

For the Love of the Game

A monthly playwriting exercise in the Bay Area is getting its writers noticed.



BY SAM HURWITT

ZABRINA TIPPON

From left, Sung Min Park, Chad Deverman, Craig Marker and Kate Del Castillo in Aaron Loeb's *First Person Shooter* at SF Playhouse in 2007.

IT'S FIVE O'CLOCK ON A RAINY MONDAY, AND the playwrights are restless. They squeeze through the doors to greet the directors and actors already milling around the lobby of Berkeley Repertory Theatre. Brady Lea is especially frazzled, having spent the weekend laboring over a full-length commission that was due today to PlayGround, the San Francisco theatre company that puts on the evening of short staged readings due to take place here in a few hours. A few days ago, Lea's short play submission was chosen for this evening's lineup, and she and her peers have come to meet their respective actors and directors for a quickie rehearsal.

"I think they just picked mine so I have to show up and can't play it off like I'm sick," Lea says, only half-joking.

"I've got the dreaded opening slot," groans playwright Aaron Loeb. "Mine is the one that's so bad you need five other plays to recover from it."

Within minutes it's a frenzy of activity. Six short plays are being rehearsed simultaneously in every available corner of the Berkeley Rep lobby. Two actors recite lines from Nima Aghdam's melancholy fantasy about an out-of-body conversation between Chet Baker and Miles Davis, while on the other end of the room, a quartet of actors playing two characters stuck in a loop in Loeb's play practice exiting one side of the stage and entering on the other. Just above them on the upstairs level, performers slink around as philosophical tigers in Mark Routhier's piece, while Carolina Rojas Moretti's actors swirl around each other making whooshing sounds.

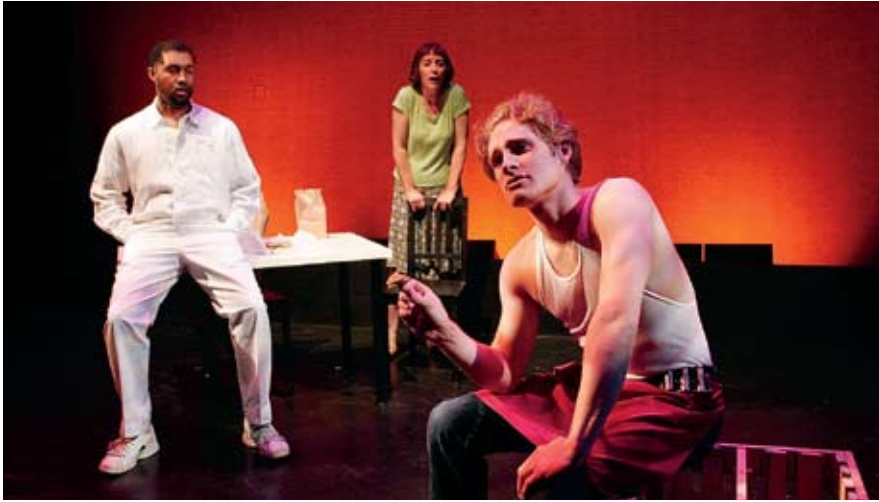
The playwrights, actors and directors have just 90 min-

utes to rehearse the shorts, each 10 pages (and theoretically 10 minutes) long, then rush off for tech in the theatre proper before the audience wanders in for a pre-show discussion.

Founded in 1994 at San Francisco State by Jim Kleinmann, Brighde Mullins and Denise Shama, PlayGround uses what's essentially a theatre game to develop the chops, portfolio and profile of emerging playwrights. Applications are accepted over the summer for 36 spots in the company's writers pool. Each month this pool is given a topic on a Friday (e.g., "star-crossed lovers"), with five days to write a short play, six of which are chosen for the following Monday Night PlayGround at Berkeley Rep. The shorts are cast by associate director Annie Stuart from a burgeoning pool of professional actors and directors—often ones well-connected enough that getting them to know the playwrights' work is an end in itself. From inspiration to fruition, the process takes 10 days.

