The Lab Report

Playwriting News from the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

Volume 06, Issue 03 (August, 2012)

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Musical Theatre for Asian Men (Only Edition) by Jonathan G Galvez in the So Low Theatre Festival!

And So Much More!

Rebecca Osborne’s Monologue Performed in Manhattan

Rebecca Osborne is very interested in topical political subjects, and a piece she wrote this summer has caught the attention of a political theatre company in New York City.

Nadia Jean-Marie, was written by Rebecca to memorialize the 1937 Haitian massacre, was performed in New York City this month by Border of Lights and CAFÉ at the Bailout Theatre in Judson Memorial Church as part of an evening of monologues on the tragedy. The event was to raise money for the show to be revived in October, when Artists Across the Americas will produce it again, but this time on the border of Haiti and the Dominican Republic to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the massacre.

Osborne first workshoped the piece at No Shame, then submitted it to Borders and Lights.

“I made some revisions,” the playwright told us. “Including adding a Haitian children’s nursery rhyme the child sings in Haitian Creole. The entire process from researching to writing through rewrites and then into performance was a terrific learning experience.”

Rebecca was able to attend the performance in New York, which was also attended by a former US ambassador to Haiti!

Osborne is entering her third year at Hollins, serves on the Board of Directors of the International Centre of Women Playwrights, is a member of the Dramatists Guild and also of Scriptworks in Austin, Texas where she lives.

Student Spotlight: Suzanne Willett

Suzanne Willett, based in Tampa, FL, joined the Playwrights Lab this summer.

She served in the US Army, where she earned the Joint Service Achievement Medal. Don’t ask her what for, because she says she’d have to kill you. After leaving the Army and returning to school to earn a degree in Electrical Engineering Technology from the University of Hartford, Suzanne decided to write. She wrote everything—novels, plays, even children’s stories—and everything she wrote was funny. “Because nobody’s going to listen to me complain if I don’t have a punch line,” she says.

Identifying humor as her calling, she took the leap into the grueling world of stand up comedy in 1998 and moved up the ladder from open mic, to opener, to finally headlining.

Willett has an impressive of professional credits, including national radio and television shows. Recently, she’s been writing and performing solo shows to great reviews, and has had productions of her full length plays, including Maria’s Song, her musical about immigration, at Venue Theatre Collective.

“I was searching online for graduate programs,” Suzanne told us, “I’d been looking for a long time and I saw that this was going on during the summer for six-week, and I thought that might be a good fit. And it is.”

We think Suzanne is a great fit for us, too. She’s been an energetic participant in No Shame, our Lab readings, and is fast emerging as a new leader in our community of writers here at Hollins University.

suzannewillett.com

borderofflights.org

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Guest Profile: Scott Bradley

Scott Bradley is co-founder of Chicago-based performance company The Scooty & JoJo Show, for which he has developed, directed, performed with, and designed the critically-acclaimed, multi-disciplinary productions Alien Queen, Mollywood, Tran: The Atari Musical and many others. His extensive resume includes a host of other professional theatres across the United States including Chicago’s About Face Theatre, DC’s Arena Stage and Seattle’s Open Circle Theater just to name a few. Bradley served as Associate Artistic Director at BACA Downtown, Brooklyn, NY and is currently creative producer with Jonny Stax Presents, an entertainment development company and a member of Actors Equity Association.

Scott joined us this summer as a performer in Overnight Sensations and as part of our guest speaker series. After his talk he took a few questions from our students.

How would you describe the Scooty & JoJo Show?

Sonny and Cher meets the Muppet Show on acid. Then you sprinkle a little fairy dust and shove it down the rabbit hole with Alice. We blend American Vaudeville, Weimar German cabaret, ’70’s variety shows, carnival side shows—and now we’ve started staging rock concerts. All of it is wide open for us in creating theatre. I don’t know that I would even call it theatre. Live performance. performance art gets a bad name, but I don’t know what else to call our work. All our shows incorporate drag, male to female as well as female to male, and we incorporate clowning and puppetry—hand puppets, body puppets, shadow puppetry and we use dance, highly stylized costumes, two-dimensional cartoon pop-up book scenic design and it all features live music with full arrangements and professional musicians.

