

Posted on Thu, Jan. 29, 2009

At PlayPenn, hard work of making theater

By Wendy Rosenfield



For The Inquirer

Paul Meshejian doesn't care for "a bourgeois middle-class theater." He's not interested in "another production of a Shakespeare play." And he doesn't think "people who spend the kind of money it takes to get into the door of the theater want to see what they see on television, or what they already know."

So when he decided four years ago to create PlayPenn - a new-play development organization that would help birth the kind of work he did want to see - he believed theatergoers would be interested too.

This season, Meshejian is one proud papa. Despite an economic climate that saw many houses jettison new work in favor of more familiar projects, all six plays developed at PlayPenn's two-week-long 2007 conference are scheduled to receive full-fledged productions at theaters around the country.

In fact, three of them are premiering or have already opened this month on local stages - Aaron Posner's *My Name Is Asher Lev* is running at the Arden, Andrew Case's opened last night at InterAct, and Russell Davis' *The Day of the Picnic* premieres tomorrow at People's Light and Theatre Company in Malvern.

Meshejian, 59, grew up in Philadelphia's Overbrook section. A director and actor, he has been a People's Light company member for two decades. But it was the years he spent in the Twin Cities in the '80s that woke him up to the positive impact a supportive theater-producing community can have on the national theater scene, and on a city's reputation as a theater hub.

Minneapolis' Playwrights' Center, which launched the careers of such playwrights as Steven Dietz, Lee Blessing and Jeffrey Hatcher, started out in 1971 "as just a place to get together," he says, "but blossomed into something more substantial. All the actors and directors in town were involved."

Meshejian says that as he began to pull back from his Philadelphia acting career and "settle into middle age," he wondered how he might "leave something lasting with the profession that's been fairly good to me."

Led by his passion for challenging new work and a desire to unite local theater

artists, he held discussions with area artistic directors and colleagues from around the country. The result, in 2005, was the birth of the PlayPenn program.

As its artistic director, Meshejian wanted to fix some of the flaws he saw in the workshopping process, in which scripts are written and rewritten, and playwrights are "blind-dated" with a cast and director for a final public reading. (He heard repeatedly that "there's nothing worse than showing up at one of these things and having the play cast improperly, nothing worse than having the wrong actor in the lead role.")

To head off bad matches, Meshejian says, "When I make an offer to a playwright, I ask, 'Is there a director you're working with, or someone you'd like to work with?' " If there is, PlayPenn covers all travel, housing, food and incidental expenses for the duration of their Philadelphia stay, and they receive an additional fee for their work.

"We try to make sure that not only does it not cost artists to do their work here," he says, "but that they might actually go away with something in their pockets."

If the playwright doesn't have a director in mind, Meshejian makes recommendations from the local talent pool, and the playwright then casts his or her reading with area actors.

Posner, whose play was commissioned by the Arden, planned to direct *Asher Lev* himself, but teamed up with director Danny Goldstein and dramaturge (an artistic consultant and researcher) Michele Volansky to fine-tune the piece at PlayPenn. The result? Volansky remained as the play's dramaturge, and Goldstein is now directing a production at Two River Theater Company, Red Bank, N.J., where Posner is artistic director.

Posner is more than pleased with the outcome. "For all the bashing that has happened in the American theater at various times about the workshopping process, I would call this a textbook-perfect example of the way it's supposed to work."

But even under the best circumstances, these are difficult times for playwrights premiering work. Christina Ham, a Minneapolis playwright whose drama *After Adam* was one of the six PlayPenn works picked up by a professional theater this season, saw Luna Stage in Montclair, N.J., postpone her show's opening for budgetary reasons.

But she is stoic about the play's prospects, saying, "Ultimately it's going to be done when it's supposed to be." And though she says "the climate for new plays has always been precarious," she's unequivocal about her experience in Philadelphia, which led her to make significant changes to her script.

"Everyone's looking for that magic elixir as to how a new play can become a produced play," she says, but at PlayPenn "so much time and care is given to make sure there is the right chemistry on each of the play's teams, which makes me realize they take the process seriously."

Seth Rozin, InterAct Theatre Company's artistic director, has long supported new work, both at his own theater and as a member of the National New Play Network, which fosters premieres at theaters all over the United States. So it's not surprising that he's also involved in PlayPenn's selection process, helping to choose scripts and cast readings. (As a result of the conference's growing

reputation, submissions have risen from 90 in 2005 to 350.)

He and Meshejian, among others, also are working on raising the city's profile as a place that not only introduces new writers, but also nurtures them. The Philadelphia New Play Initiative, still in its nascent stages, seeks to match playwrights with area producers.

Rozin explains, "Philly is well-known as a pretty hopping theater town, and playwrights and companies are setting up shop here. . . . But my worry is that if opportunities don't grow for these people, they might leave."

He also stresses that "in a world that always seems to be getting a little more conservative, with everyone moving towards safer, surer plays, I feel someone needs to be keeping the stream of new ideas alive."