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Todd Ristau

Hollins University, tristau@hollins.edu

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Guest Profile: Todd London

Todd London is in his sixteenth season as artistic director of New Dramatists, where he has worked closely with more than a hundred of America's leading playwrights and advocated nationally and internationally for hundreds more.

A former Managing Editor of American Theatre magazine and the author of The Artistic Home, published by the Theatre Communications Group (TCG), he has written, edited, and/or contributed to eleven books. His magazine essays and articles on the theatre have been translated for publication in Russia, North and South Africa, Scandinavia, Serbia, and Roumania. Todd won the prestigious George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism for his essays in American Theatre and a Milestone Award in for his first novel, The World's Room, published by Steerforth Press.

In 2001 he accepted a special Tony Honor on behalf of New Dramatists, and in 2005 he represented New Dramatists at the Obie Awards, where the organization was honored with the Ross Wetzsteon Award for excellence. Todd serves on the faculty of Yale School of Drama and as project director of Theatre Development Fund's (TDF) Playwrights Project.

There are few people in the world of new play development more respected or sought after for their opinions and advice than Todd London. We were very excited his busy schedule allowed him to come to Hollins as a guest speaker—and especially delighted that as part of his visit Todd wrote a 10-minute play for Overnight Sensations at Mill Mountain Theatre, which was directed by MFA playwright Kenley Smith!

After his public talk on his life in the arts and work with New Dramatists, Todd took questions from our students.

**What's the biggest obstacle to new plays getting produced?**

Money, for one thing. And access to theatres that can produce new work well, and take a risk on new work, especially when it is by unknown writers. Everybody is suffering from the economic downturn, and so the more adventurous, the larger that new work is, the harder it is to get it produced.

**What keeps you from being discouraged?**

The thing that most keeps me from being discouraged is that I really love the people I work around. I love the playwrights. I feel very discouraged most of the time about the theatre, but I don't feel discouraged about the impulse to make it and I don't feel discouraged about these crazy people who against all odds are trying to do something that is deeply meaningful to them and the world. And even though they suffer economically, there's very little guarantee that they will see their work as they imagined it, or that the culture will value it to the extent that it should—they do it anyway. They do it actively, energetically, and obsessively. And they do it in support of each other. The thing about playwrights is that they are really great people. They're curious about the world. They're supportive of each other. They're reckless, amazing, brave people and that is the thing that makes me excited about my work despite the fact that I know they're insane and the world doesn't necessarily support them as it should.

**And that's the mission of New Dramatists?**

New Dramatists is a center for the support and development of playwrights. Writers spend seven years in the residency program. It's their home base, their community center and we have their scripts on library shelves. We have two performance and rehearsal spaces. We have residence rooms and writing studios and the writers use the organization, and the building and staff for seven years to develop their work and themselves in the community of other writers.

**What are your thoughts about the program at Hollins?**

It seems really great. Great spirit in the program. I love the low residence part of it, and the teachers and guests that you bring in are fantastic. I like this speaking series, and how it adds to the program. It seems like a really well designed and passionately run program.

[Visit newdramatists.org](http://newdramatists.org)
The Lab Report

Playwriting News from the Playwright’s Lab at Hollins University

Outrageous Fortune: the life and times of the new american play

Theatre Development Fund, a not-for-profit organization, was created to identify and provide support, including financial assistance, to theatrical works of artistic merit and to encourage and enable diverse audiences to attend live theatre and dance in all their venues.

In 1999, TDF undertook a formal study of the American playwright to determine how best to help in facilitating and encouraging promising playwrights and the performance of their works.

Our guest artist, Todd London, was the Project Director and Senior Writerdy and the results have been published as Outrageous Fortune: the life and times of the new american play.

This book should be required reading for anyone who writes plays or produces new plays and will go a long way to helping writers and artistic directors understand the specific hopes, concerns, and fears of the people on other side of the table.

