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The Lab Report, volume 03, issue 09

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Playwright's Lab
at Hollins University

Inside this issue:

Ashville, by Lucy Thurber at Studio Roanoke 2-3

Exit Strategy by Kris Knutsen 3

From the Director: **Looking for People You Want to Work With** 4

Next Month:

- **Jayne Benjulan Named Head of New Play Development at Magic Theatre**
- **Student Spotlight: Jonathan G Galvez**
- **Dear Abe by Adam Hahn**
- **The Prom by Adam Hahn**
- **Guest Profile: Joe Banno**

From the Director: **What You've Taken, You Can Teach**

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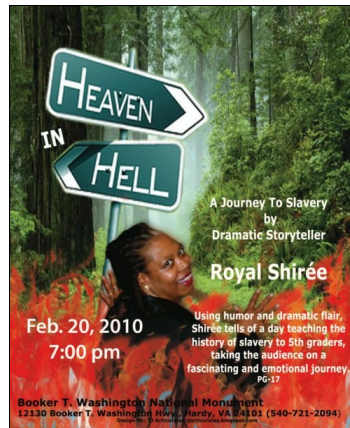


The Lab Report

Playwriting News from the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

Volume 03, Issue 09 (February, 2010)

Heaven in Hell by Royal Shiree



Royal Shiree, one of our MFA playwrights, was influenced by learning about Spalding Gray's *Swimming to Cambodia* in class last summer and applied this style of slightly fictionalized self-revelation to her new one-woman show *Heaven in Hell*.

The piece presents a video-

accompanying monologue that took audiences at the Booker T. Washington National Monument Visitor Center Auditorium on a fascinating history of slavery and how those times continue to resonate today, especially with those descended from the people who lived through it.

"I was very honored to perform this show at BTWNM," Royal said of the experience. "It was the first time in many years they've produced a program of this nature. The show was a huge success."

Royal gives Hollins some of the credit. She told us, "The playwriting program at Hollins inspires creativity, and exposes me to broader theatrical and

performative aspects I may not otherwise experience. The Narrative Theory class imbued a great impact on my performance as a solo artist. The Lab encourages artistic exploration, and provides strategies and guides to achieve success."



Guest Profile: Chad Runyon

Chad Runyon is joining our MFA program as a playwright this summer, but has already been building an impressive portfolio of written work for the stage at No Shame Theatre and getting a lot of practical experience on stage, back stage and as the new General Manager/Development Director at Studio Roanoke.

During a five-year stint teaching English in Japan, Runyon discovered theatre in the English-language sections of Kyushu bookstores. A six-week online playwriting course convinced him to return to the States. Planning on spending a three-week visit in his hometown of Roanoke before heading west ("or back out of the country"), Runyon found No Shame Theatre at Studio Roanoke and attended the Exposed! Reading Festival the next day. The quality of student productions

and instructor talks at Exposed! got him interested in the Playwrights Lab. "I was feverishly scribbling down everything Bob [Moss] and Todd were saying," Runyon said. "When I left Studio Roanoke that day, I went home and started my application to Hollins."

He decided to try acting and began performing his work at No Shame every week. He soon volunteered to help backstage for *Donnie and the Monsters*, directed by Cheryl Snodgrass. Not long after Ristau asked him to take the role of KGB Agent Shiroky in Jeff Goode's *Yes, Sventalan, There is a Grandfather Frost*. During this production, Ristau offered Runyon the opportunity to jump in all the way by taking over as general manager at Studio Roanoke. Runyon says his work at the theatre has been

an intensely concentrated education that has fueled his passion for writing and acting. "You've got this amazing group of people who are supporting one another and creating exciting, original new plays," Runyon said. "I've fallen in love with this place and this life."



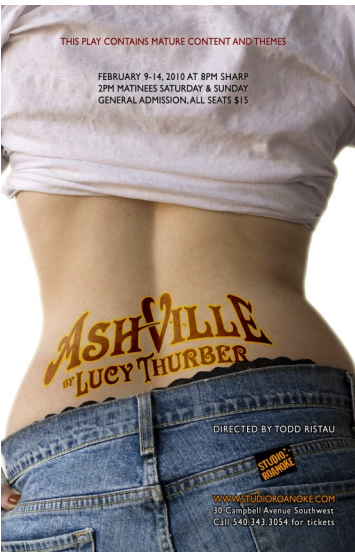
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The Lab Report

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Page 2

Ashville, Written by Lucy Thurber and Directed by Todd Ristau, Premieres at Studio Roanoke



Lucy Thurber is an award-winning playwright based in New York City. This month one of her earliest plays was produced for the first time anywhere by Studio Roanoke. It was directed by Program Director Todd Ristau with Hollins students as four of seven cast members.

