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## The Lab Report, volume 04, issue 04

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 04, Issue 04 (September, 2010)

## **Her Mother Was Imagination by Elizabeth Heffron**

*Her Mother Was Imagination* is a bold new culture-bending play about a future 'right-thinking' America written by MFA playwright Elizabeth Heffron. The play, directed by Ellie McKay, opened July 30th at Annex Theatre in Seattle.



Ian Johnston/Annex Theatre

The daring political satire is the culmination of a generative multi-disciplinary arts project exploring our future as individuals and as a culture, created by Elizabeth in collaboration with director Ellie McKay, Max Reichlin and Daniel Worthington.

### **Student Spotlight: Elizabeth Heffron**



**Elizabeth Heffron** is an award winning playwright with many productions under her belt, including *Her Mother Was Imagination* (see above) as well as *Mitzi's Abortion*, which won the ACT Theatre New Play Award. ACT premiered the play in July 2006. It was produced this month at Epic Theatre in

Written by  
**Elizabeth Heffron**

Directed by  
**Ellie McKay**

Pedal powered by  
**Max Reichlin**

July 30 - August 28  
Friday & Saturday at 8pm  
Industry Night August 16

Information and tickets at [annextheatre.org](http://annextheatre.org) \$15 General

**Annex** is a Seattle theater dedicated to creating bold new work in an environment of improbability, resourcefulness and risk. The company members of Annex are a democratic collective now in their 23rd season. Since opening in 1986, the theatre has produced hundreds of world and Northwest premiers by local Seattle playwrights and nationally recognized writers.



Of her production experiences at this innovative theatre, Elizabeth said, "What I love most about working with Annex is feeling like I can investigate theatrical genres and storylines that are exploratory and not necessarily in my comfort zone, and be supported by really generous artists."

Michigan, and read in the 2010 Festival of Student Readings, hosted by Studio Roanoke. *Mitzi's Abortion* is currently under consideration for publication by two separate publishers.

Elizabeth received a Sloan Foundation grant, through ACT Theatre to complete her new play, *FREE RADICAL*, about the current nuclear renaissance.

Other work has been produced at Seattle Rep, Annex Theatre, New City Theatre, Next Stage, and Freehold Theatre, where she's completed 5 seasons working with the women of the Washington Correctional Center for Women on inmate-generated performance pieces.

Elizabeth teaches playwriting in

the schools through ACT's Young Playwrights Program and at Cornish College of the Arts. She is the recipient of several grants from the Seattle Arts Commission, as well as a Playwriting Fellowship from Artist Trust and the Washington State Arts Commission. She's been a principal playwright at Seattle Dramatists, and is a member of the Dramatists Guild.

"Spending 6 weeks this summer feeding my head with Brecht, Artaud, and Naomi Wallace, among others, has been one of the best things I've done to further my own journey in this artform," Elizabeth told us. "The artists and thinkers who come here to teach are really inspiring. And I love the diversity and supportive nature of my fellow students."

[www.raincityprojects.org/playwrights/elizabethheffron](http://www.raincityprojects.org/playwrights/elizabethheffron)

# The Lab Report

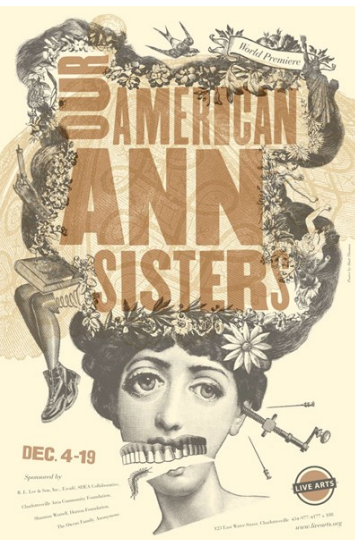
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## Guest Profile: Performers Exchange Project (PEP)



**Performers Exchange Project (PEP)** is an all-female collective of theatre artists based in Charlottesville, VA. PEP's two-fold mission is to develop and perform original works in and for their own local communities and to host like-minded performers from all over the country and around the world for residencies of performance, workshops, and exchange.



