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Guest Profile: Sandra Hosking

Sandra Hosking is Co-Playwright-in-Residence at Spokane Civic Theatre whose plays has been performed in New York, LA, Atlanta and elsewhere—including Canada. Sandra is also known for the monthly columns she writes for InSight for Playwrights which has included interviewing some of the best known playwrights of our generation. This summer, Sandra came to Hollins as one of the guest responders for our Festival of Student Readings.

“When the director, Todd Ristau, invited me to come to Hollins, the program seemed like a great opportunity for writers and MFA students and so I really wanted to be part of that,” Sandra told us. “It seems like Hollins really cares about its MFA program and I know that Todd personally tries to advocate for his student’s work. He explained how the reading festival is not just about making a play better but how to help the students get out into the real world of theatre once you’re done.”

When asked about her response to the festival Hosking said, “This weekend has been a wonderfully intense collection of ten plays that were all different—different voices, different styles. They were entertaining, funny, serious. Anything you could want from theatre, you had a chance to see that. And then hearing the comments from the responders and the audience also informed my own work. Interacting with the students was the best part.”

Asked if she had any advice for aspiring playwrights, Sandra said, “Keep writing and put up readings yourself of your own work, if no one else will do it for you and invite your friends, invite the public and get feedback and then work on it some more. Fix it, and then put it out there again. Just keep sending your work out there and don’t give up. But also, don’t send it out too early. Learn which advice is helpful and which isn’t.”

sandrahosking.webs.com

Student Spotlight: Ricky Steven Young

Ricky Steven Young Jr. is a playwright, director, and dramaturg from Clarksville, Tennessee. He recently received his Bachelor of Science in Theatre from Austin Peay State University and just completed his first summer in the Playwright’s Lab at Hollins University.

“The classes were mind blowing,” Ricky said of the summer session. “The way you run the lab is great, and I’m thinking of taking the format back to Clarksville with me and these classes are really going to help when we start up the educational program in our theatre company.”

Ricky Steven is the founder and artistic director of The Fronkensteen Experimental Theatre Group in Clarksville, TN, for which he recently directed the new play, Heart of Glass by fellow company member, Robert Tonner.

All work produced by Fronkensteen comes from their writer’s forum called The Inklings.

“We only do plays by local playwrights, but we don’t want their finished plays, we want to produce the first draft,” Young said of the company. “We want to work with a writer from the earliest point on up.”

Young, who has Tourette Syndrome, is also an outspoken activist for the rights of artists with disabilities. He plays all sorts of folk instruments and is an avid science fiction fan. He describes himself as a “Dalek with a banjo.”

Young summed up the summer by saying, “This was just Theatrical Heaven! Such a wonderful program to help us grow and develop our craft.”

www.fronkensteentheater.com
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To The New Girl, by Samantha Macher, Opens in Los Angeles

Samantha Macher is having tremendous success during her final year of the MFA playwriting program at Hollins University. She has already racked up productions and publications from New York to Los Angeles, including this month’s critically acclaimed six-week run of To The New Girl From The Former Mrs. ______: Sound Advice For My Husband’s New Wife or Mistress.

The play is produced by SkyPilot Theatre, where Sam is currently a resident playwright. SkyPilot has forty actors in its ensemble and half of them are women. To balance an all male production earlier this season, SkyPilot sought a play with good roles for ten women to include at some point in the future.

Sam was already working on New Girl, a series of monologues by female characters with varying perspectives on infidelity, as a possible submission.

When SkyPilot opened up the slots in their reading series, Sam eagerly volunteered for February Reading. When the script was read, everyone at the theatre fell in love with it and New Girl was immediately selected by Artistic Director Bob Rusch for inclusion as part of the current season!