"I came to Hollins two years ago as a guest speaker," Thurber said. "I really fell in love with what Todd was doing, and I met Kenley and they were starting this theatre here and they asked me if I would be on the Board of Advisors. And I said, yeah, because what you're doing here is exciting and wonderful and how can I help you? They asked me if I had a play that's never been produced and that you'd like to do some work on. And I said I do—and that's the whole story."

Ashville was that play. Lucy describes it as "a dark, sad little comedy about blue collar small town America, mothers, daughters, drug dealers and love." It is part of a cycle of five plays Thurber calls her Massachusetts Plays which also includes *Killers and Other Family*, *Scarcity* and *Where We're Born*. She tracks a similar character moving through the plays from childhood poverty through

increasing opportunities and hard choices about what she will hold onto, embrace, let go and be let go by.

Four of these plays have been produced in New York City and other places around the country, but *Ashville* (one of her earliest plays) has never had a production. It is the second full length play she ever wrote, and also one of her least developed plays.

"I sort of rewrote it a lot when I was first working on it," the playwright said during the talkback after the final dress rehearsal. "But, that was limited by the fact that I was very young. And these characters really exist, and I've always been very fond of them. The main character in this one is a teenager, so there's something very simple, straightforward and quick...and also all of my other plays except for one it's all young people but in this particular one you see the single mother and daughter relationship. I had a single mom...not necessarily this mom, but a single mom."

Despite the inspirations and connections drawn from her own life and experiences she insists that none of the plays in the

Massachusetts Cycle are autobiographical.

"All of these plays are personal, but once it hits the page its fiction," Thurber said. "I grew up in these situations, with variations, and with these people, with variations. You know what I mean?"

The opportunity to work on an early play by an established playwright was very appealing, but the focus of the play on young people making hard choices about who and what they will become made it an especially interesting choice, because the themes would be so relevant to student actors at Hollins.

This production represents not only an expanded collaboration between with one of our favorite guest artists, but also to build extensive creative cross-over collaborations between our graduate program in playwriting, the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies program at Hollins, and our traditional undergraduate theatre program.

The cast of *Ashville* included new MFA playwright Chad Runyon, MALS student Kris Laguzza, with undergraduate theatre majors Katlyn Hansell and Susanna Young. Hollins undergrads Lorraine Rhoden, Liz Schinkle and Rachel Linkous also gained experiential learning



Lucy Thurber, Todd Ristau, and Paul Meshejian (photo courtesy Dan Smith)

by helping to build the sets and work front of house for the performances.

"These guys were so brave tonight," Lucy congratulated the actors. "Doing new plays is hard and my stuff requires a special va-va-voom and you guys were really beautiful. Thank you."

Paul Meshejian, Artistic Director of PlayPenn in Philadelphia, focuses on developing new plays and playwrights. He also sits on the Studio Roanoke Board of Advisors.

"I first got involved with Lucy when her play *Scarcity* came to Playpenn," Paul said. "What blew my mind was that it looks like it is going to be about incest, like it is going to be really dangerous and it turns out to be a play about love. It knocked me out. Lucy came and worked on it and it knocked everyone out and *Scarcity* has had some success. Her work reminds us there are people out there who are on the edge but are still pursuing loving, complicated, meaningful relationships. These characters Lucy creates are as valuable in helping us understand ourselves as those in *Sound of Music*. You don't go away thinking it's a warm and fuzzy world where everything turns out right, but you do go away feeling ennobled about the human spirit."

Paul came to see the final dress rehearsal of *Ashville* with Lucy and participated in the talkback which followed. The audience was an invited group of guests that included Studio Roanoke's Board of Directors, members of the local arts press, prominent patrons of the arts, and influential members of the community. Roanoke's mayor, David Bowers, sat in the front row and was thrilled to discover he was mayor of a city that was being talked about in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Philadelphia.

