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Todd Ristau
Hollins University, tristau@hollins.edu

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Theatrical Gems is a new organization that exists to educate audiences about the past, present, and future of theater. MFA playwright Jonathan G Galvez is Artist in Residence with the company, headed by Claudia Stuart (Executive Director) and Jacob Shoesmith-Fox (Artistic Director).

The company’s primary focus is preserving theatre by presenting old plays from Broadway’s history that are rarely done for contemporary audiences as well as new plays by emerging writers that might otherwise have a hard time getting produced.

Last summer, Theatrical Gems produced a revival of Mr. President, Irving Berlin’s 1963 Tony Award winning musical... though, admittedly the Tony was for Best Stage Technician. The group’s 2010 treatment of the material won accolades from the press, even if the original script didn’t win over 1963 audiences. The Theatrical Gems showcase of the full libretto was the first time it had been performed since it closed on Broadway.

In December, Theatrical Gems produced a revival of Wildcat, the 1960 musical that was Lucille Ball’s only Broadway play. Galvez was Assistant Director for the new production, which starred Robert Cuccioli & Luba Mason from Jekyll and Hyde.

This month the group produced a project called Broadway For Broke People, a one-night cabaret performance at The Duplex Cabaret Theatre. The performance is essentially a concert featuring songs from Broadway but “stripped of their spectacle.”

Theatrical Gems has focused on doing benefits for other organizations like the Actor’s Fund and Broadway Cares for their initial forays. This allows them to build important relationships by working with industry veterans who provide them with an experienced acting pool and draws on established networks who are inherently invested in the benefit doing well.

“It’s easier than you think to break into the business by starting your own company,” Galvez told us. “There are also organizations, like Fractured Atlas, whose whole reason for existing is to help you make your idea actually work out.”

Student Spotlight: Rebecca Quirk

Rebecca Quirk came to the program primarily to study dramaturgy, but has proven herself to be a very talented playwright as well.

She has a strong background in technical theatre and has worked professionally as a lighting designer, and master electrician. Rebecca is a working professional freelance dramaturg focusing on new works from emerging playwrights. She recently worked with Southern Rep in New Orleans as the research dramaturg for Sarah Ruhl’s In The Next Room when it premiered there last year.

“I’m a complete research junkie,” Rebecca explains. “I love being locked in the library for hours. That is my version of Heaven. I love research so much that I actually run a website chronicling queer history, since we don’t have much of that.”

Rebecca is dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge, adept at applying that knowledge in practical ways, tactful, generous, eager to participate and always diplomatic. In short, she’s the perfect dramaturg!
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To The New Girl by Samantha Macher opens at Manhattan Repertory Theatre

Scripts are reviewed as part of the production selection process, and once chosen the creative team behind the show works closely with the highly professional and dedicated team at MRT to ensure everyone—including the audience—has the best possible experience for the lowest possible cost.

Samantha Macher, one of our MFA playwrights, had her newest play, To The New Girl, included as part of the Spring Playfest 2011 at MRT this month.

“I had heard that productions at MRT are an easy experience, and so I sent them my play Arctic Circle and they declined,” Sam told us. “So, I was mad but had just finished New Girl so I sent them that and another play I wrote last summer called The Veil. I thought that if they don’t like these then they just don’t like me, and that’s fine. They said they liked them both! New Girl and Veil are really straight forward, easy to do, cheap to produce and so that made sense. Arctic Circle was a finalist for the Reva Shiner Comedy Award at the Bloomington Playwright’s Project, but people don’t know what to do with it. This was not the first rejection of the year. I got many, many rejection letters this year.”

We’re proud that our student playwrights take the inevitable rejections in stride and are committed to making their own opportunities.

“I had just left the reading of New Girl at SkyPilot Theatre in Los Angeles and they told me they were going to do the show in LA in August. We were celebrating at the bar and I checked my email. Manhattan Rep had just written saying yes to New Girl in New York,” Sam said. “I had to leave to go cry tears of happiness in the other room.”

Then the panic set in. Sam would be producing her own showcase in New York. She wrote a check to secure the room. “A production would be a major endeavor because it involves dance and projections,” Royal told us. “But, the reading went well. Theatre students were there, including the directing class and English Department faculty. There was a talkback after the reading and the methodology was a stark contrast to how we do it at Hollins. I appreciated how Hollins has trained and prepared us for the talkback experience.”

In addition to pursuing her MFA in Playwriting at Hollins University, Royal Shirée is simultaneously pursuing an MA in English at Lynchburg College.

The White Door by Royal Shirée Read at Randolph College

one-woman shows which have been produced by Randolph College, Waterworks Players Theatre, and Leading Ladies in New York. She’s been commissioned by The Legacy Museum of African-American History, the Juneteenth Coalition, Thomas Jefferson’s Poplar Forest July celebration, and the historical Avoca Museum, where Royal is the Education Facilitator.

