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The Lab Report
Playwriting News from the Playwright’s Lab at Hollins University
Volume 04, Issue 10 (March, 2011)

Summer Course Offerings for Summer 2011

CREATIVE COURSES
THEA 501 Playwright’s Lab (4) Ristau All students, faculty, staff, and guests meet for readings of student work, guest presentations, exercises and discussion. Course must be repeated three consecutive summers.

THEA 520 Narrative Theory and Dramatic Structure (4) Ristau Introduction to the basics of storytelling and the creation of dramatic texts Required course for first-year students.

THEA 550: Special Topics in Playwriting: Experimental Playwriting (Ruth Margraff) Students will be guided in the creation of non-linear and non-traditional approaches to drama, as well as study of the work of recent avant garde playwrights.

ANALYTICAL COURSES
THEA 510 Playscript Analysis and Criticism (4) Margraff Intensive critical analysis of the play script as a blueprint for production covering representative texts from a range of theatre styles, genres, and periods. Required course for first-year students.

THEA 551: Guest Seminar: Arts Management (4) Bob Moss This course is designed to help playwrights better understand the inner workings of both commercial and non-profit theatres by examining the specific concerns which shape how different types of theatres support new play development.

THEA 513: Topics in Theatre History: The Off-Off Broadway Explosion (4) Bob Moss The bohemian revolution against the commercialism of Broadway began in tiny spaces—Caffé Cino, La Mama ETC, Judson Poet’s Theatre, Theatre Genesis and others—and would change the face of American theatre. This course covers the history of this movement, the playwrights and producers who made it happen, the individual theatres that provided homes for these provocative new plays, and the experimental plays themselves.

ADVANCED WORKSHOPS
THEA 570 Master Class - First Drafts (4) Ristau In this intensive workshop students will write a completely new play each week using shared writing prompts and exercises. Six new first drafts will result over the six-week course. While it is possible that these first drafts might eventually be developed and revised into final drafts, the emphasis is on mastering the discipline necessary to produce substantive work on a deadline, as well as reinforcing the student’s understanding of the fundamentals of play structure.

Registration is now open, please contact us for assistance in registering for classes or completing your application.

www.hollins.edu/grad/playwriting/courses.html

Student Spotlight: Yulia Gray

Yulia Gray is an MFA playwright and a graduate of the Ohio College of Clowing Arts, where she has also taught as a guest instructor. She performs as a clown under the name Alizarin Crimson.

A native of the former Soviet Union, Yulia brings an uncompromising passion to her work on the page as well as on the stage.

Yulia holds bachelor’s degrees in biology, art, art history and medicine with training in dermatopathology. She has been studying theatre at the University of Akron where she has been active behind the scenes by working on sets, makeup, props, designing projections and also performing.

Last year was an awakening of sorts for Gray, whose interest in playwriting flowered into genuine passion. She took a distance learning course in writing short plays during the Spring semester and has been looking to set up a No Shame in Akron and plans to take First Drafts this summer.

“l want to come back,” Yulia said. “Playwriting is all I want to do. There was a time when I wanted to renounce the world, you know? But now, I want to do it in a whole different way. I am going into playwriting.”
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The play received its world premier production at Studio Roanoke this month under the direction of Todd Ristau, who is also the Program Director for the Playwright’s Lab at Hollins University. In the play, three strange and slightly menacing characters meet in a Denny’s restaurant and the audience overhears them discussing murders and robberies they have been involved in, midgets and con men they have loved, and jail time they have served.

Ruth deals black jack at a casino and is also a contract killer. Charlie is a hustler down on his luck who is building a space ship. Desiree is a pre-op transgender prostitute. Five years separate act one from act two. Throughout the play, Hancock’s stage directions, which serve as a kind of objective narration, are written as footnotes in the text and intended to be projected as slides during the production. Often the information in the slides, whether word or image, directly contradicts or provides deeper insight into the dialogue being spoken by the actors.

MFA playwright Chad Runyon played Desiree in the production and documented his process as the basis for an experiential learning practicum examining the ways that acting in a new play might inform his own work as a playwright. Ristau was the instructor for the course and David Hancock served as his advisor on the project. Runyon had to write a detailed paper to accompany his performance, which he titled Escaping Flesh Time Through Free Will & Blind Spots. The title references lines spoken in the play and reflects one of the primary goals of the characters and underlying messages of the piece. In writing the play, Hancock wrestled with whether or not fictional characters can have free will, and how they exist outside the flesh of the actor portraying them.

“This project strengthened and altered my approach to playwriting,” Runyon said. “I was forced to reexamine the purpose of plays, the importance of research, the process of writing and a playwright’s responsibility to audiences, actors and themselves.”