"I am excited by your city, and the local talent and the people that I've met here." Lucy told the audience. "Every time I come here I'm even more excited. I think there's an unfortunate belief in theatre that if it's not New York, if it's not LA, or Chicago or Philadelphia then it doesn't exist. And I hate that. I don't believe in it. I think it puts a stranglehold on a lot of great American voices that are out there. You don't know. The next Tennessee Williams, the next Shakespeare might be sitting in this room right now. It is set up to be so hard to think you have a right, or that your voice counts. You know, and I came here—I'm a big believer in what I think American theatre needs to be, in general, is community based theatre. Art is important, expression is

important, and community is important. What is being built here by Todd and Kenley and the artists they work with is this idea that...I mean, I can't tell you how inspiring it is to come down and watch a group of artists be this brave. These guys are all fire, all muscle, all strength, all hope, all love giving something of themselves to you. And I come down here and we talk and they're not afraid. And a relationship starts. And now, with the show, a relationship starts with you, and with you a relationship starts with this community. Here in a room, Todd and Kenley have brought down a national theatre community and now we meet. And then we go back and we say there is something really exciting and hot going on in Roanoke."

"What's going on here is probably exactly what was going on at Provincetown Playhouse when O'Neill was writing his first plays," Meshejian echoed. "Where a real conversation can go on between the artists in the community and members of the community about what this community is. Where we can work with ideas. Not every idea will be appealing. Not every idea will be palatable but it's important to have a place where those ideas can be expressed and discussed together. This is that place."



www.studioroanoke.org/ashville

Exit Strategy by Kris Knutsen read at Studio Roanoke



Kris Knutsen was a member of the first cohort of MFA playwrights in 2007. She currently teaches in the theatre department at Trinity Western University in Langley, BC.

Last summer, Kris participated in a course called First Drafts, where over the course of the summer session students write one new play every week for six weeks. Each play is written in under 72 hours and must include a large number of writing prompts and

parameters provided by the instructor. *Exit Strategy* was written as part of that course. For this assignment, the play had to have no fewer than 30 scenes, require no more than 3 actors, no scene could be more than one page long and the time covered by the play's story had to encompass between 150 and 200 years. The play had to have a clear beginning, middle and end as well as teach a clear moral lesson. Five of the scenes has to be only stage directions, and five scenes had to

be only a monologue.

"I loved all the plays that came out of that class," said Todd Ristau, who taught the course and directed this reading for the Lunchbox Series. "The students pushed themselves well beyond what they previously expected of their own writing. This play is really quite moving, in particular the silent scenes. Kris really found the evocative poetry of movement and was able to convey it in stage directions."

Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

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From the Director: Looking for People You Want to Work With

One thing you rarely hear in a writing class is how important it is to be constantly looking for people you can collaborate with, but it is one of the single most important things for a playwright to be aware of and to develop as a skill set right along with how to craft a clear and concise stage direction or write snappy dialogue.

Obviously, becoming part of a writers group giving honest and tactful feedback is important, but a playwright can't limit themselves to a circle of writer friends...a playwright needs a large and growing network of collaborators who are going to bring the words to life on the stage in front of an audience.

You're not going to find those collaborators if you don't look

for them. That means going to a lot of plays and really thinking about stuff besides the writing.

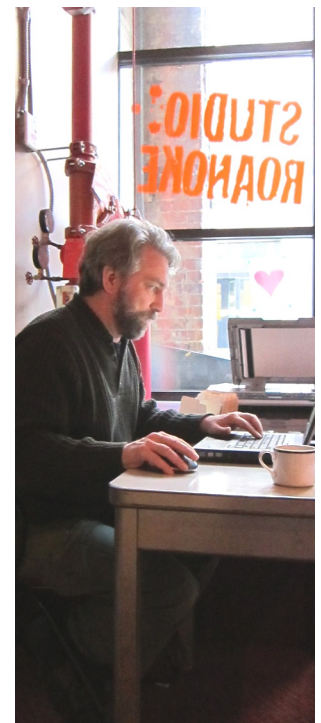
If you see actors that you like, go see them again in something else, and if you liked them in that, go see them again in something else and think about why you liked them in all three shows. Then get their contact information and tell them how great you thought they were and that you have a reading coming up and would like to use them if they are free.

Do the exact same thing with directors, designers, costumers, and every other creative participant you can think of. If you see a poster you like for a show, find out who the artist was who made it, tell them you thought it was fantastic, and ask

if they ever do posters for shows nobody has heard of before.

The more people in the theater you know, and who know you as a playwright, the easier it is going to be to pull together a creative team for a project. The better you all know each other, the better the chance for that project to be successful.

And, don't forget, it's just as easy—maybe easier—for a director or actor to suggest a playwright they know to a theatre they work with as it is for you to suggest an actor to a director or a director to a theatre you work with. Ours is a social medium and you can't know people if you haven't yet met them.



Todd Ristau, Director