The report draws on quantitative and qualitative research with surveys of 94 randomly selected Theatre Communications Group members and a select group of theatres that regularly produce new plays. Additionally, 340 playwrights were identified and surveyed from a variety of areas including alumni of university programs, members of writer’s collectives, fellowship and grant recipients, submissions to festivals and competitions, commissions. The playwrights included those who have been produced or were prize and/or award recipients.

Once the data was collected, a series of roundtable discussions with playwrights and theatre leaders were conducted in four different cities. Additionally, input was sought from agents, lawyers and commercial producers.

TDR hopes that the culmination of this research will be the beginning of a new national conversation about plays and playwriting.

“The book is about the economics of the writer’s life,” London said during his visit. “This process of creating this book really led me to understand some of the limitations of the institutional theatre community that we have built in this country, and how many of the things that were established as ways of helping playwrights had the unintended consequences of alienating playwrights from their own theatres. Literary offices were created as ways of getting playwrights in, to open doors, to serve as a conduit between you and the theatres. Over time, those have solidified as actually buffers between theatres and playwrights.”

The book lays bare a laundry list of obstacles for writers and theatres to overcome, like audience expectations, tight budgets, and high ticket costs. London still sees opportunities, however.

“The history of playwriting in our country is about connections between playwrights and acting companies,” London said. “This is where you start. Work in your own community with artists that you know and grow from there.”

www.tdf.org/TDF_ServicePage.aspx?%20do=v&id=3

Uncertainty Theory by Maura Campbell Published

Maura Campbell was one of our first cohort of students and is finishing up her final year in the program. She came to us with more than thirty productions under her belt and over the past five years has continued to garner even more professional productions and publications.

Her most recent short work for young audiences is a one-act play titled Uncertainty Theory, which has just been published by YouthPLAYS.

The play takes place on graduation day with senior boys and girls getting into their gowns to prepare for their last day together. Suddenly, there is an ambulance in the parking lot and a report that one of the students may have died. First seen through the eyes of the graduating girls, then through the eyes of the graduating boys, Uncertainty Theory celebrates the power of lifelong friendships, as it contemplates alternate universes and how the future can be altered in a single tragic moment.

Kenley Smith Named Resident Playwright

Tennessee Repertory Theatre has been gifted with the funds to support the creation of new work for the theatre and launched the Ingram New Works Project. This program includes the New Works Lab and will facilitate for playwrights-in-residence opportunities to work with their choice of collaborators from amongst top theatre artists in Nashville.

This year, MFA playwright Kenley Smith was named one of these Playwrights-in-residence. These writers will have access to Tennessee Rep’s professional staff throughout the season, and have ongoing opportunities to meet with a director, costume designer, set designer and dramaturg to explore what it would take to get their script from page to stage. Each playwright will also have the opportunity to consult with marketing and audience development staff to gather ideas about resources available to best promote their new work.

Kenley Smith is the first graduate of the Playwright’s Lab and founder of Studio Roanoke, a local black box theatre dedicated to producing new plays.

www.tennesseerep.org
Roanoke Community High School Performance Space Opens with No Shame

In fact, the very first public performances in this new space were No Shame Theatre—even before the lighting and sound systems are installed!

No Shame has had a somewhat itinerant existence, starting first on the Waldron stage of Mill Mountain Theatre as the cornerstone of Underground Roanoke in 2003. When MMT closed its doors temporarily in January of 2009, No Shame moved onto the Hollins University campus in the Upstairs Studio Space for several months before again moving to the newly opened Studio Roanoke in April of that year. When Todd Ristau stepped down as Artistic Director of Studio Roanoke, No Shame (which Ristau created in 1986 at the University of Iowa) travelled with him back to Mill Mountain Theatre and the June McBroom Theatre and the weekly collection of short, late-night theatre performances were done on the Trinkle Main Stage until the end of the 2011 Summer Session of the Playwright’s Lab. With the Trinkle closing for renovations, No Shame was performed outside in a park for the month of August until the space at Community High School got its Certificate of Occupancy. The CHS space became home to No Shame this month through the end of October, when the circle will be complete and No Shame moves back to the Waldron stage for the foreseeable future.

