Darlene Fedele Teaching at Ferrum College

Darlene Fedele, an MFA candidate in the playwriting program at Hollins University, recently started a new job as an adjunct in the Arts and Humanities department of Ferrum College (a four-year college in Virginia, south of Roanoke).

The playwright, who often writes plays for puppets, had previously taught at Liberty University.

“At Ferrum they gave me three classes that I’ve never taught before,” Darlene told us. “Public Speaking, Voice & Diction, and Stagecraft. I took a scene design course when I was an undergrad, so I have some experience, but a lot of this course is going to be set construction and working with the students who actually build the sets for the theatre department plays.”

We Have Achieved Our Fundraising Goal!

The New Works Initiative is a fund that was established to help offset the costs of producing and presenting work associated with our graduate program in playwriting.

Last month we told you that one of our playwrights had a tremendous opportunity. Samantha Macher was offered a publishing contract by a major company to add The Arctic Circle to their catalog. The publisher had been a guest responder at the 2010 Festival of Student Readings, where the play had been performed. The catch was that one of the criteria for publication was six performances of the script in a legitimate theatre with a review.

We immediately set to work negotiating a collaboration with Mill Mountain Theatre to produced the play in their space with Bob Moss directing. Bob’s involvement in the project further led to an invitation to transfer the play from Roanoke to the Playwrights Horizons Studios in Manhattan!

To accomplish all of this, we had to raise money, and raise a lot of it in a hurry.

In total, all of the production costs for even a minimal design concept with no props and simple costumes is going to run right around $7,800. That includes the director’s fee, and because he is a working professional (and on the Board of Trustees for the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society) we would have additional obligations and the actors would have to be paid at least a modest stipend. There were housing costs and travel for the entire company to New York as well.

In just a few short months we have met and actually exceeded our goal! Thanks to your enthusiastic support, we have so far raised $9,270.54!

Thanks to everyone who has contributed, bought ad space in a playbill, or bought a ticket to our events (including No Shame Theatre)! The more you help us the more we can do, so please keep spreading the word!
Lisa was struck by the professionalism of the festival as a whole and the way the guests and students interact over the course of the weekend. She said, “Everyone is very generous with each other’s work. I love the format for the discussion, the way we’re asked first to respond to the things that they find strong about the plays, then to ask questions about things that might be confusing or that listeners and audience members would like to hear more about. I think it is a really positive way to approach a play. It brings up great discussion, great comments. It’s really inviting. It seems to me that it is a great method for playwrights of all levels—beginners as well as advanced writers—because they get to hear an immediate response from the audience.”

One of the things that our guests also find most appealing is the way in which the guests, students and faculty all interact with each other as colleagues of different experience levels rather than there being some sort of perceived hierarchy. Over the weekend our guest responders have the opportunity to renew existing professional relationships and make new friends.

“There are ten guests here this weekend, and they are an amazing, diverse group of people with amazingly intelligent, wonderful, generous responses to the plays,” Lisa commented. “And its also been a great social event because I’ve gotten to meet people I’ve never met before in the playwriting world and theatre world. There are dramaturgs here who give just really astute responses to the plays and playwrights with years and years of experience. Bob Moss is a special gem among all of the guests here this weekend—he just, you know, targets the heart of the play. That is the thing about the guests that has been so lovely—that they are such heartful people. They are really looking at all of the plays for the heart of the play, the soul of the playwright and asking continuously and meticulously what called the playwright to this particular subject and this particular play… Its all just lovely!”

Lisa exemplifies all that she finds to praise in the other guests. Our students were very impressed with her gentleness and generosity as well as her insightful criticism and advice. We hope to have her back again very soon.

Lisa Schlesinger is an award winning playwright, poet and theatre artist who currently heads the dramatic writing program at Columbia College in Chicago. Her plays include Wal-martyrs, Celestial Bodies, Twenty One Positions (with Naomi Wallace and Abed Abu Srour), Same Egg, Manny and Chicken, Rock Ends Ahead, Bow Echo, and The Bones of Danny Winston. Her work has been produced nationally and internationally, with commissions from the Guthrie Theatre, the BBC, various universities, and is currently under commission by the Ensemble Studio Theatre and Portland Stage Company for her opera Harmonicus Mundi. Her numerous awards and fellowships, include the BBC International Playwriting Award and the TCG/NEA Playwright’s Residency Award and twice the CEC Artlinks International Award.

