

Omaha World-Herald

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Take stock of new plays The Great Plains Theatre Conference introduces works in staged readings and full productions.

New plays and playwrights are again at the heart of the Great Plains Theatre Conference, which opens Saturday on the Fort Omaha Campus of Metropolitan Community College and runs through May 30.

Now in its fourth year, the conference recognizes the works of renowned American playwrights, bringing them together with new and emerging writers. Veteran playwrights, professionals and academics critique the new plays.

The public can attend play readings and hear critiques each day, starting Sunday. Evening performances Tuesday through May 29 feature works by visiting guest artists.

Conference highlights:

Who's coming

Theresa Rebeck. This year's honored playwright's works have been widely produced, including "Bad Dates" and "Spike Heels." She was a finalist for the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for "Omnium Gatherum." The play, which she co-wrote with Alexandra Gersten Vassilaros, is about a post-9/11 dinner party. Rebeck's "Mauritius" ran on Broadway in 2007. This year will see two New York productions, for "The Understudy" and for "Our House," which began previews May 15 for a June opening. She has written extensively for television ("NYPD Blue," "Brooklyn Bridge," "L.A. Law," "Law & Order") and movies ("Catwoman," "Harriet the Spy," "Gossip"). She is working on a new HBO show, "Women's Studies," plus her second novel. She lives in New York City.

Constance Congdon wrote "Tales of the Lost Formicans," "Casanova," "Dog Opera" and, at American Conservatory Theater, "A Mother," starring Olympia Dukakis. She has written new versions of "The Misanthrope," "Tartuffe" and "The Imaginary Invalid," also for American Conservatory Theater. She has written seven plays for the Children's Theatre Company of Minneapolis and a number of opera libretti. She teaches at Amherst College in Massachusetts.

Mac Wellman's recent plays are "Bitter Bierce," "Jennie Richee" and "Anything's Dream." He has published two novels and two books of poems. He has won two Obie Awards for best off-Broadway play ("Bad Penny," "Crowbar" and "Terminal Hip" in 1990 and "Sincerity Forever" in 1991). He teaches at Brooklyn College.

Martha Boesing has written more than 40 produced plays. She was founder and artistic director at At the Foot of the Mountain theater in Minneapolis and was a company member of Minneapolis' Firehouse Theater. She lives in Oakland, Calif., and creates theater pieces for a street ministry in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco.

Evening events

All readings and productions are at 8 p.m., with audience talkbacks and receptions following. Tickets are \$10 Tuesday and Wednesday, \$15 May 28 and 29. The gala is \$50. For reservations, call the Omaha Community Playhouse box office, 553-0800.

Tuesday: Staged reading of "Take Me to the River" by Constance Congdon, Omaha Community Playhouse

Wednesday: Staged reading of "Bellagio" by Mac Wellman, playhouse

May 28: Evening of one-acts by Theresa Rebeck, Creighton University's Lied Education Center for the Arts

May 29: Fully staged production of "Loose Knit" by Rebeck, Creighton's Lied Center

May 30: Awards gala -- reception at 6:30 p.m., awards presentation at 7:30 p.m. -- on the Fort Omaha campus

The plays

Among the 56 plays chosen for the festival from a record 424 entries, five will be featured on the main stage for fuller treatment: "Say Prix Fixe" by Mark Donahue of Chicago; "Eating Into the Fabric" by Ivan Fuller of Sioux Falls, S.D.; "Inherited" by Halley Wegryn Gross of New York City; "Brecht in L.A." by Rick Mitchell of Northridge, Calif.; and "Charlie Moose Makes His Move" by Jessica Jill Turner of New York City.

Play-lab passes can be purchased for \$10 for one play or \$50 for a day pass, which includes lectures, roundtables, workshops and the evening performance. Purchase at the registration desk, Building 10 on the Fort Omaha campus, or online. For synopses of all the plays and a daily schedule of readings, see www.mccneb.edu/theatreconference.

Local writers

Among works being read in the daily play labs are 18 by Nebraska playwrights.

From Omaha: Benjamin Beck, Beaufield Berry, Benjamin Graber, Kendall Gray, Jack Loscutoff, Mary Nagle, Michael Oatman, Madeline Radcliff, Katie Spicka, Ellen Struve, J.B. Tyson, Christopher Villarreal, Molly Welsh and Andrew Yolland.

From elsewhere: Norman Simon and Rosalie Vetter of Lincoln, Brian Varvaro of Crete, Neb., and Leopold Kovar of Brainard, Neb.

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