Knowing that the script in its early form wasn’t quite ready for a world premier even with the enthusiasm of the company at SkyPilot, she continued to revise and rewrite. Some of the monologues were performed at No Shame Theatre in Roanoke with changes based on audience reaction to the individual pieces. Then, she submitted New Girl for possible inclusion as part of the Manhattan Repertory Theatre’s Spring Playfest 2011. The play was chosen and Sam travelled to New York for the workshop production last April.

The LA World Premier of the play, which runs for six weeks at the T.U. Studios in North Hollywood, is directed by company member Jeanette Farr (who also took the production photo below).

“Samantha was wonderful to collaborate with,” Farr said. “She provided distinct and individual voices to these characters and each has an emotional journey making the process not only fun for the actors, but satisfying for the audience.”

The critics agree, here are some cuttings from the reviews:

...a bracing blitz of pure estrogen that might make you rush out and organize a charity bake sale. This entertaining evening consists of 10 monologues from various women scorned who directly address their exes’ new wives and lovers. Things start off on a kinky note as a young woman (Mackenzie English) addresses the “other woman,” who is now accommodating her ex-boyfriend’s singular fetish. The evening comes full circle with the final monologue, a wrenching piece in which an elderly woman (Rosina Pinchot, in a moving turn) turns over the care of her Alzheimer’s sufferer husband to his new “girlfriend” at the nursing facility. From the profane to the poignant, the opening and closing scenes effectively frame the other monologues, which show Macher’s impressive range. The performances are all solid, but standouts include Niki Nowak as a sardonic Southern belle married to a gay television evangelist and Shelby Janes as an abused pregnant woman who has grown a steel backbone.”

F. Kathleen Foley – LA Times

“This is quite an emotional and racy production... abundant with meaningful messages, familiar deceit and memorable performances!”

Pat Taylor – Tolucan Times

“Macher’s writing reflects the humor and detail of an insightful storyteller. Pinchot captures the spotlight with a heartrending portrayal of a lost and cherished love. Also notable are Tifanie McQueen as an abused wife livid enough to murder her rival, and Shelby Janes as a pregnant gal bidding a welcome good riddance to her crackhead boyfriend.”

Deborah Klugman – LA Weekly

“This poignant and often humorous look at relationships from the female perspective is witty, charming and well worth seeing. It is an enjoyable and sometimes uneasy look at women who are ‘left behind’ when dreams, hope, and trust are shattered.”

Gerie Rhosen – NoHoArtsDistrict

skypilottheatre.com
Neeley Gossett is finishing up her final year in the Playwright’s Lab. Since coming to Hollins, her works have received readings and productions at Manhattan Repertory Theatre, The Coastal Empire New Play Festival, The Great Plains Theatre Conference, Mill Mountain Theatre, Riverside Theatre, Studio Roanoke, and Big Dawg Theater. She worked as a literary intern with Celise Kalke at The Alliance Theater where she was dramaturg for Class of 3000. She holds an MA in English from The University of North Carolina Wilmington and a BA in Theater Arts from Marymount Manhattan College. Neeley also teaches English at Georgia Perimeter College.

This month, Neeley’s Breath Like A Bandage was performed as part of the Working Title Playwrights’ Ethel Woolson Lab.

The Lab Report
Playwriting News from the Playwright’s Lab at Hollins University

Professional Reading and Another Published Play for Neeley Gossett

Breath Like A Bandage

Neeley Gossett

is a new play by

directed by Melissa Fougler

dramaturg by Addae Moon

Academy Theatre
Tuesday, Aug. 16 at 7:30PM
as part of WTP’s 2011 Ethel Woolson Lab

are interested in new work.

“I’ve been a member of Working Title Playwrights for about four years,” Neely told us. “They are a great support for playwrights in Atlanta and the Woolson Lab is one of their biggest events. It’s well known as a major support for play development. It is very competitive, and I was a little surprised to get one of the three slots this year. Valetta Anderson was one of the other playwrights, and she is a major Atlanta playwright. So, I felt like I was in great company.”