Additionally, The June McBroom Theatre is the home of Garnut Theater and the space will host The American Shakespeare Festival, Big Lick Conspiracy, Music After Midnight, as well as other local artists and events. We’re hopeful there will also be student initiated readings and productions coming out of the Playwright’s Lab on this great stage!

CHS is letting No Shame use the space without cost, in exchange for some playwriting workshops with their students in the future.

communityhigh.net

Ruth’s Story by Marshall Opie Produced in Washington DC

Marshall Opie returned home from his first Hollins summer and was immediately immersed in a hectic schedule of preparing to open his original play, Ruth’s Story, which was produced by From the Heart Church Ministries in August at the THEARC Theatre in Washington, DC.

“Ophelia T. Crane is her family’s anchor though she can be at times a cantankerous force,” Opie told us of his main character. “She is challenged by poor health and a house that’s too big and falling down around her. It’s up to Ophelia’s daughter-in-law, Ruth, to get this aging Christian woman to see and accept the love and support of her family and friends.”

Opie started the play in 2005, but after a successful private reading he put the script on the shelf. Marshall and his wife, Margaret, serve as Co-Ministry Heads of the Fine Arts Ministry of FTHCM and were asked to stage a production for a special night out and fellowship for members of the church’s Single’s Enrichment Class. With only a short time to come up with something, and six weeks of a new graduate program right in the middle of that short time period, Marshall dusted off Ruth’s Story. He made some specific revisions to tailor it more closely to the needs of his community and the play was accepted for the production slot.

There were, however, some changes requested by the producer and the director of the show. Marshall had to squeeze those revisions in between his already heavy course load and all the extra curricular activities that make the Playwright’s Lab such an intensive experience.

“These small, yet significant changes greatly improved the script,” Marshall explains. “The required texts, staged readings of student work, and discussion I participated in at Hollins strengthened my playwriting abilities and enabled me to engineer a better, more dramatic play for this event.”

THEARC Theatre seats 300. The August 19th performance of Ruth’s Story was held before a sold out theatre and all who were in attendance, fans, scholars and critics alike, agreed that Ruth’s Story was a thought provoking, entertaining, inspiring play.

As Co-Fine Arts Ministry Heads, Marshall and his wife Margaret are planning ahead for 2012 to include: staging two to three productions as part of a Black History Month Festival and staging a spring production and fall production as well.

Marshall tells us that It is his faith in God, the teachings of his church, and the loving support of his wife that led him to Hollins University and is giving him the deep appreciation for the rigor and challenges of the Hollins MFA Playwriting Program.

www.fthcm.org
MFA Students Initiate 10-Minute Play Workshops

The Playwright’s Lab has only a finite number of formal reading slots available each summer: five Wednesday night slots, reserved for students registered for Lab (only very early drafts are considered) and ten Festival slots (only plays considered production ready are selected).

Because hearing a play read and having it discussed by a peer group of respected and respectful community members is crucial learning this craft, we make a number of theatre spaces available to our students to check out in 2-hour blocks for rehearsals, readings, or even exercises run by students for each other.

Most students take advantage of these opportunities, helping to reinforce the importance of playwrights taking personal initiative in the development of their own work.

This past summer, our MFA playwrights started their own weekly workshop reading series in French House, one of the student housing facilities on campus.

The structure was a mash-up of No Shame and Lab. Every Monday from Noon to 2PM, students met to workshop 10-minute plays. The first four people to show up, script in hand, were read. Each writer had a fifteen minute block for the 10 min reading and 5 min of feedback. A moderator kept the discussion on track during the talk back session. As the summer went on, the format opened up from just 10-minute plays to include one-acts, excerpts from longer plays or anything someone was working on and wanted feedback in order to continue that work.

"It was open to everyone and lots of students participated," Kevin Ferguson said. "The experience was great both for the student playwright and the volunteer student moderator, because you had a chance to sit in both chairs. The entire experience was very low pressure, because it was completely student run. Everyone had a chance to participate."

