

From the Artistic Director...

It's the Summer issue. What has traditionally been downtime for most of us seems to have turned into the busiest time of the year, if PlayPenn's experience with theatre professionals of every stripe is any indication.



It's 30 years or so after most of the major regional theatres in the country were founded. Those that have survived find themselves inhabiting physical plants, many of which were built by the founders. For those artists the theatrical season once began with a first production opening in October and the final show of the year ending in late May or early June.

Well, buildings cost money and funding just ain't what it used to be – not to mention the middle-aged artists and artisans who have established families and community roots and whose livelihood is now dependent on the constancy, the regularity of year-round employment. The building is there, and the administration is still employed and utilities are being paid for, so why not produce another play or two, book something in from a sister theatre, keep the physical plant producing income? What used to be a hiatus between June and September has turned into a couple of weeks in July.

Nevertheless, here we are, along with a number of other development organizations, working toward developing new works to fill those extended seasons with the work of the next generation of important writers.

Along the way, Seth Rozin, Artistic Director at InterAct Theatre Company in Philadelphia, and I have been having conversations about how theatres decide

to produce new works, the social and economic context in which those decisions are made, and the ideas and influences that color decision-making around the production of new work. Meditations on marketing, I guess you might call it. We've mused on the subject elsewhere in this edition.

In the midst of all this we invited six terrific playwrights who are writing with great variety, unfettered imagination and incisive observation about the world in which we live. Our work was completed not long ago, as of July 22nd, and with great success.

Of course, we hope you were able, during the narrow time frame that is your down time, to have joined us for the free public staged readings that were the culmination of this year's conference. We are especially excited about the six plays we've developed this summer representing a range of work broader than we could have wished for. We're including an electronic copy of this year's brochure and you can always visit our website at www.playpenn.org for complete information about the work of the conference.

Paul Meshejian serves as PlayPenn's Artistic Director. Over the past 35 years, he has worked as an actor, director, producer, and teacher. Currently, he is a member of the teaching staff at University of the Arts in Philadelphia and continues to be a member of the acting company at People's Light and Theatre where he has worked for the past 17 years. He is currently performing in THE TIME OF YOUR LIFE at Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey and will soon direct Steven Dietz's LAST OF THE BOYS at InterAct Theatre in Philadelphia.

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BRAND NEW

By Seth Rozin

Theatre is one of the very few industries in which prospective customers and/or patrons view that which is “new” as risky and unappealing. A play -- like a movie or a CD player or a sneaker -- is a product of an act of creation that goes through some kind of process before being offered as a commodity to the public. Yet unlike a new play, a new movie commands far more interest than a repertory film that you can just as easily rent from a video store; a new CD player is assumed to be superior to current and older models; a new sneaker is always more fashionable than one from several years ago. In most other industries “new” conjures enthusiasm and excitement; a sense of advancement. In theatre, new generally conjures doubt and caution.

A new play is generally considered guilty until proven innocent. Old titles, whether they be by Sophocles or Shakespeare (especially Shakespeare -- we’ll get to that later) tend to generate much larger audiences, even over new plays written by favorite local or famous living authors.

Why is this so?

One reason might be the assumption that the average new play is, in fact, not very good. After seeing productions of a dozen new plays, a theatregoer might conclude that it is not worth spending their precious time and money on such a hit-or-miss gambit. Rather than attend five new plays, out of which maybe one or two are really satisfying, why not attend five proven classics and know that the plays, at least, will be worthwhile? That rationale is difficult to combat. But then think

about the film industry. The next *Spiderman* movie is slated to come out soon, and despite how silly and unsatisfying the last one was, hope seems to spring eternal for the fifth sequel. Prospective patrons don’t decide, instead, to rent the first *Spiderman* movie; they spend their \$10 on the new one, knowing it might be a total bust.

