing will ever come of that. Why don't you just give me the room?" And she said, "Okay." So, just like that, in the twinkling of an eye, I had real estate, Con Edison, telephones, secretarial, janitorial, elevator service, whatever—I didn't have any money, but I had real estate. I had a place to put plays on. And, so, I started putting plays on immediately.

Playwrights Horizons. What did you see as your mission?

The idea of Playwrights Horizons at the beginning was that a playwright should have the opportunity to see his words spoken out loud, moving around in space in front of an audience. And that that would be a learning experience. And I actually—maybe this is semantics, I don't know, probably—but I didn't actually think this was a theatre. I thought it was a service to the landscape. I thought we were a service to the field.

www.playwrightshorizons.org
thirty minutes or less by Jonathan G Galvez in NYC International Fringe Festival

Jonathan G Galvez is a New Jersey resident who just spent his first summer as an MFA playwright at Hollins University. His play Crossing Lights was recently produced at the Manhattan Repertory Theater and other pieces have been presented in the Strawberry One-Act Festival, Sundog Theatre's Scenes from the Staten Island Ferry and the Shortened Attention Span One-Act Festival.

His newest play, 30 Minutes or Less was produced this month as part of the New York City International Fringe Festival.

The dark comedy is about a Chinese food delivery boy (who’s not even Chinese) that stumbles upon a murder scene. What one would expect to be a whodunit turns into a social commentary not only about how we perceive race, but also the labels that are both imposed on us by others and the ones we impose on ourselves.

Galvez’s main character, Dale, is bombarded with confused stereotypes: The people around him assume he can’t speak English and offer him green tea and sake.

The playwright, who is Filipino, told us, “Looking at Hollywood and Broadway, the Asian presence has been limited to stereotypes and kung-fu. As an Asian-American, I wanted to present a piece that went against the stereotype, that fought it almost. I wanted to create a role and a play where race is a factor, but only one of a dozen that come into play should this situation happen in real life. There are archetypes, there are stereotypes, there are restrictions and labels we impose upon our perception of others, and this is a piece that, I feel, tries to take those down just a little bit in a real world setting.”

This play is part of a 10-play series Galvez has been working on for two years. Each play has stories which intertwine with the others, but all the pieces stand alone as independent works as well.

The New York City International Fringe Festival is one of the largest multi-arts events in North America taking place over two weeks every August in venues across the city. Attendance this year topped 75,000 people. FringeNYC uses a jury-based selection process and choose around 200 shows for inclusion from a huge pool of applicants.

Last year’s festival included work by another Hollins playwright, Maura Campbell’s Rosalee Was Here.

www.30minsorless.com

Staff Profile: Maryke Barber, Arts Librarian and Dramaturg

Maryke Barber is the Outreach and Arts Librarian at Wyndham Robertson Library. Among her favorite tasks are finding and buying new books, and helping theatre students do research. That’s no surprise; before earning a masters degree in information science and becoming a librarian, Barber worked as Literary Coordinator for Roanoke’s own Mill Mountain Theatre.

“I came to dramaturgy and literary management the long way around,” she explains, “after a long time working as an actor, the scholar in me took over and I realized that I loved the research most of all. Then I had the opportunity to work with new plays and playwrights in two wonderful internships with the Goodman Theatre and as a reader for several theaters in the Chicago area. I’d found my niche. And being an arts librarian today has a lot in common with dramaturgy and literary management. I keep an eye on new works and a solid foundation in the classics, just as when I gathered materials and ideas and to bring to the table for the production team and the audience. I gather and develop materials and ideas; write program notes, articles and lobby displays; moderate discussions. It’s still the same work when I am developing the library’s collection or helping students—they need to learn to create connections, explore context, and that’s what both dramaturgy and librarianship are all about.”

Our students may need to look at reviews of historical productions, find literary criticism of a playwright’s work, or locate a copy of a rare play. The library can help with all of those questions. Maryke says, “We have the resources to really explore research questions. First you find what a student is asking for. But often I’m able to bring something extra to the table as well: did you think about this, let me show you this other thing I found....and you might open up an entirely new direction. That’s when it is really fun. The most important thing you can get from a library is service. Information is increasingly more about access, knowing where and how to find information rather than owning it. So it's much more than what you have on the shelf—although I happen to think we’ve got a great collection also—but it’s also about whether you can really navigate the larger world of information. Our small size allows us to personalize services: I can easily take an hour or two to help one student, whereas that same student at a mega-school might get fifteen minutes of a librarian's attention. I can take the time, I can work directly with the faculty, and we can—and do—move very quickly to personalize our services based on what students tell us they need.”

libguides.hollins.edu/playwriting
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From the Director: Shorter Forms...is the Two Act Dead?

When someone asks me how long a play should be, I answer that it should be as long as it needs to be and no longer!

Joking aside, the debate about length persists and students wonder which is the most viable stage play form—one act, two act, three act, more?

For the past few decades writers have provided pretty much what audiences have come to expect, which is a two act play that has about sixty pages in act one, 45 pages in act two, and a 15 minute intermission in between to sell candy, drinks and souvenirs. That bladder and sales break has become sacred for audiences and theatres alike. After about an hour people start thinking about how uncomfortable their seat is and how much they need to use the bathroom. Interval sales are an important part of keeping a theatre’s doors open.

Recently, though, there has been a trend toward shorter forms...one acts running 60 to 90 minutes. These short plays are appealing in a lot of ways. Half the length means twice the rehearsal in the same period. Usually they have smaller casts and minimal production needs so they are less expensive to produce. And, it should be mentioned, if there is no intermission you don’t have to worry if people will come back after it.

Sometimes audiences resent one acts, because a night at the theatre is a big investment for them. $20 for a ticket, $100 for a meal, $75 for a baby sitter, $6 for parking...it all adds up to a heavy demand on your 60 pages to provide high value for the dollar!

Likewise, no intermission for 120 pages and they may resent being held hostage.

Here’s the bottom line. Ask what the play needs, not what the most marketable form is, and then balance that with conventions and audience expectations.

Aristotle, in The Poetics, said that plots “should have length, but such that they are easy to remember.” He suggested limiting time by the specific venue and the ordinary span of attention. Thousands of years later, that’s still good advice.

Todd Ristau, Director