PEP has, to date, created three original performances (*Zelda & Lucia's Loony Bin Tragedy*, *Dido Versus The Squid Monster*, and most recently *Our American Ann Sisters*), produced two large-scale collaborative carnivals (*Wunderkammer* and *Shentai*), and toured a working demonstration called "Building Performance: A Look at Actor-Created Physical Actions."

PEP's first exchange, in 2005, was with Serbia's Dah Theatre/

Jadranka Andjelic Project. To maximize the human contact and conversation, PEP provided food, shelter and performing space to their guests. In exchange for performances and workshops, PEP offered their experience of living/working in this community, as well as their own performances and training demonstrations.

PEP believes that the interaction instigated by their collective can serve as an example and catalyst for an ever-widening network of like-minded artists opening their doors and sharing communities.

Though PEP company members have all worked together in different configurations for over 10 years, Performers Exchange Project formed in 2005. PEP is based in Charlottesville, VA with members also living in Staunton and North Carolina. Collectively PEP has 5 supportive partners, 6 children, 8 cats, and many, many family members and friends.

PEP is Martha Mendenhall, Sian Richards, Kara McLane Burke, Doreen Bechtol, and Jennifer Hoyt Tidwell.

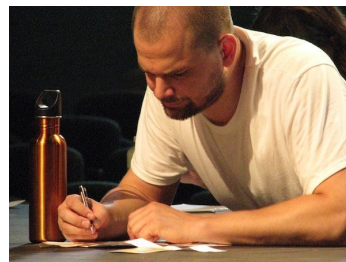


Sian, Jennifer and Martha came to Hollins for an afternoon of experimentation with our MFA Playwriting candidates.

"They were very game – took their shoes off, threw themselves (unrehearsed) into some Chairman Mao exercises and basically did whatever we told them," Martha, who led the workshop, said of the workshop.



The workshop, titled was titled: *Building a Performance: Playmaking through Collaboration*. Fundamental questions were asked: What is a PLAY? Is it a document written by an individual, then staged and performed? Or, possibly, a more collaborative venture? In this workshop, PEP led the playwrights through an abbreviated playmaking process, creating both text and action and then combining the two in unplanned ways so that participants an experience of the fresh perspective that collaboration towards creating the play can offer.



This workshop with our playwrights was one of the highlights of the summer, and

incredibly useful for the students to get practical guidance in the disciplines of performance, to engage in the collaborative act of group script creation, and to meet a theatre company that has put their ideas into action by creating, rehearsing, and touring their own plays.



"Seriously, it was fantabulous to see so many playwrights with experience as actors, directors, theatre technicians and all interested in the collaborative process of building performance," Martha said. "They created short individual performance etudes, wrote short bits of text and used these elements to create super short performances. It was gangs of fun and the playwrights concocted some impressive stuff."

The entire company returned to Roanoke two weeks later as part of our guest speaker series for an inspiring talk on their history, creative process, and plans for the future .



<http://www.performers-exchange.org>

## Living Between the Lines by Todd Ristau and Joan Ruelle

Todd Ristau, the Playwright's Lab's Program Director, has had many commissions as a playwright. Earlier this year Molly Bell, Chair of the Literacy Volunteers of Roanoke Valley Board of Trustees approached him to write something that would be the centerpiece of their 25th anniversary year and produced at Studio Roanoke in September as part of Literacy Awareness Month. Those plans have come to fruition in a very successful way.

Joan Ruelle, University Librarian at Hollins and also married to Todd, co-authored the piece, *Living Between the*

*Lines*.

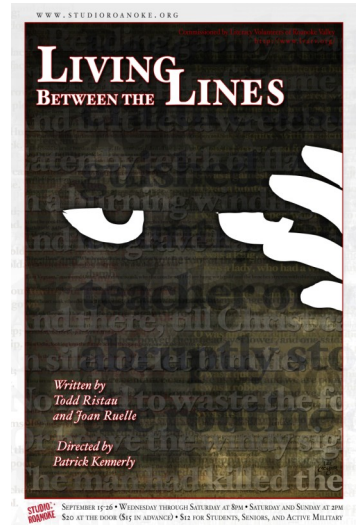
"Joan was absolutely vital to the writing of the play," Todd said. "She brought a lot of research to the table, as well as her own training as a literacy volunteer. We came up with the characters, hammered out a plausible story line and then I would knock out drafts which she would help rewrite and edit. It was a wonderful collaboration, and we're very proud of the result!"

