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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 04, Issue 02 (July, 2010)

Guest Faculty Spotlight: Dr. Kate Bredeson



Dr. Kate Bredeson is an Assistant Professor of Theatre at Reed College, and works as a freelance dramaturg. She was Resident Dramaturg at Chicago's Court Theatre and Lecturer in Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Chicago. Kate has also taught in the theatre department of Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Her awards and honors include a Fulbright in Paris, a residency at the Camargo Foundation in Cassis, France, and fellowships from the Killam Foundation, Mellon Foundation, and the Institut Français de Washington.

Dr. Bredeson, who holds an MFA and a doctorate in Dramaturgy and Dramatic Criticism from the Yale School of Drama, regularly presents at

international conferences, and has published articles in *Theater, Theatre Symposium, Modern and Contemporary France, The Tennessee Williams Literary Journal, and Time Out Paris*. As a dramaturg, she has worked with theatres including the Guthrie, the Yale Repertory Theatre, and the Yale Cabaret. She is currently collaborating with Hand2Mouth Theatre in Portland and working on a book about theatre and performance surrounding the May 1968 events in France as well as translating a series of 1960s French plays.

Last summer, Kate gave a presentation on dramaturgy with Rebecca Rugg (Associate Producer at Steppenwolf and Lecturer in Dramaturgy and Dramatic Criticism at Yale) which was well received by our students. We are very pleased Dr. Bredeson accepted our invitation to return as guest faculty this year. Kate taught our playscript analysis course, a class in introductory dramaturgy, and an advanced playwriting tutorial. She also attended every

student reading, most of the No Shame performances, and even directed one of our student's plays in the Overnight Sensations showcase at Mill Mountain Theatre. Kate could not have been more enthusiastic about the program and our students. Based on her performance and student response, we're looking forward to Dr. Bredeson being a regular returning faculty member.

"Hollins Playwriting is an extraordinary program and I am thrilled to be a part of it. I was consistently inspired by the dedication and creativity of my students, and am excited to follow their projects and productions outside of Hollins," Kate told us. "At the heart of the playwriting program is the Lab, and I enjoyed participating in the carefully-crafted feedback sessions after each new reading. Hollins Playwriting is dedicated to process, writing, and the development of the art and craft of collaboration. It is a pleasure to be a part of the program, and I look forward to returning."

Robert Plowman's *The Common: for as long as you have so far*

This summer MFA playwright Robert Plowman wrote a site-specific piece for Secret Theatre in Halifax, Nova Scotia, that is intended to be enjoyed by audiences of one. Secret Theatre, led by director Dustin Harvey, is well known for subverting traditional theatre conventions, and is invested in reinterpreting the traditional audience/performer relationship. In *The Common*, this relationship is whittled down to each performance involving one spectator and, via iPod, one performer. In the

show, a single audience member walks through a specified route in downtown Halifax, past monuments, parks, and everyday roads, all while listening to (and taking instruction from) recorded text on the audio device, and paging through a book made by Plowman and Harvey.

Plowman, in creating this unusual piece, combined myth and folklore to examine the history, landscape and identity of an area he knows well. He also turned it a little on its head

by blending facts, current events, and urban stories together into a bit of a game that reflects both truth and fiction about his hometown and its history. How real it all might be is for individual audience members to decide for themselves.

The Common has gotten very positive reviews, including a feature article in Toronto's 'The Globe and Mail' newspaper, and is up for local theatre awards. Audiences have called it "a love letter to Halifax" and a "vivid engagement of space."

The Lab Report

Playwriting News from the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

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Overnight Sensations at Mill Mountain Theatre



Overnight Sensations
pulling an all-nighter for artsake

6 short plays! Written and Staged... in 24 hours!

FREE admission

See the plays, Saturday
July 17, 2010
8:00pm
at
Mill Mountain Theatre

Seating is limited.
Call 540.342.5749 for reservations
Donations benefit
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STUDIO ROANOKE Playwright's Lab

Mill Mountain Theatre is making a comeback after temporarily closing its doors in January of 2008 and part of the plan is find creative opportunities for mutually beneficial collaborations with other area arts organizations and Overnight Sensations is just one more example—in addition to No Shame Theatre every Friday night, Best of No Shame twice a year, Music After Midnight providing classical music in an informal setting, and hosting events like performances of the Southwest Virginia Ballet, the 2010 Dance Festival, youth theatre classes and full productions of productions arising from the Mill Mountain Theatre Conservatory.

