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## LMDA Canada: Canadian Caucus Newsletter, November 1999

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Canadian Caucus Newsletter

November 1999

Please send any comments or submissions for  
future newsletters to

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## **LMDA Canadian Caucus — Membership**

### Active Members

[as of Nov. 5, 1999]

Philip Adams -  
Henry Bakker -  
Lindsay Bell -  
Diana Belshaw -  
Mary Blackstone -  
Naomi Campbell -  
Frank Canino -  
Anne Chislett -  
David Copelin -  
James DeFelice -  
Michael Devine -  
David Duclos -  
Katrina Dunn -  
Joanna Falck -  
Linda Gaboriau -  
Michael Groberman -  
Stephen Heatley -  
Ben Hend -  
Chapelle Jaffe -  
Lise Ann Johnson -  
Stephen Johnson -  
Denis Johnston -  
Urjo Kareda -  
Katherine Kaszas -  
DD Kugler -  
Jeannette Lambermont -  
Jackie Maxwell -  
Jessica Maynard -  
Kim McCaw -  
Marie Mendenhall -  
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Alisa Palmer -  
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Brian Richmond -  
Richard Rose -  
Ed Roy -  
Judith Rudakoff -  
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Laurel Smith -  
Michael Smith -  
Shelley Tepperman -  
Iris Turcott -  
Keith Turnbull -  
Bob White -  
Adrienne Wong -





Canadian Newsletter, November 8, 1998

Dear Colleague –

Some important dates and events to note in your calendars:

- Toronto area LMDA members are invited to an informal get-together on January 18 at C'est What on Front Street East at 6:30pm. A number of us have been meeting every six weeks during the fall to compare notes about scripts and programs and in January we'd like to open it up to all LMDA members. Join us for a drink and a chat about current dramaturgical events.
- LMDA Canadian Caucus meeting, Calgary, February 25, 2000 — during ATP's Playrites Festival Blitz Weekend, at ATP. Time to be announced. Please confirm attendance with me. This is a great chance to discuss issues specific to Canada. Last year's meeting was excellent, so I urge you to join us for the Festival and the meeting.
- LMDA Annual Conference, Washington, D.C, June 15 – 18, 2000 — Details won't be available until the spring, but please consider attending this event. Last year's Tacoma conference was a wonderful exchange of ideas and featured a substantial Canadian contingent. We hope to maintain that presence this year.
- PACT Conference, Charlottetown, P.E.I., August 8 – 11, 2000 — Though not an LMDA event, many members attend the conference and if possible we will try to set up an LMDA meeting during the conference.
- Theatre Centre Mini-Conference on Dramaturgy, Toronto, late June, 2000 — Dates have not been set, but this conference will feature, as usual, frank discussions of the developmental process by leading Canadian artists.
- ATHE (Association of Theatre in Higher Education), Washington, D.C., Aug. 2 –5, 2000 — This conference was held in Toronto last year and is attended by many LMDA members; it features many dramaturgical panels and sessions.

For further information contact me or the LMDA office at <admin@lmda.org>.

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Canadian Caucus Meeting, June 1999:

A number of ideas were discussed at the Canadian Caucus meeting during the Tacoma conference. Many have expressed a desire for sample contracts for dramaturgical work. Do you have a contract that worked for you, and would you consider sharing it with the membership? If so, please contact me and I'll include several samples in the next newsletter.

Lise Ann Johnson wants to explore the possibility of exchanges with American theatre companies and is researching existing programs. Those interested, or who have undertaken such an exchange, should contact Lise Ann at <lajohnexpo@aol.com>.

I conducted a modest survey of dramaturgical fees and responsibilities last spring. The results are outlined below. A more thorough survey is likely necessary. Volunteers?

. . . . .

Survey results:

- What fee to you request for dramaturgical work?
  - daily fees ranged from \$200 to \$150 to \$50.
  - weekly fees ranged from \$500 to \$800 to \$1000
  - full production fees ranged from \$2000 to \$3500
    - one respondent based his fees on actor fees for the same period
  - to read and evaluate a script: \$30 to \$150
  
- If you don't generally receive the fee that you request, what fees do you typically receive?
  - "I negotiate based on the actual budget of the project, and the range of fees other artists are receiving ... sometimes that's nothing at all."
  - This response seems to sum up the general feeling. The desire to work on an attractive project seems often to overcome a resistance to a modest fee.
  
- Do you sign contracts for such work?
  - The answers ranged from "rarely" to "whenever possible" to "no".
  - Several members have offered their contracts as models, and we will look at circulating them. Contracts must include an agreement on credit, as this is a sticking point with many dramaturgs who feel that their work has been poorly recognized.
  
- As an individual dramaturg, have you received a percentage of an author's royalties for your work?
  - "no, although it has been offered by the playwright."
  - "no, but support this wholeheartedly."
  - "no, though on one project I became a co-writer, by mutual agreement. It was a novel adaptation and ended up with 55% to the novelist, 30% to the main writer and 15% to me as co-adaptor."
  - "I'm much more comfortable requesting a flat fee."
  - "I receive royalties from one play ... but only when I am not the director, or when it is produced in other media. This is in the belief that my work is recognized in this case as the director, but that that work is in part responsible for success in other media and the writer has agreed to acknowledge that fact."
  - most have not received royalties.

- Do you believe there are circumstances in which a dramaturg should receive such royalties?
  - "not specifically for the services of a dramaturg ... if the relationship evolves into co-writing, then yes ... each situation is different, and must be discussed in detail, not only at the outset but as often as the work, and the relationships within that work, evolve."
  - "by and large, no, because dramaturgs (like directors, actors, et al) should be employed and paid by producers not playwrights."
  - "when the dramaturg was instrumental in the development of a play that is then produced."
  - "generally, as long as dramaturgs are well paid and recognized, I am unsure about the desirability of royalties."
  - "only if the dramaturg takes on a different role and becomes co-writer by mutual agreement and without coercion. I agree with those who see a danger in the dramaturg trying to claim entitlement to a portion of royalties or rights or intellectual property. In such a situation playwrights might fear working with us, and would have some grounds for that fear."
  - "I think dramaturgy is a lot like stage management. There is skill, intuition, and craft to it, but it is essentially artisan's work, not artistry. Just as I object to a stage manager hi-jacking a show by 'interpreting' a director's cues due to some misplaced idea of an SM's role, I am ambivalent about according a dramaturg co-artist status on projects. Like SM's, their work is irreplaceable in the creative process. That doesn't make it worthy of artist's status, contractually."

Thank you to everyone who took the time to answer these questions, and for the quality of your responses.

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#### Membership:

Thank you also to those who have renewed their membership. Note that memberships are on an annual basis, and expire on June 1 each year. In accordance with the LMDA as a whole, membership fees will rise next year to the following rates:

- active member      \$60 Cdn
- student member     \$25 Cdn

Fees have not been increased in many years and we appreciate your commitment to the organization and your support through your financial contributions.

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Thank you to everyone who has contributed to the newsletter. I look forward to seeing you at the upcoming events.