This particular February Monday is complicated further by PlayGround's collaboration with the Mathematical Sciences Research Institute. Once a year the mathematicians suggest a topic for the playwrights to tackle. It's usually something that could be taken in a conventional way ("zero-sum game," "strange attractor," or this week's concept, "one-sidedness"), but there's an optional field trip to MSRI in the Berkeley hills for a lecture on what the concept means to mathematicians.

After six of these Monday Night PlayGrounds (from October through March), 7 out of 36 plays are selected as Emerging Playwright Award winners to be included in the Best of PlayGround Festival, the next of which will be held May



TOM HAUCK

From left, Dion Graham, Julia Brothers and Craig Marker in the 10-minute version of Brady Lea's *Mushroom Boy*, at the Best of PlayGround Festival in 2005.

7–31 at San Francisco's Thick House. Each year the company publishes these selected shorts in a *Best of PlayGround* anthology, and it has partnered with KQED to produce some of them as audio podcasts.

BETWEEN THE EVENINGS OF SHORTS, the festival unveils staged readings of five commissioned full-length works. Since 2002, PlayGround has offered two first-time commissions each year to writers in the festival: the June Anne Baker Prize, given to a female playwright who represents "a gifted new comedic or political voice," and the gender-neutral PlayGround Fellowship.

This year's June Baker play is *Postgrad (or the Odyssey Years)* by Lauren Yee, who is in her second season in the PlayGround writers pool. Yee started the San Francisco Young Playwrights Festival while studying playwriting at Yale, and last year she won a Dramatists Guild Fellowship. Her pre-existing comedy *Ching Chong Chinaman* was mounted by Berkeley's Impact Theatre last fall and Minneapolis's Mu Performing Arts Center this past February.

Another Yale playwright, Molly Rhodes, joined the pool in 2005 after she moved to San Francisco in search of playwriting opportunities. Her 2007 PlayGround Fellowship commission, *The Singularity of We*, was inspired by the MSRI collaboration. Rhodes has had shorts performed in American Conservatory Theater's David Mamet writing contest, the Bay Area Playwrights Festival and the 6 Women Play Festival, and last month had her first professional full-length premiere, *For All the Babies' Fathers*, at Brava! for Women in the Arts.

Not all PlayGround commissionees had a body of work before coming to the program. So in 2006 the company added three alumni commissions to the mix, to give playwrights a chance to follow up with second or third full-length PlayGround scripts.

"We've awarded 22 full-length play commissions, and there are 14 writers who

have received one or more," reports company co-founder and artistic director Jim Kleinmann. "The Monday Night series and the festival certainly get writers to a level of *our* awareness, but in order to bring them to a regional awareness they've got to have a body of full-length work, and the commissioning program is critical to that."

Case in point: Aaron Loeb's first commission, *First Person Shooter*, was a hit last season for SF Playhouse in a co-production with PlayGround. The play was Loeb's first professional production, and it has gone on to stagings at Capital Stage in Sacramento and City Lights Theater Company in San Jose. His second commission, *Abraham Lincoln's Big Gay Dance Party*, premiered at SF Playhouse in December.

Other PlayGround commissions that have gone on to full productions include Garret Jon Groenveld's *Missives*, which premiered at SF's Theatre Rhinoceros in 2005 and played last year at 59E59 Theaters in New York, with PlayGround aboard as one of several co-producers. The 2004 commissions *Tenders in the Fog* by Trevor Allen and *Manumission* by Martha Soukup went on to 2005 premieres at

San Jose Stage Company and San Francisco's Cassandra's Call Productions at Exit Theatre, respectively. Geetha Reddy's *Safe House* was selected for the Playwrights Foundation's 2008 Bay Area Playwrights Festival, and she and Loeb are co-writing *Blastosphere!* for Berkeley's Central Works this October.

"The difference between PlayGround and a lot of companies that might commission is that we have no current aspirations to produce the work ourselves," Kleinmann says. "We have created incredible relationships within the local theatre community—primarily, I think, because we're not seen as competition. We're seen as a feeder institution that ultimately makes the Bay Area more attractive for writers in general and makes it easier for theatres to commit to producing new work by an unknown writer."

