10-2011

The Lab Report, volume 05, issue 05

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Recommended Citation
Ristau, Todd, "The Lab Report, volume 05, issue 05" (2011). Lab Reports. 56.
https://digitalcommons.hollins.edu/labreports/56

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Guest Profile: Peter Ullian

Peter Ullian is an award winning playwright who was one of our guest responders for the Festival last summer.

“I was delighted to do it,” Ullian said of his participation. “I think the work was really terrific. Really diverse, a bunch of really different stuff, different styles, different sensibilities. We saw some things that are really exciting.”

Students were very pleased with Peter’s tactful responses during the talk backs that followed each play’s public reading, and for his obvious enthusiasm for the work that they are doing at Hollins.

“One of the things I really like about this festival is that the focus is on the playwrights,” Pete told us. “It’s about what the playwrights get out of showing their work to an audience, not showing off the most commercial pieces that have come out of the workshop here, it really is about what the playwrights need.”

Peter’s got a lot of experience in writing musicals as well as a deep interest in the history of Jewish theatre. We’re hoping to bring him back soon as a visiting faculty member to teach courses in those areas of his expertise.

He offered this advice to students, “Every time you sit down to write a play it is like mapping a new jungle. What you’ve learned will help guide you but you’re never going to crack the formula because every play requires a new formula. Be prepared for that, be open to that, and believe in it from your heart. Find what is about this play that makes you believe in it from your heart or you won’t be able to do good work. And, just practically, I’d say you need to find a way to earn a living that you feel good about. Find something that you don’t hate doing. You can have another profession and still be a writer.”

Student Spotlight: Avis Gray

Avis Gray came to us last summer as a first year playwright. She is an instructor at Winston-Salem State University in North Carolina and teaches communications courses with a teaching load that includes more and more theatre classes.

“Playwriting is one of those courses,” Avis told us in her application letter. “Playwriting is an area of theatre I’ve always loved, but never pursued. This program is so incredibly doable (given my teaching schedule) that I can’t believe it exists. Being a single working mom, I was at the brink of giving up my dream an MFA, but now I have a renewed spirit.”

Avis has aspirations as a playwright, however her main goal is to learn the craft so that she can teach it to her students.

“My version of Heaven is the classroom,” Avis said in Lab. “I respect this craft, and I plan on writing the best plays I can, but mentorship is my passion.”

Avis has already taken things she learned her first summer back to her own classrooms. She reports, “My students really enjoyed the exercises from Narrative Theory, and I have even used them in other theatre courses besides playwriting. Winston-Salem State university has also decided to create a writing lab for students taking Playwriting and adopt Final Draft. I’m very excited!”

We’re very happy Avis has joined our community because she is generous, enthusiastic, a good listener and highly motivated to succeed—in addition to being a pretty talented playwright!
Confirmed Faculty and Guests for 2012

Todd Ristau, the Program Director for the Playwright’s Lab, starts planning for the next summer before the current summer is even getting started. During the first week of classes he is already getting a sense of what courses returning students will want to take as part of their plans of study, who might be ideal visiting faculty members to teach those courses, and which people out there in the profession might be the best guest speakers and responders to compliment those specific courses.

Invitations and queries are sent out, and by the end of the summer session in July, he already has a pretty good idea who will be coming and what will be taught so that in the end of session advising meetings students can already be planning for what classes they will be taking when registration opens in July.

Each summer, Ristau teaches Lab, the signature course of the program. In addition, he teaches Narrative Theory, a foundational course taken by all first year students, and a Master Class. This year that will be First Drafts, a very popular course where students complete six new plays in six weeks.

Guest speakers and responders are selected from across the spectrum of professionals our students are likely to encounter as they pursue a life in the theatre. Past guests have included not only professional playwrights but also literary managers, dramaturgs, artistic directors, actors, designers, publishers, agents, composers, and even the lead drama critic from the Chicago Tribune!

Visiting Faculty for 2012

Carl Hancock Rux is an award-winning poet, playwright, novelist, essayist and recording artist who will be teaching Playscript Analysis, Solo Performance and Advanced Workshop.

Mark Charney is a playwright and dramaturg active in KCACTF and SETC. He is currently Director of Theatre at Clemson University. Mark will be teaching Dramaturgy and Docudrama.

Guest Artists and Speakers for 2012

Guest director Cheryl Snodgrass returns to direct another full production written by a Lab playwright. To The New Girl, by Samantha Macher at Studio Roanoke will kick off the 2012 summer session. Cheryl has directed at least one play and several readings every year since we began the program in 2007.