The play follows main character Joe Conroy, who is functionally illiterate. He is offered a promotion but accepting will mean exposing his inability to

read. He has to decide if hiding his limitations is more dangerous than asking for help to overcome them.

Molly Bell said of the process, "When Todd and I first met to explore the idea, I was aware I was asking for a great deal. Whoever tackled the project would be investing their talent in the initiative, as well as an important personal commitment to our group. I was thrilled when Todd personally agreed to write the play, and he and Joan have written a very sensitive and powerful story for the stage that rings true with experiences we see in our work at Literacy Volunteers of Roanoke Valley. This will be a great asset for

us in increasing awareness of the issue of adult illiteracy."



## Flower Duet by Maura Campbell



Maura Campbell is an award playwright with more than 30 productions behind her. She was a member of the first cohort of graduate playwrights at Hollins, and will be graduating in 2012.

Her play, *Flower Duet* is a contemporary story that revolves around two couples and one child, with fast dialogue, compelling narrative and an emotionally charged ending. The play's characters are

complex, yet it is easy for audiences to identify with at least one of the many issues these individuals face.

*One couple has an open marriage, the other has a loveless one with the added stress of parenting a four-year old daughter whose behavior is becoming more difficult to understand. Inside this story of marriage gone awry is the theme of raising a child with special needs and the confusion and impact it creates in a relationship.*



Green Candle Theatre Company mounted this month's production in cooperation with Samson Productions and Winterset Productions. The company is committed to providing accessible, accountable, and dynamic theatre to its

audiences in Burlington, VT.

Green Candle has worked with Maura on several productions in the past, including her recent remounting of *Wild Geese*.

Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream also supported *Flower Duet* by creating a customized sundae scooped at select shows and available for a limited time at the Church St. Scoop Shop in Burlington.

Earlier this year, on March 24th, the first draft of *Flower Duet* was given a professional reading at Manhattan Theatre Source as part of Infinite Theatre's inaugural event. From there the script was refined in preparation for the world premiere by Green Candle Theatre and Samson Productions.

The full cast of the Green Candle production travelled to Roanoke this summer when the play was featured as part of the Festival of Student Readings. *Flower Duet* was heard and critiqued by publishers from New York and Los Angeles, the lead drama critic from the Chicago Tribune, and other guest responders that included internationally renowned

playwright Naomi Wallace and director David Gothard of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin.

"The readings, and opportunities afforded through the Playwright's Lab have been vitally important in this play's development," Maura said. "I've been fortunate here in Burlington, Vermont to work with a theater company whose main mission is the development of new plays. My career as a playwright has truly blossomed thanks to my collaboration with Green Candle Theatre and the graduate program at Hollins University."



mauracampbellplaywright.com

## 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: The Importance of Keeping a Portfolio

All of our MFA playwrights are required to keep a digital portfolio and submit it for review at the end of each summer.

The updated portfolio must contain a current headshot, updated resume, all written work to date, professional bio, press clippings, production photos, and a timeline of their professional credits thus far.

This is more than an exercise in obsessive archiving, though.

I think it is incredibly important for writers to learn how to document their own professional lives, know where that information is and have it readily available upon request.

There is nothing worse than being asked for a bio and a

headshot by a theatre doing your work or journalist writing a story on you and either having to come up with something improvised on the spot or struggling to update a painfully out of date version.

The resume is a chronological listing of your accomplishments, but the timeline turns that into a series of narrative descriptions of each credit as though you had been asked for a quote about it for a journal or newspaper.

Each entry is annotated with supporting documentation and citations so that you can better remember the specific details. More importantly, however, to prove the credits on your resume actually happened.

I've learned from experience how hard it can be to call up

from memory the exact title of every panel I've ever served on, the correct names and dates of every conference where I've presented, and the exact production dates and people involved for all my readings and productions...and that's exactly what you'll need to do if you're applying for a teaching position or under tenure review.

And having all that information on file for each and every one of our student writers helps me be a stronger advocate for student work through our network of supportive theatres, in the press, and in the creation of each issue of this newsletter.



**Todd Ristau, Director**