

From The Artistic Director, Paul Meshejian



We've managed to put together Volume 1, Issue 2 of The New Play Times. We began this quarterly publication with a simple desire to keep interested parties up-to-date on the path and progress of Play-Penn conference writers. In the process of thinking about the work of developing new work I began to feel the need to talk about what it is we do, how we do it and why we do it. In musing on paper I found myself with something I wanted to share. So I asked two of my very experienced colleagues to think and record their thoughts about new play development. What you get is three pieces on development and the place for new plays in the American theatre. We

hope you find these reflections provocative enough to stimulate your own thoughts on the subject. If you feel compelled to write us, we'll try to print some of your responses in our next issue.

We are in the final stretch toward identifying this year's finalists. The field of work submitted this year has been a pleasure to read. Our initial evaluation process involves 60 readers, all professionals from every part of the Philadelphia professional theatre community. They have all expressed their appreciation and excitement at taking part in assessing what we believe will be the next important plays to be seen on stages in Philadelphia and across the country.

We are looking forward to announcing this year's conference playwrights (we're inviting 6 this year, increasing the field from the 4 we have invited each year up until now) and hope you will be able to come and hear the results of the work ahead from July 19 – 22.

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Paul Meshejian serves as PlayPenn's Artistic Director. Over the past thirty-five years he has worked as 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 he past 17 years. He recently opened a production of Anton Chekhov's THREE SISTERS at Arcadia University.

THE PLAY'S THE THING by Rick DesRochers

After a fifteen-year career of working with new playwrights as a literary director, director and dramaturg, I am still in awe at how many wonderful plays I have read and worked on, and how much talent there is in the American theater. I am equally as impressed (and dismayed) by how little of that potential theater actually finds its way onto the American stage.

The plays that attract me are varied in tone, style and subject matter, but share a common denominator. They each have a point of view, a unique voice, and use the stage as a platform for theatrical metaphor that questions our assumptions as human beings in the present moment. "Inside every good play lives a question" says Anne Bogart in *A Director Prepares*. Conventional wisdom and assumptions come under scrutiny when plays pose questions that provoke exploration of what we take for granted.

Every time I am asked to write an article on the state of the American theater, I ask myself "Why *am* I so cynical about where the theater is right now?" The answer: because I truly love it and feel that it so very often deserves better than it gives. I have worked for large institutional theaters and small fledgling theaters, each fraught with their own concerns for survival. Only one thing holds true for both: the quality of plays being developed and produced is the hallmark of worthwhile theater companies. Plays must ask hard questions that cannot or will not be asked otherwise. Rather than reaffirming home truths that we agree to and to which we can easily say, "Yes, this is so" the theater must ask "Is this so? And if so, why?"

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As a theater practitioner, I, like many others, am overjoyed when I come into contact with a play that fits this description. So, why not produce more new and challenging plays? What are we so afraid of? Will our subscribers flee our theaters if brought into contact with provocative plays? In my estimation, audiences want to be asked difficult and compelling questions. After all, they have become all too familiar with formulaic storytelling in the form of television and film. We are one step away from the "laugh track" in theater. It is certainly easier to say, "They will like this, because they have seen and heard this all before, and we know what the response will be." We have become so beholden to a formula that includes recognizable titles and authors and familiar theatricalities that we are undervaluing the reasons audiences seek out the

theatre in the first place. My feeling (maybe naively so) is that we are not trusting ourselves for fear of failure -- both financial and artistic.

As I have yet again finished reading an honestly wonderful new play, I ask myself "why isn't this one being produced?" It's clear that the quality of this work is what we look for when

we say we are looking for the "next exciting play." The great success of the regional theatre movement in this country has brought us to a moment of an unparalleled number of productions on the American stage. So, why do so many theaters assume the fallback position of producing plays that they know will please their audiences? Shouldn't the opposite be true? We need to put plays out there that our audiences don't know and let them enjoy what we all enjoy when we read or see a workshop of a new play that excites us. That same excitement will translate to our audiences as it does to all of us who work on

MAKING GREAT PLAYS by Michele Volansky

I've spent a lot of time lately thinking about new plays. Not just because of the obvious – my relationship with PlayPenn – but because I'm feeling a little, well, antsy about new plays.