Jeffrey M. Jones is a playwright whose work includes 70 Scenes of Halloween and Tomorrowland. His essays have appeared in The American Theatre Reader and Performing Arts Journal. Jones taught playwriting at the Yale School of Drama and is currently co-curator of the OBIE-winning Little Theatre series at Dixon Place.

Sean Christopher Lewis is a playwright and noted actor who will also present his solo performance Just Kids at Hollins as well as conduct a writing workshop with our students.

Scott Bradley is a Chicago based actor and director who co-founded The Scooty and Jo Jo Show. Scott will be performing in Overnight Sensations.

Guest director Gary Garrison is the Executive Director of Creative Affairs at the Dramatists Guild of America. He is a playwright and literally wrote the book on writing the 10-minute play with his The Perfect Ten. He has filled the posts of Artistic Director, Producer, and full time faculty member in the Department of Dramatic Writing at NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts.. He is a regular responder at festivals and conferences around the country and will be the lead responder for our own Festival of Student Readings.

Festival Guest Responders

In addition to our faculty, the confirmed guest responders for the Festival of Student Readings will include:

Che’Rae Adams (Director), Wesley Broulik (Playwright/Actor/Director/Artistic Director), Megan Gogerty (Playwright/Solo Performer), David Gothard (Director/Producing Artistic Director), Doug Grissom (Playwright), W. David Hancock (Playwright), Julianne Homokay (Playwright/Director/Dramaturg/Literary Manager), Kristin Newbom (Playwright), Tira Palmoquist (Playwright), Adam Szymkowicz (Playwright), and Daniel Witzke (Director)

We hope to add several more guests, and while these confirmations are now firm, please remember that the actual faculty and guests might be subject to change due to unforeseen alterations in their schedules and availability. Check the program’s website and Facebook page for the most current information.

Still to be announced are the selections for Lab readings and the ten plays chosen for slots in the Festival of Student Readings which will be held over the weekend of July 20-22. There will also be local auditions held this summer, and we’re planning an interview workshop with the arts columnist from the Roanoke Times!


Mitzi’s Abortion Opens at Infinite Abyss

Infinite Abyss is an edgy theatre in Fort Lauderdale, Florida founded by Jeff Holmes (Artistic Director) and Erynn Dalton (Producing Director) in 2010 with the goal of bringing provocative works to the stage and screen.

Infinite Abyss’s first production, Stop Kiss by Diana Son, was directed by Jeff Holmes and produced in April 2010. It was an instant hit with audiences and critics alike and put Infinite Abyss on the map of promising up-and-coming theatre companies in South Florida. Their following show, Angel Eaters by Johnna Adams, was a Florida premiere and also met with critical praise. The Infinite Abyss line up for 2011 included Hedwig and the Angry Inch, The Pillowman and this month saw the Florida premiere of Mitzi’s Abortion by MFA playwright Elizabeth Heffron.

The cast featured Shelby Steel in the role of Mitzi and was directed by Jeffrey D. Holmes.

The play was very well received, in spite of its incendiary title, and garnered accolades from The Miami Herald, whose Eileen Spiegler wrote, “...no matter where you fall in the debate, you’ll be moved” and “The arguments for and against come from unexpected places here, and we’re reminded the effects aren’t abstract, but flesh and blood.”

Heffron’s play follows Mitzi, a 22-year old who discovers she is pregnant just before her boyfriend is deployed overseas. They marry in order to get health insurance and then are told the heartbreaking news that the fetus Mitzi is carrying has anencephaly and will live only a few days if carried to term. Her doctor advises terminating the pregnancy but her government insurance refuses to cover an abortion for any reason unless the mother’s life is at risk.

The moral, religious, and legal ramifications of this dilemma are argued over by all the characters, and Mitzi even gets unlikely advice from the ghosts of a burned-at-the-stake midwife and Thomas Aquinas.

Heffron’s play is published by Original Works Publishing, and she’s donating 5% of her playwright’s royalty to our New Works Initiative Fund here at Hollins!

infinite-abyss.com

Fronkensteen Experimental Theatre Invites Submissions

Fronkensteen Experimental Theatre Group

Fronkensteen Stage season.

The Fronkensteen Stage is a season devoted completely to new work created by the group and produced with an emphasis on developing the play rather than flashy production elements.

After his summer in the program, Ricky Steven decided to open up submissions to playwrights outside the core group, which would also include fellow members of this MFA program.