So, perhaps the real issue is cost. A movie costs between \$8-12 and a professional theatre ticket between \$20-50. It’s not hard to understand why a theatregoer wouldn’t want to minimize the artistic risk, given the money they’re spending. Still, by this logic, moviegoers would tend to *rent* a classic film instead of seeing the new *Spiderman* sequel in a theatre. Yet, despite the fact that it is cheaper, by two thirds or more, to rent, millions more people choose to see the new movie.

Perhaps it has more to do with visibility. A new movie, or a new sneaker, is promoted with millions, if not billions, of advertisements in every conceivable media outlet. If one owns a television, listens to the radio, rides public transportation, reads a newspaper, or surfs the Internet, it is virtually impossible to not know about the next *Spiderman* movie. Even if the action genre isn’t your preference, you can’t help but remember the dynamic images, the catchy slogans or the famous actors from all the ads. Certainly, if new plays were promoted with such extraordinary resources, the audiences would be larger. But the average not-for-profit production of a Shakespeare play does not receive this grand scale of promotion, so we’re back to the “perception of quality” argument.

Customer confidence is generated by the track record of a product or of the product’s creator. A sneaker

Seth Rozin co-founded InterAct Theatre Company in 1988, and has since served as Producing Artistic Director. He has directed over 40 productions for InterAct, including Israel Horovitz’s LEBENSTRAUM (1999 Barrymore Awards for Outstanding Direction of a Play, Outstanding Overall Production of a Play, and Outstanding Ensemble) and IT’S ALL TRUE (2001 Barrymore nomination for Outstanding Director and Outstanding Overall Production). He has twice been named “Best Director” by the Philadelphia Inquirer for the world premiere of Thomas Gibbons’ 6221 in 1993 and for LEBENSTRAUM. Seth has also directed for the Fountain Theatre in Los Angeles, Blue Heron Theatre and the 45th Street Theatre in New York, as well as regionally with Act II Playhouse, Venture Theatre, Philadelphia Theatre Company, Philadelphia Young Playwrights Festival, and the University of Pennsylvania. As a playwright, Seth is the recipient of two fellowships from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, and two of his three produced plays - MEN OF STONE and MISSING LINK - garnered Barrymore Award nominations for Outstanding New Play in 2001 and 2002, respectively. His newest play, BLACK GOLD, will be premiered by InterAct in January 2008 as part of the company’s 20th Anniversary season. Seth has served on the Boards of the Women’s Theatre Festival, Theatre Alliance of Greater Philadelphia, New Paradise Laboratories, Fresh Visions Youth Theatre, and the National New Play Network (for which he served as President from 2002-2006).

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produced by Ralph's Sneaker Factory is not going to generate the kind of confidence as the same sneaker bearing the Nike logo. Ergo, a play by Shakespeare – widely agreed to be the greatest dramatist in history – bears a name that a patron can trust. But then I have to ask whether Shakespeare's plays, as brilliant as many of them are, remain truly relevant and contemporary in the way that a new Nike sneaker captures the most current cultural aesthetic. A great many of Shakespeare's most-produced plays center on decidedly old theatrical conventions and outdated themes. *Taming of the Shrew* (produced by TWO professional theatres simultaneously this past season in Philadelphia) is singularly misogynistic; the plots of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night* and *Comedy of Errors* hinge entirely on mistaken identity; *Measure for Measure* and *Much Ado About Nothing* revolve around chastity; and most of the history plays revolve around the divine rite of kings. These are not exactly themes and conventions that speak to the ethos of our time. But Shakespeare has proven its staying power over several centuries, which counts for a lot in the mind of a consumer.

Even some of Shakespeare's lesser plays have stood the test of time, so the theatregoer figures there MUST be a good reason. Whereas the attitude toward a new play is more likely to be "let's wait and see if this turns out to be the real deal." Here, again, Shakespeare is akin to Nike. Before it is marketed to the public a Nike shoe presumably goes through multiple designs, as well as multiple phases of market research and focus groups over many years. Whereas a new play, if it's lucky, gets a handful of readings and developmental

workshops over a couple of years before being trotted out in front of a paying audience, along with theatre critics. A Nike shoe hits the stores with confidence, based on extensive research and development, while a new play hits the stage with tremendous insecurity. The new shoe is a finished, finely honed product. The new play is an evolving organism that will change, and hopefully improve, with each production. It may take one or two productions, or it may take dozens to get the play to the equivalent place of a Nike shoe.

