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# The Lab Report, volume 01, issue 03

Todd Ristau

Hollins University, [tristau@hollins.edu](mailto:tristau@hollins.edu)

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Playwright's Lab  
at Hollins University

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# The Lab Report

Playwriting News from the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

Volume 01, Issue 03 (August, 2007)

## Overnight Sensations at Mill Mountain Theatre



**Overnight Sensations** is Mill Mountain Theatre's unique version of the popular 24 Hour plays. Adam Hahn, pictured above, was one of six playwrights participating in the fundraising event. Other writers this year included MFA playwrights Keith Bridges, Maura Campbell and Kenley Smith, as well as visiting faculty member Stephen Sossaman and Charlottesville writer/director Clinton Johnston.

The directors included Mill Mountain Theatre's Artistic Director Patrick Benton, Program Director Todd Ristau, local director Ionia Zelinka, Richard Washer and Chris Stezin of Charter Theatre, and Joe Banno, former Artistic

### Student Spotlight: Krista Knutsen

**Krista Knutsen** graduated from Trinity Western with a degree in theatre.

"I'm inspired by truth and wisdom," Kris says of her path into theatre. "I think the heart of theatre is the search for understanding. It is essential for me, as both a writer and an actor, that my work be steeped in honesty."

For over a decade, this young writer has developing herself as a theatre artist through playwriting, acting, and teaching theatre skills to others.

Director of the Source Theatre in DC.

Actors were selected from a broad range of backgrounds and experience and then grouped into 6 casts of 5 performers each. Cast lists included some notable local celebrities such as WSLS news anchor Juliet Bickford and Roanoke Mayor Nelson Harris, as well as several MMT board members.

At 8PM on Friday night, in a reception in the lobby of Center in the Square, the playwrights selected their directors through random drawing. Then the directors randomly drew their cast lists. Randomly drawn from the hat were writing assignments, such as themes, genres, locations, and other endowments. Then, the participants were given a tour of the Trinkle Main Stage, where the ten minute plays they were about to write would be performed, as well as shown a variety of props and

costumes available for use.

At half past eight the writers were spirited away to the Wyndham Robertson Library to furiously write their plays before 1AM. They could continue at home if they chose, but they had to leave the library.

At 8AM the next morning, writers showed their work to the directors, and the scripts were revised and prepared for rehearsal. Actors arrived at the theatre at noon, and rehearsed until 5PM, when they took the stage for a cue to cue rehearsal.

Audience began arriving at 7PM and the curtain went up on six original ten-minute plays at 8PM.

A wonderful time was had by all—writers, directors, performers, and audience. A cast party, held at a local nightclub, followed the spirited post performance discussion.



[www.millmountain.org](http://www.millmountain.org)

process of self discovery."

We agree, and we're very pleased to be part of this MFA student's process.



KRISTA  
KNUTSEN

[www.myspace.com/krisknutsen](http://www.myspace.com/krisknutsen)

# The Lab Report

Playwriting News from the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

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## Guest Profile: Melanie Joseph



**Melanie Joseph** is the founder and producing artistic director of the Foundry Theatre in New York City. She has produced or directed nine new works for the Foundry, which have been awarded seven Obie awards and three Drama Desk nominations. Melanie has commissioned and developed new works with such artists as Carl Hancock Rux, Rinde Eckert, the Rude Mechs, Grisha Coleman, and W. David Hancock. In 2001, she was awarded the League of Professional Theatre Women's first annual Lucille Lortel grant in recognition of her "cutting edge producing style." She serves on the Board of Trustees for Theatre Communications Group (TCG) and is the U.S. President of the International Theatre Institute (ITI).

"It is really my pleasure to be here in this inaugural year of this program," she said at the Lab. "I think it is really exciting. It's been really wonderful to meet all of you, it's a really diverse group of people and I'm excited to think of the diversity of work that is going to come out of all of you and the diversity of lives you're going to have in the theatre."

