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Jayne Benjulian Named Head of New Play Development at Magic Theatre

Jayne Benjulian joined the MFA program at Hollins in 2008, and in 2009 was named Resident Dramatrag at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco.

Jayne recently let us know that she has been promoted to Head of New Play Development at the Magic, which means returning to the program is unlikely for the foreseeable future. We’re disappointed that her success means she won’t be coming back next summer but couldn’t be more proud of her accomplishments.

“I love what you are doing and hope you will consider me a friend of the program,” Jayne wrote us.

We certainly will. While we put a high value on students graduating with their degree, we know that professional recognition and employment by a major theatre like the Magic is also measure of success.

We look forward to Jayne joining us as a guest artist in the near future.

magictheatre.org/blog/1348

Student Spotlight: Jonathan G Galvez

Jonathan G Galvez is an actor, playwright, director, and certified teacher. His produced pieces as a writer have included Thirty Minutes or Less in the 2009 New York International Fringe Festival, Crossing Lights in Manhattan Repertory Theatre’s Amazing Play Festival; and he has had his one acts premiere in The Shortened Attention Span festivals, Sundog Theatre’s Scenes from the Staten Island Ferry, and the Strawberry One-Act Festival. He is a performer and technical director for Stuff Films Comedy troupe and is a member of the Dramatists Guild. He received his B.A. in Theatre Education from Wagner College and is currently pursuing his MFA in Playwriting at Hollins University.

“I am currently a teacher of theater at a high school in New Jersey,” Jonathan told us in his application materials. “I teach not only acting, but writing, directing and technical theatre production. Sometimes it is a struggle to balance the needs of my students and my needs as a writer. That’s why I’m looking forward to coming to Hollins as a student to spend summers focusing on my own work as a writer. Hollins makes it possible to achieve my artistic goals while continuing to work for the students who depend on me.”

The unique structure of the program at Hollins makes it ideal for playwrights who are already employed as teachers but who want to add to their training, contacts or experience in the field. As with Jon, this not only helps expand the horizons for our students but makes them better and more valuable teachers for students at their schools.

“I’ve been an actor, but felt limited by that. I’ve been a director, but felt limited by that. As a playwright, I just feel like I can do so much,” Galvez said, in explaining his decision to focus on writing for the stage rather than the other areas of theatre he has worked in. “As an undergrad actor, I did a lot of plays and half of them I didn’t speak English in, to be perfectly blunt. I want to do something where someone like me can do a piece and not have to be locked into a stereotype.”

Jon hasn’t stopped performing, though—he’s been very active at No Shame Theatre, the late-night performance venue at Studio Roanoke.

“I’ve done a lot of work No Shame and the concept is great,” said Galvez. “No Shame is a wonderful way to get out from under preconceptions about what can be put on the stage.”

magictheatre.org/blog/1348
Dear Abe by Adam Hahn at Studio Roanoke

"I had worked with Joe before, actually," Adam remembered. “in 2008 he came to Mill Mountain to direct in Overnight Sensations and he was randomly selected to direct my ten-minute play. Our aesthetics just meshed. We got along, he understood my play, and I really liked what he did with my work on stage. Joe was great at finding the middle ground of a drama where occasionally funny things happen.”

Banno said of this full production, “The cast is such a natural ensemble that right from the start it sounded pretty good at the first read. It is one of those plays that really mixes the quirky and the conventional, comedy and drama. You never know what’s going to come up next. You’re laughing and all of a sudden something will come up that is really creepy...then it’s very moving and then it’s slyly funny again. It’s a really quite a roller coaster.”

Of Studio Roanoke, Adam said, “It is wonderful to have a theatre of this size devoting this kind of energy and resources into this show. The designers and technicians put the time into constructing something that really supported this very physical script.”
The Lab Report

Playwriting News from the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

The Prom by Adam Hahn in Lunchbox Reading Series

Adam Hahn was one of a handful of brave students who took a course called First Drafts taught by Program Director Todd Ristau last summer. In this very difficult course, each student completes six plays in six weeks. Each play has assigned style or genre a series of prompts to incorporate. Students have only 72 hours to finish each play.

The Prom by Adam Hahn, came out of that course and was read as part of the Lunchbox Series at Studio Roanoke this month. “It was absurdism week and I wrote an absurdist play about religion, and being a teenager, and teenage movies,” Adam said of the assignment. “It ended up being this interesting, odd little artifact that, like a lot of the things I wrote in that class, if I’d just been at home that summer and writing in my room, I don’t know that I would have had the courage to write, to take that kind of risk.”

“Whenver possible we try to have a reading of another work by the writer of the featured production;” said Todd Ristau, who directed the reading and is also Artistic Director of Studio Roanoke. “It really helps the audience get a broader sense of the writer’s body of work, and when we have the writer in residence, it is a great opportunity to pair up something that is more finished with something that is earlier in its process. The Prom is really very touching, nostalgic, and also brutally funny in the way it examines the kinds of life choices we’re thrust into making at that last big social event of our young lives. Prom is a metaphor that really resonates with nearly everyone. That’s why I used my own prom photo for the poster. It is just so iconic and universal...but then Adam’s brilliant way with words still manages to bring so much to it that is unexpected and can’t be anticipated. I loved how willing he was to just embrace the craziness that is at the heart of absurdism.”

