

Theater

Graduates provide the scripts for Brown/Trinity Playwrights Rep

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By Channing Gray

Journal Arts Writer



Brown University theater Prof. Lowry Marshall, seen above in the Stuart Theatre at Brown, oversees the Brown/Trinity annual playwrights festival.

The Providence Journal / Sandor Bodo

For four summers now, Lowry Marshall has relied on her “little black book” to come up with talent for the Brown/Trinity Playwrights Repertory Theater. The annual festival just doesn’t have the staff and the wherewithal to conduct a national search for new plays, said Marshall, the Brown theater professor who oversees the event. So she calls on former students who are now making names for themselves.

“Over the years, having taught so many marvelous writers,” said Marshall, “it’s not hard to write to somebody and say, have you got a play for me this year or would you be willing to write one?”

So far, Marshall has managed to pick winners. Most all the plays seen at Brown in the past three summers have gone on to productions in theaters around the country.

Last summer’s *Boom* by Peter Nachtrieb, opened in March to glowing reviews at New York’s Ars Nova theater. Ben Brantley of the New York Times praised it for its “darkly funny dialogue,” and for “speaking, quietly and piquantly, to our enduring fascination with and need for myths about the beginning of life as well as its end.”

This summer promises to offer more winners.

The Playwrights Rep opens tomorrow with Andy Bragen’s *In Spite of the Devil*, a funny play about the serious relationship between a father and son, the son’s girlfriend and her lover.

“It’s sort of a love quadrangle,” said Marshall. “It explores a lot of interesting questions about the relationship between parents and children, between dependency and interdependency.

“It’s a very lyrical play that sort of goes from the ridiculous to the sublime. At times it’s poetic, at times outrageously funny. It’s a nice sort of rollercoaster in that way.”

Bragen is an award-winning playwright with an MFA from Brown.

Next up, on July 16 is Diana Fithian's *Girls on the Clock*, about three women working in reality television.

Marshall remembers Fithian as a very funny undergraduate at Brown, who went on to get a degree in screen writing from New York University. She later got a job in reality TV.

"I've been calling her for years telling her to send me a play," said Marshall, "and this year I told her this was the year. So she wrote one on deadline."

Marshall called *Girls on the Clock* an "evolving project" that's in its third rewrite.

"I think it's going to be a marvelous play," she said.

The third offering, which opens July 23, pairs two solo shows under the title *Painting/Eating*. Originally, the festival had planned to put on a new musical called *Café Bel Canto*, but that wasn't ready in time, and had to be scrapped at the last minute. Again, Marshall turned to two former students, who had prepared pieces for a course she teaches in solo performance.

Providence resident Zoe Chao's *Painting* is a mystery about an art heist, with vignettes from famous painters such as Picasso and art dealer Leo Castelli. It also includes the fictitious art thief and the person roped into stealing the painting, all acted out by Chao.

Rachel Caris' *Eating* is "one of the most outrageous pieces of theater I've ever seen," said Marshall.

"We've got to put warnings all over the place because if you can be offended you will be offended. It's got sexual situations, language issues, religious satire, you name it."

Eating is set in the 1950s and deals with a wacky family who takes up residence in a bomb shelter, said Marshall.

While this is the first time these plays have been produced, Marshall doesn't like to call the shows premieres. She prefers "developmental workshops." That way the playwrights can offer the premieres to more prestigious theaters in New York and elsewhere.

But, said Marshall, "We want people to understand they are getting first-rate performances."

Playwrights Rep draws on the talents of Brown alumni and graduate students in the Brown/Trinity Rep Consortium, as well as seasoned professionals.

"One of the things we are trying to get away from is being represented as student theater at Brown," she said. "We don't have any current undergraduates in shows."

The playwrights spend six weeks at Brown attending rehearsals and refining their texts.

Each play runs for about a week, then on Aug. 2 all three plays will be seen together during a day-long festival. Ticket prices went up this year from \$10 to \$12 (\$10 for seniors, \$5 for students), which is still cheap, said Marshall. She said she often wonders if the low price doesn't work against the theater, because "people think if you can see a play for \$12 it can't be that good."

"But, of course, what they find is that the quality is very high. It's the best bargain in New England."

Performances have been ^{Obitu} this summer from the Leeds Theatre to the Stuart Theatre, 77 Waterman St. Call (401) 863-2838 or log on to www.brown.edu/btprep.

cgray@projo.com