In her talk, Melanie detailed her own struggles in making a life in the theatre and finding a

path to both giving expression to her own artistic voice and also providing a mechanism for other artists to express themselves. The notion of collaboration is fundamental to her artistic vision.

"I believe from the bottom of my soul that this is a collaborative process, a collaborative art form. We make this *in* community, and *for* community, and to *create* community," Melanie told our students. She also had advice should they get a production in a regional theatre, "I want to encourage you to make sure that you know who the Marketing Director is, make sure you meet the Box Office Manager...and invite those people to your early rehearsals. Those people are your collaborators also. There is such a dichotomy in this country between the management of the theatre and the artistic. And that's bullshit. Because those managers are working their asses off and they should be a part of... You don't have to necessarily ask them for their dramaturgical participation, but you can find ten minutes and ask them what they thought about it. It's not just so that they'll market your play better, it has something to do with the way that the ecology of this business operates."

Equally important to her are notions of social justice and paying artists like anyone else who makes something of value.

"When I formed the Foundry the thing that I felt really committed to was that if people were going to work with me, they were going to get paid. I was never going to do anything, nothing, not a reading, not a workshop, not a production, not a nothing unless people were paid a living wage." This limits the number of

commissions her small company can produce, but at the Foundry, generative artists all get paid and the art they create never feels like a commodity being sold at auction.

She warned of the danger having a parochial mindset can engender, and told our students to take personal initiative in their work.

"Wherever you live, you need to see everything. You need to see everybody's work, you need to know who you want to work with, and when you meet with an artistic director, you need to come in with 15 people that you want to work with. Otherwise, they'll just assign everybody to you. It is your responsibility to know the directors you want to work with, and why. Who are the designers who make you crazy with joy? Who are the young producers out there hustling? It is absolutely your responsibility to know who everybody is and what's going on. Otherwise you're just a leaf in the wind."

On the subject of self-producing,

she told us, "I actually believe that the power of our work is in ourselves and if they're not producing you, then you produce you. Usually there is somebody who will help you, and that's part of your business. Find out who those people are and take the agency for your own. Don't wait. Because, we are not victims."

This is one of the lessons Melanie learned when she was so disillusioned by theatre that she considered giving it up for med school. Cornel West, whom she sought out for advice and who now sits on the Foundry's Board, prodded her to envision the kind of theatre she wanted to work in. That description became the mission statement for the Foundry.

"I was always waiting for the theatres to hire me, and waiting for them to give me the play that I really wanted to do and not the play that I didn't want to do...waiting and waiting and finally I thought, I can't do this. I can't do this anymore. And that voice should be listened to. Don't wait."



**Melanie Joseph and MFA playwriting students Kris Knutsen, Maura Campbell, Joshua Graves and Adam Hahn at Miniature Graceland.**



## The Little Theatre at Hollins University



The Little Theatre on the Hollins Campus is vibrant and active through the academic year as the hub of the Theatre Department. Lack of air conditioning, however, keeps it from being nearly so active during the summer session.

Completed in 1924, this building remained one of the newest buildings on our campus for decades. Our own Little Theatre, at the time of its

construction, was one of the finest in the nation. Of this Hollins can take special pride because the building of the theatre was largely a student initiative.

The Little Theatre Movement was an organized effort to create a network of theatres in the US invested in creating community, rather than participating in the predominantly commercial enterprise professional theatre had become. Little Theatres intentionally avoided hiring professional actors and concentrated on advancing the role of performing arts without expectation of profit.

Before the 1920's, plays had been performed on campus in various locations using

improvised stages. In 1922, the students at Hollins launched a drive to raise the money to build a dedicated theatre space. In less than two years, that dream was realized when students contributed nearly \$45,000 toward the total cost.

From the beginning students wanted their theatre to be an important part of the campus community, but also of the surrounding community. They wrote the following message in the program of the first production mounted in the new space: *"It is hoped that in the future it will be used not only for the presentation of student plays, but also for other productions, professional or otherwise."*

Over the years, that mission has

been fulfilled with a great many professional theatre artists coming to our stage, and its use by local and regional companies such as Mill Mountain Theatre and Barter Theatre of Abingdon.