Where a muddled plot (*All's Well That Ends Well?*) or an under-developed character (Ophelia?) or an unbelievable motive (The Duke's spying in *Measure for Measure?*) renders one of Shakespeare's "problem" plays a compelling directorial challenge, a new play with the same flaws is more likely to be summarily dismissed by critics.

Which brings me to the role of critics. A Nike shoe might get a bad review in Consumer Reports, but it has the track record to command significant sales, regardless. Whereas if a new play gets a bad review in the local paper of record, it will have a hard time generating sales, let alone future productions. And yet, despite the enormity of the impact of their reviews, theatre critics are generally hard on new plays. They are quick to point out the weaknesses in plot, character, style, structure and tone. And they rarely make the effort to evaluate the intent and the promise of the play, but rather whether it is successful or not. Where a muddled plot (*All's Well That Ends Well?*) or an under-developed character (Ophelia?) or an unbelievable motive (The Duke's spying in

Measure for Measure?) renders one of Shakespeare's "problem" plays a compelling directorial challenge, a new play with the same flaws is more likely to be summarily dismissed by critics. With the cost of a theatre ticket what it is, the track record of a new play or playwright being uncertain, and minimal coverage by the local media, theatre reviews play a significant role in hindering consumer confidence in attending new plays.

So, perhaps a national campaign to create a positive "brand" is the key to overcoming consumer reluctance to embrace new plays. A kind of "Got Milk?" for the new play field. The problem with this is that unlike milk, or sneakers, new plays encompass a vast range of quality, content, form and style. This amount of variation may be a positive reflection of mankind's extraordinary diversity and creativity, but it necessarily negates any branding opportunity, since there is no baseline consistency to the product.

In the end I have to conclude that the lack of adventurousness on the part of American theatregoers has to do with a combination of all these factors: The perceived risk of a new play not being good, high ticket prices, minimal visibility, lack of a track record, skeptical criticism, and not enough research and development. And in order to overcome this lack of adventurousness we need to (1) give new plays more time and money for research and development, (2) lower ticket prices, (3) increase advertising budgets, (4) educate audiences to rely less on critics, and (5) find ways to get theatres to commit to the *continued life* of new plays so they can earn their track records. We've got our work cut out for us.

Keeping Our Own Council

By Paul Meshejian

While watching the Tony Award show this past Spring, I was struck by what I perceive as a genuine sense of schizophrenia that we, working across the country as theatre artists, face regularly in our lives in the profession.

This award show, purported to be a celebration of those among us who are achieving at the highest level, seemed to be principally concerned with the sustaining 'Broadway' and the long and fabled history associated with that institution. We were given a taste of much of what has been celebrated over this last year by way of reports of record ticket sales and revenues, articles in the *New York Times* touting performers, playwrights, producers and directors and some glowing critical response. There were lots of musical numbers, performed live for the viewing audience and a few photographs from the 'straight' plays that were in consideration for award recognition. Artists stood at the microphone professing their undying appreciation for the generosity and talent of collaborators, the love and support of family and lovers and partners – all a legitimate form through which to acknowledge the unbelievably difficult job that faces any group of people who set out to create anything anywhere.

I wish that I didn't find it embarrassing.

I sat through most of the program wondering how most of America – the part that wasn't watching *The Sopranos* final episode or the NBA playoff game or any number of other available diversions – was responding to this display. Are people thrilled at the rather flat presentations of uninspired musical numbers (never really translatable to the screen) to the point of planning that next trip to New York, picking up their phones and buying tickets? Or is the point of the chosen and presented musical numbers to cement our national pre-occupation with ideas of "living the dream" of being on Broadway, of succeeding in ways heretofore unimaginable? "There's a little Broadway in all of us" went the refrain – the signature phrase for the evening.

