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Guest Profile: Branko Dimitrijevic

Branko Dimitrijevic is a playwright and novelist from Serbia, former Yugoslavia. He has three published novels (one of which was made into a major movie) and many plays both produced for children and adults. He currently serves as a member of the board of the Drama Artists Association of Serbia and dramaturg for the Serbian National Theater in Novi Sad, Serbia's oldest performing arts institution.

In Summer of 2010, Branko visited Hollins as a guest responder for the Festival of Student Readings.

“The plays that I heard were nicely composed and had lively dialogue,” Branko said. “The young actors were a delight to listen to and the whole event was a nice mixture of spontaneity and professionalism.”

Dimitrijevic went on to say, “I was so impressed at how this event was organized that I wrote about it for Ludus Magazine, the bimonthly magazine for theater professionals in Serbia. I also told the faculty of the University of Novi Sad Theater Department that they should organize something along the same lines and maybe invite either Todd Ristau or Jeff Goode to help them do so.”

Branko was a member of the Playwright’s Workshop and International Writing Program at Iowa in the 1980’s. During that time he worked frequently with Goode and Ristau staging plays in off campus venues, doing readings of his work, and performing at No Shame Theatre.

www.snp.org.rs

Guest Profile: Chris Jones of the Chicago Tribune

Chris Jones is the chief theater critic for the Chicago Tribune. He has reviewed and commented on culture, the arts, politics and entertainment for the Tribune for 15 years.

Along with being the paper’s chief voice on local and national theatrical productions, he also writes a weekly column on culture and the arts. We were delighted to have him visit Hollins as a guest responder for the Festival of Student Readings last summer.

“I found this to be a remarkable visit,” Jones told us. “You really create a unique summer community of writers and I found the emphasis the program puts on recruiting students with rich and diverse life experiences really enhanced the quality of the work. The atmosphere was fun and supportive and it truly was a pleasure to be there and offer some feedback. Several of those writers have kept in touch.”

Jones has covered theater in numerous cities throughout the United States and serves on the boards or committees for major drama awards including the Pulitzer Prize. His arts criticism has appeared in major newspapers and magazines.

Jones spent 10 years teaching at Northern Illinois University, where he also served assistant chair of the School of Theatre and Dance. He also served as associate dean of DePaul University’s Theatre School, where he continues to be an adjunct professor. His honors include the Gold Medallion from the American College Theatre Festival, for his work with young theater critics.

bio.tribune.com/ChrisJones
This is My Office by Andy Bragen at Studio Roanoke

Andy Bragen, a graduate of Brown University’s MFA Program in Literary Arts, and a playwright whose work has been developed and produced in theatres around the country including Clubbed Thumb, The Guthrie Theatre, Ars Nova, Rattlestick, LAByринth, EST, Repertorio Español, Soho Think Tank, Page 73 Productions, NYU’s hotINK Festival, The Illusion Theatre, The Aurora Theatre and the Lark Theatre. He is a core member of the Playwrights Center and a part of the 2010-2011 Soho Rep Writer/Director Lab.

Andy’s newest piece, This Is My Office, was first produced by Brown/Trinity Playwrights Rep in July 2010, and this month the one-person piece was produced at Studio Roanoke under the direction of Todd Ristau. Local actor Drew Dowdy played the character of playwright Andy Bragen. The show is a semi-autobiographical account of a writing residency in what turns out to be the former office of the playwright’s deceased father. Memory, musings and grappling with a cornucopia of personal failures make up this moving play.

Andy invites the audience into his world and talks in circles around his writer’s block. With each pass, coming closer to confronting uncomfortable truths about himself. At the same time he inadvertently helps the audience to do the same while listening to the rambling, poignant vignettes from his life.

The previous production was a traditional monologue play delivered from a stage, but Ristau wanted to create an atmosphere where the audience was literally let into the experience while simultaneously let in on the character’s secrets. They were given a “tour” of the space, and then helped the actor by setting out their own chairs. Everything had the peculiar intimacy of a very real, very private conversation. Everything was naturalistic, including hand props created for the show that were given to the audience to examine.

Were you happy with the Show?

I definitely was inspired by some of Todd’s choices, and some of the acting choices, I’m not sure how they might affect future versions of the script, but definitely I learned things that may come in use for other plays. Working at Studio Roanoke with Todd definitely helped me to grow artistically. I learned a lot, and was very pleased with the results. This is a hard business, and the production definitely made me feel good. It gave me hope. I’ve had lots of chances to think about, and talk with friends about the production of THIS IS MY OFFICE in Roanoke, and I really have great respect and admiration for what they did with it, how Todd built the production so effectively for that space. I have come out of the experience feeling a renewed faith in theatre, and also a great deal of awe and appreciation for the work he put in to make theatre come to life. It meant a lot to me.
Wendy-Marie Foerster’s Adaptation of NO EXIT

Wendy-Marie Foerster is one of our MFA playwrights. She currently is the Development Director at San Luis Obispo Little Theatre where she helps run their No Shame and frequently directs and heads up other creative projects involving new work.