We were very excited that Lisa was able to come to Hollins as a guest responder for the annual Festival of Student Readings this year.

“The writers at Hollins are wonderful,” Lisa told us. There’s all kinds of different voices happening, different kinds of plays. Like, Neeley Gossett, she wrote a play we saw yesterday for young people, a very beautiful, very evocative play about teenagers in a small town and one of them learned how to dive off a bridge. It was a really mysterious and beautiful play. And that was just one of the diverse and gorgeous plays we’ve seen happening here.”

Lisa’s play, Carolina Dive (photo above), is set to be published by YouthPLAYS later this year. The announcement was made immediately following the reading at Festival.
**Guest Profile: Brett Neveu**

Brett Neveu is an award winning playwright whose plays have been produced by theatres across the US. Long associated with Chicago Dramatists, he has also developed work with Steppenwolf, Victory Gardens, the Goodman and other regional theatres. He is also an ensemble member of A Red Orchid Theatre. Internationally, his plays have been produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company and he was commissioned by The Royal Court Theatre. He is published by Broadway Play Publishing and he has taught writing at Northwestern University, DePaul University and Second City Training Center. He came to Hollins as one of our guest responders for the 2011 Festival of Student readings. Like fellow responders Lisa Schlesinger, Peter Ullian, Gina Kaufman and Jeff Goode, Brett also attended the University of Iowa with program director Todd Ristau.

Ristau commented, “I was really thrilled to get Brett to come to Hollins. We worked together a lot when we were at Iowa, and my little theatre company produced his work not only in Iowa City but also in Chicago. He was always so innovative and fresh in his writing. A lot of the people who were at Iowa back in the 1980’s are now at the forefront of new play development and it was fantastic to have so many of them here at Hollins to share their history and inspire a new generation of emerging dramatists to make their mark on the national scene.”

“Its been wonderful to see the new work,” Neveu told us. “It feels like the comments and the discussion after the readings is just the right length. It is all quite helpful and accepting. I think it’s a good program, it seems like everybody’s really happy with it. That’s always the gauge—are the students happy with the program, do they think they are getting something useful out of it. From this past weekend it seems the students are getting something out of it. They are challenging themselves to create work that is outside of themselves. I don’t know much about the classes, but from what I’ve observed from the outside it seems like it is a really good program”

“I don’t know of any other programs that are structured like this, six weeks in the summer. It seems like it suits certain individual’s schedules better, certain individual’s lives better, and it allows you that time to work on productions or whatever you need to do to survive and then come back and be a student for awhile.”

Asked if he had one piece of advice he’d like to give student playwrights, Brett replied, “Be truthful. That’s what I’d tell them.”

**Formation of the New Works Advisory Board**

The New Works Initiative is a fund to promote the production and presentation of work associated with the Playwright’s Lab. Since the playwriting program at Hollins started in 2007, we’ve provided funding for dozens of full productions, readings, special events and workshops at Studio Roanoke and Mill Mountain Theatre pairing our student playwrights with professional directors like Cheryl Snodgrass, Jeff Goode and Joe Banno. We’ve also worked with theatres like SkyPilot in LA and The Lincoln Loft in Chicago to co-produce student work way, way off campus—and that includes taking a production of a student play from the Mill Mountain Stage all the way to Manhattan!

With the growth of the program that our success has brought with it, the time has come to create a formal body of advisors whose input will help keep this continued growth sustainable.

“The mission of our New Works Advisory Board will be to provide support for our programming, assist in raising the funds necessary to continue that programming and help generate greater enthusiasm in our community for new play development,” Program Director Todd Ristau explains.

The basic structure is modeled after the advisory board of the Wilson Museum of Art, with input from the university administration.

Ristau continued, “We’re assembling a group of people who represent different constituencies in the community, people already supportive of what we’re doing and who have been looking for new ways to help us do what we do. They are going to be giving me good advice on selecting shows for productions and readings, volunteering for events, attending our shows, and raising public awareness of the playwriting program and the accomplishments of our students.”

All of the final administrative authority for the program as well as the New Works Initiative fund will ultimately still reside solely with the program director, but by having additional input, those decisions will not be made in a vacuum.

NWAB members will have demonstrated strong support for the program through prior volunteering and/or charitable contributions to the fund. Currently these will include Kris Laguzza (local director and actor) and Ross Laguzza (local actor and improv performer), Matthew Marshall (Hollins faculty), Bob Moss (professional director and Hollins faculty member), Chad Runyon (Graduate Student Representative) and Kat Osborne (Hollins theatre department’s Assistant Producer).