It all strikes me as one thing and one thing only - an attempt to sell 'Broadway,' the brand (no big surprise, really). And it's probably working.

I couldn't help thinking about the hundreds, even thousands, of theatre artists I've known and worked with over the years that labor, in the communities in which they live, to bring stories laden with ideas and emotional journeys to people with whom they share a life. Globalization notwithstanding, these artists, the communities they live in and the people they live amongst share a daily paper, ride the same public transportation, shop in the same grocery stores, experience the same weather conditions and respond to a shared local political climate as part of how they go about their daily lives. Not everyone, everywhere, reads the *New York Times* – or even *USA Today*, for that matter.

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When the regional theatre movement began in the United States (and it actually began with the Little Theatre movement of the early 20th century), the idea that drove it was that the theatre was the story-telling center, the campfire of the community and that each community's life had its own integrity while existing in a larger world. This movement was very much a reaction against the enforced diet of theatrical

entertainment that was being brought to every small community across the country by New York producers.

From watching the Tony Awards one might gather that there are no individual communities with provincial concerns existing in a larger universe. There seems to be an underlying assumption that we are all very well represented by the expression of those few who have found some common denominator that appeals to and attracts the largest possible audience. This kind of consumption is a function of the homogenized "disney-fication" evident in those entertainments that can appeal to the largest number of people over the longest period of time creating the greatest wealth for its investors.

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Then there is that moment in the ceremonious proceedings of the Tonys of acknowledgement of the provinces by the gesture of the Regional Tony, telling some community, each year that their theatre is as good as what happens in New York. Boards of Directors are hiring new artistic directors and expressing their desire that their theatre pursue this 'award.' Somehow this feels to me like a co-opting of what makes these regional theatres important to the communities they function within. It is an insidious attempt, actually, to undermine the efficacy of our regional theatres in the interest of a profit for the few.

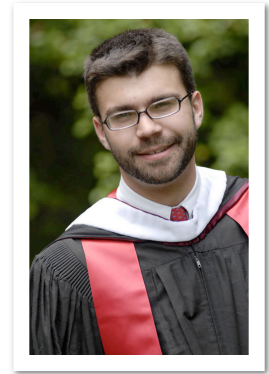
What are the artists at these theatres to think? Should they begin to shape what they do to reflect the Broadway model, seeking to satisfy those who would judge them as living up to the arbitrary standard of the Broadway theatre? (And let's not forget that at least part of the reason Broadway is popular is that it is marketed as a national brand.) Or should they narrow their focus and create with and among those artists and audiences with whom they live, eat, love and sleep? If the work is good and specific, my experience tells me that New York will eventually benefit from its existence, Tony or no Tony, and our provincial regional theatres will continue to be unique places where the joys, pains, sadnesses and triumphs of living life in a specific time and place will be reflected with a vibrancy that is particular and utterly satisfying.

**PlayPenn is now
accepting submissions for
its 2008 Conference. For
complete guidelines visit
our website at
www.playpenn.org.**

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Liam Daley

Liam Daley, a 2005 PlayPenn Intern and a Washington College English and drama major from Drexel Hill, Pennsylvania, has won the Sophie Kerr Prize and a check for \$60,027.



Daley's critical thesis on medieval English literature, along with **his portfolio of plays** and short prose pieces, earned him the largest literary award in the untry exclusively for undergraduates—the Sophie Kerr Prize—presented Sunday, May 20, 2007, during the College's 225th Commencement ceremonies.

The awarding of the Sophie Kerr Prize, given annually to the graduating senior who demonstrates the greatest "ability and promise for future fulfillment in the field of literary endeavor," is awarded annually at the Washington College commencement where Liam has been a student. The Prize, worth \$60,027 this year, is among the largest literary awards in the world.