“Open submissions open the doors to everyone,” says Young. “Fresh voices always make for greater theatre and it has been our mission to share those voices with our community.” Any submissions received by November 30th are guaranteed to be considered for the theatre’s next season.

Full length plays will be considered for one of five reading slots, and one acts will be considered for a full production. Notification will be made by December 10th.

“We will also try our hardest to give each play direct criticism whether or not we decide to produce it,” Young said. “Fronkensteen has prided itself for maintaining the directive that playwrights need feedback and recognition for their work.”

For more information, contact Ricky Steven Young Jr. at 931.648.2692 or email fronkensteentheater@gmail.com
Yulia Gray Opens Breast Cancer Play

Yulia Gray is in her second year of her work towards her MFA in playwriting and this month Truth Be Told, a theatre company at the University of Akron, produced her play I Need More Time, Thanks!

“This is the first time a play that I have written has ever been produced,” Gray told us.

The play tracks the journey of a character who discovers an abnormality in her breast and the progressions of decisions she must make from whether or not to call a doctor through possible avenues of treatment.

Yulia was inspired by the life and death of an acquaintance and came out of an assignment in the Narrative Theory and Dramatic Structure class she took her first summer at Hollins. Back in Akron, Yulia shared the script with Caorl Eustey, who is the Artistic Director of Truth Be Told and herself a breast cancer survivor.

It was Eustey’s idea to stage the play in October as part of Breast Cancer Awareness month. She also decided to film some of the scenes and have them projected during the performance, alternating with live action scenes.

“People felt empathy for the characters, perhaps because of their own experiences,” Yulia said of the audience reaction to the show.

Best of No Shame Returns to the Waldron

No Shame Theatre was the brainchild of Todd Ristau while he was in the Iowa Playwright’s Workshop as an undergraduate student in 1986. It started in the back of his pickup truck out in the theatre department parking lot on Friday nights at 11PM. Anyone who had a short skit could climb up in the bed of the truck and perform it for the gathered audience members.

He was asked to start a No Shame in New York for HOME for Contemporary Theatre and Art in 1989, and other No Shames have sprouted up, withering or flourishing, all over the country ever since.

In 2003 Ristau started a No Shame in Roanoke on the Waldron Stage of Mill Mountain Theatre as the cornerstone of their alternative programming series, Underground Roanoke.

In 2009, when Mill Mountain closed its doors, No Shame Roanoke began an itinerant existence, taking the late night venue first to Hollins University, then to Studio Roanoke until 2010 when it moved to the Trinkle Main Stage at the reopened Mill Mountain Theatre while the Waldron was being renovated.

Because the Waldron renovations were not completed when the renovations to the Trinkle began in August 2011, No Shame had to again find temporary shelter.

They were offered shelter in the new Community High School theatre space while the Waldron renovation was completed, but the hitch was that the new June M. McBroom Theatre there would not have its certificate of occupancy until September.

For the month of August, No Shame (with the kind permission of the City of Roanoke) was performed outdoors in Century Plaza Park, often under the glow of handheld flashlights and the confused stares of passersby.

After those outdoor performances, only one of which was rained out, the quirky faithful of this hardy venue traveled across the railroad tracks to CHS and performed there for the next five weeks or so under coffee can lights with a home stereo for a sound system.

This month, just before Halloween, No Shame returned to its ancestral spawning grounds in the newly renovated Waldron Stage. For the first performance they had to bring their coffee can lights with them, but it really was like going home again.

“That was the best possible way to return,” Ristau said. “We had sold out houses and more than 20 pieces each night, including many written by our MFA playwrights.”

noshsame.org
Luis and the Great Field Trip Adventure by Wendy-Marie Foerster and Jason Miller

Wendy-Marie Foerster is a 1993 graduate of Pacific Conservatory of the Performing Arts. After ten years of teaching, writing and directing she returned to the Central Coast in 2009 and reconnected with the educational outreach of PCPA. The director, Leo Cortez, told her about a book he wanted to adapt for the tour.

“Leo talked about what he loved about the book and how disappointed he was to lose it because he’d been wanting to do a show about the importance of homework and its practical application,” Foerster told us. “So I went home and constructed a treatment incorporating the themes and character traits Leo had shown the most excitement for and emailed him the idea for Luis and the Great Field Trip Adventure a couple days later. Leo embraced the idea with lots of enthusiasm and I went to work fleshing out the idea and writing the first draft.”