Members are appointed for three year terms, and will not be asked to serve more than two consecutive terms.

“It has been fantastic to have the counsel of this board when thinking about bringing in guest artists that are not only going to be a good fit with the curriculum I’m designing but also appeal to the general public,” Ristau said. “I need input from the community. I also need their input on play selection. I had over 40 plays to consider for the ten festival slots this year. The board read all of the plays, rated them, and discussed them with me before I made the final selections. I don’t know how I ever did it alone, but I never want to go back to being the only one involved in those choices. At the end of the day, the NWAB also provides a much more realistic model for our students. This is how it is done in the real world.”
SkyPilot Theatre Company presents

Plane Talk at SkyPilot Features Hollins Playwrights

SkyPilot Theatre Company is dedicated to fostering new relationships with provocative playwrights to develop the most compelling, challenging and humorous new plays for the LA theatre going audience.

Jeff Goode, who is a regular returning faculty member here at the Lab, created the playwright-in-residence program with several Hollins playwrights as core members.

In addition to award winning productions and regular staged readings, member playwrights are also participants in the frequent short play showcases, usually set in a single location and riffing on a shared theme.

This month, SkyPilot’s second annual “One-act, one location” production featured ten new short plays, all of which were set in an airport. Hollins playwrights included Goode, Adam Hahn, Samantha Macher, and Nikki Adkins along with Brett Neveu and Jonathan Price who have been Guest Artists at Hollins. Goode, Macher and Price also directed pieces for the show which featured 29 members of SkyPilot’s acting ensemble.

The short plays presented audiences with a smorgasbord of genres including comedy,

...first-class in terms of comic sensibility and imagination”
—The LA Weekly

drama, theatre of the absurd and even one musical!

“This was another of the opportunities created by SkyPilot’s marriage of an acting company with a group of resident playwrights,” Hahn said of Plane Talk. “The two sides of the partnership work together and inspire each other to create something new. I was paired with a director (James Sharpe), and we asked to work with two actors who excited us (Germaine Deleon and Sara Kubida).”

“...An entertaining evening of quirky airport stories overall ... Fly to your telephone ... and book a first class seat!”
—The Tolucan Times

Shifting Gears by Jeri Weiss at Fronkensteen

Jeri Weiss had three of her short plays produced this month by Fronkensteen Theatre, a company created by fellow MFA playwright Ricky Steven Young.

“Shifting Gears deals with people trying to change the course of their life,” Weiss said of her work, “I realized how many of my plays take place in cars. Since it wasn’t something I consciously set out to do, I had to ask what is driving me to place my characters behind the wheel? I noticed that the model of car not only reveals qualities of its owner, but also suggests the atmosphere of each piece. An even closer examination reveals a deeper thematic element—the car as a means of escape.”

We’re excited by how our playwrights create their own opportunities to work with each other to develop their plays by putting them up on stage and in front of audiences.

www.facebook.com/events/30764179279464/

http://skypilottheatre.com/?cat=43
The Lab Report

Playwriting News from the Playwright’s Lab at Hollins University

Young Actors Studio Commissions Samantha Macher

Samantha Macher is set to graduate this May, but is already garnering a host of professional credits as a playwright. Most recently, she has been tapped by the Young Actors Studio to create four short scenes and three monologues for teens as part of their Winter 2012 Commissioned Project.

The Young Actor’s Studio commissioned three Southern California based playwrights to create scenes and monologues and theatre pieces for their teen/young adult students. The company is specifically interested in character-driven work that deals with real, contemporary issues affecting youth.

Commissioned writers meet with selected students and develop the work together.

“For this project I’m being given the task of writing specifically for and with the student actors at the Young Actor’s Studio,” Samantha told us. “The students are in the advanced study class and range from age 15 to 18. The kids are incredibly talented and I’ve been told that they are really mature for their age, so I’m being encouraged to take on subjects that are not traditionally thought of as children’s theatre material. I can tackle subjects like death, divorce and sexuality without worrying about offending or upsetting anyone. I’m also looking forward to working with the directors, Jeff Alan Lee and Andrew Shafer tremendously. And, I’m excited to learn more about what it means to work with young actors creating work intended for young audiences.”