Why do you do it?

For the majority of audiences, it is just a lot of fun. For me? I like to hold up sacred cows that we have allowed to define us and give them a spanking.

How did you start doing your mash up musicals?

Our pop fusion experiments. These have been our big successes, where we attack the current Broadway musical formula. In really trying to seek out how to blend these big icons a lot of different things go through your head as you try to define these symbols of sexuality that you want to depose but you try to find things that are really good, that also stand as really good art. I thought that was going to be a real challenge and it’s not. There’s a lot of red meat out there for me when it comes to satirizing popular entertainment that really defines a lot of beliefs that we have about ourselves as people, as women and men, as trans. As a writer I was getting a little tired of the Broadway formula for musicals—either the jukebox musical where you shove together great music and a really bad book or the musical based on the movie, where you have some really good material and you shoehorn in some really bad scores. And I thought, why can’t anybody come up with a really good movie and put it together with really good music?

Can I do that and still talk about the things I want to talk about? So, I was doing work with Hell in a Handbag Productions in a cabaret space in Chicago that was being used only for drag shows at the time, but it was a really interesting historic space and they allowed us in. I said to my partner, Jonny, are you ready? Shall we do this? And he said sure and he went out of town. When he came back I told him we were booked and we had to come up with something to do. I learned at No Shame how to come up with things fast. I was already booked to direct a big show, The Birds, a site specific work based on the Hitchcock film and our show was set to open ten days after that. I was going to do a show using John Carpenter’s Halloween, which has a lot to say about gender and misogyny and sexuality and I was scribbling out how we were going to advertise it. I arced the letters of John Carpenter and it looked just like The Carpenter’s logo. I thought, can I put The Carpenter’s music in Halloween? Yeah, I really can! Naïve teenage first love sung by a woman who was destroyed by body image, you know? There’s a girl who got slashed apart by our social construct of what a woman should look like. And I played Jamie Lee Curtis, because it is even more ridiculous when a man is put into that kind of virginal place. My partner, Johny Stax, worked on the music but after I opened The Birds I had ten days to stage it. And it hit at the right time. We had a line around the block, we sold out. We had to extend, which was really exciting. It put us on the map.
What do think made Carpenter’s Halloween such a success?

Chicago is a really muscular, working class town. You know, Steppenwolf. Really muscular naturalism. That’s what Chicago is known for. That’s what it likes. We were able to come in and, there was a vacuum, maybe? What I do I wouldn’t really put over in more traditional camp categories, it grabs a nerve with a lot of people. Our audiences are incredibly diverse. When the critics first came and saw us they thought it was going to be just a lot of gay men watching drag theatre, and our audiences are about, maybe 25% gay. For whatever reason, what we do really touches a much broader audience. Which makes me thrilled. It means I’m not always preaching to the choir. What makes theatre exciting to me is when you’re able to get a really diverse crowd into a room to share an experience. Share that moment. If Scooty & JoJo Show can help create those moments in a town like Chicago, I feel really fortunate. As Jonny says, a Southern Baptist minister, “We’re doing the Lord’s work.” We’re bringing people to theatre because we always perform in night clubs, music venues, sports bars, cabaret rooms. None of our work happens in a theatre. I do my other work in a theatre. I feel like what we do is sort of outreach with the Scooty & JoJo Show. I reach people where they’re comfortable and if they see that, if they engage with that, then maybe they will set foot in a theatre.

What is the Go Go Legit campaign?