It was a combination of Daley's thesis and his playwriting skills, "both the critical and the creative," that earned him departmental honors from the English department and caught the attention of the Sophie Kerr Committee. "He was a standout in a particularly strong group filled with talent and promise," said English professor, Kathryn Moncrief.

English Professor Richard Gillin, who presided over the committee's deliberations, praised Daley's skills as a dramatist. "With regard to Liam's plays, the rhythms of the dialogue paralleled the emotional turmoil of the characters, and the structuring of the plays' elements and the repartee among the characters are particular strengths."

Professor Corey Olsen, Daley's thesis adviser, echoed Gillin's enthusiasm for this year's winner. "Liam's work demonstrates remarkable wit and liveliness. Both his critical essays and his dramatic writing display his intellectual intrepidity and his literary perspicacity."

PlayPenn is honored to have been another aspect of Liam's literary ascent.

They Started Here!

This years Interns included a range of ambitious students. They each had the advantage of working closely with one of our creative teams over the course of that individual play's development. Additionally they received the close guidance of Philadelphia playwright Michael Hollinger who led a workshop geared to result in playwriting by each intern that was performed by the conference acting company. These are talented young people to keep your eye on.

Carrie Chapter

Carrie Chapter graduated with a degree in English from Washington College in 2006. She has participated in many under graduate productions as actor, dramaturg, stage manager, and director. She is currently pursuing an MA in Theater from Villanova University.

Josh Cohen

Josh Cohen is a junior at Swarthmore College, where he is pursuing a BA in Religion. He has acted in many plays, most recently playing Parolles in Shakespeare's ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL, and he has worked for several off-Broadway theatre companies in New York City. He is also a playwright.

Oliver Johnson

I am in my penultimate term of school at Radley College, England. I am hoping to go to university to read English and Drama. I am currently preparing for my final A level piece to be performed in May. I am very grateful to be a part of PlayPenn which will give me an invaluable insight into the world of professional theatre.

Mathias Paul Krick

Mathias Paul Krick just finished a semester studying with the National Theatre Institute in Connecticut at The Eugene O'Neill Center. He is currently completing his bachelor of fine arts degree in acting at the University of the Arts. While there he had the fortunate opportunity to perform in WHOSE LIFE IS IT, ANYWAY?, THE GARDENER'S DOG and Arthur Miller's THE AMERICAN CLOCK for which he received an Irene Ryan Award nomination. He is thankful and excited to be joining the PlayPenn team this summer.

Bayla Rubin

Bayla Rubin will be a junior this coming fall at the University of the Arts where she is currently obtaining a BFA in Applied Theater Arts. She studies and works in several areas of theatre including directing, stage management, and playwriting. Bayla is the recipient of the 2005 Suzanne Roberts Theatre Alliance Scholarship Award, which has allowed her the opportunity to work as an assistant stage manager at the Barrymore Awards.

Annabelle Shore

Annabelle Shore is excited to be a part of PlayPenn 2007. As a freshman at Washington College majoring in English and Drama, Annabelle's first college theatre experience was as Carla in Howard Korder's BOYS' LIFE. Currently she is preparing for three roles in the spring performance of OEDIPUS REX. Before entering Washington College, Annabelle took summer acting classes and workshops and was featured in a television commercial for the 2004 presidential campaigns. In addition to acting, she loves to write and is very grateful to be a part of PlayPenn which combines these interests.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Jordan Harrison (PlayPenn '05) recently had a workshop production of **AMAZONS AND THEIR MEN** at New York's Clubbed Thumb directed by Ken Rus Schmoll.



Jordan's play, **DORIS TO DARLENE: A CAUTIONARY VALENTINE**, will be produced by Playwrights Horizons in December directed by Les Waters. He is currently working on commissioned works for South Coast Rep and the Arden Theatre. This summer, Jordan will be in residence at the Orchard Project.

J. T. Rogers' play **THE OVERWHELMING** (PlayPenn '05) toured the UK following its sold-out run at London's National Theatre; his adaptation was then broadcast worldwide on BBC radio.