Since the redesign of the theatre department under Ernie Zulia, the theatre that Hollins students built has been more vibrant and active than ever.

We fully expect that with the addition the Playwright's Lab, the trend will continue.

We look forward to opportunities to build on this important legacy through the production and presentation of lots of new plays in this old building.

And air conditioning.

We also look forward to air

## Area Highlight: Foamhenge, and the mind of Professor Cline



Foamhenge is the brainchild of artist Mark Cline of Natural Bridge and a favorite destination for our students when they have a chance to get off campus.

Professor Cline, as he calls himself, has created a life size

replica of Stonehenge on top of a hill near Natural Bridge. The structure is crafted from several 420 pound blocks of Styrofoam. Because it is so near the Natural Bridge Safari Park, it is not at all uncommon for visitors to be standing in the

shadow of Foamhenge and see elephants being fed hay from the back of a pickup truck.

Though only slightly less mysterious than the original, this replica of Stonehenge is an impressive "must see" attraction that is featured in both **Roadside America** and **Strange Virginia**.



Cline is also the proprietor of **Enchanted Castle Studios**, where he practices his many arts with an emphasis on sculpting in fiberglass.

Visitors will also want to take in

**Professor Cline's Haunted Monster Museum & Dino Kingdom**, an old school haunted house with animatronic sculptures as well as a garden walk back through time to a Civil War scene in which Confederate soldiers have released dinosaurs in order to rout a Union cavalry attack!



<http://www.roadsideamerica.com/story/9209>

## Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

Todd Ristau, Director  
Graduate Program in Playwriting  
Hollins University  
PO Box 9602  
Roanoke, VA 24020-1602  
Phone: 540.362.6386  
Fax: 540.362.6465  
E-mail: [tristau@hollins.edu](mailto:tristau@hollins.edu)

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For application materials, please call (540) 362-6326 or visit on the web at [www.hollins.edu/grad/playwriting](http://www.hollins.edu/grad/playwriting) for more information.

Check out our MySpace page!

<http://www.myspace.com/hollinsplaywrightslab>

### From the Director: Submission Tip #1

In addition to my role as Program Director, I am also the Literary Associate at a professional theatre that has an open submission policy. This means I read, and reject, a lot of plays sent by hopeful playwrights. Starting with this issue, I'm going to be presenting some tips to take some of the mystery, and the agony, out of the submission process.

Let's start with the most controversial issue in submissions...**the reader's fee.**

Trying to tackle the issue of whether or not reader's fees are exploiting playwrights just isn't possible in the space allotted for this column, and doing so wouldn't be a "tip."

For background, on one hand

playwrights invest a lot of time, energy, and expense in submitting the very thing that theatres exist to do...plays. Charging them an additional \$5 or more (sometimes much, much more) seems like exploitation to offset costs that theatres should be absorbing as part of doing business. In the case of contest fees, I've heard the word "theft" used, and sometimes with justification.

On the other hand, theatres are constantly fighting to keep the doors open and sometimes the choice is between charging a reader's fee, requiring submission by agent referral/invitation only, or no longer accepting any submissions at all.

I worry sometimes that this hot

button topic creates the impression that the relationship between theatres and playwrights is inherently antagonistic and adversarial. That hurts everyone.

It is perfectly fair to ask the theatre charging you a fee what it will be used for and why they feel it is important to charge a fee at all.

When asking, try not to be adversarial in your approach though, or you're only going to reinforce the idea that living playwrights are too hard to work with. Seek an answer, not a debate. When you have your answer, make your own decision about submission to that theatre.

The bottom line is, avoid paying fees unless you feel the risk and added expense is truly worth it. It is your money: don't waste it. Play submission isn't the lottery.



**Todd Ristau, Director  
Playwright's Lab at Hollins  
University**