So much of the work we do is film parody, legally, under the fair use parody form and also the tribute band allowances. Like I said, we play only in night clubs and music venues that pay ASCAP/BMI licensing like cover bands and DJs do, but that means the work can only stay at a certain level before the trademark lawyers and copyright attorneys start saying, “Um, I want some of that.” So, right now we are raising money so we can really grow these projects, and so we can work with the original artists. It’s a legal process and a learning process. We’re paying a good chunk of money to a high priced entertainment lawyer who deals with these things. We want to protect the source material and pay those people for their work.

As a queer identified theatre artist, what are you looking to see on stage?

I want to see 90-minute Angels in Americas. I want to see stories about now. I want to see stories written by Gay, Lesbian, Trans, Bi people who are in their twenties. I want to hear what that story is because its different from mine. I think my generation’s stories are getting out there. And that’s great, that we’re seeing more of them, but I really want to hear the next generation talk about it. Patrick Andrews, an amazing actor who plays the lead in the production of The Homosexuals I was in at AboutFace, he’s 25 and the age of the character. I was the old queen in the show at 45, and the show was written by a 30 year-old, is about this young kid who didn’t really care about the politics of my generation. He didn’t really care about the concern around safe sex and was more interested in how to just find friends. How to just navigate having a boyfriend and dating. Those things weren’t concerns for me. For us, for my generation, the concern was staying alive. It was keeping from being killed in rural America. It was about not being killed by AIDS and government inaction and media ambivalence and that’s what our theatre was about. It was about rage and it was about survival. Now, I want to see an Angels in America written by someone in their early twenties. But, only 90 minutes, please.

How was participating in Overnight Sensations?

It was fantastic, amazing. I was in a new 10-minute play written and produced in just 24 hours. I think it’s an incredibly valuable resource for the Hollins writers and for the community. To me it is the quintessential idea of what theatre should be, creating a space for people from diverse backgrounds to all come together and share a single moment and something in common with the person next to you—someone with a different skin tone, different sexuality, different gender, a different class—yet you all experienced that moment together and you now have that in common and I think that makes the world a better place. I’m kind of a hippy when it comes to the power of theatre and art.

Any advice for playwrights?

Write a lot and keep writing. And show it to people.
JAW Festival Features Elizabeth Heffron

Elizabeth Heffron has been a very busy playwright since joining the Playwright’s Lab two years ago. She’s had recent productions in several cities of her play Mitzi’s Abortion, including the Capital Fringe in Washington DC. The play (which was read in Festival her first summer) has been published not only by Original Works but also included in an anthology of political plays edited by Naomi Iizuka: Manifesto Series 3: Here’s to a Theatre of Defiance. This series of anthologies is published by Rain City Projects. Each is edited by a nationally prominent playwright connected to the Pacific Northwest.

And, most recently, this MFA playwright was invited to participate in the very prestigious JAW Festival this summer.

JAW is Portland Center Stage’s developmental festival of new work for the stage. For two high powered intensive weeks in July, JAW: A Playwrights Festival takes over the Armory—which was originally a barracks and training facility for the Oregon National Guard and is now a thriving arts center with multiple theatre spaces, galleries and restaurants. The annual festival presents new works in progress that intended to explode audience expectations of what live performance can do.

Since launching in 1999, JAW’s principal focus continues to be the playwright and the creative process. For two weeks, four-to-six playwrights (chosen from over 200 submissions nationwide) collaborate with directors, dramaturgs, actors, and other theater professionals from across the U.S. to read, revise, and sometimes completely re-write their scripts. The intention is to discover through the process what does or does not work in the transition from page to stage.

Joining featured playwrights are “Promising Playwrights,” 4-to-6 high school students selected from PCS’s Visions & Voices program, who write and develop their own short plays, working alongside the professionals. All of the playwrights’ works are then presented in staged readings for the general public.

Heffron’s selected play was Bo-Nita, which was also featured in last year’s Festival of Student Readings at Hollins.