The play opens the Roundabout Theatre Company's season this fall, when it will be concomitantly published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux. His plays **MADAGASCAR** and **WHITE PEOPLE** were published by Dramatists Play Service, and **WHITE PEOPLE** was seen at the New Rep in Boston, where it was

nominated for an Elliot Norton Award for best play of the year. In 2007, his work has won the William Inge Center for the Arts Otis Guernsey New Voices Award and the Blanche and Irving Laurie Foundation's Theatre Visions Award; he has taught a master class at the new Theatre/TV/Film MFA writing program at Northwestern; he was a MacDowell Colony fellow; and he just been made a resident playwright at New Dramatists. This summer he will be in residence at Yaddo, working on a new play for the National Theatre.

Lydia Stryk's **ON CLARION** (PlayPenn '05) will have a workshop and will be featured in A Celebration of Women's Work by Rivendell Theatre Ensemble in Chicago this summer. Lydia



received a commission from Geva Theatre in Rochester, NY. She is currently working on a new play, **ATLANTIS**, inspired by her stay as playwright in residence at the William Inge Center for the Arts this past fall. And her play, **AMERICAN TET** will be produced in Berlin in the upcoming season. This Fall she will be teaching playwriting and a course of her own design called Theatre and War at Hunter College in New York.

Lucy Thurber (PlayPenn '06) has been



commissioned by Playwrights Horizons. She will be in residence at The Orchard Project this summer. Her play **SCARCITY** – developed at PlayPenn last summer - will be produced on the Atlantic Theater Company main stage this fall and will be published as part of her trilogy which is forthcoming.

Deborah Yarchun's play **FREEZEFRAME** (PlayPenn '05) was produced off-Broadway through the Young Playwrights Festival XXIV in May 2006. **FREEZEFRAME** was also produced at Wichita State University through their national undergraduate/graduate playwriting contest and was performed in Ames, Iowa through the American College Theatre Festival Region V competition. Drexel University also produced **FREEZEFRAME** as the Winter Studio Show in February, 2006. Her play **BIRDWOMAN** was performed through the Fall Studio shows. Deborah's play **NEXT YEAR IN**



JERUSALEM was nominated for the John Cauble short play award and received a reading at the American College Theatre Festival Region II conference in Poughkeepsie, NY in early 2007. **NEXT YEAR IN JERUSALEM** will be featured in "Java Drama," an evening of sitespecific one-act plays that she is producing for the Philadelphia Fringe Festival. Recently Deborah served as Interim Literary Manager at Rattlestick Playwright's Theatre in NY as well as a Literary Intern at Labyrinth Theatre Company.

The Collaborative Playwright: Practical Advice for Getting Your Play Written

By
Bruce Graham and Michele Volansky

Bruce Graham and Michele Volansky are two of the artists who were instrumental in bringing to life an organization devoted to new play development in Philadelphia. Now they have written a book on the subject worthy of attention. I encourage you all to take a look at their work and judge for yourselves. It's a pleasure to promote the work of fellow Philadelphians and respected colleagues. Buy a copy.

The interaction between the ideas of the playwright and the know-how of the dramaturg is vital to the success of any production. But not every writer is accustomed to thinking like a dramaturg. *The Collaborative Playwright* changes that by offering a lively dialogue between a highly successful playwright, Bruce Graham, and an equally accomplished dramaturg, Michele Volansky, supported by hands-on exercises to get you thinking and writing in new ways.

The Collaborative Playwright gives you professional advice on how to get started with a play, how to structure it to be performed, and how to work with a dramaturg to turn it into a staged production. Graham and Volansky's fun, smart conversation offers step-by-step advice on each of the components of the craft—exposition, rhythms, characterization, structure, and story generation—all illustrated with clear examples from Graham's own plays.

But unlike other books that advise playwrights, *The Collaborative Playwright* is written from two points of view: the playwright's and the dramaturg's. It's both friendly and packed with indispensable nuggets of information, including interviews with more than thirty current theatre artists whose collective advice articulates some of the more practical aspects of working in the theatre—knowledge that playwrights need as they write.