After being selected, Neeley did a major rewrite of the script before beginning the workshop process and then did more revisions between each rehearsal.

Gossett told us, “It was an intense and rewarding process. I wish I could always work like this. Addae Moon is an amazing dramaturg who works at The Horizon Theatre in Atlanta. He is subtle, supportive, smart, and great at asking the right questions. He is everything a dramaturg should be. Melissa Fougler director. She works at Actors Express and other professional theaters in Atlanta, as do all the actors. Melissa really helped me to think about some of the visual elements that I often miss because I’m focused on the dialogue.”

The reading was attended by members of the general public as well as theatre professionals who gave feedback on the script and might consider it for future productions in other theatres. Neely also feels more confident about submitting the script to other theatres on her own.

“Every playwright should have this experience,” Neely said. “Every single person who worked on this play was smart, talented, and a team player.”

Neeley doesn’t hold back her enthusiasm for the playwriting program at Hollins and the benefits she’s gotten from it. She credits her time in the program with laying the groundwork for much of her current success.

“Hollins completely changed my writing for the better,” She said. “I’m not just pouring my heart on a page anymore. I know how to approach a project like a professional writer with a real knowledge of structure, style, and deadlines. Hollins is the real deal. I was talking with someone in another MFA program. She will finish hers with one finished play, while I’ll finish Hollins with eight. This program is amazing.”

Gossett’s play for young audiences, Carolina Dive, was read at the 2011 Hollins Festival of Student Readings this summer. The play is now published by YouthPLAYS.
Man With Wings by Ben R. Williams at Studio Roanoke

Man With Wings, Williams’ newest play, opened this month at Studio Roanoke. The one-act play deals with a freelance crypto-zoologist (played by Drew Dowdy) who is hot on the trail of elusive proof that might justify his life’s work of cataloging the strange and bizarre creatures. He has tracked down a retired sheriff (played by Patrick Kennerly) who investigated sightings of a winged man with glowing red eyes back in 1971.

For inspiration, Williams drew loosely on the stories about the Mothman, which supposedly haunted Point Pleasant, West Virginia and may or may not have been involved in bridge collapse that took the lives of more than 40 people.

Man With Wings relies more on chilling storytelling than spectacle, and takes place on a unit set (masterfully designed by Jason “Blue” Herbert) that, like the play, is filled with odd angles, dark corners, and stark contrasts.

Williams, who also performs in a Randy Newman tribute band, credits his time in the Playwright’s Lab with helping him make the transition from writing primarily novels and poetry to writing for the stage.

“My being in the playwriting program definitely helps. I’ve learned a lot about how to put together a play and this one, unlike my first play, Ant Farm, this new play does not involve 7,000 props. The radio class I took with Jason Grote has also come in handy with my music and I’ve also been able to edit tracks and sound effects for some of the plays we’ve put up here at the theatre.”

Kenley Smith, who is the first student to graduate from the Playwright’s Lab and founder Studio Roanoke, directed the production.

The Roanoke times called Man With Wings “a thought provoking play” and “highly entertaining.”

Smith agreed, “It’s a great cast and some really compelling characters. The subject matter really appealed to me, going back to my childhood and hearing about the Mothman in Point Pleasant, West Virginia.”

“I couldn’t be happier with the work that Kenley did on Man With Wings,” Williams said. “He brought many subtle touches I had never even considered, but that I will definitely be incorporating into the next draft.”

Smith is a past President of the Board of Studio Roanoke, and has served as Interim Artistic Director for the past year, stepping down this season in order to concentrate on his writing and other creative pursuits.
The Aesop Project at SkyPilot Theatre Features Hollins Playwrights

Nikki came up with the idea of having SkyPilot do short original plays written by the company’s playwrights-in-residence to be performed for young audiences both at the theatre and also possibly tour elementary and middle schools in the area.