“The bad news is the dates,” Elizabeth wrote when she got the news of her acceptance. “I didn’t know if it would be possible to take two weeks out of six for the festival or have to drop my classes for the summer and start again next year.”

“It wouldn’t make sense to train a playwright to achieve this kind of recognition and then force her to decide between her summer classes and the tremendous opportunity represented by being included in JAW,” Todd Ristau told her.

They worked with visiting faculty members to incorporate the festival into her actual coursework for the summer and Heffron kept a detailed log book of her activities at JAW, which were turned in for credit in Lab. She also took with her copies of all the plays included in our Hollins Festival of Student Readings and emailed a detailed response to each of the playwrights whose reading she would miss while in Portland for the last two weeks of the summer session.

In her play, thirteen year old Bo-Nita waits outside school for her ride. Seemingly to pass the time, she begins telling us about an experience she had which she believes was the only miracle she’s ever seen: her ex-stepfather having a heart attack while trying to molest her. Bo-Nita’s experiences as she navigates a decidedly sketchy family life—a belly-dancing grandmother, a mother who is less than discreet with her sex life, the predatory step-father—are alternately hilarious and heart-breaking, slapstick and searing with all the characters played by a single actor.

Heffron reported, “The schedule at JAW is pretty intense. They rehearse six days each week with only one day off. The actor (Kate Eastwood Norris) did a phenomenal job with the first read, finding definite voices for all seven characters. The company was really moved and engaged by the story. Over the next few days, cuts suggested themselves just from watching Kate work. Before the reading I really did at least 3 new drafts. Only a fourth of the 550 seat house was empty. Kate was spot on and so I watched the audience. They gave us a standing ovation! The JAW Festival experience has been so generous and productive in so many ways for the play, but also for me. I met all these amazing people who want to keep in touch. I feel very lucky to have been a part of it and also continue my studies at Hollins.”
The New York International Fringe Festival is produced by The Present Company and is the largest multi-arts festival in North America, with more than 200 companies from all over the world performing for 16 days in more than 20 venues. Previous festivals have included productions from Hollins MFA students, including Rosalie was Here by Maura Campbell in 2008 and Thirty Minutes or Less by Jonathan G Galvez in 2009. Galvez returns to the festival again this year with his new play, The Girl with her Hands in the Sand, one of 187 selected shows chosen from thousands of submitted.

The New York International Fringe Festival only presents shows, they do not produce them. Each selected participating show must be self-contained, have its own production company, raise their own budget, provide their own staff and coordinate their own rehearsals.

Jonathan’s production company, Theatrical Gems, presented their play in the Cherry Lane Studio Theatre in the West Village. It was directed by Michael Hagins and starred Katherine Mullis, Tavis Doucette, Imran W. Sheikh, and Erica Jensen.

For the production, Theatrical Gems commissioned NJ artist Elana Celano to create the original artwork required for the show.

Getting his play into the festival was a tremendous honor, but it also presented a tremendous potential problem—the rehearsals would have to take place while the playwright was attending classes at Hollins this summer!

“That turned out to be a good thing,” Galvez said. “You have to trust that you can allow the director and actors to figure out the work, and know that if there are any issues or problems with the script, all they have to do is call. These actors are amazing.”

The play is part of Galvez’s BRIDGE series, a 16 play cycle of interconnected stories. Other parts of the series have included Crossing Lights (produced 2008), Thirty Minutes or Less (produced 2009), The Last Rites of Kyle Wardach (2012) and Lost in the Crossing, which was part of the 2011 Festival of Student Readings.

“On opening night, I was sitting in the back of the house with the director and audience was laughing when we want them to, they are reacting the way we want them to,” Galvez reported, but he was already shifting for playwright to producer—counting heads, calculating sales and worrying about the reviews.

The playwright summed up the experience by saying, “I really enjoyed doing this show, and I don’t know if the play is ever going up again, or if I’ll work with these people again. The question is, what do I do now? Anything could happen. I just have to breathe, keep going and prepare for the unexpected.”

jonathanggalvez.com
War Bride by Samantha Macher

Catherine, Yumi and the neighborhood girls. This was as important for Samantha as for her director and collaborator, Nancy Dobbs Owen.