Doesn't sound much like a closed theatre to us!

Playwright's Lab Program Director, Todd Ristau worked at MMT for more than six years as the producer of Underground Roanoke's late night alternative offerings and Literary Associate. He first came up with the concept of Overnight Sensations as a fundraiser for the theatre in 2008.

"I was given 24 hours to come up with a new idea for a fun event that would raise money and highlight the community

involvement in this professional playhouse," Ristau remembers. "So, I came up with a twist on the 24 Hour Plays project. It was a perfect opportunity to involve both the general community and our new playwriting program in a kind of micro-brewed new play festival."

This year's return of Overnight Sensations marks the third time the event has been staged, but the format has remained the same.



Six playwrights are selected, which usually includes some students in the program, guest faculty, and at least one local playwright. On Friday night, everyone involved attends a reception, and at 8PM, the writers each randomly select a director from six names in a hat.



Each director then draws a pre-generated cast list from the hat that has a balance of

experienced actors and local celebrities. Then directors and writers take turn drawing from the hat a genre, a location, and a theme as well as several specific writing prompts.

The writers are whisked off to the Wyndham Robertson Library on campus to work on their individual 10-minute plays until 1AM. Next morning at 8AM writers and directors meet to discuss the drafts over coffee and donuts, make revisions, and gather props. At noon the actors arrive and begin rehearsing until 5PM when everyone heads to the theatre to do set cues. AT 7:30, the audience is let and at 8PM, ready or not, the show begins!

GENRES: Comedy, Drama, Farce, Horror, Crime/Noir, Melodrama/Soap Opera

LOCATIONS: Barn/Farm, Restaurant, Pawn Shop, Laundromat, Bank, Cocktail Lounge

THEMES: Birds of a Feather Flock Together, Self Help is the Best Help, Slow but Steady Wins the Race, If Words Suffice Not then Blows will Follow, No One Truly Forgets Injury in the Presence of Him Who Caused It, Fine Feathers Don't Make Fine Birds.

This year's plays, all written, produced and performed in just 24 hours were:

Safe
Written by MFA playwright Sean Engard
Directed by Todd Ristau

Pawn Quixote
Written by MFA playwright Brandon DuMonde
Directed by visiting faculty member Kate Bredeson

The Old and the Restful: A Soap Opera

Written by Dwayne Yancey
Directed by Miriam Frasier

Hola

Written by MFA playwright Neeley Gossett
Directed by Charlie Boswell

Little Debbie & Coke

Written by April Drummond
Directed MFA playwright by Kris Knutsen

Dick Piston, Hotel Detective in PROSTHESIS: MURDER

Written by visiting faculty member Jeff Goode
Directed by MFA playwright Maura Campbell

Playwrights in the program were involved in all aspects of the event. Some were writers, some were directors, some were actors, and some provided technical support.

Studio Roanoke also partnered in this event, providing additional rehearsal space and their Technical Director (Jason "Blue" Herbert") to set the lights and run the show with our own Rebecca Quirk.

The evening finished with a reception at a local restaurant where everyone, including the audience, toasted their shared success in cooking up some amazing plays from scratch!



Festival of Student Readings

Studio Roanoke again hosted our annual Festival of Student Readings. Plays are selected from the full body of student work including that of returning students and new arrivals. It is understood by all that this is not a contest, and that there are tremendous learning opportunities for everyone even if your play is not selected to be one of the ten readings.

The festival is not about being discovered, but rather the entire focus is on developing individual scripts and helping playwrights learn how to interact with audiences and visiting guest artists with the kind of professionalism we hope will be associated with our program.

Guest responders attending this year's festival included playwrights, publishers, drama critics, directors, and arts administrators. Each of our festival guests will be profiled separately in upcoming issues of the Lab Report.

Plays given full readings in this year's festival were:

- *Troposphere*, by Chad Runyon
- *Breadcrumb Sins*, by Neeley Gossett
- *Stones from the Sky*, by Kris Knutsen
- *Mitzi's Abortion*, by Elizabeth Heffron
- *The Ache*, by Adam Hahn
- *Flower Duet*, written by Maura Campbell



- *Twenty Minutes in an Elevator*, written by Scott Ramsburg
- *Ubiquity of the Spirit*, by Wendy-Marie Foerster
- *Schooling Love*, written by Sunny da Silva
- *The Arctic Circle*, written by Samantha Macher

Each reading was followed by a moderated discussion with the student writer and feedback from each of the guests.