Hermina Hendricks, director of the Randolph College Multicultural Services Office has regularly commissioned Royal to create and perform one-woman shows for the college.

“I told Hermina about my new play, The White Door,” Royal said. “It isn’t a solo piece, but she thought it was very intriguing and though she isn’t connected with the theatre department there, she pushed for having at least a reading Randolph.”

Mace Archer, Chair of the Theatre Department at Randolph, and theatre professor Ken Parks, worked with Royal to arrange the reading. They even held out the possibility of a full production of the play if the reading generated enough interest.

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Nicole B. Adkins wins National Playwriting Workshop Award

The Bonderman Symposium is one of two national, bi-annual children’s theatre development conferences focused on the development of new works (the other is the Kennedy Center's New Visions/New Voices conference).

The Lost Princess, written by Nicole B. Adkins as part of her MFA thesis, was a winner of the 2011 National Waldo M. and Grace C. Bonderman Playwriting Workshop and given a reading at the Indiana Repertory Theatre this month.

Nikki was flown to Indianapolis for ten days, provided with lodging and a stipend, as well as a creative team to concentrate on the development of her script, culminating in the rehearsed reading being featured at the conference.

Working on the reading were New York dramaturg Amy Jensen (a Denmark Fulbright scholar who has worked with such organizations as the New York Neo-Futurists, Sintroca, and Goodman Theatres, also NYC Regional VP for the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas), and director David Saar (Artistic Director and founder of Childsplay Theatre in Tempeh, AZ, and playwright of the award winning play for youth, The Yellow Boat).

“It was a defining experience,” the playwright told us. “The Yellow Boat is one of my all-time favorite plays for youth, so I was really thrilled that David Saar would be directing my piece.”

Work began long before she arrived in Indianapolis. Nikki, David and Amy spent about a month and a half revising the script. Once at the symposium, the rest of our team was added, including professional age-appropriate actors, and a graduate intern as their assistant/stage manager.

Nicole gives some credit for her success to her work with the Playwright’s Lab.

She told us, “From my perspective, the Lab helped prepare me in so many ways. We learned the most productive and professional ways to run and respond to feedback sessions, to work fast, and to be bold. We learned what makes a good play, and never to be content with mediocre work or letting the iron get cold. We learned to work as individuals and also as generous, conscientious, and motivated members of the theatre community at large.”

www.irtlive.com/artists_information/playwrights/bonderman_introduction/

Book Roots

Book Roots was organized by Elizabeth Dragga and Jessica McClendon in January of 2010 with a mission to empower underserved youth to build personal resiliency and become self-motivated learners through literature and arts-based enrichment programs. They were joined in March by Nicole Adkins, who has her MFA from the Hollins Children’s literature program with an emphasis in playwriting as well as a background in professional children’s theatre.

The small company is working to connect teens with books they like, helping them build personal libraries, and encouraging them to discover and explore individual creative interests. They make regular visits to schools and are forging creative partnerships with supportive organizations like Children’s Book World and Determined to Succeed, an educational non-profit.

Members of the company help the students discover and explore their various interests and passions through books, but also to connect them with a larger community of mentors for hands-on learning experiences. It seemed natural to expand the services offered by Book Roots to include a monthly book club and quarterly enrichment workshops based on the students’ various interests, offered by professionals from the community. To date these workshops have included: Music Production/Song-Writing, Make-up Design, Crochet, Playwriting, and Poetry.

www.bookroots.org
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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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From the Director: Controversial Work and the Writer’s Responsibility

The history of theatre is a history of controversy. When Thespis first stepped out of the chorus it was controversial. A layperson was imitating a divinity! Blasphemous! An old tradition was being shattered to start a new tradition! Outrageous! Instead of a unison hymn sung by all the chorus, a character was engaging the chorus in dialogue! Shocking!

Plato, Socrates and Plutarch all advocated tight control or outright abolition of the mimetic arts in fear of their corrupting influence on society and the youth.

People have rioted in theatres over endings they didn’t approve of, like Nora abandoning her husband and children in Ibsen’s Doll House.

After Columbine, schools banned on the presentation of plays that incorporated the use of prop guns—sometimes swapping them for swords!

Recently, a production of Corpus Christi by Terrance McNally was cancelled after the Lt. Governor condemned the play for being offensive, crude and irreverent. A gay Jesus? Never!

After September 11th a near constant discussion circulated about what was and was not appropriate when dealing with related subjects in art.

I think it is entirely appropriate, and responsible, for playwrights to consider the impact of their work on an audience. They should absolutely not be surprised when work they know is going to be provocative provokes some negative reactions.

However, taking that into consideration is not the same as self-censorship. Write what is in you, and what needs to be written by you. Then decide where to do it and for whom. Take a moment to decide if what you’ve written, and how you’ve written it, is prodding people to take action or just poking them with a stick.

Are you helping an audience face uncomfortable truths or just enjoying making them uncomfortable? Either is fine, if intentional, but the former is more likely to get your audience to come to another one of your shows.