“Roles for women are far too few in American theater,” Owen believes. “We were also committed to authentically cast both Japanese and American actors, filling a gap in the Asian acting community.”

Though Macher might not describe herself as a political playwright, Owen saw a contemporary message in this play based on a specific historical period.

Macher describes the process of putting War Bride up as one of the most collaborative theatre experiences of her life. She intended from the beginning to buck the old trope of writing what you know and to really explore things she was interested in but didn’t know personally. To write someone else’s story. Someone she had never even met. That meant multiple early readings of exploratory drafts, research and consulting with fellow MFA playwright Rebecca Quirk who worked as one of two dramaturgs and translators on those early drafts.

“I only had six months to find the play, the characters, to tell the story,” Macher told us, “I relied heavily on the creative team.”

It all came together when she started working with the actors, the director and the designers. Heidi Hostetler, a graduate of the Hollins undergraduate theatre department, was stage manager, assistant director and took the amazing production photos shown here. The designers lent authenticity and underscored the emotional tone with lights, set, costumes and makeup. Director Nancy Dobbs Owen coordinated, balanced, and further contributed to the realization of the initial text in production. The talented cast (Julia Sanford, Brett Fleisher, Sachiyo K, Jeffrey Markle, Kelly Goodman, Katie Apicella, Amelia Rose, Ethan Zachary Scott, Alicia Foo, Yukari Koseki, Reesa Ishiyama) functioned as an ensemble to blend performance traditions from two very different cultures.

War Bride was top rated at Bitter Lemons, and “100% Sweet” due to not a single negative review in the LA press. Sold out shows have resulted in extending the show through September 23rd!

Samantha Macher graduated from our program this year, and continues to be one of our brightest rising stars. As one of the resident playwrights of SkyPilot Theatre, she has already garnered critical acclaim for her smash hit To The New Girl, been published, been commissioned to write a film, and even acted in a musical last month!

War Bride, her latest play, has just opened to rave reviews in the first formal co-production between SkyPilot Theatre and the Playwright’s Lab at Hollins University.

Set in the Fall of 1945, Private Alvin Rhodes returns home to his mother Catherine in Merced, CA. He has an injury that he doesn’t want to discuss and a new wife, a Japanese nurse named Yumi. Yumi is greeted with suspicion and fear, even outright hatred. The bombs were dropped only two months prior and Japanese Americans are still unjustly interned at Manzinar, not far away. She is shy and withdrawn, but with the help of Catherine’s old friend Richard, a Japanese/English dictionary and 1000 paper cranes, her story is slowly revealed.

War Bride combines sharp, witty dialogue with Japanese Butoh influenced contemporary dance to create a completely new theatrical experience that challenges our ideas of right and wrong. The story is told from the point of view of the women: Catherine, Yumi and the neighborhood girls. This was as important for Samantha as for her director and collaborator, Nancy Dobbs Owen.

“The lessons of World War Two are relevant in a world where we still lock people up without a trial based upon irrational fears and prejudice,” Owen explained.

Macher describes the process of putting War Bride up as one of the most collaborative theatre experiences of her life. In a way, it had to be. She intended from the beginning to buck the old trope of writing what you know and to really explore things she was interested in but didn’t know personally. To write someone else’s story. Someone she had never even met. That meant multiple early readings of exploratory drafts, research and consulting with fellow MFA playwright Rebecca Quirk who...
Macher’s storytelling remains taut and gripping throughout (occasional anachronisms notwithstanding). Director-choreographer Nancy Dobbs Owen furthers the mounting dread with a Butoh-inspired chorus of writhing ghosts depicting Yumi’s inner torment, though a little goes a long way with this stylized technique.

