




Dramatists Guild
of America 

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REGIONAL REPORT | Washington, DC
By Callie Kimball

Hello good people! Co-rep Rich Amada and I are taking turns with this column. Lots of juicy news, so I'll get right to it! As I mentioned before, DC is a great place to self-produce. This time I'm focusing on outfits devoted to new plays.

Yesterday I joined about 20 people at H Street Playhouse to discuss dramaturgy in American contemporary theatre. The event was hosted by Inkwell (inkwell.org), a new organization that invests "time, energy, and expertise into a playwright's unique perspective on playmaking, providing multiple opportunities to develop new work through staged readings, open rehearsals, inventive 'happenings,' and bare bones productions with the goal of putting raw plays on their feet and in front of audiences." (N.B.: they also compensate playwrights.) Centerstage Resident Dramaturg Gavin Witt, former Woolly Mammoth Director of New Play Development Mary Resing, and freelance dramaturg Otis Ramsey-Zöe were on the panel, which was moderated by Inkwell Artistic Director Jessica Burgess. Ramsey-Zöe offered sound advice, "Be wary of anyone who reads your play and immediately tells you what it's about without first asking questions." He maintains that listening is the first job of the dramaturg, a sentiment that the other panelists echoed. He similarly asks that the playwright separate their ego from their play and engage with the text on its own terms.

Resing had the following caveat, borne from what one can only assume are her many years spent at DC's leading theatre for new plays: "When directors become dramaturgs, productions become boring. Without a dramaturg, directors often don't direct new plays, they try to fix them." This clarification prompted a question from me at the end of the session about the villainization of the dramaturg—I asked what their response was to charges that they were accessory to an institutional co-opting of the playwright's process. They all wanted to know who these people were that were giving dramaturgs a bad name so they could be held accountable. To this, Witt added a sentiment I share, that ultimately playwrights have to take responsibility for their process: "I don't want it to sound as if it is only playwrights' fault that the process might go awry, or that some have not been already responsible; merely, that it is in their/your power to take that responsibility." I took from this panel the confirmation that we should be working to find and

connect with the theatres and directors who “get” our work, to strengthen our ability to separate our ego from our play, and to communicate our needs clearly.

I attended an organizational meeting for Artists’ Bloc (artistsbloc.org) led by co-founders Roy A. Gross and Colin Hovde. Their mission is “to support and challenge the creative process by encouraging cross disciplinary collaboration in the creation and development of new works.” The gathering was at the shiny new Atlas Performing Arts Center. Artists’ Bloc is still in its nascent stages, and they have intriguing items on their agenda: 12x6, a bi-monthly informal showing of 12 minutes of developing work by 6 local artists; support for site-specific work; and Drive-By: “Hit and run art on an unsuspecting public.” The founders’ energy and idealism is seemingly limitless. I’m curious to see who takes advantage of what Artists’ Bloc is offering: a platform on which freelance artists can develop their own work on their own terms while enjoying the benefit of identifying with a group. (There is a \$20 membership fee starting in 2009.)

You may have heard of Extreme Exchange (extremeexchange.wordpress.com), a nomadic, politically inclined theatre that features local artists. It was founded in 2004 and is run by Ben Fishman, Betsy Rosen, Charles Phaneuf, Hannah Hessel, Gwen Grastorf, and Rachel Grossman. Extreme Exchange’s mission is to “engage audiences and artists in a dialogue about current political and social issues through the presentation and discussion of live theatre.” In X-Play, local playwrights write short plays about topics that are politically current. (Interested playwrights should email extremeexchange@gmail.com. Note: there is no compensation.) The most recent X-Play at Woolly Mammoth featured plays that were based on presidential candidates, and there was a lively post-show discussion with around 100 audience members.

DC is fortunate to have quite a few theatres with established records of producing new plays, including Charter Theatre (chartertheatre.org) and Woolly Mammoth (woollymammoth.net). Charter focuses especially on local playwrights. Renee Calarco, who won last year’s MacArthur Award for Outstanding New Play for their production of *SHORT ORDER STORIES*, describes Charter’s mission: “To nurture and support both emerging and established playwrights by developing their work through readings, workshops and productions,” adding, “One of the great things about Charter is that new plays are produced and not developed to death.”

Woolly Mammoth is one of the more aggressively accessible theatres when it comes to supporting emerging artists. They’re always offering up their space for various upstart happenings, and Howard Shalwitz is one of the more visible Artistic Directors in audiences around town. I was fortunate enough to be invited to National New Play Network’s (nnpn.org) National Showcase of New Plays, hosted by Woolly. I thought I’d just be popping in and out of readings over the weekend, but I found myself talking with the most passionate, generous, open-minded lovers of new plays during the breaks and over drinks and whatnot. I also found myself being given lots of business cards and being asked to submit my work, which I am horrible at doing.

I am by nature a skeptic. Out of all the new play goodness I describe above, the only cons I can suss out are the ones playwrights know all too well—that if you’re not discerning, you can find yourself bolstering an institution’s grant-application credentials and hipness factor (look at us, we’re edgy because we do new plays!) while not making a dime. We should seek out

opportunities that truly benefit us and our work, whether it's through royalties, marketing traction, or—the pot of gold—through refinement of our work through meaningful development and artistic collaboration.

In my last column I reported on DC Fringe while nostalgically pining for the defunct Source Festival. Well, you've probably heard Source is back! I was thrilled to hear the Festival (sourcedc.org) was being resuscitated, but was dismayed to learn they were charging playwrights to submit. This prompted some letter-writing from local playwrights (including yours truly), and Producer Jeremy Skidmore eliminated the fee. This encouraging change of heart was accomplished with the diplomatic touch of Gary Garrison and with material support via Gregg Henry from the Kennedy Center.

Now I'm off to rehearse a Mozart operetta I translated and adapted that opens next week at the Atlas. There's just so much to do here in DC!