Wendy-Marie took the script and contacted a composer, Jason Miller, to turn it into a musical. After completing the songs and getting approval from Cortez, the collaborators polished the script (targeted to K-6 students) and went into rehearsal for a slot on PCPA’s 2011/12 tour and begins performances this month. It will run through May of 2012 touring schools throughout Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo Counties.

“It’s a fantastic cast and directing/design team. Jason and are both very happy with the process and the results,” Foerster said.

“My time in the Playwright's Lab definitely helped me to focus and bring this project to a deeper level,” Wendy-Marie says. “I believe the layers we found throughout the development process were directly impacted by things I learned at Hollins.”


Sandbox Radio 2 Features Elizabeth Heffron

The Sandbox Artists Collective was created in Seattle as a place for mid-career artists to explore their craft in the company of their peers. MFA playwright Elizabeth Heffron was part of that original group.

In July we told you about Sandbox’s first effort at a live broadcast of short radio plays, that were later posted as podcasts. MFA playwright Elizabeth Heffron was one of those first half dozen or so playwrights involved and this month, they’re at it again. In this second installment of live broadcast (on a Halloween theme), Elizabeth joins the company of other writers (including Edgar Allen Poe), performers, and the Sandbox Radio Orchestra led by Jose Gonzales on the stage at West of Lenin on October 10th to record an evening of spooky new works in front of a live studio audience.

Heffron was also recently accepted into Seattle Rep’s new Writer’s Group, where 5 writers meet every other week at the Rep for two years. Recipients get several perks, including a modest stipend, complimentary tickets to shows at the Rep, and will present a staged reading of a full-length play each year of the program.

written by: Vincent Delaey
Jose Gonzales
Kt Gottberg
Elizabeth Heffron
Leslie Law
Paul Mullin
K. Brian Neil
Dan Tierney
& Edgar Allen Poe

www.paulmullin.org/just-wrought/sandbox-artists-collective
in the program, even in the readings, to work collaboratively awakened my understanding that this is how I want to work, in a community of artists helping to create an experience of the life you have put on the page. These were my peeps. Also learning— in Dramaturgy and American Women Playwrights—that in the study of theater the play is to be viewed as a person, a living whole, brought to light an intuitive understanding that I had not spoken aloud for fear of sounding crazy. It was this viewpoint that allowed me, as the artist, to learn to “let go” of my creation, and thereby give up control of its life. This recognition of the vibrancy of the living stage made me proud to define myself as an artist in this medium.

I have also learned to have respect for my own creative abilities. Throughout the program I was asked to try new things, experiment with subjects or conceits I had never considered. In my realization that I could adapt my voice to these ways to express a story— specifically the courses Radio Drama and Writing Plays with Music and a workshop with Mac Wellman—I discovered that sound, in the form of rhythm or music or tone, was an important part of my creative voice, and I had the ability to include it. Each of my plays since then have contained some musical or sound element.

Experiencing the work of others, as well as the reactions to my own work through the readings in class, at the end of the term, and No Shame, have also given me confidence. These venues have allowed me to share in the processes of others and discuss mine.

Although often painful, and always emotional, the community of the program has created an atmosphere in which individual voices are respected, no matter how different they may be, and my fellow students and teachers were—most times— very supportive and respectful of my tender artist self.

Finally, I have gained a personal understanding of myself, and why I create. I had always worried that you weren’t really an “artist” until you were successful at it. Yet, through listening to the experience of other artists, even those who can be called “successful,” it is clear that success in the arts can be measured in many ways. Naomi Wallace, Suzan-Lori Parks, Mac Wellman... each of these successful artists very seldom gets produced after their initial opening, yet are considered highly successful in the theatrical world. They do not write to get produced—they create theater because they have to. They are Theater Artists. This is why I write, and it may not lead to a production, but I am still a playwright.

All of these things have benefited me as an emerging writer by allowing me to see myself as a member of those species known as PLAYWRIGHTS.

At the end of my studies I can now understand and take part in the creative side, although the understanding of the analytical benefits the artist in me, it is now the artist that is in charge. This is what I most needed from this program, although I did not know it.

Thank you.

Congratulations, Sunny! We’re also very grateful for the ways in which you have contributed, helping us create this unique community of artists.