—Philip Brandes, LA Times

WAR BRIDE emotionally examines the hidden scars that destroy human souls...Director Nancy Dobbs Owen creates a moving piece of theatre through the combination of fine acting, production work and symbolism.

—Mary Mallory, Tolucan Times

Congratulations, Sam, and also to everyone at SkyPilot on your success!

Open Call for Submissions

The Playwright’s Lab has stepped in to help fill the void left in our local community after last month’s closing of Studio Roanoke.

Because local audiences, theatres, and theatre artists were concerned about losing the opportunity to work on new plays we have negotiated with Mill Mountain Theatre and the June M. McBroom Theater of Community High School to resume two separate reading series which used to be an important part of the programming at Mill Mountain Theatre before they closed for reorganization in 2008.

**CenterPieces** readings are short (25-45 minute) plays performed over the lunch hour on the second Wednesday of each month.

**Discovery Readings** were new plays done sporadically to pose the question after a reading of a new, possibly controversial, full-length play, “Would it work in Roanoke?” The two times plays were read in this series, both scripts were by Jeff Goode. *(THE EIGHT: Reindeer Monologues and Love Loves a Pornographer)*

Both reading series will resume on a regular monthly basis beginning next month, produced by the Playwright’s Lab with participation by the growing number of actors and directors in the area eager to work on the development of new plays.

CenterPieces will again be at noon on the 2nd Wednesday of each month on the Waldron Stage with a moderated talk back to follow. Discovery Readings will be on the 3rd Sunday of each month at 6PM in the June M. McBroom Theatre at Community High School. The moderated talkback for Discovery Readings will also include light refreshments for the audience and the actors.

There is no compensation, but writers unable to attend the readings are provided with a DVD of the performance and discussion.

A $5 submission fee to offset costs of the readings, like script copying and the refreshments, is waived for current members of the Dramatists Guild. Simply include a copy of your card rather than a check.

Send hard copies (in standard stage play format) with cover letter, brief synopsis, character breakdown, contact information and a business sized SASE for a response to:

Playwright’s Lab Reading Series
PO Box 9602
Roanoke VA 24020-1602

Make checks payable to Hollins University with **NWI: SUBMISSION** written in the memo section. Scripts are recycled, not returned. Average response time is 6 months to a year.
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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: Your Public Profile

Observant followers of this little newsletter may have noticed I’ve changed my photo, as I do after each summer at the start of a new volume of the Lab Report.

It’s a nice reminder we’re starting a new year with lots of new projects and lots of new work to do. It’s also a nice mile marker, showing who I am today is the culmination of who I’ve been before.

As someone who has dealt with a lot of auditions, one of my biggest pet peeves is seeing a headshot of someone who looks perfect for the role and casting in someone for an audition based on that resume and headshot only to find that to cast the actor I wanted I’d need a time machine.

Here’s the thing, I wish I still looked like I did when I was 27. In my mind I don’t have gray hair, I don’t have a sway back, I don’t weigh more than 200 pounds, I don’t have crows feet, ear hair, and terrible fashion sense.

Unfortunately, if I am honest, I do not look like I imagine myself to look. How I actually look might be PERFECT for a really good part but I’m never going to be considered for it if I’m still using a headshot from when I was 27 or refuse to post a photo of myself that looks like how I actually look rather than how I want myself to look.

Believe it or not, this doesn’t just go for actors. It also goes for playwrights. Maybe more so, since we are supposed to be dedicated to discovering and revealing truth rather than presenting a beautiful illusion.

I’m not saying you should find a warts and all profile picture—you can still work with a photographer (like our own Chad Runyon) to get a truthful picture that conveys an honest image of you which is still pleasing to the eye—but that takes being able to see with your eye what is beautiful about you today not straining to still see what was beautiful about you way back when.

Thanks, Chad, for helping me do that and also for using your eye to capture so much beautiful truth in our students with your camera.

Todd Ristau, Director