Brian Quirt

## Canadian Dramaturge Goes To Oz – by Vanessa Porteous

WORLD INTERPLAY is a biennial Festival of Young Playwrights that takes place in Townsville, North Queensland, Australia for ten days in July. Alberta Theatre Projects is the Canadian representative of the organization, and Eugene Stickland, our playwright in residence, is the rep. He was unable to go this year, so as ATP's assistant dramaturge I was privileged to attend Interplay '99, the sixth Festival, as the Canadian Tutor Delegate. I went with two young Canadian Playwright Delegates, Sue Balint (Niagara Falls ON) and Rob Bartel (Edmonton AB).

Interplay is an Australian initiative established in 1983, that brings together playwrights aged 16 to 25 and tutors, who are directors, playwrights, dramaturges, and teachers, from around the world to spend ten days focused on the craft of playwriting and on cultural exchange. This year delegates included writers and tutors from the Royal Court in England, a team from the High School of the Arts in Manila, the Philippines, aboriginal writers from Australia and New Zealand, two Kenyan writers, a Croatian writer, Roumanians, Greeks, two American tutors, and many more. A world-ranging contingent of delegates from Interplay 97 was also in attendance to finish and stage *Something Blue*, a play they wrote collectively over the Internet. Drama students of James Cook University, which hosts the Festival, were on hand to be script-readers and technical support.

It was an intense, stimulating two weeks. The days began with an informal gathering at The Cowshed Theatre. We streamed off the shuttle buses and sucked back coffee and danishes under the kookaburras and cockatoos in the trees while madly planning the upcoming day.

The morning was devoted to projects (a reading or a rehearsal of a play in progress), workshops (classes or seminars on a particular issue in playwriting), and one-to-ones (a tutor and a delegate meet to discuss a script). After a hurried lunch and more planning, we spent the afternoon in base groups.

A base group consisted of four to six playwrights. Every day two different tutors would join the group as facilitators. Activities included reading and discussion of someone's play in progress, writing activities, work on a collective project.

At 5:30 we would roll back on the buses and go to dinner at a local restaurant. Then a cultural event, a pub crawl, night-clubbing, or (for the exhausted tutor) a retreat to your aussie billet and bed.

Michael Gow, the distinguished Australian playwright, was Artistic Director of Interplay '99. His goals were to make the Festival more practical than theoretical, and to put as much responsibility as possible in to the hands of the young playwrights. For the Tutors, who came from many different cultures and professional backgrounds, it was a daily challenge to facilitate and teach groups of writers coming from extremely varied traditions.

At first a great deal of dramaturgical attention was given to the scripts the writers had brought with them, in the name of practice over theory. But readings, discussions, and one-on-one dramaturgy piled up, and the writers found they had very little time to make any adjustments.

The writers themselves began solving the problem. They started to ask the Tutors to bring writing activities, anecdotal experience, and tricks of the trade from their own background to the base groups.

Eventually the writers themselves began to offer things to do from their tradition. Cultural exchange and the nuts and bolts of writing plays began to meld. Collective creation techniques from Switzerland (take a word from someone's poetic prologue, write a monologue from it, and offer it to the writer for use or reference). Puppet theatre from Hungary (role-play the characters in a situation and setting outside the play). Creative games from the Royal Court (light a match and tell your life-story before it burns down). Writing exercises from New Zealand (place a three-word limit on each line of dialogue—now write a scene). Games from Poland (The objects are a wine-glass, a river, a piece of paper saying yes. Write the scene that explains the presence of these objects). And of course many hi-falutin discussions of story, inter-textuality, structure, postmodernism ("I see your play is addressing the issues of boredom and stasis. But in a good way?") Pretty soon we Tutors started losing our preconceptions about the almighty rules of good playwriting.

We jammed on everything from Mac Wellman's exercise "how to write a bad play" to role-playing the director-writer relationship. I even hosted a workshop on punctuation for performance that became so engrossing somehow that we went for three hours. I don't know, maybe it was the tropical heat.

On the final weekend we held a forum where the young writers spoke with passion about what made them write for the stage, and what life was like for an artist in their home countries. The young Brits said they wrote because they were "very very angry." The Philipinas told us how pervasive and vital theatre is to their culture: "That is how the Spanish managed to colonize us. They enthralled us with theatre." The Kenyan writers got us thinking about artistic risk in a whole new way. In Kenya your life may depend on your ability with coded speech and allegory: it's the only way to get your message across and also stay alive.

All in all a thrilling, challenging immersion. Really made me focus on the essentials: teach good practice by example, focus on finding the most effective ways to work collaboratively, speak from personal experience, and stay away from rules.

And keep your ears open. Next time you see me, ask me for the story the Croatian playwright told me about her brother and his girlfriend ("She is Dalmatian, you know, so she is GORGEOUS.") You see in Zagreb after the war there were all these street gangs....

**Vanessa Porteous**  
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## Translation on the St. Lawrence – by Lise Ann Johnson

In September of 1998, the Centre des auteurs dramatiques (CEAD) in Montreal launched its inaugural Writer's Residence. The setting for the residence is the magnificent Fletcher House, located in Tadoussac, where the St. Lawrence River meets the Saguenay. Fletcher House is the family home of Canadian director Bill Glassco, who along with translator Linda Gaboriau, served as the hosts for the very first residency. CEAD runs two separate residencies each year, one devoted to the development of new French-language plays, and another devoted to the development of new translations.

The translation programme is unique in North America as the only writer's residence devoted exclusively to theatrical translation. The primary goal of the programme is to commission and develop new translations of and by Quebec playwrights. Each September, we bring together playwrights and translators from diverse cultures to work together in isolation over the course of two weeks. Translators bring a first draft to the residency and have the opportunity to consult and work with "their" playwright on clarifying and revising the text. A translation dramaturg is available to offer feedback to the writers and translators.

Following the residency, CEAD works in tandem with other theatre companies to ensure that the scripts are workshopped and publicly presented. In 1998, we collaborated with Alberta Theatre Projects and Playwrights Workshop Montreal. Of the four new translations developed as part of our exchange with ATP and PWM, three are slated for production. Bobby Theodore's translation of *15 Seconds* by François Archambault can be seen this season at the Great Canadian Theatre Company in Ottawa, Prairie Theatre Exchange in Winnipeg, Alberta Theatre Projects in Calgary and Touchstone Theatre in Vancouver. René Gingras' translation of Eugene Stickland's *Some Assembly Required* will premiere at the Compagnie Jean Duceppe in December. André Ricard's translation of *Inexpressible Island* by David Young will be produced by the Théâtre de la Manufacture at La Licorne in Montreal this winter.

