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The Lab Report, volume 03, issue 04

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Playwright's Lab
at Hollins University

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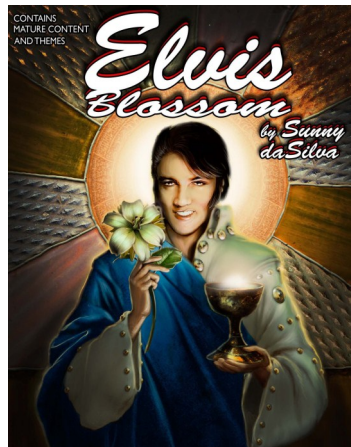


The Lab Report

Playwriting News from the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

Volume 03, Issue 04 (September, 2009)

Elvis Blossom by Sunny da Silva



Sunny da Silva is now entering her final year as an MFA playwright at Hollins. She is a middle school English teacher in Lexington, Virginia.

Her play, *Elvis Blossom*, was first read in Lab last year and has seen several revisions before heading into production this month at Studio Roanoke. It is set in 1987, when a beautiful young woman named Cherry Blossom is convinced she is about to bear the child of Elvis. The fact that Elvis died a decade

before is only a minor inconvenience. It is a tender (but quirky) love story about the child who is born to be the King of all Elvis Impersonators.

The production was directed by Joe Banno, formerly the Artistic Director of DC's famed Source Theatre. Banno has directed over 75 productions and brought 25 years of experience to working with the cast and playwright of *Elvis Blossom*.

Program Director Todd Ristau said, "Readings and productions are the two most important tools in developing a script, which is why we work so hard to build relationships with theatres that do new plays, and to pair our student writers with guest professional directors who provide immersive experiential learning opportunities."

Sunny da Silva had not

originally intended to be as immersed as she became with this show. After losing an important cast member early in rehearsal, the playwright stepped into the role herself. Sunny attended all the rehearsals and even served as costume designer for the show.



www.studioroanoke.org/blossom

Student Spotlight: Robert Plowman

Robert Plowman is a playwright and dramaturg from Halifax, Canada. For the past decade he has focused his theatre career on working with ensemble-based companies exploring the role of the writer in collective creation. In that time he has had numerous plays produced, received grants, and been published.

"I was interested in pursuing an MFA in playwriting and had already been accepted into two full-time programs when I learned about Hollins and realized a low residency MFA would better suit me," Robert says of his decision to come to Hollins. "Hollins' summer

intensive MFA is precisely what I was looking for. The Lab has a number of unique features which make it a good match for me. I thrive in the intensive environment provided by the six-week summer terms of the program; what's more, this structure allows me to continually take what I'm learning in the MFA and apply it to outside creative projects throughout the rest of the year. As well, the exceptional faculty and guest artists offer the possibility of mentorship with a variety of exciting professionals. Finally, there are the reading and production possibilities of the program being associated with Studio



Roanoke. The MFA at Hollins will help me both advance my creative practice as a theatre artist and give me the tools I need to become a playwriting teacher."

robertplowman.com

The Lab Report

Playwriting News from the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

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Guest Profile: Jeffrey Sweet



Jeffrey Sweet has been a playwright, screenwriter, lyricist, critic, journalist, teacher, theatre historian, and sometime songwriter and director. He is a resident member of Chicago's Victory Gardens Theater, which has produced twelve of his plays. Sweet is also the author of *Something Wonderful Right Away* (an oral history of Chicago's The Second City troupe), *The Dramatist's Toolkit* and *Solving Your Script*. He has written for television and adapted some of his plays for radio. His work for the soap opera *One Life to Live* resulted in a Writers Guild of America Award for writing for a daytime serial in 1992 and an Emmy nomination. Sweet serves as a member of the Council of the Dramatists Guild, is a member of Ensemble Studio Theatre, and is an alumnus of New Dramatists.

Sweet visited campus last summer to conduct a writing workshop give a public talk about his life and work. Here are some of his comments answers to our questions.

Do you have some advice for student writers?

