

SUNDANCE ON STAGE

Producing Artistic Director Philip Himberg: “This is a way to take plays to the next level.”

By Laura Hitchcock

THE NEW PLAY DEVELOPMENT SCENE in Los Angeles has dimmed since the demise of the Audrey Skirball Kenis Theatre Projects and the long-time development labs at the Center Theatre Group.

Light is flickering on the horizon from the expanding Sundance Institute Theatre Program under the direction of Producing Artistic Director Philip Himberg who, from SITP’s LA headquarters, has begun an outreach program to Sundance writers and finalists. Though not specifically LA-oriented, projects may be read here and local artists utilized.

“We recently began to understand, since we have our creative and administrative offices here, that we want to reach out to the local community to support Los Angeles-based writers,” says Himberg, a slim intense man with a passion for plays. On Nov. 30, *A Jerusalem Between Us* by Bay Area writer Aaron Davidman was given a reading at The Stage in Santa Monica. Further spreading his own LA wings, Himberg will direct *Flora, the Red Menace* for Reprise! on the UCLA campus in May.

Sundance has also drawn on southern California talent, including Gordon Davidson, Founding Artistic Director of the Center Theatre Group, who was one of four creative advisers over the last two Summer Laboratories, and playwright Naomi Iizuka, who has labbed two plays there, including *36 Views* which has been produced at New York’s Public Theatre, Berkeley Repertory Theatre and Laguna Playhouse, among others.

Since 1997 Himberg has helmed SITP which was founded by actor/director Robert Redford as the Sundance Theatre Laboratory in 1983 and modeled after the Eugene O’Neill Theatre Center’s National Playwrights Conference, though there are significant differences between the two programs. Himberg, whose energy fuels not only programs but spin-off programs, is excited by what Sundance has produced and where it is going.

The Theatre Program now runs neck-to-neck with its famous film siblings at the Sundance



Philip Himberg

Institute. Among plays nominated or winning Tonys, Obies, and Pulitzers are *I Am My Own Wife*, *The Light in the Piazza*, *Grey Gardens*, *Spring Awakening*, *Angels in America* and *The Kentucky Cycle*.

SITP receives 700 plays a year, of which Himberg reads about 100 personally. With his reading staff of writers, actors and dramaturgs, he winnows them down to seven or eight which are developed at the three-week Summer Laboratory in Sundance, Utah. About a month before the Lab begins, each playwright has a one or two day Pre-Lab Dramaturgy meeting with the director and dramaturg who will work with him or her on the play.

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Charlayne Woodard and Gordon Davidson

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At the Lab, the playwright alternates solitary writing days with days of development work using actors, director and dramaturg, thus absorbing and building on their input. Unlike the O’Neill, Sundance, which is not a producing organization, has no outside audiences.

“I essentially wrote my new play *Ghostwritten* at Sundance last summer,” says Iizuka, who is the new head of the playwriting program at UC San Diego. “They took a chance! I only had the first 15 pages but they said come, and I left with 90 pages. The amount of writing I was able to do was phenomenal. Sundance provided a structure and ecosystem in which I could write and see my work, supported at every level. That’s hard to do and they do it well. The actors are gifted and astute dramaturgically and the rehearsal space feels like a room of friends. A lot of creative energy is marshaled around the play.”

Iizuka particularly credits her long-time director Lisa Portes and Irish writer/dramaturg Jocelyn Clarke. “He was my muse. It would be a different play without him,” she says. Not the least

aspect of the ecosystem is Sundance’s flexibility in accommodating families, including Iizuka’s one-year old child and her director’s two small children.

The Final Presentation occurs during the Lab’s last week and is attended by distinguished creative advisers who bring experience in development and presentation from some of the world’s outstanding theatres. This year the four included Davidson; Emily Mann, Director of New Jersey’s McCarter Theatre; Dominic Cooke, Artistic Director of the Royal Court in London; and Charlayne Woodard, actress, playwright and now Sundance board member.