Chad immersed himself in the LGBT community in Roanoke and worked with a member of that community, Dolly Davis, on ensuring that the performance avoided caricature. “It was a grueling process for everyone,” Ristau said. “The play demands a hyper realism and the lines must be not only word perfect, but punctuation perfect. The actors can’t see the slides but the slides describe blocking. We spent hours rehearsing a single page.”

“I was very pleased,” Hancock said. “I thought it was successful. The performances were exquisite, Todd’s work was great, the set was great. It’s not an easy play.”

David will be returning in July as a guest speaker and the cast will reunite for a reading of SECONDS, a sequel Hancock wrote as an opening night gift for the cast of BOOTH.
Neeley Gossett, a Hollins MFA playwright who lives in the Atlanta area, was selected for participation as one of the writers in the SETC Ten-Minute Play Festival.

“It was exciting,” Gossett said. “There were three other writers, but I was the only grad student and the only woman. We were given the genders of our actors and picked props, then left in a hotel conference room all night. In the morning we turned everything over to the directors.”

After the performances, all the writers were given feedback from the man who literally wrote the book on the ten-minute play, Gary Garrison. Garrison is a playwright, author, Executive Director for Creative Affairs of the Dramatists Guild of America and Artistic Director/Division Head of Playwriting for the Goldberg Department of Dramatic Writing at the Tisch School of the Arts.

Todd Ristau, Program Director of the Playwright’s Lab, regularly participates on numerous playwriting panels at SETC and has served as Chair of the High School Playwriting Contest Committee for several years. Hollins playwriting students frequently help select the finalists and Ristau directs the staged reading of the winning play. Sometimes the reading presents interesting synergies between the graduate and undergraduate programs. This year’s reading of the winning play, Eisegesis by Nick Mecikalski, included undergraduate actor Elaine Previs with graduate playwrights Chad Runyon and David Schwingle performing with her. All participated in the moderated talkback that followed.

Chad Runyon was also enthusiastic about attending the convention. He said, “You’ve got the option of attending seven or eight workshops a day, and some of them are incredible. A few instructors significantly changed the way I prepare and perform as an actor, which also affects my work as a writer. And, lucky for me, I’ve developed what I feel are lasting professional relationships with these generous and talented people.”

Keynote speakers are also highlights of the conference. Atlanta playwright Pearl Cleage spoke on an emerging American language resulting from multi-ethnic and multi-cultural forces. Broadway actor Matt Cavenaugh discussed how theatre artists must take ownership of their own careers and Ben Cameron, Program Director for Arts at the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation gave a passionate and articulate discussion of the future of arts funding in America.

In addition to the full slate of conference activities, a meeting of Dramatists Guild members was organized by Pamela Turner, Regional Rep for the Greater Atlanta Area. The meeting was hosted by Working Title Playwrights.
Playwright’s Lab at Hollins University

Todd Ristau, Director
Graduate Program in Playwriting
Hollins University
PO Box 9602
Roanoke, VA 24020-1602
Phone: 540.362.6386
Fax: 540.362.6465
E-mail: tristau@hollins.edu

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

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From the Director: Backtalk, The Agony of Post Show Discussions

One of the most useful, possibly one of the most terrifying, and sometimes one of the most painful tools in new play development is the talkback with the writer after a reading or a production of their work.

As a playwright, you’ve just watched a room full of people watch or listen to your words and then you go sit on the stage and have to listen to what the audience thought, how what you wrote made them feel happy, sad, angry, thoughtful—and then take questions that prove they didn’t understand your play.

You’re the most vulnerable a playwright can be and are blinking like a deer in the headlights wondering why you chose to be a writer in the first place.

There are a lot of reasons to have a talkback and you need to know why you’re there in order to have a hope of the talkback being useful to anyone. Is this talkback about developing your play or developing an audience for new plays? Are you hoping for useful feedback or simply hoping for praise? Is this more about fundraising with a “meet the writer” event where the audience is the general public or is it about improving your script by getting an audience of people with knowledge and experience in the field of new plays?

What is expected of you? Are you supposed to answer questions or just take notes? Are you there to respond or to justify your decisions?

Unless you know the answers to those questions and unless you and the theatre hosting the talkback are in agreement, this is a one way ticket to disaster.

The talkback can be an artistic tool, but that works best when it is in private and for an invited audience, like our readings in Lab. The more common kind of talkback is a marketing tool to increase audience investment in new work, like the talkbacks after the readings in our Festival.

If you know the purpose of the event, you can start to frame your responses in the way that will be most beneficial to you and the theatre hosting it.

Todd Ristau, Director