Wendy-Marie Foerster added, "It was a cross mix of students from each year sharing work and feedback openly and respectfully. Plus, we broke for pie and coffee in the middle. I hope we can find a way to keep it going at the French House next summer."

Jeri Weiss, who was a first year playwright last summer, agreed. Weiss told us, "It was tremendously helpful to hear how the dialogue was interpreted by readers, and the supportive feedback I received inspired me to take more creative risks than I otherwise would have. The connection I made with the other writers really enhanced my experience at Hollins. I’m an introvert and if they hadn’t made me feel so welcome, I could have easily spent the summer holed-up in my room."

Taylor Gruenloh in The Pillowman

Taylor Gruenloh (top left) joined the Playwright’s Lab this year and brings with him a wealth of experience not only as a writer but also as an actor and artistic director of his own small theatre company.

This month Taylor appeared in The Pillowman, by Martin McDonagh, at Florissant Valley’s Terry M. Fischer Theatre.

The play was particularly appealing to Gruenloh because its complicated plot centers on a writer in an unnamed totalitarian state being interrogated about the gruesome content of his stories and their similarities to a series of child murders. The play is an unflinching examination of the very nature and purpose of art.

"This was my first role coming back from the Lab at Hollins and it was pretty fitting," Taylor told us. "I never played a character before where you had to make so many decisions about when you’re lying, when you’re telling the truth, and how blurry that line is for the character."

Gruenloh credits his new approach to unlocking a character and working with another playwright’s text to the foundational courses he took during his first summer at Hollins.

"Attacking the script using the things I learned from Narrative Theory and Ruth Margraff’s Playscript Analysis class forced me to look at the environment of the play more deeply than I had in the past."

facebook.com/STLCC.FV
had that transformative moment. Standing in front of those actors, I had that tingle when you know suddenly that you are at the center of your universe, you are home. And I just kept doing it. It never occurred to me not to.

Who are your influences?
I audited classes by the great Uta Hagen. She was one of the great influences that is with me to this day. She was the person who made the most sense. I just sat in the back, didn’t say anything, and learned from her the real use of this vocabulary. What it really meant, how it was useful, how brilliant it was, and that it was essentially common sense. She had all kinds of very technical exercises that anybody could do to help you solve a problem. Her talk was utterly pragmatic.

What does a director do?
Our job as directors is to come to the material and see what we see and be the intermediary between your script and the audience. But we’re not a machine. We’re not a functionary. Our job is to look at the script, look at the space, think about the audience and transmit the play, like a messenger, to the audience. We make choices.

How does learning about directing help a playwright?
You don’t want to leave room for a director in your writing, but you have to leave room for the audience. What are you telling the audience and what are you leaving for them to figure out? What the playwright has to understand is that actors go slowly. In the early weeks, all the line readings are going to be wrong. There’s a process. They’re taking it in, but they’re not ready to give it back yet. If they can sit there in rehearsal and hear every line read wrong and not go crazy, then I would love them to be there. The trick is that before we go into rehearsal I earn the playwright’s trust. The theatre is an act of enormous collaboration. You’re going to collaborate. It isn’t a compromise, it’s a collaboration. That’s what will help.
Lab Playwrights Present Drama Camp in Los Angeles

Nicole B. Adkins is a graduate of the Children’s Literature MFA program at Hollins, but she has worked so closely with our students and taken so many playwriting classes that we count her as one of our own.

After graduation, Nikki was named Children’s Programming Director at SkyPilot Theatre in Los Angeles and has been working extensively with Book Roots to advance their mission bring books and personalized literacy and arts enrichment programming to at-risk youth, especially teens in foster care.

Last January, Book Roots entered into talks with Determined To Succeed Los Angeles (dtsla.org), an educational nonprofit organization dedicated to getting motivated, low income 5th grade students at risk of getting lost in the system the academic and enrichment resources they need to succeed in school so that they are prepared to apply to a college, be accepted, and succeed in their studies.