Adkins oversaw the project details and worked with the theatre’s Literary Manager, Eric Johnson, on producing the event itself. This pilot project involves adaptations of Aesop’s fables and included plays by several writers associated with Hollins. Adkins wrote a script, as did MFA playwrights Samantha Macher and Adam Hahn. Former guest artist Jonathan Price and faculty member Jeff Goode also contributed plays.

The completed early drafts of the adaptations, compiled under the working title The Aesop Project, were read by members of the theatre’s acting company this month with a test audience of young people. Senior Playwright-in-Residence Jeff Goode moderated the talkback session that followed the reading.

Playwright Hahn said of the reading, “It went well, and actual children in the audience had a great time. I don’t usually think of myself as a writer of plays for children, but in Jonathan Dorf’s Theatre for Young audiences course I proved to myself that I could write them, and I have no excuse to say no to this kind of opportunity.”

The next step is Nikki making contacts with some schools to explore the feasibility of performances.

“Ideally, this would be for sixth grade students,” Adkins said, describing her target audience.

“We’re working on a study guide to compliment the California Education Standards for that level, which includes the study of Aesop as part of Greek History. I’d like to bring cogent, affordable, and entertaining theatre to pre-teen audiences. That also fits perfectly with SkyPilot’s mission.”

MFA Playwright Adam Hahn Wed in Wyndham Robertson Library

Adam Hahn was busy this summer. A production and staged reading at Studio Roanoke, finishing his thesis (which also had a reading in Festival), and taking his final class. Adam also got married in the Hollins Room of the Wyndham Robertson Library.

“This wedding was a chance for Amanda and me to bring our families to Roanoke.” Adam explained. “This has become another home for me. Amanda has been able to visit me at school and when I’ve performed at Studio Roanoke, but most of our family members had never been here. The Hollins Room was the venue for several workshops with program guests. The library was one of the first places I took Amanda when she visited last summer. She fell in love with it as soon as she walked through the door.”

Amanda, a professional baker, made their wedding cake in a kitchen at the Hollins student apartments. Adam read pages of his thesis aloud while she mixed frosting.

“She gives excellent notes,” he added. “Instead of a bachelor party, on the night before the wedding I took my fiancée to No Shame theater. The last No Shame of the summer session is always a celebratory send-off for the playwrights, especially for those of us completing the program. Our wedding was officiated by Nikki Adkins, one of my best friends since my first year in the program, and the person who introduced me to Amanda in Los Angeles.”

Congratulations, to you both!
No Shame on the Move Again

No Shame Theatre was created at the University of Iowa by Playwright’s Lab Program Director Todd Ristau in 1986 and has been in Roanoke since 2003. The popular late night venue for short original performance pieces is temporarily homeless while current host Mill Mountain Theatre undergoes renovations to both its main stage space and second stage.

While the renovations continue, and until the newly remodeled facilities have a certificate of occupancy from the City, No Shame will be on the move. For the entire month of August, by special permission of the City of Roanoke, No Shame Theatre was held outdoors in Century Plaza Park between Campbell and Church Avenues.

Writers, performers, and audience members stood under the moonlight, hoping it didn’t rain and jockeyed for limited park bench seating. Performers read scripts illuminated by flashlights and by request of the police there was no amplified music.

While in Century Plaza donations were accepted but the normal $5 admission was waived.

Renovations to Mill Mountain Theatre’s Waldron Stage are expected to be completed near the end of October. Next month, No Shame moves down the street to the newly opened Community High School auditorium. MFA playwright Chad Runyon is a co-producer of No Shame Roanoke, which provides an important experiential learning environment for both our graduate and undergraduate students as well as members of the local community.

“The City was very encouraging about this, and Mill Mountain Theatre took care of the permit applications for us,” Ristau said of the move outside. “The only thing they asked was that we be respectful of the neighbors and warned that while we are out in the public park to try and not be too loud, too obscene, or too disruptive. I think everyone was more than willing to comply with the request and return the respect and support the City gave us when they granted the permit.”