Guest Profile: Naomi Wallace



Naomi Wallace is an internationally respected poet, novelist, playwright, and screenwriter whose work has been produced in the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States. Her plays include *One Flea Spare*, *In the Heart of America*, *Slaughter City*, *The Inland Sea* and *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*. Naomi's awards include the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, the Kesselring Prize, the Fellowship of Southern Writers Drama Award, and an Obie. She is also a recipient of

the MacArthur "Genius" Fellowship. Her award-winning film *Lawn Dogs* is available on DVD. She continues to create works of great power and subversion, writing new plays for the Public Theatre, Oregon Shakespeare Festival and Clean Break of London.

Naomi first came to Hollins in 2007 while working with Mill Mountain Theatre on her play *Fever Chart*. She arranged for a rehearsal in the Hollins studio theatre for our students and read her poetry in the Hollins Room of the Wyndham Robertson Library. Naomi returned to campus this summer as the featured guest responder for the Festival of Student Readings.

Naomi was extremely generous with her time, meeting individually with each of the festival playwrights and interacting with all our playwrights in a relaxed and informal way. She also gave a talk on imagination and writing for the theatre followed by an intimate question and answer

session. All in attendance were taken by her candor and willingness to discuss personal aspects of her artistic journey.

Asked about the transition from the Playwright's Workshop, where she got her MFA in playwriting, to the profession she answered, "Well, the University of Iowa was a bit like what you're doing here now. Guest artists are brought in and a special connection is made with the new playwrights. When I was at Iowa, David Gothard was a guest and incredibly helpful to me as a new playwright. He read my work and suggested people and theaters where I should send my plays. And David was responsible for connecting me with the late Rod Hall, a brilliant man who became my agent for many years. I also met Tony Kushner while I was an MFA student in playwriting, and he gave me some guidance. But it's not just about 'making connections' that can further our careers, it's about *connecting* with people. Finding the artists that inspire you. While it's important to prepare ourselves to get out in the real world, I still believe we have to think hard and work hard to

write good plays rather than obsess about where our plays will be produced...Still, each of us has a slightly different route. My very first production was at the Old Red Lion in London."

The "theatre" she referred to was a small empty room above a pub that held about fifty people.

"The theatre was so small that there was only one guy running it," Naomi remembered. "And I said, so, since you don't have a literary manager, can I have the title? And so I became the Literary Manager of the Old Red Lion. I enjoyed the sound of it. Through this position, and with the help of generous folks like Gothard, I connected with others in British theater."

Naomi ended her session by commenting on collaboration in the theatre. She told us, "What transfixes me is working with other artists. Because my mind alone is not good enough. Not big enough. We need to work with others. We're like flint. We make contact with one another to spark the fire."

Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

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

Look for us on Facebook!

From the Director: Summer Recap

It's hard to believe that another summer session has come and gone. On the one hand it seems like only yesterday that I was checking in new arrivals...but on the other hand it seems like that was more than six months ago.

We've accomplished a tremendous amount in a very short period of time. Full course load of academic studies with papers and exams and voluminous reading lists. A guest speaker every Monday, developmental reading of a student play every Wednesday. Workshops with visiting artists on most of our Saturdays, and seeing new plays at Studio Roanoke and *Taming of the Shrew* at the Blackfriars Theatre in Staunton. Student initiated readings whenever there was a

free slot in the studio theatre, No Shame performances every Friday night, and we still found time for costume parties, karaoke at Watusy's, brunches with visiting professionals and lots of conversations about theatre late into the night.

And don't forget Overnight Sensations—writing and producing six plays in 24 hours!

Several of our students had productions and readings and won contests this year, some of our students had shows in other cities during the summer session itself! There was *Leading Ladies* in New York, featuring monologues by three of our writers, *Her Mother Was Imagination* in Seattle, *Feedback Loop* in Los Angeles, and two of our students had

plays in the Appalachian Festival of Plays and Playwrights at the Barter Theatre. Robert Plowman had a fantastic review of his iPod play in *The Globe and Mail*. People laughed. People cried. Everyone—faculty and students alike—were exhausted but we're all looking forward to next summer already.

Randy Rollison and Ruth Margraff will be teaching with us. We've got some great guest artists already lined up—including Mac Wellman, W. David Hancock, Lisa Schlesinger, Gina Kaufmann, Brett Nevue, Peter Ullian and others.

We'd love for you to think about joining us.



Todd Ristau, Director