We know we’ll be hearing a lot more from you as you continue your life in the arts.
October Graduate: Adam Hahn

Adam Hahn was also among that very first cohort of students in the Playwright’s Lab in 2007. He has been an integral part of the program’s development and served as Program Assistant during most of his time at Hollins. As our students complete their thesis work, we ask them to reflect on what they found most beneficial at Hollins and to tell us how it helped them grow as a playwright. This is Adam’s response:

Some of the most important lessons I’ve learned in grad school have related to giving and receiving feedback on artistic work. As this program has grown, I’ve participated in the evolution of feedback in the Playwright’s Lab. Fortunately not many of our lab sessions have been openly antagonistic, but I’ve seen careless comments, playwrights too vulnerable for frank criticism, playwrights too guarded to make use of feedback, and sessions where respondents have been uncomfortable offering any negative comments. I’ve learned how hard it is to avoid giving prescriptive advice.

We all forget that it’s not our job to solve the problems in someone else’s play, and we end up telling the writer to change their work to be more like the hypothetical version of the play that we would have written.

I think I’ve learned how to give and elicit better feedback: beginning with positive comments, asking for questions, and personally trying to limit suggestions and make statements about the work and my experience listening to it. I’ve also learned how to listen to and benefit from prescriptive advice, even when I have no intention of following it.

Often a terrible piece of advice will mask some useful information: the audience member’s expectations (either what he carried in, or what I created with the opening scenes), when he got bored, which characters or plot elements he wanted to follow when he lost track of everything else. This information is worth unpacking. Sometimes, it tells you something useful about your play, and sometimes it confirms that a particular audience member isn’t interested in the kind of play you’re trying to write.

This experience in the Playwright’s Lab has translated directly to giving, receiving, and facilitating feedback outside of the academic environment.

It will be strange not having Adam’s tact, wit, and good natured camaraderie on campus but his positive example will persist.

Adam lives in L A, where he is a playwright-in-residence at SkyPilot Theatre. Adam, congratulations—and we look forward to your future success!

Samantha Macher’s LA Success Story

Samantha Macher, who will graduate in May of 2012, recently relocated to Los Angeles and joined SkyPilot theatre as a playwright-in-residence. Macher has had multiple readings of her work in LA and New York, and this season SkyPilot mounted a six-week run of her play To The New Girl that garnered rave reviews. There are plans to remount New Girl next year. Macher is also producer of the theatre’s new monthly one-act series. Each month, Sam will select two one-act plays for performance commencing in March, 2012.

Samantha works part time with Book Roots, a youth literacy company, conducting educational theatre workshops. She also moonlights as a proofreader for YouthPLAYS, run by visiting faculty member Jonathan Dorf. The company recently published Sam’s collection of short Christmas plays. This month Sam sat on a playwriting panel for the Alliance of Los Angeles Playwrights at their Big Fall Event this month.

As if all that weren’t enough, Sam also landed a movie deal by answering an ad on Craig’s List!

“This basically, I found this ad looking for a ninety-minute film to be shot in real time,” Macher explains. “I wrote a draft and submitted it, not expecting much of anything, but James Rearden of Victory Films wound up buying the movie and actually producing it—which is nuts. I’m tentatively signed on to write a second movie, but we’ll see what happens.”

Adam & Abby follows a young documentarian making a film about her brother who is a hero firefighter and features Ana Vilavane, Ashley Bracken and Jonathan Aube, produced and directed by James Rearden.
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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: Getting Experience in the Medium You’re Writing For

When I’m asked for advice for aspiring playwrights, my first answer is always, “Go find a theatre and volunteer.” This is more than getting your foot in the door in hopes that they’ll feel guilty enough about your sweat equity to read your play. It’s about getting your hands dirty learning everything you can about the organization that exits solely to be a conduit between plays and an audiences. The more you know about how it all works, the better you’ll understand how you fit in and how to work with all the different collaborators who are part of that theatre’s organization. Enter into it with wide eyes, hungry ears, and a generous heart and you’ll go far.

A good place for playwrights to start is to ask about helping read plays in the literary office. If the theatre doesn’t have a literary office, ask if you can be a script reader and you might just become the Literary Office.

Then start asking if you can do more, like ushering at productions. That will help you see a lot of plays for free. Watching plays is very important if you want to write plays.

Then see if you can worm your way into observing rehearsals by being an assistant stage manager and into productions by being running crew. You don’t need to know a lot to get those important jobs, and you will learn A LOT. Observe everything and talk to everyone. Get to know the writer if they are present, and also the director.

Let them bounce ideas off you and listen to what they tell you about working with playwrights that excites them and what makes them crazy.

Get to know the actors, and maybe try your hand at a role to see what it is like on the other side of the page.

Hang out with the administration—learn how the office works, the publicity, the deadlines, and especially the development office.

The more you know about what other people do, the easier it will be for them to trust that you respect and understand what they bring to the table.