Everyone involved pitched in to make the outdoor No Shame performances a success, including moving benches back after the show and picking up any litter. We always left the park cleaner than we found it.

Robert Plowman Completes MacDowell Colony Residency

Robert Plowman, one of our MFA playwrights, was hard at work at Thornton Wilder’s desk this month. He was in residence at the MacDowell Colony, in Peterborough, New Hampshire, and occupied the same artist studio that the Pulitzer prize-winning author of Our Town had, eighty years before.

“Inside each studio, there are plaques on the walls with the names of all the artists who’ve been there before,” Plowman explained. “It’s both intimidating and inspiring to look down the list and realize that some of the most exciting playwrights of the American theatre — names like Paula Vogel, Rob Handel, Anne Washburn, and Gary Winter — sat in my rocking chair, or looked out this window.”

Founded in 1907, MacDowell is the oldest artist’s colony in the United States. It hosts roughly 250 artists a year, in seven disciplines: architects, composers, filmmakers, interdisciplinary artists, theatre artists, visual artists, and writers. At any one time, there are up to 32 artists in residence, in studios spread over 450 acres of woods and fields.

While in residence at MacDowell, Plowman worked on new drafts of two full-length plays that he’d begun in the Playwright’s Lab at Hollins. “In the intensive atmosphere of the Playwright’s Lab, we generate a great deal of new writing very quickly,” he said. “At MacDowell, I had the chance to reflect on the feedback I’ve received in staged readings and to take my work to another level.”

In addition to being a wonderful creative environment, Plowman said, MacDowell offered unexpected social benefits. “One of the profound things about the MacDowell experience is the mix of artists in residence,” says Plowman. “It is incredibly energizing that the colony brings together early career artists with people who are very established and widely recognized in their field.”

On August 14, MacDowell held its annual Medal Day, when the colony is open to the public and an award is given to an artist who’s made a major contribution to our culture. Past medalists include Robert Frost, Georgia O’Keefe, Stan Brakhage, and Joan Didion. This year playwright Edward Albee received the honor.

“Only twice before in the fifty years the medal’s been given has it gone to playwrights: to Thornton Wilder and Lillian Hellman,” Plowman said. “It was fantastic to be on hand to see Edward Albee recognized for a body of work that’s changed the American theatre.”
Hollins Graduate Gives $1000 Gift to New Works Initiative Fund

Matthew Marshall, a graduate of the Hollins MALS program (2007) and MFA program in Screenwriting (2011), gave $1000 to the New Works Initiative Fund this summer.

“What I love about the Hollins playwriting program is the wonderful guest artists we get to engage with,” Marshall explained. “They are very inspiring and encouraging. I was so glad I could be there to hear Mac Wellman speak. He really articulated something that is at the heart of why my wife and I decided to give to the New Works Initiative. Mac said that theatre is in the moment. We have such a difficult time living and appreciating things in the moment and in theatre it’s there and then it’s gone. It lingers only in the mind. I find this extremely valuable. I support the New Works Initiative because I believe there needs to be a place where people can create and experience new plays and new ways of seeing the world. New audiences can only be cultivated by giving them more opportunities to see new work. The Playwriting program at Hollins is making this happen and I feel very privileged to be able to help it however I can. That’s why I gave to the New Works Initiative and I feel others should also, for this very reason.”

The New Works Initiative Fund was created as a way to offset the cost of producing and presenting plays associated with our MFA program in playwriting. The money comes from charitable contributions as well as a share of revenue from student productions we help fund. The NWI was created in 2009 and that year we collected more than $4000. Last year we raised more than $6000.