Jeff Alan Lee is Artistic Director of The Young Actor’s Studio and teaches acting. He has worked with young people for over 20 years. Andrew Shafer studies with Alan Lee and is now the Associate Director and Playwright-in-Residence.

The Young Actor’s Studio is one of the best acting schools in Los Angeles for children/teen/young adult actors. Previous commissioned works have been published through Three New Plays for Young Actors from The Young Actor’s Studio (LimeLight Editions).

MonoSlam creator and producer, Mike Rademacher, has been growing the event since the theatre first began hosting MonoSlams last year. He claims the submission levels have grown steadily and he currently receives over forty monologues for each submission call.

Rademacher then chooses five comic pieces and five dramatic pieces for the competition and the audience chooses the winners.

“MonoSlam is a great motivation to continue practicing the craft of writing strong monologues,” Foerster said. “The Secret Rose is only a couple hours away and gives me an opportunity to connect with other writers in the LA area. I look forward to submitting again soon.”

Foerster has had her work performed in two previous MonoSlams after being encouraged to participate by Hollins visiting faculty member, Jeff Goode. Goode himself is a regular writer for the event and had seen Wendy-Marie’s monologues at No Shame.

nailoupproductions.com

Nail Soup Productions was established in 2005, and is a culturally diverse production company whose mission is to benefit poets, playwrights, dancers, singers, musicians, directors, designers, writers, actors, and artists of every genre. They produce events in LA and New York including productions, readings, an annual Limerick Festival and MonoSlam, a monologue contest held at Secret Rose Theatre in North Hollywood.

Last month, Hollins playwright Wendy-Marie Foerster was a participant in the Holiday MonoSlam Competition held on December 15th, and her piece Guilty won best dramatic monologue.

Guilty (performed by actress/director, Jill Turnbow) tells the story of a woman who attempts to turn herself in for the murder of her husband who recently died of a heart attack.

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nailsoupproductions.com
Robert Plowman brought his most recent play into the classroom for a day-long workshop with undergraduate acting students at the University of Waterloo, in Waterloo, Canada.

In collaboration with the student actors and Assistant Professor Jennifer Roberts-Smith, Plowman was refining the most recent draft of The Muse Factory, which he began in the Playwright’s Lab.

“It’s a story set in a dream-like 1940s about a group of bohemians whose aspirations are, in equal measure, literary and criminal,” Plowman explained. “Initially inspired by the lives of the so-called Beat writers — Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs — The Muse Factory is a play concerned with the importance of transgressing boundaries, and also the price.”

The first draft of The Muse Factory received a staged reading in the Playwright’s Lab in 2010. Since then, Plowman worked on the play while in residence at both the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire and the Playwrights Theatre Center Colony in Vancouver.

“After recently hearing the play read by some great actors at the PTC Colony it was a real gift to hear the recent revisions with a completely different set of voices,” Plowman said. “Inevitably, different things popped in this reading and—thanks to the acting students—different solutions presented themselves.”

The workshop that Jennifer Roberts-Smith proposed was, Plowman said, “an ideal meeting of pedagogical and creative goals.” For the acting students, steeped in text work with classical verse plays, the workshop allowed them to apply their skills at scansion to the development of a contemporary play composed in free verse.

“Jennifer and I have been collaborators for many years, since we were students together at King’s College in Halifax,” Plowman said, “so it was a real pleasure to meet her students and work with her in an academic context.”

Plowman is a playwright and collaborative theatre artist. His play Radium City was published in volume nine of the New Canadian Drama anthology series. As well, his critical writing on collective creation has been featured in Theatre Research in Canada and Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre.

robertplowman.com

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Clinton Johnston Directs \textit{Night of the Iguana}

Charlottesville that has been dedicated to tapping into and building an African American audience. I know both the people at Live Arts and the people behind Melanin. I've worked with Leslie Baskerfield, who created Melanin before. When she showed me their plan for this year, I got really excited and immediately wanted to be involved with a bunch of their projects because they seemed creative and challenging.”

Last month Johnston directed a staged reading of \textit{Night of the Iguana} for the Melanin Theatre Project at Live Arts Theatre. “I specifically liked the idea of directing a staged reading of a Williams piece, because I don’t think you ever really know a playwright like you do when you're directing their work, and with a staged reading I wouldn’t have all the practical tasks of a full production,” Clinton said of his attraction to the project. “Most of my interest was a writer as opposed to as director. It's beautiful to see Williams hang all the associations on this simple plot. It's interesting to see him play with both explicit and implied metaphor. And it's really fascinating to see how fully he's considering stage craft like simultaneous movement and sounds.”