I don't think that I am saying anything revelatory when I say that theaters need to produce more new plays. Every playwright in America shares this opinion – often framed generally, but the real concern is "Why aren't they doing *my* play?!"

I've been on the "they" side of the aisle and I understand the tension in putting together a season. I know that it is *sometimes* difficult to market a new play, especially if it is by a relatively-unknown playwright (e.g. anyone other than Christopher Durang or Tom Stoppard). There is always a tricky balance of giving your audience something familiar (whether it is timely or is a known quantity – actor, director, playwright) and presenting something brand new. You don't want to produce the same thing year after year.

There is a part of me that wants to completely revamp the system of American theater, because it seems as though the subscription-driven, packaged way of producing just isn't serving the stories that people want to tell, in the ways that they want to be told.

At this moment, I don't have an answer. At this moment, I'd like to address why I am antsy about new plays. Beware: some sweeping generalizations may follow.

I am feeling a little frustrated because I feel as though playwrights are trying to write "to" some particular type of audience member, most significantly, an artistic director, director or literary manager. I'm not feeling heat. I'm not feeling passion. I'm not feeling, as I've

said for years, that you the playwright will *die* if you do not get this story out.

Perhaps it is a problem with our culture. I am a college professor and I have noticed that my students – some of my students – are afraid to take risks, to put themselves fully out there. There is a fear from the very, tippy-top that suggests that if you question, or if you try something even a bit different, there is a cost.

And so there is a tendency to play it safe. To not offend. To not criticize. To not question.

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No offending, not criticizing, not questioning makes, for me, bad art. And that *could* be a reason why they aren't doing your play.

One of things that I love about a great theater production is that everyone, from the protagonist to the fly-rail operator, is working without fear. Playwrights, more than anyone involved, need to work without fear. Fear in playwriting creates timid, average plays. Sure, some plays are *good*. But don't we need *great* plays? Don't we need to be reminded of how it feels to all be breathing the same tense, fraught, committed air?

No one has figured out (and for that I am thankful) the "secret" to creating a "hit" play. However, I would argue that the more you put yourself out there, the better off the play will be.

Michele Volansky is an Assistant Professor of Drama at Washington College and a freelance dramaturg based in Philadelphia. She is the co-author (with Bruce Graham) of THE COLLABORATIVE PLAYWRIGHT, published in March, 2007 by Heinemann Press. She most recently dramaturged Graham's DEX AND JULIE SIT-TIN' IN A TREE at the Arden Theatre Company and served as an advisor to MY NAME IS RACHEL CORRIE at Washington College.

WHAT ARE WE DOING? By Paul Meshejian

I've always been interested in what motivates producing theatres and development organizations to devote time, talent, energy and financial resources to the work of helping to bring new plays to our stages and to the literary canon of the American theatre. Now, it has become my principal occupation.

Some theatres want to develop work that reflects their own aesthetic and the relationship they have with their particular audience

Some theatres include the production of new work as a part of their season because government and private granting agencies offer project support for new play production – or because they want to attract the broadest possible audience, including those who prefer the new over the traditional.

Some theatres are simply committed to the idea that new plays are an exciting way to carry on a conversation with their audience in “the here and now” about ideas, issues and problems that confront the community in which they exist.

I have long believed that people who go to the theatre are interested in and engaged by the possibility of their own growth and the growth of their communities. Most audiences don't talk or even think about these things in a conscious way. But no one I have known speaks about the desire to narrow her or his world. So, if you are willing to accept the premise that people want to grow, however frightening to them that prospect might be, and that growth necessarily requires change, you must accept the notion that people are at least interested in change. There can be no growth without change. Each time we encounter something new, as manifest in the form of theatrical metaphor, we are presented with a possibility that such change might implant itself in the quotidian, as well as in the deepest part of ourselves.

