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Todd Ristau
Hollins University, tristau@hollins.edu

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Darlene Fedele designs puppets for *Donnie and the Monsters* by Robert Gibbs

*Donnie and the Monsters* is a quirky play written by California playwright Robert Gibbs. The show was produced at Studio Roanoke this month under the direction of frequent guest artist Cheryl Snodgrass. “It has a strong expressionistic quality,” said Todd Ristau, who designed the set and costumes for the play. “The title character is having a hard time at school and at home because other kids pick on him; an evil sock puppet is whispering naughty things in his ear in bed; Blackbeard the Pirate is giving him bad advice; a talking toilet is being mean to him; and the monster under his bed is deciding whether or not to eat him. And this play demands a wide variety of puppets that need to make their own costume changes and participate in scenes with the actors. It would be a real challenge, and I thought of Darlene immediately.”

MFA playwright Darlene Fedele has an extensive puppetry background and often performs with them at No Shame Theatre using puppets she designs and constructs herself. Ristau contacted her for advice about making puppets for the show and Darlene volunteered to design and build them herself and also gave instructions on how the actors could double as puppeteers.

“I was impressed with the care she took to give each puppet a true personality that informed the lines,” director Cheryl Snodgrass said, “She actually created characters, not just puppets. They were hilarious and I couldn’t imagine the production without them.”

Darlene said of the experience, “I really had fun making those puppets and watching them perform. I’m thinking of doing something with the monsters for No Shame.”

**Next Month:**
- *Rosalee Was Here* by Maura Campbell
- Student Spotlight: Royal Shiree
- **NU NAYBAHOOD II, Here We Go Again** featuring Royal Shiree
- Guest Profile: Jimmy Ray Ward
- **Soul of the Studio and 40 Days and 40 Nights**
- From the Director: Writing for Collaboration
- **From the Director:** From the Director: Write It Down and Put It In A Contract

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Guest Profile: Jimmy Ray Ward

Jimmy Ray Ward has an M.F.A. in Scenography from UNC-Greensboro, and his credits include work at many theatres along the East coast. He served as resident designer for Mill Mountain Theatre for almost ten full seasons before the theatre closed in January. After leaving MMT, he formed his own company, Jimmy Ward Scenic, and continues to provide the highest quality design and technical support for productions around the region. Jimmy Ray has taught design for area colleges including Roanoke College and Hollins University.

Jimmy Ray conducted a design workshop for us and spoke about his work relevant to new play development. Here are a few of the things he had to tell us:

What can a designer do for our work as playwrights?

Designers are not here to do art for art’s sake. We are here to reinforce the work that you’re putting out. First we start with your text and try to find out what it’s all about and then from that we’ll build on it in terms of color, line and texture. Scale and size and proportions; what is realism and what are abstractions. There are hard choices that have to be made within the design team, because theatre is a collaborative effort. When you write a piece, don’t think that it is only yours. You’re putting it out there for all of us to be a part of, to share with you, and hopefully to fain some enjoyment out of. I love to design. I have absolutely no interest in playwriting. I respect those that do, and I will have a lot of questions, and I’ll give feedback and you might think that because I’m not really a playwright so it doesn’t matter...and that’s fine...but eventually your script is going to land on my plate to touch it, be a part of it, get into the meat and bones of it—the things that you take for granted and just dropped into the script because you thought would be good—I’m here to find a way to make it even better. We don’t look at right or wrong choices, but weak and strong choices. If we don’t talk to each other, we can’t help each other.

Do new plays present special problems?

What I love about new works is the challenges, things that we are helping to solve whether it is the premier or a workshop production. Don’t be afraid to write in challenges, things that need to happen. It is my job as a designer to figure out how we can help achieve that—to give us movement, shape and some sort of visual interest.

How much does budget influence design?

It doesn’t. The budget will make a difference. If we find the metaphor, what’s the show really about and you know the color, line and texture of what you’re trying to achieve you can take the same ideas for a design that you only have $500 for and you can develop that into something that you have $10,000 for but still hold on to the same essence of what your work is about. I enjoy working where we are...I like companies that can afford me to come in. I like dealing with the new works, I like dealing with what you can do on a shoestring. I’m okay with that, and I like regional theatre because there’s not the pressure of having to have $10,000 to make it happen, but I can still make the same kind of art. I wouldn’t say that their design is any better, but maybe the execution of their product is better. The kinds of things they can use and purchase may be better. So, budget makes a difference, but the best solution is not always the most expensive solution.

How involved should the playwright be in the design? Is there an ideal production meeting?

Well, I don’t know that there is an ideal one because you have to take everybody’s personalities into account. In the best possible world they would all be open minded and come to the table so no one person has the strong vision of this is the way it has to be and they’re going to drive it in a direction...I think what’s great is when we sit down at the table and we just start talking about the work. Should the playwright be a part of the design process? In a perfect world the playwright is going to be part of the conversation. Normally, I’m hoping that the director and the playwright had discussions before I’m even involved. I mean, I’m making decisions for actors before they’re involved. I mean, down the line it sort of steam rolls from the top. So, when we sit down in these design meetings our goal is that we just try to talk about the work. Not that we’re saying. “This is what it’s going to look like.” What’s it about? What do we want the audience to know? How do we want them to feel? And, who is the audience? That’s a great first meeting. Then we all go away and re-read our scripts, we start doing some research, develop ideas and then I’m going to come back into the next meeting with ideas. My process goes pretty fast, I think because I’m doing 13 shows a year, just out of habit I make quick decisions because I know that I have four weeks before it goes to the shop and when it goes to the shop I’m already having to start thinking about the next one. Everything is show by show, but it’s layered. It has to be to make a living.

www.jimmywardscenic.com
Royal Shiree is Miss Missy, Storyteller

Royal Shiree, one of our MFA playwrights, has been writing and performing her own material for years. The only thing that comes more naturally to her than being on a stage is coming up with the inventive stories she tells us there. She is a musician, poet, actor, director, producer and one of the most enthusiastic theatre artists you will ever meet.