Hahn said, “The value of any reading is that you are able to find out which of your risks are paying off in front of an audience and which things need more work. For the reading, we didn’t actually have everything the script called for—the giant stapler or the spurs of blood shooting out of the people’s hands after they’ve been stapled together in their prom photo—but I felt that the images were appropriately communicated to the audience through the stage directions, which were read by Joe Banno from the broken sailboat on the Dear Abe set.”

In The Prom, the Stage Manager comes out to give the curtain speech but he’s not good at it, so he reads from note cards that go on for pages and pages incorporating the conversations he overheard while walking through the theatre until he has to be physically dragged off stage so that the play can begin.

“It was a risk,” Adam said. “When you’re working in absurdism you take some risks, maybe you are able to take bigger or strange risks, but this was another one that ended up paying off. If you think too hard about that kind of thing, you might take it out, but I was glad to have the opportunity to put it in front of people and find out that it did (and does) actually work.”

www.studioroanoke.org/lunchbox.html

Guest Profile: Joe Banno

Joe Banno been directing for more than 25 years, staging more than 75 productions at the Source Theatre Company (where he was artistic director for more than a decade), Theatre J, Mutineer Theatre, Blue Heron Theatre, Renaissance Theatreworks and other companies around the US. His acclaimed, updated stagings of Shakespeare have been seen at the Folger Theatre, Washington Shakespeare Company and Shenandoah Shakespeare, among other theatres. Banno has directed over 30 opera and musical theatre productions with a dozen companies including Opera Delaware, Wolf Trap Opera and the Alba Music Festival (in Northern Italy). He directed his first independent feature, Sleeping and Waking (2008), and has a Shakespeare-based feature film currently in development for production due to begin this year.

“I’ve been working with new plays for thirty years now, and I’ve never found such a consistently compelling, prodigiously skilled group of playwrights as the students Todd Ristau has nurtured in his Hollins program,” Joe remarked on the Playwright’s Lab.

Banno has been a frequent guest of the Lab. In 2008 he directed a short play by Adam Hahn at Mill Mountain Theatre for Overnight Sensations and returned as a guest responder for our Festival of Student Readings in 2009. In September of last year, Joe directed the Studio Roanoke production of Elvis Blossom by Sunny da Silva. He now returns to Roanoke to direct Adam Hahn’s Dear Abe.

“Adam and Sunny—to name but two among a gifted class of writers—have compellingly individual voices and know the nuts and bolts of how a good play is put together,” Joe told us. “That’s partly thanks to their innate talent, but has just as much to do with the kind of intense, conservatory training Todd gives them as director of the graduate playwriting program at Hollins. Not to mention the who’s-who of great American playwrights the Lab brings in, giving students invaluable master-class training in their craft. Adam and Sunny are smart, savvy, ready-for-prime-time writers, and directing their plays was a great joy for me.”

Joe is a recipient of the Helen Hayes Award, the Mary Goldwater Award and the Bud Yorkin Award. Complementing his directing work with a second career as a music journalist, Banno has also served as a classical music reviewer for The Washington Post since 1993, as opera critic for Washington City Paper (1989 to 2008).

www.joebannodirector.com
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From the Director: What You’ve Taken, You Can Teach

Taking good notes in class not only helps with grades, but can be very handy if you’re ever asked to suggest some additional course offerings of your own. This was certainly true for me when I started teaching. I was hired to teach two courses in dramatic literature, one in theatre appreciation, and playwriting. It wasn’t long before I was being asked to teach other classes I could demonstrate experience in...like acting, directing, and to even design some courses of my own, like Writer as Performer.

This is not an uncommon phenomenon. I know someone who taught at a small college in the English department. It became known he’d taken theatre classes and he was asked to fill in for the acting teacher who was on sabbatical. A playwriting class followed, then directing, and now he’s the head of the theatre department.

I didn’t graduate from Iowa planning to design a new MFA program at Hollins. I did, however, seize opportunities to talk with faculty and guests about how the academic structure worked there. I served as Graduate Student Representative so I went to faculty meetings and served on committees. I helped to interview possible new faculty, and even helped in the redesign the undergraduate curriculum. All of that experience is what made the accepting the opportunity at Hollins possible.

Even if you don’t plan to teach in a school, most small theatres have an education department and are always looking for ways to expand their offerings and increase community outreach. Look at your transcript for classes you’ve taken that could be converted into workshop sessions you could offer at your local theatre for extra income, added experience, and increased name recognition.

If you learned it, you can teach it. The more you teach it, the better you know it. So—take good notes and ask good questions in class. Think about how to apply what you’re learning to your work...but also how what you learned might help you to get some work.

Todd Ristau, Director