It is always a lovely, embracing feeling to see our beliefs, mores and habits affirmed by having them reflected back at us from the stage. It is exhilarating to have those same beliefs, mores and habits challenged by encounters with the new. With few

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exceptions, theatre-goers are looking for exposure to something they have yet to encounter. Whether it be presented in the form of ideas yet considered, social worlds undiscovered, beautifully spun tales, characters of unusual constitution or simply an introduction to unique spectacle, our audiences are, at base, engaged in a process of personal and communal exploration and growth.

Lest you think I have forgotten the idea of entertainment as a primary aspect of all theatrical gesture, let me make clear that I believe it to be our first responsibility. Promoting and producing new work that is so esoteric or polemical as to confuse or alienate audiences is not part of my agenda.

Where I balk at the idea of entertainment as the holy grail of theatrical institutional policy is at the line that distinguishes true entertainment from amusement. The word ‘entertain’ has its roots in two words – *entre*, the French for ‘to hold or enter into’ and *tenir* ‘tension’. *To enter into a tension* with our audiences is, as theatre artists, that to which we all aspire.

To amuse our audiences is not, in itself, sacrilegious but it often results in an unfortunate patronizing of the very audiences that responded to our first organizational gestures that were, with almost no exceptions, rooted in a passionate desire to share evolving understandings of what it means to be alive and human and to share that humanity with others. We can “entertain” our audiences with stories that engage them in serious thought, healthy provocation, as well as with frivolous amusement. By the same token, there is no theatrical exercise that lacks the unfortunate potential to send our audiences home uttering the phrase “that was nice”. “That was nice” as a response to a theatrical experience is the mark that we are offering safe, expected and unchallenging fare – in short, that we are not doing our jobs.

And so, rather than present our audiences with what may be familiar, comfortable, value-affirming story-telling, PlayPenn and many organizations like PlayPenn are raising the flag of “the new” in the interest of embracing, engaging and challenging the audiences that we believe wait, with hunger, for what the next generations of writers have yet to offer.

Where Are They Now?



Gina Barnett (**A SCREAM**, 2006) will have her one act play **ALONE AT LAST** published by **Vintage Books** in an anthology of comic short plays entitled **Laugh Lines**.



Sheila Callaghan (**WE ARE NOT THESE HANDS** 2005), is currently being produced by **Catalyst Theatre Company** in Washington, D.C. and in Seattle by **Macha Monkey Productions** presenting the play's Northwest premier. And her play **SCAB** will be produced in Chicago in April. Her play **DEAD CITY** is a finalist for the **Susan Smith Blackburn Award**.



Jordan Harrison's play, **ACT A LADY** just opened in Portland, Oregon at **Portland Center Stage**. A Minneapolis production opened in late February at **Illusion Theater**, directed by PlayPenn alum Peter Rothstein (director, **ON CLARION**) An L.A. production is opening in March at **Sacred Fools Theater Company**. It has been published recently by **Playscripts.com**. In other news, Jordan has just spent time at the **Sundance Playwrights Retreat** in snowy Wyoming working on a new play about the history of typography. His play **AMAZONS AND THEIR MEN** is going to be at **Clubbed Thumb** in New York this summer. Perhaps the biggest news is that **DORIS TO DARLENE**, his newest play is going to be produced at **Playwrights Horizons** in December 2007.



Since PlayPenn 2006 **Eric Pfeffinger** (**MALIGNANCE**) has had his children's play **LOST AND FOUNDLING** picked up for publication by **Dramatic Publishing Company**. It will be produced next season by **Imagination Stage** in Bethesda, MD. His short play **TINY BABY** will be produced in May as part of Chicago's **2007 Estrogen Fest**. And his full-length play **ACCIDENTAL RAPTURE** recently received a staged reading at **Rattlestick Theatre** in New York City.