Royal is also a substitute teacher in Lynchburg, VA, where she moved to care for her father until his death in 2008. Her experiences as a caregiver with limited resources available for caring for the elderly led her to write and co-direct two documentaries on the subject and after they were sent (with assistance from the Virginia Poverty Law Center) to members of the Virginia General Assembly funding was appropriated for caregivers.

As a solo performing artist, Royal has been seen frequently at No Shame Theatre and producing her own touring shows that often include what she calls “rhythmic poetry and storytelling” and accompanying herself on the tuumba (a bass drum from the cong family).

Royal created the fictional character of the story-telling Miss Missy to address specific educational needs and requests for historical information about the difficult transition from America’s slave owning past to the contemporary black experience today. Her vignettes touch on subjects like the life of Thomas Jefferson, the hardships of women slaves, and the day-to-day experience of colonial life with Miss Missy’s slave friends who have gone on to glory. The character of Missy was never herself a slave, and as part of the performance she proudly demonstrates possession of her “Freedom Papers.” The solo performance piece was designed for children K-5th grade, but adults often find plenty to explore during the show. The entire piece is constructed to fit within the Virginia Standards of Learning requirements for educational material.

Because the piece is like a chautauqua, Royal had to do extensive research to ensure the accuracy of the information she’ll be giving in character. Each 30 minute performance means weeks of preparation in advance.

This past June, Miss Missy was commissioned to be performed as part of the Junteenth Celebration in Lynchburg.

“What an awesome day,” Royal said of her performance before about 450 people. “Gospel music fills spirits and feeling my spirit and I’m feeling the spirit still, with childhood flashbacks of my father hosting gospel groups at his church.”

Royal also performed her original percussive commentary Fighting Blacks at the Junteenth event and performed Miss Missy again over the Fourth of July weekend as part of a commission for Thomas Jefferson’s Poplar Forest.

“I created Miss Missy three years ago, in 2007,” Royal told us. “I have or will be performing her at the Legacy Museum of African American History and the Booker T. Washington National Monument in Hardy, VA. Miss Missy is hugely loved and frequently requested. She may do funny dances or engage the audience in a song, or even tire out but adults and teachers thank me and the children hug Miss Missy and tell her they love her!”

Royal is also the Education Facilitator for the Avoca Museum, where she teaches elementary school children about American history and where Miss Missy makes regular appearances!

Soul of the Studio and the 40 Days and 40 Nights

Steven V. Rice, MFA playwright and General Manager at Studio Roanoke, has been working closely with the Arts Council of the Blue Ridge for the past few months to coordinate a special showcase of some of the most popular offerings from Studio Roanoke’s programming as part of the city wide 40 Days and 40 Nights Arts Festival and the Roanoke Arts Festival: City Soul.

40 + 40 (An Arts and Culture Explosion) is the ambitious project of the Arts Council designed to provide a calendar listing of arts and cultural events/activities/happenings taking place from October 1 through November 9 in communities throughout Southwest Virginia. The Roanoke Arts Festival: City Soul is the kick off event with special performances by Roanoke arts organizations. All events were selected from a large pool of applicants and must offer tickets for free or priced at $10 or less.

Soul of the Studio presented scenes from No Shame Theatre, original dance performances, The William Penn Trio, cuttings from the productions Elvis Blossom by MFA playwright Sunny da Silva and Biology Lesson by Sandy Dietrick, and original music by local singers and songwriters.

www.4040fest.com
Learn the craft of writing dramatic works and study the collaborative art of theatre during our six-week intensive schedule—and earn an M.F.A. in playwriting in just a few summers. You'll work closely with such guest artists as Ruth Margraff, Naomi Wallace, and Mac Wellman and form professional relationships that can lead to reading and production opportunities before graduation—a potent formula few other programs offer.

For application materials, please call (540) 362-6326 or visit on the web at www.hollins.edu/grad/playwriting for more information.

From the Director: Write It Down and Put It In A Contract

In Suzan-Lori Park’s wonderful play *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* there’s a recurring theme: “Write it down or we do not exist.”

Where Suzan-Lori was talking about preserving a largely oral tradition, I’d like to borrow the phrase, however crassly, and apply it to a playwright’s arrangement with a theatre to produce a play, collaborate with another writer or composer, teach a workshop, or even just come and give a talk.

Write it down or the agreement does not exist.

Trust is a wonderful thing, but memories are fluid and it is extremely useful to have something on paper both parties can refer to and ensure everyone remembers the same things in the same way.

I remember showing up at a theatre early in my career with set pieces, costumes and three people I’d flown in from England to start work on my show. I thought I’d confirmed the dates. The Artistic Director thought he’d told me he’d cancelled the production.

Who was right? Who cares! If you can’t prove it, it doesn’t matter.

This expensive and mutually mortifying situation could’ve been avoided by having a written contract, letter of agreement or something saying who was responsible for what, when and where it was going to happen, and how all parties would be compensated if the show made tens of dollars.

I'm not saying you need to lawyer up or use a Guild Approved Contract in every situation. I am, however, saying that you are inviting heartache, misery, and years of resentment if you think you can work in a collaborative medium like theatre without writing down the most basic information about what you’re doing, who you’re doing it with, and how you’ll divide the bounty or blame that results.

The most important phrase in contract law is: *That which is not specifically retained is deemed to have been given away.*

Todd Ristau, Director