We recently wrapped up the 1999 Translation Residency, which was primarily devoted to our Irish exchange project entitled BELFAST-MONTREAL-DUBLIN. Jean-Marc Dalpé translated *Between Two Circuses* by Belfast author Pol Mag Uidhir, and Emmanuelle Roy translated *Melonfarmer* by Dublin playwright Alex Johnston. CEAD hosted Pol and Alex as part of a larger exchange with two Irish theatre companies, Tinderbox and Bedrock. The Residency also focused on an exchange with English Canada. Carole Fréchette has translated *The Monument* by Colleen Wagner, which will be presented on November 8 at La Licorne in Montreal, in a reading featuring Monique Mercure. Don Druick worked on an English version of Larry Tremblay's *Les Mains Bleues*, which will be read at Theatre La Chapelle on November 15th. Both readings are part of "Transmissions", our annual exchange with Playwrights Workshop Montreal.

CEAD's residency programme aims at developing new translations and new translators. Where possible, we try to match playwrights with other playwrights. Theatrical translation, unlike regular literary translation, requires a keen ear for dialogue, a sense of dramatic rhythm and an understanding of how words will "feel" in the mouth of an actor. In offering playwrights the opportunity to translate plays, we hope to expand both the field and the repertoire of available scripts in translation.

The Residency also functions as a cultural exchange. The programme encourages participants to engage in broader discussions about the issues central to their particular



society. Through shared evening meals, drinks around the fireplace and excursions to watch whales gather in the St. Lawrence, the artists have a chance to discover a new culture in a personal way. We believe that this aspect of the programme is invaluable. In our wired world, new borders are erected as quickly as old ones are torn down. We are continually faced with the conflict between the dangers of nationalism and the values of cultural sovereignty. Translation and the cultural exchanges they foster become a means of better understanding our shrinking global village. As René Gingras wrote in a follow-up letter, "Translation is a bridge, more necessary than ever, between two cultures."

This opportunity to exchange ideas, along with plays, made a great impact on our participants. David Young explains how Tadoussac changed his perception of Quebec:

"Tadoussac itself was a revelation. My ideas about Quebec were based on a superficial knowledge of Montreal. I never factored in the reality of the St. Lawrence. A land mass with an ocean washing in and out, twenty foot tides, whales, the Saguenay, the history which resides in Bill's wonderful house, all of these things have, as they say, changed the optics. Culture is, on some level, an expression of place. I think I now understand Quebec's mental geography and the ripple effect it has in culture and politics."

I leave you with Morwyn Brebner's impressionistic description of the Residence. It makes me want to drop everything and head north. Morwyn, who was working on the English translation of Erik Charpentier's *If I Had Sole Possession Over Judgement Day*, writes:

"I described Tadoussac to a friend and she said it sounded like Writers' Paradise. It was, absolutely. Translator's Paradise. When I remember it I see us all wandering on and off the front porch, looking I would guess to the tour bus people on the boardwalk like inmates at a particularly freewheeling sanatorium. Eugene is wearing shorts and a white undershirt and those shades; René is working with ungodly ultimate-translator laserbrain concentration; Bill is in his pith helmet picking mushrooms off the lawn; and Bobby is giving himself an aneurysm trying to explain to François why "gueguese" has to be "thing" in English. There is a blue and white Q-Tip box sky, a warm sun, and a cold breeze blowing off the Saguenay. I got a ton of work done, and I learned an awful lot about the art and craft of translation. It was wonderful."

**Lise Ann Johnson**

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## Experimenting with the Audience – by Mary Blackstone

The 1998-1999 season at the Globe Theatre in Regina announced the arrival of the new Artistic Director, Ruth Smilie, and afforded her the opportunity to highlight her interests as well as the directions in which she would be taking the Globe and its audiences. Her programming promised attention to the work of contemporary commonwealth writers as well as recognition of the important work being done by aboriginal artists and the need to address the cultural dynamic of the community. With three of the six Mainstage shows and the three pieces in her Second Stage series, she also signaled a commitment to mounting the work of Saskatchewan writers and artists. Promoted as featuring the "creations of Saskatchewan writers and producers who work on the edge," the Second Stage Series opened with *On the Line*, "a freefall through new work" of "this province's emerging and established writers." Although minimally staged and rehearsed, the performance of a substantial number of these very short submissions enabled Smilie to also announce an interest in new work and set the tone for "the anticipation, the excitement, the passion, the fantasy, the imagination and the surprises" promised in the season brochure.

In her first opening night chat, Smilie challenged the audience, if they liked what they saw, to "tell a friend" and if they didn't to "tell me." By the end of the second Mainstage production, Floyd Favel Starr's *Lady of Silences*, yellow response slips in the foyer revealed that Globe audiences would not be shy in communicating negative as well as positive reactions to the season. By March and the season's penultimate show, Connie Gault's *Otherwise Bob*, concerns regarding audience response assumed an unusually high profile, even before the opening, when Smilie issued a letter to subscribers in which she warned that the production had encountered difficulties (a sick designer, an injured technical director, a replaced actor) and that "the bold and challenging" direction of the play had established a "tone and emotional volatility" which she had not anticipated and which was not communicated in the theatre's marketing. She noted that some subscribers with "sensitivities to strong language and disturbing imagery, may choose not to participate as audience members in this production" and offered them several options for exchanging their ticket or getting a refund. Smilie's pre-show mediation with the audience continued through an interview with the *Leader-Post* Entertainment writer (leading to the headline "Globe issues warning about newest play") as well as an insert in the program explaining the unconventional structure and characterization in the play which were further discussed in her opening night chat.

Response to the production had something of the effect of nuclear fission. In a CBC interview on the morning after the opening as well as in written communications to the writing community, the playwright (who had attended some rehearsals prior to being banned from rehearsals in the last week) indicated that she wholly supported the production and the director's interpretation and urged people to attend the show. In a back to back CBC interview, however, Smilie reported that a number of subscribers had already taken advantage of the offers of exchange or refund. The *Leader-Post* review did not contribute to a reversal of the trend. With the headline "Globe's *Otherwise Bob* is really just a boring play," reviewer Nick Miliokas expressed disappointment that this was not the "dark, disturbing and haunting play" which Smilie had warned about in the earlier interview. Although complimentary to aspects of the production which "is certainly worth seeing," Miliokas criticized the play because contrary to prior warnings, it did not "take me to places I have never been."



The "audience" for *Otherwise Bob* continued to expand with ripples—eventually waves—of response appearing in letters to the *Leader-Post* editor, a *Globe and Mail* column, the *Globe and Mail* letters to the editor, the Saskatchewan Writers Guild electronic list serv, and letters to the *Globe* by local writers, artists and organizations—including the Writers Guild and the Saskatchewan Playwrights Centre.

In the midst of this my students in second-year dramaturgy in the Theatre Department at the University of Regina were preparing for their final project of the year—a workshop with Connie Gault which would focus on the development of *Red Lips*, her latest play scheduled for inclusion in the Saskatchewan Playwrights Centre's Spring Festival that May. As a result of having heard Gault read from her work earlier in the semester in our Playwrights Reading Series, their enthusiasm for the project stemmed in part from an awareness of Gault's experimental dramaturgy. Consequently, their fascination and mystification with respect to the *Otherwise Bob* production had less to do with the play itself and more to do with the pre- and post-show response. Several with an interest in pursuing their own experimental work were depressed at the response they perceived all experimental work was doomed to receive in the city. Nearly all were anxious about the effect the episode would have on the playwright unavoidably drawn into the controversy on her home turf and the progress—not to mention the reception—of her future work.

