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Student Spotlight: Royal Shiree

Royal Shiree is graduate of West Virginia State University and earned her BS in Communications with cognates in Theatre, Media Production, and Journalism. In addition to being a musician, poet, solo artist, actress, director, producer and playwright she has also a talented film maker with two documentaries under her belt. She is a Fellow at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts (VCCA) and a substitute teacher in Lynchburg, VA.

Royal is a highly acclaimed solo performer who has created a large number of one-woman pieces which she tours regionally, including her educational piece on slavery featuring a fictionalized storyteller named Miss Missy.

Royal has been commissioned to create performances for The Black Theatre Ensemble of Virginia and MFA playwright Royal Shiree collaborated to create and perform the musical comedy Nu Naybahood II which is based on D. Munyungo Jackson’s humorous look at ebonics The Nu Naybahood Funetic Ebonics Dictionary.

This is the second time the BTE has tackled this material, having mounted a previous production in 2006 with ten original songs by Hiawatha Johnson, who also directed.

In a series of six scenes taking place in different locations the play looks at how people talk, and whether what you say is more important than how you say it. Though satirical, the message is quite serious, that people may be different from each other and have different ways of saying things, but these unique qualities should be celebrated. Nothing is more important than trying to communicate.

The play was primarily written and directed by Gloria Cannady with Royal contracted to write and direct one vignette and playing the principal role in two others. Jackson himself was on hand for the performances as a special guest and also conducted a Drum Circle Percussion Workshop with the performers. Munyungo has over thirty years of percussion experience, having played with Miles Davis, Stevie Wonder, The Temptations and many others.
The Lab Report
Playwriting News from the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

Guest Profile: Craig Pospisil

Craig Pospisil is the award-winning author of Months on End, Somewhere In Between, Life is Short and the collection Choosing Sides, all published by Dramatists Play Service. Months on End had its world premiere at the Purple Rose Theater Company and has had scores of productions around the country, as well as in Australia and Hong Kong. Somewhere in Between premiered at the Detroit Repertory Theater and more than sixty productions since, including ones in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and Paris. His drama The Dunes was workshopped at the Venice Theatre, and won Theatre Conspiracy's New Play Contest. Craig and composer Jeremy Schonfeld presented the musical Drift at the 2006 New York Musical Festival.

Craig is the head writer for theAtrainplays, the acclaimed twenty-four hour theatre project, for which he has written sixteen short plays and musicals since 2002.

Craig's work has been seen at Ensemble Studio Theatre, New World Stages, Bay Street Theater, PSNBC, Vital Theater, West Coast Ensemble and the Caldwell Theater, and has been performed in Australia, Canada, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Samoa, Singapore and Hong Kong. His plays have been translated into Danish, French and Cantonese.

Craig was one of our guest responders for the Festival of Student Readings held at Studio Roanoke in July, participating energetically in the discussions after each play.

“I really love going to a festival like the one at Hollins because it's such a great atmosphere for the students to hear their plays,” Craig told us. “It's nice to have several days to see and hear new plays take shape and maybe help the student writers answer the kinds of questions that all playwrights have to deal with. It's also a great place to take yourself back to school for a quick refresher. I left Hollins' Festival of Student Readings with a big boost of energy and ideas for my own work.”

Craig also made time to meet with students individually to discuss their writing. This kind of interaction with working professionals is an important part of what sets the Playwright's Lab apart from other programs.

www.craigpospisil.com

Guest Profile: Larry Pontius

Larry Pontius is a playwright based in New York City, born and raised in the Mid-West and educated around the country, most recently receiving his MFA in Playwriting from the University of Texas at Austin, which included being awarded the Michener Fellowship. His plays have been produced in New York, Chicago and as part of the Minnesota Fringe Festival. His work as a screenwriter includes Qaatil, a 13-part murder mystery which aired in Pakistan in 2008 and several episodes for the anthology series New York Stories, which was filmed in New York and aired in Pakistan. Larry is a member of The Dramatist Guild, The Playwright's Center, and Manhattan Theatre Source's Writers Forum.

He was also one of our guest responders for the Festival of Student Readings held at Studio Roanoke in July.

“I had a wonderful time in Roanoke,” Larry wrote us. “It was a great opportunity to get out of a New York and see some green and open spaces! I wasn't sure what to expect, but I found the city to be quite charming, laid back, and I found myself the perfect coffee shop. I wasn't there, of course, for the coffee, which was great, but to hear some plays.”

Larry was sent the stack of ten plays included in the reading not long before departing Manhattan, and he finished reading just as the plane touched down in Roanoke.

“They were great reads and I was very excited to hear them in the mouths of actors,” Pontius remarked. “What surprised me the most was the variety of writers in the program. Sometimes an MFA program can churn out cookie cutter playwrights, which is both a disservice to the writer and the art. Writers can learn so much from writers who approach craft and story differently than they do. Quality and diversity of writer was exciting to see.”

