

Birthing of a Play Colorado Playwrights Festival



P.J. by Mark McQuown

Mother's Nature by Priscilla Waggoner.

by Bill Smith

Playwriting Colorado-style, judging by the recent proliferation of writers' workshops, readings and premieres, is clearly in the limelight. Out of the Changing Scene, the Denver Theatre Project and other performing groups committed to staging new plays, audiences may be witnessing the seminal works of a host of gifted voices—the new playwrights of the 80s and 90s. Three of those dramatists are having world premieres of their creative labors mounted at the Littleton Town Hall Arts Center, as part of the Colorado Playwrights Festival.

A unique production collaboration of the Denver Public Theatre, the Performer's Guild and the one-year-old Town Hall Arts Center, the festival's plays include *Willow Winds* by Manuel Gomez, P.J. by Mark McQuown and *Mother's Nature* by Priscilla Waggoner. The three productions were chosen from more than 30 manuscripts submitted by Colorado playwrights in response to a playwrights' competition conducted last March. Underwriting by the Colorado Council on the Arts and Humanities and Ogpre, Inc., a Colorado Developer, has enabled the festival organizers to offer audiences and playwrights some extra added attractions.

A staged reading—actors performing with scripts and without elaborate sets or costumes—is what most promising playwrights can expect if their plays are accepted at the Eugene O'Neill or Aspen Playwrights' Conference. But writers Gomez, McQuown and Waggoner, each the recipient of a \$1,000 honorarium, have the support of top flight directors, designers and actors for full-scale productions.

Additionally, audiences are invited to participate in lectures, seminars, open rehearsals and post-performance symposiums with directors, playwrights and casts. Theatre-goers can give opinions and examine the production process from start to finish.

Even the local theatre critics are getting into the act. Alan Stern of the Denver Post, Jackie Campbell of the Rocky Mountain News and Westwood's Juliet Wittman, along with the three festival producers formed the advisory panel which selected the winning plays.

"I was wowed well-written plays that dealt with interesting subject matter," says Stern, adding that some plays with strong literary

merit were discarded because they dealt with subjects already explored by established playwrights.

Besides originality, says Ken Foster, Director of the Town Hall Arts Center, producibility was another key factor in determining the finalists. A limited production budget, a small theatre seating 285 people and a house which admittedly has "some tech problems" were factors which warranted plays with small casts and reasonable technical requirements. Yet, admits Foster, some nice playwrights, high on vision and low on pragmatic experience, submitted plays that would have exceeded the festival's production scope.

After initial screening and interviews with the semi-finalists, five plays topped the list; three were chosen for production. Two plays—*Suds* by Richard Sharp and *Back in the World* by Sue Furze and Jeanne Mulcahy—received honorable mentions. At that point, each of the three critics were assigned the role of dramaturg for a selected play.

While the term dramaturg is defined as an expert in dramatic composition, the critics note that it has come to mean anything from a play reader (one who selects plays for production at a theatre and helps directors to interpret plays) to a play doctor to a playwright's advocate.

Alan Stern favors the explanation for the term used by Michael Feingold, critic for the Village Voice: "A dramaturg is the in-house critic, as opposed to the reviewer who is the out-house critic."

Jackie Campbell explains that her feedback to Mark McQuown (author of P.J.) focused on correcting anachronisms, unclear references and literary errors. "I saw myself as a representative audience, asking what the audience going to think, what are they not going to understand." She adds that the rehearsal period can be devastating to the playwright-in-residence, as months of painstakingly conceived images and text are disseminated and transformed by actors and director. "The playwright is under siege. The dramaturg, as a writer, has sympathy with the author, and also a desire to see the whole production go."

Priscilla Waggoner found Alan Stern's suggestions of *Mother's Nature* to be extremely helpful. "Having someone who has not lived and died with the script for the last year, a fresh perspective who could see a dress rehearsal, say that didn't work, you are repeating yourself, it didn't

mean anything," those comments helped with the rewriting of the script.

Nonetheless, Waggoner, like all writers, felt very protective of her work, which deals with three sisters living on an Oklahoma farm during the Depression dust bowl. Response was favorable to the second and third acts which show how the sisters' lives are disrupted when a stranger crosses their lives. But Stern suggested that the first act would flow better if four pages were cut. "I didn't agree with him until opening night," she says. "When I saw it, I realized he was right."

Waggoner describes herself as the "blonde in the corner of the lobby who has no fingernails left" but she is better recognized as the author of the critically acclaimed one-act, *Big Sky* which won the Best Original Script Award earlier this year at the American Festival of Community Theatre.

Willow Winds underwent extensive changes after discussions author Michael Gomez had with dramaturg Juliet Wittman and director Dan Heiser. "One character was eliminated and three were added during five script overhauls. I received a four-year course in theatre in three months, gaining insight into the process of marrying lines to actors," says Gomez, a retired engineer with no previous theatre experience. With a background as a published poet, he chose to stylize the play—set in the civil war turmoil of El Salvador—with dialogue containing lyricism and poetry. The story focuses on two clergymen and their relationship with an adopted son who now is at odds with the humanitarian concepts prescribed by his former mentors.

During rehearsals, Gomez understood the necessity of finding literary and structural ways to increase character tension. "We flushed out the bare bones of pure innocence of each character," he says. "Now, we have human symbols who will speak to the cause and the people."

Of opening night, Gomez says, "It was gratifying to me that we had a full house and that the audience reaction was favorable." But he admits experiencing real writer's angst when an actor accidentally set a small, persistent fire on stage. "As a playwright sitting in the front row, there is a tremendous urge to go over and put it out."

Previously unknown to local theatre critics, Gomez was surely a "find" for the festival. The dramaturgs and producers

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