What had been warmly anticipated by the playwright as a rare opportunity to see her work produced in her own community was transformed into a polarizing event leading to outright rejection on the part of some local people without having seen the play and vigorous defense, again sometimes including individuals who were familiar with external events alone and not the production in question. A season promising renewed interest in the work of Saskatchewan writers and new work "on the edge," concluded with prevalent anxiety and depression amongst playwrights who had hoped to be able to see their experimental work produced locally. Organizations representing writers continue to exchange letters with the *Globe* administration and members like myself are caught in between. Having worked as a dramaturg at the *Globe* and teaching students who work there as well, I am a loyal subscriber and an experienced arts administrator all too familiar with the challenges of having to meet the media and the public face to face while maintaining a placid surface such as to inspire ongoing support—despite the underlying centrifugal pull of forces emanating from financial reality and artistic creation. As a dramaturg who has worked with Connie Gault and admires her work, I want to see the playwright connect successfully with her audience, and I long to see more experimental work produced in Regina—and in North America in general—as well as the audience support to make it a positive rather than a divisive experience.

As a dramaturg who is also an educator responsible for students in undergraduate and graduate programs in dramaturgy—as well as one of the two dramaturgy courses required of all theatre majors here—I am also inclined to ask myself, what can we learn from this incident? There may be important lessons for both arts administrators and playwrights here. It may illuminate the tensions which can develop among artistic director, director and playwright. It may even provide forceful evidence for greater support within arts funding agencies for enhancing the budgets of regional theatres in Canada so that dramaturg's could be regularly engaged in the planning of seasons and helping to manage communication between artistic director, playwright and/or director for each production.

For me, however, the most important lesson is that the Canada Council's recent interest in audience development needs to be applied directly to the practice of dramaturgy and to the

dramaturgical training of future professionals in all areas of theatre. Dramaturgy in Canada is dominated by attention to the development of new plays and playwrights. Developmental centres like our own Saskatchewan Playwrights Centre have been successful in developing plays and playwrights by situating them at the heart of their process. But where does the development of an audience for the plays belong in our process? How do we as dramaturgs create a positive environment for the reception of new work? How do we help develop a broader, main stage audience which is not only open to but also eager for new work—work that pushes beyond the boundaries of linear, realistic dramaturgy, work that addresses painful social issues, work that speaks to our cultural diversity? How can we facilitate a response which will make it possible for experimental, new work to move more quickly and successfully to the main stage and/or how can we develop a stronger following for second stage series, theatres specializing in the development of new work and other alternative theatres? I am working on a follow up article which explores the position of the audience in various developmental processes and dramaturgical mechanisms for audience development, but simply from a practical perspective I am interested in becoming more immediately involved here in the development of audiences for experimental work. For this reason, I've been interested in LMDA's recent electronic exchange on post-reading/show discussions, and I'd be most interested to hear from other Canadian members regarding the position of the audience in their own development of new work.

**Mary Blackstone**  
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## Feeding My Habit — by Joanna Falck

### or Why I stopped Being a Dramaturg and Went Back to School

Brian asked me to contribute something to this LMDA Newsletter and suggested that I talk about my decision to return to school after working for a few years as a dramaturg in Edmonton. Being a typical dramaturg who is sometimes better at asking questions rather than answering them, I had to stop and really think about why. Why did I decide to subject myself to four more years of school? And how does it relate to my desire to work as a dramaturg?

I graduated from the University of Alberta's Master's Program in 1997 and began almost immediately to work for several companies as both a resident and freelance dramaturg. I also had several playwrights with whom I met frequently to discuss any of their new work. But after almost two years of working professionally I started to get the feeling that I couldn't do this anymore. I realized that I wasn't going to be able to support myself being a dramaturg. When I had begun, many MANY people warned me away from this profession. They told me it was too hard, that I'd never get enough work and that there were too few jobs out there. But I thought that things would be different for me. I was right in some respects—there were actually a lot of people out there interested in working with dramaturgs. Playwrights, directors and artistic directors all called me for my services. But—you guessed it—most of them couldn't (or in some cases wouldn't) pay me. I tried applying for grants but that didn't work either. For the amount of work that I was doing I just wasn't making enough money to call it even a part-time job.

What I began to realize after seeing some plum dramaturgical jobs ('plum' meaning they actually got paid) go to people who never really identified themselves as dramaturgs was that just calling myself a dramaturg would not be enough. I had always thought that if I was a great dramaturg it didn't matter that I wasn't a director/dramaturg or a playwright/dramaturg or an artistic director/dramaturg. That being just a dramaturg period was enough. But it's not. Maybe it's economics—everyone in theatre has to do more than one job because no one can afford to hire a different person for each job. And many theatres who can actually afford to have dramaturgs on staff don't. Or maybe there's still too much suspicion of this weird and wonderful word—dramaturg. I'm not sure.

So I looked back at school—specifically the PhD program at the University of Toronto and thought that maybe this was the way to feed my habit. Dramaturgy is offered as a course there—for the first time it is now a required course for all PhD students. So I now get to sit through more discussions of the eternal question, what does a dramaturg do? But there are other courses in directing, theory and history that I hope will both improve my skills and perhaps help me to find other ways to work dramaturgically.

So who knows. Maybe I'll never be able to officially call myself a dramaturg. Maybe I'll be swallowed up into the halls of academia never to be seen again. But I am, perhaps foolishly, hopeful that I'll be able to find some way to keep working as a dramaturg—in whatever way I can.

**Joanna Falck**

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## Mini-Conference on Dramaturgy 1999 — by Brian Quirt

Theatre Centre, Toronto — June 28–29, 1999

Artists from across Canada (and some from the U.S.) gathered at the Theatre Centre to explore the dynamics of dramaturgy. The focus was on the role of the dramaturg in new play development, as this is the principal activity of dramaturgs in Canada.

The goal for the third annual edition of this conference was, as always, to keep our focus on practical issues of dramaturgy. For that reason, all speakers were asked to use detailed examples from their own recent working life.

In his opening address, **Peter Hinton** challenged dramaturgs to be practical, responsive and informed. He argued that passion, collaboration, humility, and responsibility are key to the dramaturg's role in the theatre; he cautioned against an obsession with clarity and "fixing". **Sarah Stanley** emphasized the importance of the dramaturg to the director, and encouraged companies to approach all new projects with the assumption that they will work.

Newfoundland's **Jillian Keilley** gave a fascinating demonstration of her play creation process, which involves huge casts, elaborate choral and staging notation, and extreme audience involvement.