Want to write plays that work as well on stage as they do in your head? Read *The Collaborative Playwright*, listen in as two theatre veterans discuss the crucial characteristics of good writing, and find out why, if you're writing for the theatre, it pays to listen to your dramaturg.

(Excerpts from the recently published *Practical Advice for Getting Your Play Written* by Bruce Graham and Michele Volansky, Heineman Press)

WHY I BECAME A PLAYWRIGHT

My old man was a plumber and when I was little he'd occasionally take me on a job with him. At the age of five I spent a memorable winter day with him in a block of apartments under construction, which contained a room full of empty appliance boxes. For a kid with an imagination, row after row of Westinghouse refrigerator cartons was better than Disneyland. (Hey, we were poor.) The old man even gave me a sharp object to cut out windows and doors. (Today this would be seen as terrible act of child abuse. Ahh, the 60's were a great time.) As late afternoon approached, however, I began to freeze and went looking for dad.

I found him squeezed into a crawl space lying on a piece of cardboard, trying in vain to ward off the effects of the cold concrete floor. His hands, filthy from wrestling with pipes all day, were cracked and bleeding. The only warmth he'd had all day came from his small acetylene torch.

As we walked to the car – him lugging a toolbox that weighed more than me – I realized something important: I never wanted a job like this.

I didn't want cracked, bloody hands. I wanted to be warm and not carry anything heavier than a briefcase. I wanted to get up when I felt like it and work till I felt like quitting. I wanted to go to parties, meet lots of girls and make a ton of money.

So I became a playwright.

And – except for that ton of money thing – the rest all came true.

I can't write prose. Bores the hell out of e. Describing a room, a sunset, a woman's smile, is torture. You need an eye to write a novel, which I don't have. (My wife once proved this theory by asking me the color of our bedroom. I got it on the third guess.)

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A playwright writes with his/her ear. You can be as visual as you want - write reams describing your set, costumes, even – as in the case of O'Neill – your characters. But it's all pretty much a waste of time since the budget probably won't allow everything you want, your director and designers have their thoughts, and the actor you can't live without just isn't as tall as you have written in the script. (O'Neill goes to great lengths describing the pudgy Hickey in ICEMAN COMETH, and then cast the gaunt Jason Robards, Jr.)

Who cares about the color of the wallpaper? That's for when you're in pre-production. When you sit facing the empty notebook, it's what the characters say and do that's important. Worry about that other stuff later. It's tough enough putting interesting characters into a fascinating plot without getting bogged down in the style of someone's shoes.

During this book I'll be making lots of references to my own work. I do this for a few reasons:

I don't have to get permission for the rights.

You might become intrigued enough to buy copies, which cranks up my royalties. (They make great gifts, by the way.)

I can describe in detail how these plays came to be. (Not to mention filling up pages with lots of amusing anecdotes.) I can't honestly say where other playwrights get their inspiration, but I can pretty much explain where I got mine

Okay, let's get something out in the open right now.

I am totally untrained as a playwright. Never went to Yale. Hell, I barely got out of Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

My training was as an actor. When I went to New York right out of college I found there wasn't a huge market for short, balding young character actors. So I decided to start writing plays with parts for short, balding character actors. And they always ended up casting a tall guy with hair.

I didn't just decide overnight to become a playwright. I'd written plays and comedy sketches in high school. I spent three years making money as a stand-up and creating material. But training? I finally had a

playwriting course in grad school at Villanova. By that time I'd had two plays off-Broadway and was . I skipped it a lot. I got a B.

I learned to write plays by watching them, reading them, and being in them. I was in my 30's when I finally discovered that some guy named Aristotle laid down some very practical rules for writing plays. Wish I'd known this earlier. Would've saved me some trouble.

Since I'll be making some references to THE POETICS I thought it might be good to bring it up now. Sure, it's a bit dry. And some of the advice is a bit dated. ("A character should be good. Even a woman or a slave can be good.") But at its core, there's some good stuff in there.