That playwriting is strongest when it uses an inferential mode. Rather than saying exactly what is on your mind, you're trying to get the audience to come up with the important idea. If I say $2+3=5$

then you say, "So what?" But, if I say $3+X=7$ you fill in the X. Similarly, if you say what's on your mind, you make the audience passive. What's more interesting is if you create the circumstances under which the audience comes up with their own ideas, because what an audience comes up with for themselves they believe in more deeply than anything you spoon feed them. I think that you should not articulate your theme. I think that the theme should come out as a byproduct of the action and the theme should occur to the audience from watching the piece themselves. Because, that's the audience's job. The audience is there to figure this stuff out. The audience is there to evaluate the behavior and come up with their own ideas. If you ram stuff down their throats they might as well just go to the editorial page, which is where they're supposed to go for overt opinion.

You literally wrote the book on *Second City*...what does improv have to do with playwriting?

I was pretty young and I wanted to read a book about *Second City* and nobody had written it, so I thought, "Okay, then I have to write it." I studied improvisation with a guy named Sheldon Patinkin. This was so I could learn something about

improvisation from the inside...so I could ask questions that the people I was going to be interviewing would respect and answer. And, I thought that I was taking a vacation from playwriting. I thought that a theatre that doesn't use writers and develops all its material through improvisation with actors has nothing to do with playwriting. Then, somewhere along the line, I realized the audience doesn't care whether the material was generated out of improvisation or if it was generated at the typewriter. All they care about is whether it makes them sufficiently interested to keep watching and wanting to know what happens next. So, I started to think that the improvisational principles and techniques that Viola Spolin developed...they have their analog to playwriting. When I started looking at her work from that point of view, and adapting her work, it made a huge difference in my own because it meant a shift in my perspective. I stopped thinking of playwriting as a literary activity and started thinking of it as an extension of the actor's function. I stopped thinking about actors being there to serve my intentions and started thinking about how I could make them look good. And with that shift...that's when I started to sell stuff.

How do you go about marketing a play?

I've changed a lot of my attitudes about marketing because a huge percentage of the people who are charged with reading scripts—intelligent, well schooled people—can't read scripts. They can't see the event underneath the material. Which is why I don't submit scripts anymore. I set up readings so that people are introduced to my work through a performance because I've had experiences where I've sent scripts to people

that they've rejected and they've later seen readings and put on the same plays that they've already rejected because now they've seen what it looks like in performance. Now, were all these smart people wrong? Or, is there something in the nature of dramatic writing that does not lend itself to being understood on the page? I think that there is. I think that an awful lot of good work doesn't reveal itself when you read it. I think an awful lot of it only reveals itself when you add actors. Now, this makes it awfully bloody difficult to sell scripts, doesn't it? This is one of the reasons you are in a better position as a playwright if you live in a community where there is an active theatre community so that if you're submitting to theatres you can actually put together a group of actors and invite potential producers to see something rather than just tossing it onto that pile of submissions.

Is it a myth that a playwright can be passive and rely on submissions to have a career?

This idea of passivity of artists drives me nuts. Oh, we have to wait until a producer gives us permission to be artists. This is nonsense. It doesn't cost that much to put on some kind of theatre. As long as you design it cheaply enough, you can put on some kind of theatre. And the other thing is the theatre is a social form and if you want to work in the theatre, then work in the theatre! Volunteer at a theatre that is working and has a mission that you respond to. Type the envelopes, write press releases, write grant proposals and then guess what? This company is going to *want* to read your stuff and when they do, they are going to *want* to like it. Because otherwise they are going to have to find somebody else to write the grant proposals for them.

Sasparilla by Robert Plowman read at Studio Roanoke

Sasparilla, by MFA playwright Robert Plowman, is a light-hearted look at a modern cowboy torn between the call of adventure and the demands of family.

"The Lunch Box Reading of *Sasparilla* at Studio Roanoke was a great example of classwork feeding straight into professional experience," says Plowman. "And it was especially gratifying for me that the staged reading was directed by Todd Ristau, with three fellow members of the Playwright's Lab reading." MFA playwrights Kenley Smith and Ben R. Williams were cast in lead roles and Steven V. Rice read stage directions.

"I thought it was a hilarious little piece that would be perfect for the series," said Todd Ristau, the Lab's program director and Artistic Director at

Studio Roanoke. "Robert is a truly gifted writer, and this short work has engaging off-beat characters presented with a slightly sad sense of humor. I knew when I first read the play that we had the perfect cast for the reading. That's always a sign to me that a play is really good, if I've started thinking about how to direct it before I've even finished reading."