Playwright **Judith Thompson** spoke about her commitment to language; she feels that one of the dramaturg's purposes is to ensure that writing maintains its link with the unconscious. **Vanessa Porteous**, **Henry Bakker** and **Joanna Falck** revealed the challenges of entering the field of dramaturgy. After **Don Kugler** outlined his excellent theatre program at Simon Fraser University—and all those teaching theatre of any kind should contact Don for information about his program, which is remarkable—**Peter Hinton** described the role of the dramaturg in opera; the new opera world is especially fertile right now and Peter's work with Canadian new music companies and with an opera showcase in the U.S. provided a fascinating glimpse into a very high-pressure and high-stakes form of dramaturgy.

To wrap it all up, **Bob White** took us on a retrospective tour of his work at Playwrights Workshop Montreal, Factory Theatre, Alberta Theatre Projects, and the Banff Centre Playwright's Colony. Bob's survey was a good reminder that we often reinvent the wheel and that nothing is gained by not asking our colleagues for assistance. A great deal has happened in Canadian theatre in the past twenty years; hearing Bob speak of his experience reminded me that much of that history is unrecorded. I hope an eager graduate student out there is preparing to put this on paper somewhere.

The Theatre Centre thanks the speakers, as well as those who attended, for their substantial contributions to a superb two days of conversation about the art of dramaturgy.

Please consider joining us for next year's edition. Contact the Theatre Centre to be placed on their email and mail list and you'll receive details regarding the conference next spring.

Theatre Centre: <crayon@interlog.com>

**Brian Quirt**

## Canadians in Chicago – by Andy McKim

This past September 23-25, Linda Poole, the Cultural Affairs Officer of the Canadian Consulate General in Chicago, organized ABOVE THE LINE, A New Canadian Play Development Symposium. It was held in collaboration with the League of Chicago Theatres and with the generous support of the Canada Council, the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Playwrights Union of Canada. The Canadians invited to participate were Claudia Buckley (Theatre Officer, Canada Council), Paula Danckert (Artistic Director of Playwright's Workshop Montreal), Connie Gault (playwright), Andy McKim (Associate Artistic Director, Tarragon Theatre), Yvette Nolan (President of Playwrights Union Of Canada), Richard Rose (Artistic Director of Necessary Angel Theatre Company), Judith Thompson (playwright) and Bob White (Artistic Associate, Alberta Theatre Projects). Linda Poole's intention was to generate more interest in Chicago for Canadian plays and I think she was successful.

Three playreadings were held during the weekend: RED LIPS by Connie Gault, hosted by The Goodman Theatre; THE ROAD TO HELL by Michael Healey and Kate Lynch, hosted by Steppenwolf Theatre; and PERFECT PIE by Judith Thompson, hosted by the Chicago Dramatists. The Consulate, in consultation with some of the invited Canadians, submitted a number of plays to these three theatres for consideration while the final choice of play was left up to each host theatre. The theatres each chose an in-house director and cast the readings locally. Once Linda Poole knew which plays had been chosen she invited the corresponding playwrights to attend the symposium. In the case of THE ROAD TO HELL, the writers were performing it at the Tarragon in Toronto and I was already going so....

The playreadings were well done, well received and well attended. Many local people told me that they enjoyed the readings and that the attendance was good. Each reading was followed by a discussion session with an enthusiastic and supportive audience. On Saturday there was a panel discussion about New Play Development in Canada. It was held at the Chicago Dramatists theatre space with a large group in attendance. The panelists were Paula Danckert, Yvette Nolan, Richard Rose, Judith Thompson, Bob White and me. Each of us spoke in turn about our individual experience of new play development.

It was a wide-ranging discussion but there were a couple of interesting things for me that came up in the open discussion that followed. In Chicago, it is routine to hand out audience surveys. They seem to actively solicit the audience's input, with the intention of using that response the way a business would use a consumer survey. They were surprised by our criticism of this practice. Amongst the Canadians on the panel there was relative unanimity that direct audience input into the dramaturgical process often has a negative, if not a benign, result. It can often be destructive for the playwright.

As a counterpoint to this, I was interested to hear a number of people talk about how playwright-centered they thought the dramaturgy in Canada seemed to be. They remarked that we, on the panel, were clearly interested in helping to develop the playwright rather than just develop a play. They were very interested in the many programs like residencies, playwriting units, workshops, etc., that are geared to the playwright's needs.

It was a distinctly odd experience later that afternoon to witness two people, sitting on either side of Judith Thompson, reading out the audience response sheets after the PERFECT PIE reading. They did this without discretion and with Judith on stage, even though she didn't want to hear the responses. Most were very positive, but the obsession with this practice seems inappropriate and misdirected.



I would tend to mostly disregard the audience's "suggestions" for how to "improve" a play. What I do find useful is when there are a number of people who have similar problems with the clarity of any part of a play. What follows is a list of potential contacts in the Chicago area:

••• Jonathan Lavan, the Managing Director of the Prop Theatre, and Scott Vehill, the Artistic Director, sent me a fax two months ago because they are interested in bringing a Canadian play from Tarragon Theatre to Chicago next spring. They want us to be a part of the theatre festival that they are putting together for the spring of 2000. They may be interested in hearing from other people who would like to tour there next spring with a reading or a production. At their web site where you can read up on the festival. Prop Theatre are members of the National New Play Network which they describe as "an eclectic alliance of small and medium-sized theatre companies across the United States emphasising the development of new work for the American stage." David Goldman is a driving force behind the Network.

Jonathan Lavan, Prop Theatre  
2621 North Washtenaw Avenue, Chicago, Illinois USA 60647  
[www.viprefix.com/proptheatre.html](http://www.viprefix.com/proptheatre.html)

••• Russ Tutterow is the Artistic Director of the Chicago Dramatists where both the panel, and Judith Thompson's reading, were held. They have an office, a small theatre space and some meeting room space. They were founded in 1979 and they are "dedicated to the development and advancement of playwrights and new plays." Their mission is "to discover, nurture and promote the plays and playwrights that will contribute to the national theatre repertory." They want to "collaborate with actors, directors, dramaturgs and audiences during the creative process." Russ is an enthusiast for Canadian plays and he is very interested in the differences that may exist between new play development styles in Canada and Chicago/USA. Robin Stanton, the Producing Director, did a great job with Judith's reading. They are worth getting in touch with.

Russ Tutterow, Artistic Director, Chicago Dramatists  
1105 W. Chicago Avenue, Chicago, Illinois, USA 60622-570

••• Michele Volansky is the Dramaturg/Literary Manager at Steppenwolf Theatre Company. They will be producing THE DRAWER BOY next year. They are interested in considering plays from Canada. She is already aware of many Canadian plays and seems to be well informed about what is going on up here. She would be a good person to send information to.

Michele Volansky, Dramaturg/Literary Manager, Steppenwolf Theatre Company,  
1650 North Halstead Street, Chicago, Illinois, USA 60614  
[www.steppenwolf.org](http://www.steppenwolf.org)

••• Dennis Zacek, Artistic Director of Victory Gardens Theatre, was the lone person from Chicago to attend the Calgary *playrites* Festival last year. He came back to Chicago really excited about Canada's new play development. Linda Poole built on his enthusiasm and created this week-end symposium in Chicago as a way to expose more Chicago theatre artists to Canadian plays and new play development in Canada.