We’ve used some of that money to bring in guest professional directors from around the country to work side by side with our graduate playwrights on fully mounted productions at area theatres like Studio Roanoke. That means much of the money donated pays for paint, costumes, props, tools and other stuff purchased from local merchants. Audiences going to those plays also go to restaurants, pay for parking, and help put more energy into the local economy. The admissions tax for those tickets help support local schools, and Mill Mountain Theatre. These exciting productions also create unique experiential learning opportunities for our undergraduate theatre students by performing in the plays, working behind the scenes, and useful internships in arts management. Plays we’ve helped produce with this fund have gone on to see professional productions in New York City, Washington DC, Los Angeles and have been or will be published. So, you see, this small fund pays huge dividends for our community and our students. The goal we’ve set for the coming year is $10,000. As the program grows, we will need at least that much to continue providing the support our playwrights need to meet their full potential and fund a slate of exciting proposed projects.

One such project is Samantha Macher’s new play, The Arctic Circle (and a recipe for Swedish pancakes) to be presented at Mill Mountain Theatre in February under the direction of Bob Moss (founder of Playwrights Horizons). The play will feature local actors and is already planned to transfer to Manhattan with the original cast!

Please, make a contribution today so that tomorrow the voices of emerging playwrights like Samantha will be heard.

Make your check payable to Hollins University, and write New Works Initiative in the memo area to ensure that your gift gets to the right fund.

Mail to:
Playwright’s Lab
PO Box 9602
Hollins University
Roanoke, VA 24020

hollins.edu/forms/give_online

The Lab Report
Playwriting News from the Playwright’s Lab at Hollins University

The Terrorism of Everyday Life by Hamell on Trial at Hollins

Ed Hamell is a one-man punk rock band with an acoustic guitar playing loud, fast music informed by politics, passion, energy, and intelligence. The banter that knits it all together into a unified show is delivered with a sharp tongue and a wicked sense of humor.

Ed performs under the name Hamell on Trial, and students in the program were treated to a performance of his show The Terrorism of Everyday Life, which won the Herald Angel Award at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2007.

“I write songs, that’s what I do,” Hamell told our students after the show. “I work very, very hard at this. But this—even though I won that award—I’m kind of playing with that. And anybody could say to me, you’re not a playwright! What the fuck are you doing? I spent my whole life doing this and you’re just...Back there, before the show, I’m thinking, Should I go in front of a theatre group? Is this a play? Really? I don’t know. Writing plays is not my passion, music is my passion, but I tell stories between the songs.”

Ed needn’t have worried. We were bowled over by his work and inspired by his ability to weave deeply personal stories from his own life into a compelling autobiographical narrative that supports, while being supported by, his music and lyrics.

MFA playwright Clinton Johnston commented, “I’ve shied away from being both writer and performer. Seeing Hamell showed me a different format for a one-person work, and I started considering it for the first time.”

www.hamelltv.com
**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.

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**From the Director: Playwriting For Dummies**

I was asked in December by John Wiley & Sons (the folks who do the “For Dummies” books) to be an Expert Reviewer for their new book on the subject of writing plays.

I read the text, from introduction to appendix, making comments as to my opinion of the content.

I was to ensure the book was complete and appropriate for an audience of writers looking to hone their playwriting skills and turn a script into a performance. I didn’t do any proofreading or copy editing, just looked for technical accuracy and made suggestions where I thought they might be helpful.

The book is written by Angelo Parra, a well respected playwright with an impressive string of credits. I think that the finished book is very useful for playwrights of all experience levels. While I don’t think it would substitute for an MFA program, Parra hits all the basics and I can honestly say that even I learned a few things from Playwriting For Dummies.

This was a fun project and I really enjoyed working on it. The publishers were first rate professionals and treated me like one too.

If your ego can handle the title of the book, you’ll likely benefit from picking it up—even if it is mainly to help friends and family to understand what this playwriting business is all about.

This isn’t meant to be just a plug for the book, though. I want to point out how quickly the reputation of our plucky little MFA program has grown. I was picked as an expert because the publishers respect what we’re doing here at Hollins. They’re no dummies.

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Todd Ristau, Director