Aristotle lists what a good play needs. It needs a character with a strong "want." It needs conflict. It needs spectacle, which means "something to look at." It needs a character who changes during the course of the story.

And it needs a "thought" behind it. More on this later.

So, once you're done with this book, go and check out Aristotle. (Feel free to skip over the really boring parts.)

Bruce Graham is the author of the following plays: *Burkie*, *Early One Evening at the Rainbow Bar & Grille*, *Minor Demons*, *Moon Over the Brewery*, *The Champagne Charlie Stakes*, *Belmont Avenue Social Club*, *Desperate Affection*, *Coyote on a Fence*, and *According to Goldman*. *Coyote on a Fence* was the winner of the Rosenthal Prize and recently opened in London's West End starring Ben Cross. His one-man show, *The Philly Fan*, was recently revived for a third run. Two new plays, *Dex and Julie Sittin' in a Tree* (Arden Theatre) and *Full Figured, Loves to Dance* (Theatre Exile), opened this year. His feature film credits include *Dunston Checks In*, *Anastasia*, *Steal This Movie*, and his TV movie, *Ring of Endless Light*, won the Humanitas Award for Best Children's Teleplay. Graham has received grants from the Pew Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and he was a recipient of the Princess Grace Foundation Statuette Award. He currently teaches playwriting and film courses at the University of Pennsylvania and Drexel University. Graham lives in Media, Pennsylvania, with his wife, Stephanie, and their daughter, Kendall.

WHY I BECAME A DRAMATURG

My family tells stories. We live for it. We also like to listen to stories. However, our dinner table is one of the toughest rooms one will ever play – if your stories are not good, we will take you down.

I learned fairly early on that while I did have some gifts in the storytelling department, I was a MUCH better responder; that is, I was the one who would, in fact, take a bad storyteller down. There was mocking, there was cajoling, there was shame.

All of which leads to superb dramaturgy.

I'm joking, of course. Sort of. Good dramaturgs are those special individuals who can listen acutely, respond appropriately and, with equal parts tact and tenacity, can assess the success and failure of a given work, all the while offering helpful options of how to proceed. I don't want to rewrite a playwright's play. I want them to write the play that they are yearning to write.

One of the most exciting things about being a dramaturg (okay, so it isn't all that exciting a career – we take our joys where we can) is working with a playwright over a long period of time, on a number of different plays, and from a variety of starting positions.

While I do not have the actual playwriting experience that my esteemed colleague has, I have been around hundreds of writers at all levels – from the emerging to the award winning (not sure where my colleague fits in here...) and I've taught playwriting for years. I know a thing or two about what doesn't work, and a couple more things about what does.

I had the benefit, in writing this book, of having an extraordinary collaborator. Because Bruce and I have worked together before, we had a common vocabulary and a shorthand that became enormously helpful. We also have very little ego when it comes to "ownership." You'll notice throughout the book that we have inserted "digressions" and "other opinions," as well as the use of the word "I." The "I" in this case is actually a happy merger between Volansky and Graham. It is an example of collaboration in action. I hope every playwright can have such a colleague.

A word about that teaching playwriting thing. I'm not one hundred percent convinced that writing can be

taught. Bruce and I will give you a great deal of suggestions, helpful hints and offer insights into what makes a good play. But at the end of the day, you still have to do it. You and you alone have to have your own passion, your own drive and your own point of view.

Good luck.

Michele Volansky is Assistant Professor of Drama at Washington College and the dramaturg for the PlayPenn New Play Development Conference. She has worked on more than 150 plays, including the Broadway productions of *Buried Child* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. She has worked with numerous theatrical groups, including Actors Theatre of Louisville, Steppenwolf Theatre Company, and the Philadelphia Theatre Company. In 1999 she won the inaugural Elliot Hayes Award for Dramaturgy and is also past President of the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas. She is also a doctoral candidate at the University of Hull (England), writing about the critics Kenneth Tynan and Frank Rich.

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