Dennis Zacek, Artistic Director, Victory Gardens Theatre  
2257 North Lincoln Avenue, Chicago, Illinois, USA 60614  
[www.victorygardens.org](http://www.victorygardens.org)

## **Andy McKim**

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## War of the Worlds – by Adrienne Wong

Question: What do Brian Wilson, Hitchcock, Stalin and Orson Welles' typist have in common? Answer: Russian inventor Leon Theremin. You know the theremin—that eerie sound from 1950s sci-fi flicks and the Beach Boys' Good Vibrations. Blurring the lines between fact and fiction, Vancouver local heroes Alex Ferguson and Peter Hannan re-invent the creative titans behind *War of the Worlds*—the radio event that rocked America. Looking back over my two years with Rumble Productions, I can trace the development of this project from conception to reality.

The seed of the idea came from Rumble's Artistic Producer Norman Armour, who I will be assisting as director. Norman has a long time fascination with radio as a theatrical form, and Rumble has a history of presenting work on-air through its Wireless Graffiti series. Norman is adept at pulling together threads of interesting material and then finding the right people to weave them all together. Initially conceived to be performed in the Pacific Ballroom of the Hotel Vancouver (one of the original broadcast sites for the CBC in Vancouver) other threads are:

- The 1938 broadcast of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* (The hysteria caused by this broadcast is fascinating in comparison to contemporary media skepticism.);
- Orson Welles, whose company Mercury Theatre on the Air produced and broadcast the adaptation;
- Composer Bernard Herrmann, who conducted the CBS orchestra for the broadcast and went on to compose music for Welles' films, among others;
- Leon Theremin, the Russian inventor of the world's first electronic instrument, the theremin (most easily recognized as the 'woo-woo' sound in the Beach Boys' Good Vibrations).

With these elements as a starting place, it was vital to get people talking, face-to-face. In April 1998, we held a roundtable jam session with fifteen theatre practitioners. Michael O'Brien and Allen Cole were interested in collaborating as playwright and composer, respectively. Also in attendance were: Jeanne LeSage (stage manager), Michel D Bisson (producer), Lainé Slater (publicist), John Webber (lighting designer and technical director), Andreas Kahre (set designer), Rob McDonough (filmmaker), Kathleen Flaherty (producer at CBC), Alex Ferguson (performer), Laara Sadiq (performer), Wendy Noel (performer), Chris Gerrard-Pinker (dramaturg), Norman Armour (director) and myself (assistant director).

At this point in the process, not a page of dialogue had been written. Nor were any of the artists involved committed to anything further than the jam session. The focus of our meetings was placed on articulating our impressions of the broadcast and the historical figures involved. We also shared our anxieties about being at the end of the millennium, visions of the future and fears of invasion. All the questions and discussions were planned to feed the creative processes of Michael and Allen. As it turned out, both had to pull out of the project, but, as Norman was the initiating force in the project, the forward momentum of the creative impulse was only briefly slowed. Later that summer Alex Ferguson and Peter Hannan agreed to work on the project.

In April 1999, a three-week workshop was organized to experiment in the rehearsal room with script and music concepts, and then test them in front of an audience at a one-night-

only presentation. Alex was particularly interested in investigating how to write a non-linear, dreamlike narrative. Norman and Peter struggled with the integration of music into the theatricality of the piece. At the end of the workshop, one hour of material was presented at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre by five actors: Camyar Chai, Kerry Davidson, Patrick Keating, Kerry Sandormirsky and Paulo Ribeiro (a dead-ringer for the young Welles). The audience feedback was mostly positive but dissatisfactions were expressed about the integration of music and action, the small amount of material relating directly to the broadcast, and challenging songs performed by actors with insufficient singing training.

The next step in the project was more work (of course). Playwrights Workshop Montreal agreed to take on the project and Peter Hinton came to Vancouver for a one-week intensive with Alex, Peter and Norman. Alex was also accepted to the playwrights' colony at the Banff Centre for the Arts where he worked with Paula Danckert. He returned to Vancouver with a new draft that was substantially different from the one presented in the workshop in April. The principal characters were still present (Welles, Theremin and Sylvia, the typist) but the balance had shifted. Sylvia's role in the broadcast became more central as she was triangulated between Welles and Theremin. A Journalist was added to capitalize on many of Alex's poetic musings on the action that were previously contained within the stage directions.

We are currently deep in preparation for the production, and will probably be in rehearsal by the time you read this. There are many technical elements to draw together. Apart from the requirements of set and lighting, we have a live band (Standing Wave), a singer (Jennifer Scott), and slides and projections designed by Urban Visuals to incorporate. Norman has insisted on four weeks of rehearsal for the mainstage presentation to allow for continued development on the script and music—as well as time to properly integrate other elements. As an interdisciplinary extravaganza, it is interesting for me to note the different timelines required for the various collaborators in the project. The singer and band need lead-time before performing the music (the more the better), and Peter needs enough time with the text to compose before passing it on. Sometimes it feels like a scramble to keep everyone in touch, but our producer, Greg Fruno, and stage manager, Kerrene John, are working very effectively to keep everyone on track.

This is one of the most ambitious projects that Rumble has attempted to date. We are all excited about expanding the scope and size of the projects we can do. I'll keep you all posted on how it turns out.

**Adrienne Wong**

Guest Artist, Rumble Productions, Vancouver  
<awong@rumble.org>



## Dramaturging Dr. Faustus – by Stephen Johnston

Dramaturgy in the Graduate Centre for Study of Drama, University of Toronto:  
a co-production of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*

Christopher Marlowe's tragedy was recently co-produced by the University of Toronto's Graduate Centre for Study of Drama, the research group Centre for Research in Early English Drama (CREED), and the Toronto theatre group Handmade Performance. The nature of the co-sponsorship—combining academic pedagogy at a graduate level, research into the nature of historical theatre, and the involvement of young professionals in production—provided opportunities for production dramaturgy that are worth recording. Specifically, two dramaturgs from the Drama Centre worked on the show, in co-operation but to quite different purpose.

Robert Ormsby, whose specialty is Renaissance Drama in production, and who is associated with both the Drama Centre and CREED, acted in the more traditional role associated with production dramaturg—what I would describe as the playwright's champion in rehearsal. His expertise in the language and literature of the time allowed him to contribute enormously to the actors' understanding of text, including the usual explanations of obscure references, pronunciations, relationships (especially among minor characters in political situations—and these abound in *Faustus*). But beyond this, his expertise in the period allowed us to take a more radical textual path than otherwise might have been visible.

The fact is that Marlowe's play is an editorial mess. It exists in two quite different versions, both published some time after his death. There is evidence of as many as three writers' hands on the text, missing scenes, an instance of alternative scenes printed together—and a mixture of farce, satire and tragic verse that careens wildly in tone. To say that the scripts in hand are by Marlowe is a wish; they bear many examples of his great verse, but after that, potential directors are left to cut and shape the raw material according to a hypothetical authorial intent, or according to an imposed directorial intent, or both.