As reported in our first issue **JT Rogers** (PlayPenn 2005) after completing its four-month run at the National, **THE OVERWHELMING** finished its tour of the UK at the end of last year and was published by Faber and Faber. That production will air as a radio drama (adapted by Rogers) on the **BBC** in April. The play was one of three nominees for the **South Bank Show Award** for play of the year. As well, it has won the **Theatre Visions Award** for best play not yet produced in the US, and it has won the **William Inge Center for the Art's New Voices playwright award**. **THE OVERWHELMING** opens the **Roundabout's** season at the **Laura Pels Theatre** this fall, when a US trade paperback of the script will be published by **Faber and Faber**. His plays **WHITE PEOPLE** and **MADAGASCAR** have just been published by **Dramatists Play Service**; **WHITE PEOPLE** opens at **New Rep in Boston** on March 10th. This spring he will be working on a new play, **commissioned by the National Theatre**, while in residence both at the **MacDowell Colony** and at the **Salt Lake Acting Company**. In May he will teach a master class at **Northwestern's MFA writing program**.



Lydia Stryk (**ON CLARION**, 2005) recently had a workshop of her play **AMERICAN TET** in London with **Greta Scaachi**. This past November her new play **GHOST MALL** was workshopped, at the **William Inge Center for the Arts** where she was a playwright in residence. She has been commissioned to write a new play by the **Geva Theatre**.



Lucy Thurber (**SCARCITY**, 2006) recently opened her play **STAY** at **Rattlestick Theatre** in New York with PlayPenn alum Maggie Siff as a part of the cast. Lucy's play **BOTTOM OF THE WORLD**, will be workshopped with **Women's Expressive Theater** with PlayPenn alum Brian Mertes directing. This summer she will be playwright in residence at the **Orchard Project**.

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these plays. If we don't adhere to our convictions in the importance of quality new work, then what are we achieving in the end but a reaffirmation of what we, and they, already know. By adhering to the status quo in play selection and production, we are continuing to make the theater outdated and irrelevant.

An interesting anecdote comes from an instance where a major regional theater for which I was working became concerned that it needed to become more "conservative" in its programming so that subscribers and single ticket buyers would not be alienated by work that was not familiar to them. After assessing the past three years of programming, surprisingly three new plays had outdrawn audience over easily recognizable plays and playwrights that are the staple of most regional theater seasons. It is the *perception* that the new works were not as highly in demand that should concern us here. It was taken for granted that the new plays lost audiences and therefore revenue, and that the "classics" were better received. I think that this is the real lesson to be learned: we are underestimating the power of new and challenging work, whereas other forms of entertainment such as film actually thrive on the unexpected works that audiences discover and that ultimately set the trend for what will be produced in the future.

The American theater and its playwrights are thriving, however the regional theater has lost its way, and consequently its purpose, when it accepts the notion that play selection is based on sustaining a status quo in lieu of engaging in a provocative open communication with its audiences. Plays that engage rather than en-

courage the status quo are alive and well, and our theater will continue to thrive if our regional theaters make a concerted effort to support this work.

There are many great new play festivals throughout the country and this seems to be where the action is. I participate in these festivals and see many compelling works at these events. Usually one play makes its way to the top of the pile as "the hit of the festival," presumably from validation of the critics and "popularity" in terms of broad audience response, but all too often it is the end of the line for the rest of these new works.

With regard to classical texts, and to my mind contemporary plays as well, Richard Pettengill was quoted as saying in a recent issue of *Theatre Research International* that "Theatre by artists of undeniable consequence that undertakes a fresh approach to a familiar piece is to me far preferable, even when it stumbles, than average, workaday, predictable, consumer-driven work. This is the work that matters, for it pushes us, often uncomfortably, toward perspectives we could not ourselves have imagined." I concur wholeheartedly. Now, how do we make this happen more consistently and more often?

Rick DesRochers has been the Literary Director for both The Joseph Papp Public Theater in New York City, and The Goodman Theatre in Chicago. He is a freelance director and dramaturg having worked at theatres across the country including PlayPenn of Philadelphia, The Playwrights' Center of Minneapolis, and the New York Musical Theatre Festival. Mr. DesRochers is currently an assistant professor of theatre at Long Island University at CW Post.

See you in Philly!

SAVE THESE DATES:

PlayPenn Conference: July 9-22

Play Readings: July 19-22