Larry, studying theatre at the University of Iowa, was a frequent writer/performer for No Shame Theatre. Larry was excited to find that there is a version of the off-beat late-night venue in Roanoke.

“And to top it off, I got to perform at No Shame,” Larry said. “In my undergraduate days, I performed at the original No Shame, and found it key to my development as a writer. So, when Todd invited me to perform, I was thrilled. I went back to my hotel room and reread the script, dragging Craig Pospisil and Bob Moss into the performance. Bob, of course, played the small, yet vital role of Charles Darwin, who guarded the gates of Hell.” The students loved sharing the stage with these guest professionals, something unique to the Hollins experience!

www.lpontius.com
Rosalee Was Here by Maura Campbell in Vermont

Green Candle Theatre, in Burlington, VT is dedicated to doing new plays. In their current production of Rosalee Was Here, MFA playwright Maura Campbell also directs and she’s made a few changes from previous versions. One major difference is that the character of the school principal, Ms. Holiday was rewritten to be played by a male actor.

Campbell explained, “When we auditioned the role an actor (Dennis McSorley) arrived who had seen an earlier developmental reading. He’d coincidentally been a special educator in New York City, now retired. I saw in his audition how teachers and administrators of different sexes and generations have to negotiate impossible situations together. Rewriting for a male gave added pressure to the role and further underscored the absurdity of the story’s predicament. Previously, Ms. Holiday was seen as an instrument of the system, but Mr. Holiday takes on the system and becomes a rebel in his own right.”

Rosalee (played by Liz Gilbert), was arrested at the age of 11 and is now under court mandated supervision at school. Molly (played by Tracey Girdich), is a school aide assigned to monitor Rosalee’s every move.

Rehearsals began in real locations, and some sequences were filmed to be projected later when the company moved into the actual performance space.

The performances took place in the Outer Space Café, an intimate little venue that was converted from an old warehouse with a restaurant and a cabaret stage.

“The small and intimate venue challenged us to consider this realistic drama in a dramatically different way,” Maura said of the space. “And we choose to build a monument of objects that belonged to the story. As the story unfolded, the objects became more meaningful and the gritty realism was elevated by these expressionistic visuals.”

In addition to the projections, which included the actors running through hallways and numerals popping up while the characters did math problems, there was music accompanying the action played live on a keyboard by Leon Campos.

Campbell described the underlying message as being about functioning within a system that is designed to force compliance and uniformity of thought and action. “That inflexibility is so damaging,” Maura said. “If people don’t find ways to bend these rules, the people break.”

Treading Water by Timothy Cochran at Studio Roanoke

Studio Roanoke, in the interest of developing both new plays and new audiences for them, hosts a monthly lunchtime reading series where audiences are invited to attend the free reading of a new and bring a bag lunch. Following each of the readings there is a moderated discussion where audience and actors alike are asked to respond to the strengths and weaknesses of the play. If the author is unable to attend, the reading and discussion are video taped to be sent to the playwright so that they might benefit from the conversation.

This month’s offering was Treading Water, written by MFA playwright Timothy Cochran. The play was written as part of the Writing for Young Audiences course taught by Jonathan Dorf last summer. The reading was directed by former Mill Mountain Theatre Artistic Associate Daryn Warner.

Tim is currently a professor at Holyoke Community College and has worked at theatres in California, Colorado, Nebraska, Iowa, Massachusetts and Connecticut.
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From the Director: Writing for Collaboration

The good news for playwrights is that the law is on your side in that it requires all productions of every play you write follow every stage direction exactly as written for as long as the copyright is in effect...currently 70 years after your death. The law does allow for creative changes to your text in production if permission is asked and given.

That all sounds perfectly reasonable and protects the playwright’s intellectual property while allowing for the possibility of creative input which deviates from the text if permission is sought and given. Right?

I am a playwright, director and an actor. I’ve been horrified by a director I admired asking the actors to cross out the stage directions before the first rehearsal. I’ve been a director frustrated by an inability to make minor changes to suit my space or acting pool. I’ve been a playwright thrown out of rehearsal for complaining that my script had been revised without my input.

The argument is frequently made that strict adherence to all stage directions is destructive of all that is creative about live theatre.

What is missing from this valid concern is any request of the playwright to create work that lends itself well to collaboration and input by those other artists who will bring it to life on the stage, or be flexible enough to be performed in interesting and surprising ways on a variety of stages.

I’m not talking about writing everything under the Creative Commons License, but I am saying that if there is no reason for the couch to be purple, don’t put that in the stage directions so that every production has to find a purple couch. If the character doesn’t need to be red-headed and thin, why build in a legal requirement for the theatre to cast it that way?

As a playwright and head of playwriting program, I am adamant about respecting the author’s intent...but equally adamant that the playwright’s intent include room for the creative participation of collaborators.

Todd Ristau, Director