After directing David Mamet’s adaptation of Voysey Inheritance for SLOLT, she was asked by the Artistic Director of the of Ubu’s Other Shoe (SLOTS staged reading program) to take on adapting Jean Paul Sartre’s No Exit.

“I agreed before re-reading the script,” Foerster admitted. “I’d read it during my undergrad studies and completely forgotten how amazingly depressing it is.”

The project of modernizing the 1970 text and giving it an American flavor may have proved challenging, especially with her additional duties at the theatre cutting into her writing time, but everyone agreed the results were impressive.

Foerster recalls, “It took a very long time before an image hit me that opened the door to the adaptation. At first I struggled with the setting. In the adaptation I’d read the characters quibbled over the color of the settee and this statue in the room that seemed to mock them. I tried to imagine an uncomfortable setting that would force these characters into constant contact with each other because that is at the root of their hell. I decided they would get no seat at all. In fact, no set whatsoever. Hell would be standing or sitting on the ground. Then I had an image of the space shrinking as time continued on.”

Wendy-Marie envisioned using lighting to shrink the playing space, and the three characters are forced to stand shoulder to shoulder sharing only one pool of light by the end. She changed the names to American equivalents of the French names. So Joseph Garcin became Vince Vaughn. Inês became Agnes and Estelle became Star. The Valet was split into an Escorts role, which is shared by 4 actors.

The reading was directed by Thom Waldman, who worked closely with the playwright.

“This was the first time I’ve been a part of the earliest rehearsals of my own work,” Foerster told us.

Ernie Zulia Receives Perry F. Kendig Award from the Arts Council of the Blue Ridge

Ernie Zulia is an associate professor and Chairs Theatre Department at Hollins University. He is an accomplished director, was Associate Artistic Director at Mill Mountain Theatre for a number of years, and wrote the stage adaptation of Robert Fulghum’s All I Need To Know I Learned In Kindergarten, which premiered at MMT in June of 1992.

For his tireless work to bring new professionalism, excitement and artistic reach to his students and the community at large in Roanoke, the Arts Council of the Blue Ridge conferred upon Zulia the Perry F. Kendig Award for outstanding support of the arts this month at a gala held in the Taubman Museum of Art.

“I fell in love with Roanoke,” Ernie said of his choice to locate here. “Not only is it absolutely gorgeous geographically, but the people are so welcoming and the atmosphere of the community is so striking to me. I feel like the arts community in Roanoke is my family, and the chemistry of the people who have come together here is pretty rich. What I love, which you don’t find in other cities, is that all the disciplines interact. I have very close friends who are painters, who are sculptors and composers who are not working with me in my own discipline but who are stimulating me because we scratch through the surface together and try to dig deeper into what it is we’re trying to say through the arts.”

Ernie was instrumental in creating the support needed in the Board of Trustees that led to the creation of the playwriting program at Hollins. His advocacy and commitment to a community of artists that is integrated into the broader local community is why he so richly deserves this recognition.

The Perry F. Kendig Award, named for the late Roanoke Valley arts patron and a former president of Roanoke College, was established in 1985 to recognize examples of support, involvement, accomplishment in the arts, and to inform the community about significant contributions to the arts in our region.

The Perry F. Kendig awards are chosen by a committee of community volunteers based on nominations from the general public.

The Arts Council of the Blue Ridge was launched in 1976 with the mission of advancing arts and culture throughout western Virginia by providing leadership in community cultural planning, educational programming, services for cultural organizations and artists, and arts and cultural advocacy.
Playwright’s Lab at Hollins University

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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.

From the Director: New Expanded Format Coming Next Month

We are about to begin our fifth year of the playwriting program at Hollins University. Next month many of our first cohort of graduate playwrights will return to campus for their last summer of classes and one of the largest groups of new MFA playwrights will arrive at Hollins for the first time.

Since we started our playwriting program, more than forty playwriting students have enrolled for summer sessions. More than fifty guest artists have visited to talk to our students, conduct workshops or respond to student work. Ten working professional faculty have taught classes, advanced workshops and conducted independent studies.

Our students have had readings of their work on campus and in legitimate theatres around the country. Several have won awards for their work in national and regional festivals, been published, and fully produced in cities like Roanoke, New York, Washington DC, and Los Angeles.

Our students have had professional internships and attended prestigious writer’s colonies, become resident playwrights, dramaturgs, and artistic staff at professional theatres.

Even publishing these newsletters on a monthly basis, four pages is simply not enough space to keep up with the growing number of students we are nurturing here at Hollins and the impressive number of professional credits they are adding to their portfolios. We no longer have space to also sing the praises of our faculty, visiting instructors and guest artists. There’s just so much to tell you, we simply need more space in order to do it effectively.

Starting next month, The Lab Report, the official newsletter of the Playwright’s Lab at Hollins University will move to an 8-page format.

We’ll still be bringing you the same news about courses, student accomplishments and the professional development of our faculty. We’ll just be bringing you more of it because there’s so much more to bring you!