Live Arts agreed to pay for the rights to Iguana, offered one of their rehearsal spaces for a night of performance, and included the show in its normal marketing cycles for the season. Everything else was Melanin. All eight actors volunteered their time. Costumes were pulled from their closets.

“Many of the people who saw it, liked it,” Johnston said. “People were thrown by Williams' alternative plot structure. it was unfamiliar to them, but in the discussion that followed the reading, they couldn't go so far as to say it didn't work. It's just that they play didn't move the way they were used to. The good news is that nobody balked at our having cast the majority of the show with African American actors.”

Asked what his experience at Hollins had contributed to his process with Night of the Iguana, Johnston replied,. “I could not have gone through this process without thinking about last summer's Alternative Theatre class taught by Ruth Margraff and what we would've made of this work in discussion. I certainly approached the piece with my head still in that space.”

To accomplish the mission, they are adopting a three-pronged approach. First, they will work with established local theatres (many of whom also want to open up this demographic) to do staged readings of plays that are either lesser known works which center on people of color or well-known plays done with non-traditional racial casting.

“This is different than race-blind casting,” Johnston explains. “We want to show that a more creative racial landscape can add depth to the work. Obviously, this may not have been what the author intended, but you don't have the sense of black actors pretending to be white, you are asking what new meanings the play might have if the characters were black.”

Second, Melanin hopes to conduct theatre classes for actors of color so that more non-white performers feel auditioning for plays rather than only being recruited when a role pops up for an actor of their specific race or ethnicity.

Lastly, the ultimate goal is for Melanin to stage full productions, with an eye toward finding modern, multicultural approaches to works originally conceived in times of racial stratification. With Johnston’s involvement, they may also include productions of new plays written specifically to address these concerns with roles for an ensemble he is already familiar with.

Clinton Johnston already held an MFA in directing from the University of Virginia before joining the MFA program in playwriting at Hollins University. He has long been associated with some of the most exciting theatre in his home of Charlottesville, VA, and directed or performed in many shows at local venues including Live Arts where he has also served on the board of trustees.

Now, Johnston has joined The Melanin Theatre Project. Melanin is a new group of African American actors in Charlottesville with an interesting, new approach to an old problem—how to increase casting opportunities for actors of color, specifically African Americans.

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Johnston told us, “We’re partnering with Live Arts, a community theatre in Charlottesville that has been dedicated to tapping into and building an African American audience. I know both the people at Live Arts and the people behind Melanin. I’ve worked with Leslie Baskerfield, who created Melanin before. When she showed me their plan for this year, I got really excited and immediately wanted to be involved with a bunch of their projects because they seemed creative and challenging.”

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From the Director: Who’s a Starving Artist?

Inside Higher Ed reported last May the Myth of the Starving Artist had been debunked.

According to the myth, pursuing a life in the arts will lead “perennial unhappiness, hunger and unemployment.” According to the article, the opposite appears to be true. Graduates of arts programs just as likely to find jobs and satisfaction as any other major.

That doesn’t surprise me, and not just because I’m anecdotal proof. After all, art is what allows us to contextualize information, extract meaning from it, and then imagine methods of turning meaning into effective action. Through art we understand our world, and communicate that understanding to others.

The article said that two-thirds of the surveyed arts graduates said that their first job out of school was, in fact, a close match for the kind of work they wanted. It also mentioned that only 3% of those holding jobs were working in food service. And, for those who found work outside the arts, 70% said they still make or perform their art on their own time.

My big takeaway from the article was that these artists have learned how to be entrepreneurial, putting personal initiative into direct action instead of waiting to be discovered. They are finding work or, with 60% of these artists being self-employed, 14% running their own companies, they are making work. One of the disconnects, though, is the complaint by alumni that they had no real job training or preparation as part of their degree program.

That’s why Hollins brings in guests to discuss their early careers and teach courses in arts administration for playwrights with workshops on practical aspects of the profession like contract negotiation, collaboration agreements, creating and maintaining a professional portfolio, internships, talking to the press and starting and your own theatre company.

We want our playwrights to learn their craft, but we’re just as invested in their satisfaction as working professional artists after graduation.

Todd Ristau, Director