Lab playwrights are encouraged to get hands on experience in every aspect of the medium they are writing for, and participating in readings as actors is an excellent way to learn about how audiences relate to text.

"I was thrilled to have *Sasparilla* go on in the Lunchbox Series and I think Ken and Ben are ideal for the piece," Plowman, who could not attend the reading, told us by email.



Robert is a Canadian playwright and dramaturg who has worked in collaboration with ensemble-based theatre companies in Toronto and Halifax, including Chestnut Tree Theatre, Small Wooden Shoe, and Zuppa Theatre. His play *Radium City* was published in volume nine of the *New Canadian Drama* anthology series.

Plays selected for Studio Roanoke's Lunchbox Reading Series must be 30-45 minutes long and suitable for general audiences.

See website for complete submission details.

www.studioroanoke.org

Story Club by Nicole B. Adkins Published



Nicole B. Adkins (Nikki) is actually enrolled in the MFA program in Children's Literature at Hollins University but with a playwriting emphasis. She has taken courses from our faculty since the first summer of the Playwright's Lab. Nikki works so closely and so often with us that we claim her as one of our own. In particular, Nikki took the Writing for Young Audiences course this past summer, where

she forged an ongoing professional relationship with visiting faculty member Jonathan Dorf.

Jonathan is Co-Chair of the Alliance of Los Angeles Playwrights and a co-founder of YouthPLAYS, a publishing company focused on creating an exciting mix of award-winning professional dramatists and talented new discoveries, each with an original theatrical voice, who are dedicated to expanding the vocabulary of theatre for young actors and audiences. Jonathan encouraged Nikki to submit her work.

Adkins' play, *The Story Club*, is written to be performed in elementary schools. It was first developed in an Advanced Tutorial offered by the Hollins Children's Literature program and given further opportunities for development through peer

critiques and readings in the Hollins Playwriting program.

Dorf describes *Story Club* as "an engaging play that understands its audience and theatricality. It's a good fit for professional touring groups, high schools or college programs performing for young children in their communities."

"One of the greatest things about my experience at Hollins," Nicole explains, "besides the challenging and cogent classes, the seasoned professors, and the potential for synergy between the different graduate programs, are the many chances to work with fellow emerging artists. Peer collaboration has been a major component of my personal development as a writer. I know it will continue to be a vital resource in the outside world."

Nicole has a BA in Theatre Arts from the University of Central Oklahoma, and studied

Shakespeare at London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts. She has worked with children's theatres as a performer and teacher for many years, including the Children's Theatre of Charlotte, where she was a member of their professional troupe, the Tarradiddle Players. A playwright for youth and adults, she was a finalist in the 2008 Francelia Butler Conference, was invited to participate in the 2009 Bolderman Symposium Playwright Slam, and has been showcased in the annual Best of No Shame Theatre Virginia. She is a member of The Dramatists Guild of America, Inc., Alliance of Los Angeles Playwrights, and the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators.



youthplays.com/plays/view/69

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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.

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From the Director: Bad Choices Make Good Stories

I don't know who first said that bad choices make good stories, but you couldn't get better advice about playwriting.

A good story almost always comes of someone making a really bad choice. Some of the best stories I've ever told to a group of friends were about dumb things I've said, wrong turns I've taken, times when I should have known better.

Telling those stories would be just one more bad choice if I hadn't learned something from the mistake so I'm less likely to make screw up again.

It's exactly the same thing with the characters in our plays, except *their* bad choices are decisions we playwrights make for them.

We get very close to our characters when we're creating them. We like them and we want what's best for them. We know what they need, and we know what is keeping them from getting it. We know who wants to help them and why. We know which characters they should trust and which to steer clear of. We know who'd be good for them and we know who will break their hearts—causing them so much pain they might decide to make even worse choices. In short, we want our characters to be happy in the end and we know with certainty which choices will keep them from getting to that happy ending.

But, if our characters don't make those bad choices, a happy ending won't mean

anything to them or to us. They won't learn anything because they won't have had to redeem themselves.

So...if you really love your characters, let them turn their lives into a living hell. Let them be foolish, take crazy risks, and then suffer horribly as a result. Break their hearts, take their money, make them hurt and disappoint people they love.

And just when they realize what a mess they've made of their lives...dangle some hope before you kick them again.

That's what keeps our interest...the vicarious hope that we can recover from our own bad choices too.



Todd Ristau, Director