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Great Plains of Theatre

A regional theater gathering on the climb

by Leo Adam Biga

The May 29-June 5 Great Plains Theatre Conference concentrates intensely on on the playwriting craft, and connects the local theater community with emerging playwrights from around the country and major New York theater figures. Both insiders' confab and public festival, it is designed for enthusiasts.

Metropolitan Community College hosts the event. Area theater companies stage works; local arts/cultural organizations serve as guest sites. Metro's president emerita, Jo Ann McDowell, founded the conference five years ago. Her three decades overseeing major American theater conferences nationwide are being recognized this year.

Creative director Kevin Lawler said a sign of the annual event's maturity is the consistent quality and record number of plays, more than 300, submitted for readings.

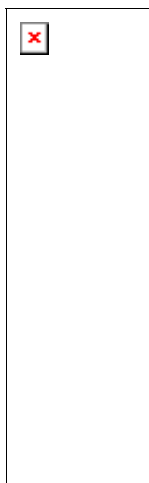
Two featured plays have strong Omaha ties. Native Monica Bauer's *My Occasion of Sin* is a drama inspired by her taking music lessons from the late Luigi Waites in 1960s South Omaha. That straightforward contract between the white Bauer and the black Waites became a social action in a time and place beset by racial tension. One-time Omahan Mary Kathryn Nagle's *Waaxe's Law* charts the story of Chief Standing Bear's historic trial at Fort Omaha. Lawler provided notes during Nagle's extensive rewriting process and helped secure grant funding for multiple performances.

Lawler, a co-founder of the Blue Barn Theatre, said he, conference organizers and patrons want the GPTC to be "one of the top theater gatherings in the country." He said earlier this year he attended "the godfather" of theater fests, the Humana Festival of New American Plays in Louisville, Ky., and while admittedly biased, he feels the GPTC offers "more interaction, connection and chance to actually work on theater."

The Omaha conference is a mix of panels, workshops, laboratories, staged productions, performances and presentations. Depending on what you attend, the goings-on can lean more towards academic or artistic or entertainment; the plays can range from rough works-in-progress to polished gems; the playwrights from obscure to prominent.

This year's honored playwright is Pulitzer Prize-winner David Lindsay-Abaire, whose acclaimed *Rabbit Hole* and *Fuddy Meers* will be performed by the Brigit Saint Brigit and Blue Barn, respectively, at Creighton University's Lied Education Center for the Arts. Playwright, director and theorist Erik Ehn, head of the playwriting program at Brown University, will have his *Radio Elephant* performed at Kaneko. Playwright Constance Congdon's *Dark Bridge Mountain* will have its world premiere there.

Play lab readings provide a behind-the-scenes glimpse into script development. Authors get immediate feedback from respondents and can respond in kind. It's a privileged listening-in to the dynamics of a play's



journey from page to stage, making audiences even more a part of the theater experience. Some crosstalk between playwrights happens privately. However it happens, and regardless of whether playwrights are celebrated figures, the exchange is valued.

"Writing can be such a solitary endeavor," Lindsay-Abaire wrote in an email: "We spend hours of our days hunkered down in our writer-caves, alone, staring at our screens, trying to sort out story and character. That can be wonderful, but it can also be terribly isolating. Which is why it's so invaluable to have gatherings like the GPTC, where playwrights can lumber out of their hibernation to come together and interact, engage with each other, debate, lament, provoke, commiserate and inspire one another ... And when it's all over, we'll all head back into our caves, knowing that we've stored up enough inspiration and fellowship to sustain us through the long winter ahead."

Bauer said she's open to whatever feedback she gets: "Getting responses from other playwrights, as well as just plain folks, is an important part of the process." Nagle said, "I guess I just never thought this would be possible. It's a dream, so to speak."

Lindsay-Abaire's attended his share of theater gatherings. He said his "fondest experiences" always involve the conversations more than the Q&As. As a young playwright he hung out with the likes of August Wilson and Edward Albee "chatting about writing" as if he were a peer. Now that he's on the other side of things, he said, "I will certainly answer whatever question comes my way ... but ... I feel like I have as much to learn from the conference as anyone else."

Another New York theater scene stalwart, director and playwright Kip Fagan, who got his start at Omaha's Blue Barn, is coming to direct and teach. He said, "It's a rich community where I live, but no matter how rich or varied, it's always clarifying and energy-generating to meet in different territory with people from outside your tribe." He senses the GPTC is getting better known in New York: "The caliber of playwrights it honors and the quality of guest artists it brings in is instrumental in putting the conference 'on the map' ... " Lindsay-Abaire agrees the conference is "well regarded."

For schedule details visit mccneb.edu/theatreconference/ or call 457.2618.

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