Davidson feels Sundance provides a healthy creative atmosphere which services the playwright, as opposed to showcasing plays, and notes four of the eight plays he first saw were so good he would have continued to develop them. He is intrigued by plays that demand something of him.

“I give better notes when there’s something going on that challenges me,” he says. “Although some playwrights don’t want to work in develop-

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ment but just put it on, I haven't met one who doesn't actually benefit from it.” He commends actors at Sundance who work as “servants of the text” rather than focusing on making their own mark. “I try to talk to writers informally,” he says. His touchstones are skill, technique and, most important, “what they have to say.”

A Post-Lab Dramaturgy session is also available. If the playwright has a new draft, Sundance will provide a dramaturg. Iizuka took advantage of that immediately, utilizing a long-distance call from Jocelyn Clarke in Ireland to talk about the play for an hour.

Not every new play is ready for actors but Sundance is. They have established a Playwrights Retreat at Ucross, Wyoming, in collaboration with the Ucross Foundation. Five playwrights and one theatre composer are invited to this serene and beautiful facility to work with a dramaturg on the early stages of their work. Both emerging and established artists are invited to Ucross, now in its tenth year, but “invited” is the key word here. There is no submission process for Ucross or for the Sundance Theatre Lab in White Oak, Florida.

White Oak, now in its sixth year collaborating with the Howard Gilman Foundation, supports two plays each season, a musical and an ensemble piece which are individually cast and rehearse daily. Projects supported here include Mabou Mines' *Song for New York* and *Grey Gardens*. This season White Oak will lab *Sucked Up Fairytales*, a musical by Kristen Childs, and *DRC: Or How I Learned to Act in Seven Steps*, an ensemble production from the Mitu Company, directed by Ruben Polendo.

Himberg's address to the American Theatre Critics convention this year included a selection from Scott Frankel's new musical *Doll*, sung by Brent Barrett, currently “The Phantom” in the Las Vegas spectacular. Apparently fascinated by gothic subjects Frankel, who won Tony and Drama Desk Awards for *Grey Gardens*, has created a haunting score for this story of artist Oscar Kokoschka who was so obsessed by Alma Mahler,

mistress of many artists, he created a life-size doll in her image which he escorted to theatres and restaurants in turn-of-the-century Vienna.

“It's intriguing,” says Himberg, “and problematic.” He stresses not everything that goes through the Sundance process is finished. This year the Institute has begun a Second Stage in New York

created in response to writers' requests for additional support for plays that weren't yet ready for production. In November two staged readings were held at the Public Theatre by Sundance alumnae: *Marie Antoinette* by David Adjmi and *...And Jesus Moonwalks The Mississippi* by Marcus Gardley. “This is a way to take plays to the next level,” says Himberg, “and we're very excited about it.” Creative advisors included Oskar Eustis, the Public's Artistic Director, and playwright Lynn Nottage, Sundance alumna and recent winner of the McArthur Genius grant.

Among the future projects he is designing for Sundance are a mini-lab in Chicago for the theatres there and the continued International Initiative which, over the past six years, has worked with creative partners in Eastern Europe and East Africa.

Last summer writer/performers Kenneth Kimuli of Kampala, Uganda, and Mumbi Mwangi of Nairobi partici-

pated in the Utah lab, taking meetings with solo performer Charlayne Woodard. Sundance plans to sponsor a 10-day workshop in Kampala in 2008 whose goal is to create productions which would perform at schools and festivals in Uganda, offering workshops under African leadership.

Himberg says proudly, “85% of Sundance plays are produced within two years.” Two of the seven plays in 2007 have productions scheduled and two more are going on to workshops at other theatres.

“I'm grateful to Sundance for many reasons,” says Iizuka, “the ability to write, their generosity in accommodating families, the bringing together of artists who have worked together for a long time with new artists. It's a tremendous constellation!” ■



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