Robert brought to the process research and understanding on the relationship between the two versions of the script, and in particular the idea that the text was rewritten during the twenty years after Marlowe's death in order to appeal to different audiences, and to appeal to changing tastes—in spectacle (more or less of it), and in theology (more or less puritanical). Instead of looking at the texts as corrupted versions of a hypothetical Marlovian original, we looked at them more as adaptations to compensate for change. This might have freed us to adapt the text radically for our contemporary purpose—we would only be following in the tradition if we had. However, Robert's contribution ultimately resulted in the preservation of more of the text than I believe is typical in contemporary productions. We looked at the disparate parts as comments on each other, and this influenced the production greatly. The poetic (and obviously Marlovian) scenes between Faustus and Mephistopheles are beautifully rendered, building complex relationships and a tragic sensibility. The clown scenes—they are prominent in the so-called 'B' text, which we chose to produce—parody that tragic master-servant relationship, almost as if a parody of *Faustus* from another theatre were printed along with its object. In addition, scenes of pointed anti-Catholic, anti-Aristocratic satire are printed which—although they have ill-defined characters in spectacular, violent, and slapstick situations far different from the other two styles just mentioned—do emphasize the waste to which Faustus put his

newfound power. The result of this collaboration between theatre research and practice led to the unusual situation of respecting the text "as printed" in production by putting aside the need to find Marlowe's intended play.

Meanwhile, Alison McElwain, a Drama Centre graduate student whose interest is in contemporary theatre and playwriting, was given a very different task. The mandate of Handmade Performance includes the democratization of classic texts—that is, to produce the text in such a way as to allow for the individual work of as many creative artists as possible to be seen in performance. There is a strongly Brechtian influence to the work, clearly visible here. As a premise, to maximize the involvement of individual actors, the production was set in the Little Theatre of Hell, performed in Hell each evening for Lucifer (who sat in the audience). The cast consisted of Faustus, who played himself, Despair (playing Mephistopheles), the Seven Deadly Sins and Beelzebub, who played all other characters. The production began with the scene in which the Seven Deadly Sins introduce themselves (moved from the middle of the script), and ended with Faustus' great final speech on his last desperate hour of life, taken away from that actor and divided among all the devils on stage. All actors were on stage at all times, watching and reacting to the story of Faustus as their "sin" when they were not playing a Clown or an Emperor. The result was a more equitable use of actors, who could comment on the scene "in role" at all times they were not in the scene itself.

Alison's task was to help make these actors into individual sins. She did this by preparing a package of materials for each, full of research related to their role. These included the expected—pictures by Breughel, Goya, Bosch, and a variety of literary descriptions. But the packages also included contemporary materials the dramaturg thought analogous to each sin—including magazine advertisements, newspaper articles on political figures, comic books and selections from graphic novels (and, a personal favourite, a web-article arguing that Gilligan's Island is in fact an allegory for the Seven Deadly Sins). The dramaturg worked with the actors to turn these images and ideas into a variety of physical and vocal interpretations of their sin—comic, abstract, and contemporary—that they could then use in their creation of the range of characters they portrayed. In Brechtian terms, she was responsible for assisting in developing a complex of social gests.

The point of these descriptions is not to praise the production itself, except insofar as it reflected the sophisticated work of the dramaturgs. I believe their work was a model of the radically disparate ways in which the production dramaturg can contribute to the richness of the rehearsal and performance experience. On the one hand the production was textually respectful, putting on stage more of the longer, later text of the play than is normally performed, and exploring the relationship of the familiar poetic scenes with the clown and satirical scenes so often cut. On the other hand, the production interpreted the text as epic theatre, and as such established a frame within which actors (and designers) could explore the politics of sin, and the unheroic qualities of the protagonist. The two dramaturgical results were surprisingly complementary—one provided a more "epic" text, and the other assisted the actors in exploiting it.

### **Stephen Johnson**

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## Inside the process: a new angle on the Spring Festival of New Plays — by Marie Mendenhall

For the past five years, I have attended the Saskatchewan Playwrights Centre's Spring Festival of New Plays as a journalist, providing standard event coverage to various magazines. This year I was one of six university students given the opportunity for an inside view of the festival workshops, as interns.

Festival dramaturge Paula Danckert, artistic director of Playwrights Workshop Montreal and Banff Playrites Colony dramaturg, chose four playscripts-in-progress in a "blind" process (the author's name is unknown) from 12 submitted by Saskatchewan playwrights. Danckert knew the three-day workshop would end in public readings, held May 19-22 at the University of Regina's new University Centre theatre. She considered "what was being said within the plays, and if the script that I was reading would be well served by the kind of format that had already been set up."

The scripts chosen included *Just Julie*, Saskatoon playwright Janice Salkeld's first play, exploring a woman's decision to become a stripper after discovering she has breast cancer. *Patriots Divided* by Saskatoon actor-turned-playwright Dennis Hunt (*Two's Company*) is a dense history play exploring the role German physicist Werner Heisenberg had in the Nazi regime's failure to develop the atomic bomb. *Red Lips* by Regina playwright Connie Gault (*Otherwise Bob; Sky; Soft Eclipse*) revolves around the nature of a character's personal quest during two trips to Ireland. *White River Junction* by Saskatoon's Rod MacIntyre (*Blue Zone*) unravels the past loves and lies of three characters in a remote northern fishing camp, upon the arrival of a fourth character.

Each workshop is tailored to meet a playwright's individual needs, and each provides unique revelations for the playwrights—and the interns. Just as it does for playwrights, the festival gave interns opportunities, tools and insights into the process of writing and revising a new play. The position is open to less experienced playwrights as well, but this year we were all university students.

Intern participation varied too, as I discovered during those all-important lunch break discussions and informal socializing. As well as involvement in the workshops, each intern volunteered to staff the temporary office or tend bar for the evening receptions. Most interns sat in on all three days of the workshop for a given play. My own schedule, tied up in outside commitments and an SPC contract to photograph the festival, only allowed me a few days participation. Yet SPC dramaturge Angus Ferguson took great pains to meet my needs, arranging for me to sit in during two workshops (Salkeld and MacIntyre) over the course of the week.

University of Regina intern Heather Ritenburg (who wrote up her experience for SPC's newsletter) took over several stage management duties during Salkeld's three-day workshop. During the first day, she sat in on a session in which Salkeld, Danckert and director Vanessa Porteous of Calgary's Alberta Theatre Projects developed a comprehensive chart of character action and motivation across two acts of the play. On the second day, actors Pamela Haig Bartley, John Huston, Graham Bell and Andrea Menard responded to several questions about their characters, gleaned from detailed line-by-line analysis.

These tools were invaluable, said 43-year-old Salkeld, who rewrote scenes and cut and revised throughout the workshop period. Danckert contributed many different ways and

angles of looking at the play -- "like kite strings pulling in all different directions, and she was holding them all in her hands, keeping them straight for me."