Nicole and Elizabeth Dragga, the original founder of Book Roots, devised a drama camp for DTSLA and added MFA playwright Samantha Macher as a third instructor. Dragga has years of experience teaching theatre performance and Macher has taught high school and conducted playwriting workshops, so the three were confident in what they could bring to the table as well as certain they could be flexible and tailor the needs of the camp to the students as they got to know them through their work.

“The camp was offered to their rising 8th grade class,” Adkins explained. “An amazing group of 13 kids who had never before written plays, and many of whom had never before acted.” At first the students were very nervous and none of them wanted to act in the plays they were going to write.

“When we promised that we were not going to let them look stupid, and addressed their individual and group fears throughout the process, they relaxed into the safe-space we all worked together to create. The students ended up doing lots of truly extraordinary work.” Nikki told us.

Throughout the two weeks of hands on theatre work, the instructors were amazed by the caliber of work the kids were able to create. One particularly shy student reported to us at the end, after performing up a storm, that “he felt proud of himself.”

“Having taught playwriting camps and workshops to various ages over the years, there were many different techniques and exercises that I wanted to include in this curriculum,” Nicole said. “Not only were the kids proud of the outstanding work they did, but Sam, Elizabeth, and I really felt blessed to have gotten to work with them and learn from them.”

The final collection of six short plays written by the students was called Evolution of the Ocean. It charted themes of growth and change across a variety of beachside landscapes.

DTSLA was very enthusiastic about the success of the camp.

Abby Adams, Executive Director of DTSLA thanks the group for their addition to the program and called the camp a “game changer” for this group of kids. She said, “Your curriculum and approach brought out much untapped potential and personality in all of them.”

The praise for the theatre camp was very enthusiastic across the board with kudos going to both the teachers for crafting exercises that brought out confidence in the students, and for the budding thespians who gave a wonderful performance of their original work in a very cohesive ensemble.

Samantha will continue working with Book Roots in the future with other events and enrichment programming and has been asked to work with both Book Roots and DTSLA on their media campaigns and marketing.

“Working with Book Roots and DTSLA has been an incredible experience for me,” Macher said. “Because of my connection with Nikki through Hollins, I got to share my passion for theater with these amazing, talented kids, and hopefully they now love—or at least appreciate—it too. It teaches young people about theater and writing and in doing so, it cultivates an audience and talent for new work at a young age. I think it might have also helped some of them get over stage fright, which is a great tool to have whether you ever do theater again or not. People like Nikki Adkins, Elizabeth Dragga, Abby Adams and Angel Honda are some of the most loving, dedicated teachers and advocates I know.”
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: Our Writers Work, and Their Work Gets Done

I’m constantly impressed by how much of the work our students at Hollins do in the classroom goes on to get done in legitimate theatres around the country. Our writers are writing all the time, and even experimental short exercises and assignments for class seem to have a habit of getting published and produced.

Of course, the quality of the writing is part of this formula for success—but in some ways the more important component is highly motivated or students are to seek out or create their own opportunities.

Very often our students will write a short piece in class, perform it at No Shame, submit it to a publisher like Smith & Kraus and then see it in print within a year of having written it.

An astonishing number of the plays written in First Drafts have had readings and productions in Roanoke, New York, Atlanta and Los Angeles.

Several plays written in Jonathan Dorf’s course on writing for young audiences have been published by YouthPLAYS.

Even though we’re a low-residency summer intensive program with no graduate acting program, no graduate directing program and no time to mount productions of student work on campus during the summer, we’ve succeed in getting our students more productions, publications, and reading opportunities than you find in the average traditional program.

And the productions our students are getting aren’t just university workshops, these productions are in legitimate theatres with some amazing theatre professionals. Cheryl Snodgrass, Joe Banno, Jeff Goode and Bob Moss have all directed plays by Hollins students that began as assignments in classes here.

Beyond that, many of our students are working in professional theatres themselves, or starting their own companies and looking to each other for new scripts to bring to their stages.

Bob Moss called us a Provincetown Playhouse for a new generation. He wasn’t lying.

Todd Ristau, Director