The intensity continued into the third day, as Porteous staged two scenes for Salkeld, although the actors remained behind music stands during the public reading. That reading gave Salkeld the chance to hear audience response and laughter, Salkeld added, but it was also "excruciating to sit through because I already knew I wanted to make changes."

*Patriots Divided*, by contrast, was the only play in which actors came out from behind music stands to stage the reading during this festival. Playwright Dennis Hunt came into the process feeling satisfied with the script on the page, and wanted to see it up on its feet. Henry Woolf of Saskatoon directed the seven-actor cast in a process that revealed elements in the script Hunt had not expected, such as the need for stronger scene endings.

Woolf also surprised University of Regina intern Sarah Polkinghorne by blocking the play so quickly, and she appreciated the opportunity to observe him making decisions and setting priorities. On a personal level, she found her recent experience as an exchange student in England allowed her to make contributions, such as her observations comparing North Americans to Europeans.

Several interns and playwrights sat in on the boisterous workshop of *Red Lips*. Director Don Kugler, currently instructing at Simon Fraser University, said Gault presented a new draft on day one of the workshop—and continued to trim, cut and reshape throughout, "trying to find the right voice" for the characters. Kugler and the actors "kept on the page to give the playwright an accurate reading of the rhythm of the language." This work set her up for writing another draft of the play, Gault said later. *Red Lips* also attracted the largest audience this year, with about 80 people attending the public reading.

For *White River Junction*, Danckert focussed on plot while director Bob White of Alberta Theatre Projects focussed on characters. White commended Danckert's ability to get into the writer's mind while maintaining the necessary critical distance, and to respond to a wide range of material. MacIntyre also wanted to revise parts of the play, but found the revisions extensive and complex enough to require more time than the workshop allowed.

Intern Melanie Dease, an acting student from University of Saskatchewan, read stage directions at this public reading. She called the process of writing a play similar to piecing together a puzzle. In the case of these festival workshops, all the pieces go towards helping the playwrights create the next draft.

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## ScriptLab: Millennium Approaches — by David Copelin

Since 1990, ScriptLab has been Toronto's independent home for the development of new texts for performance. At ScriptLab, Co-Director Virginia Reh and I try to create conditions in which authors can write and rewrite their plays naturally, confidently, with faith in their own expanding visions. Since we are not formally affiliated with any of Toronto's producing theatres, we can serve a broad constituency—playwrights who are not (or not yet) members of writers' groups sponsored by nonprofit theatres—that has few places to get the support, the sense of community, and the professional dramaturgy that playwrights want and need.

We can and do collaborate with many theatres to provide that support in several ways. Given the small number of production slots (or even development opportunities) at our underfunded playhouses, many plays must be returned to their creators even though there is something interesting in the scripts that ought to be pursued. Obviously, an organization like ScriptLab can play a significant role here. A few weeks ago, I met with several dramaturgs: Edward Roy of Buddies in Bad Times, Iris Turcott of Canadian Stage, Brian Quirt of Factory Theatre, Chris Abraham of Theatre Passe Muraille, and Henry Bakker of Theatre & Company in Kitchener. I asked them to refer plays and playwrights whose work they admire, yet who don't fit easily into their theatres' present planning, to ScriptLab.

In return, ScriptLab will alert them to the existence of provocative new material that they might not yet have seen. Since ScriptLab doesn't produce, we do not compete with those who do. Instead, ScriptLab and the theatres can share information and scripts with each other, thereby increasing the chances that interesting new writing for performance will be recognized in time to do it some good.

ScriptLab's current programs include:

### **Reading Series**

Our most visible program is at the heart of ScriptLab's mandate. This program's goal is to provide gifted writers with the opportunity to hear their early draft scripts read aloud by professional actors, and to receive useful response from audience discussions moderated by ScriptLab's Co-Directors. Readers are contracted and paid by ScriptLab, and each writer receives a modest honorarium. Audience participation is free to the public. The next Reading Series will be held at Harbourfront between January and May, 2000, on alternate Sundays at 3:00pm. Details will be forthcoming soon.

### **Writers' Intensive**

A seminar-style workshop designed for both beginning and experienced writers. The Intensive meets weekly for 10 sessions for facilitated readings and critical discussions of current work in progress. Each writer has the chance to hear his or her work read aloud, followed by critical feedback that identifies problems and opportunities in the script without becoming prescriptive. Although the urge to rewrite someone else's play for them is a common human trait, at ScriptLab we do what we can to suppress it. Sessions are moderated by one of the ScriptLab Co-Directors. There is a fee of \$295 for each 10-week Intensive (\$260 for ScriptLab Associates.)

### **Intensive OnLine**

This program is an ideal way for writers who live outside the Greater Toronto Area (GTA),



and who have access to a computer with e-mail capabilities, to get individual and group feedback on their work-in-progress. Fees are the same as for the Writers' Intensive.

### **Script Development Workshops**

When scheduling permits, ScriptLab is pleased to host extended developmental workshops of new Canadian scripts—often in active partnership with a producing theatre or an independent producer.

### **Script Analysis Service**

Writers wishing to have a written evaluation of a script may receive one for an analysis fee of \$75 per script (\$45 for ScriptLab Associates). An in-person consultation with one of the Co-Directors can be arranged for a fee of \$100 (\$65 for ScriptLab Associates).

### **ScriptLab Newsletter**

Twice a year, ScriptLab publishes Lab Report, which is circulated to our Associates, Friends, and other supporters nationwide. In addition, it is mailed to Canadian theatre companies committed to developing and producing new scripts. Lab Report lists all of our upcoming readings, workshops, new programs, and special events. ScriptLab Associates and Friends are encouraged to submit information about productions, workshops, successful career moves, and the like for free placement in Lab Report.

ScriptLab's funding can best be described as "bottom-up" support: Writers may join ScriptLab as Associates for a \$35 annual membership fee, which entitles them to receive Lab Report, as well as discounts on program fees. Actors, directors, audience members and other interested parties may become Friends of ScriptLab for a minimum donation of \$25 a year, for which they receive Lab Report and a charitable receipt. We occasionally receive funding from theatre companies outside Toronto who want to workshop a script with Toronto-based actors, and last year the Bank of Montreal gave ScriptLab a one-time-only grant for our Reading Series.

By far the greatest source of support for ScriptLab is non-monetary. Dozens of writers, some directors, a few theatres, some dramaturgs, and a conscious, supportive Board complement the efforts of ScriptLab's volunteer Co-Directors.

Right now, I'm facilitating ScriptLab's fall 1999 Writers' Intensive, and Gini Reh and I will be choosing among several dozen scripts submitted by October 31, 1999, for the Reading Series. In the past, many works such as Leslie Arden's *The House of Martin Guerre*, Doug Hughes & Marcia Kash's *Who's Under Where?*, and Cathy Elliott's *Silas Marner* have been "ScriptLabbed" before going on to successful production.

New ScriptLab contributions to the growth and improvement of Canadian playwriting will be revealed shortly.

### **David Copelin**

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