ALTHOUGH THE INFUSION OF FRESH blood is vital to the pool (not to mention the commissioning structure), many playwrights participate year after year, and that's very much by design. At first there was no writers pool. A topic was announced, and anyone who heard about it could submit a play.



Martha Soukup's *Manumission*, staged by Cassandra's Call Productions at Exit Theatre in 2005.

"A writer could have participated in a Monday night, gotten a play selected and made it into the festival that year, and that was the only time they ever considered themselves a playwright," Kleinmann recalls. "We felt that's not what we're really committed to."

"When we commission a playwright, they have to submit a proposal of three to five different plays that they have an interest in writing," says Stuart. "Sometimes they take

one of the short plays that they wrote and say, 'I really want to explore this.' Evelyn Pine's play this year is about the Lumière brothers. She wrote a 10-page play as a submission one month, three or four years ago. It was probably the best play written that month, but we could not produce it because it was so visual. We all felt terrible, because it was so gorgeous. So when Evy proposed it as a full-length, we jumped on it."

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Pine's *Terror*, *Astonishment*, *Love* will play alongside full-length works by two other PlayGround commission alumni: Trevor Allen's *Lolita Roadtrip* and Brady Lea's *Mushroom Boy*. The latter is adapted from Lea's one-act of the same name from the 2005 festival, about a woman whose turkey sandwich talks to her. Lea's director for the work-in-progress, former Magic Theatre artistic director Chris Smith, also staged the first reading of her original short.

Likewise, Daniel Heath is working on this year's PlayGround Fellowship commission, *Fifty Years Hungry*, with Aurora Theatre Company founder Barbara Oliver—the same director who helmed the Monday night short that he incorporated into this longer play, after his original concept proved problematic. Heath has been a member of the pool for four years, which is exactly how long he's been writing plays. "I had been working for a while on fiction, but hadn't had anything of consequence published," he says. "Then I saw PlayGround in the entertainment listings and I put it on my calendar to write a play for them next August. That was the first play I ever wrote. I don't know how you would come to playwriting without an opportunity to have people actually do your stuff, because a play without people doing it is a pretty sad, pointless little thing. Just the opportunity to have that done got me to write plays, which has become my major mode of expression."

The commission narrowly missed being Heath's first full-length play. Last year he took one of his PlayGround-written shorts that hadn't been selected for a Monday night and won a short-play competition with it that earned him the right to write a full evening show for the small local troupe PianoFight. The resulting comedy, *Fork Off Down Your Own Forking Adventure Which You've Forked: Forking!*, enjoyed four-week runs in San Francisco and Los Angeles this winter.

A number of other writers in the pool come from other disciplines. National New Play Network literary chair Mark Routhier and in-demand comic actor Ron Campbell direct and perform for PlayGround, respectively, but both have also joined the writers pool. And while Loeb studied playwriting at NYU, he took a long hiatus from theatre to become first a journalist and then a video-game developer—a day job that inspired *First Person Shooter*. Joining PlayGround in 2002 gave him the impetus to write plays again.

Loeb's *Abraham Lincoln's Big Gay Dance Party* is a "trial of the century" play that

features a shuffling three-act structure in which the story is told from three angles, and the audience votes on the order in which the scenes are performed. Playing several blocks away at roughly the same time, Heath's *Forking!* also featured audience voting, usually about whether characters would hook up. The format of the Monday Night PlayGround encourages experimentation—the "one-sidedness" topic this season inspired a play structured like a Möbius strip, for example, while other months saw shorts in which actors embodied GPS systems or letters of the alphabet—and that sense of play seems to spill over into the writers' longer work.

Trained as a clown, *Mushroom Boy* author Lea says she never considered herself a playwright before she submitted to PlayGround in 2001. Her June Anne Baker commission two years ago, *Feets Too Big*, was her first full-length work.

"The commissioning program has definitely changed things for me," she says. "If you write six short plays a year, you wind up with this vast storehouse of short plays very quickly. There are lots of places that do short-play festivals, but that's not necessarily going to take you to the next level. So for me, having the ability to work on full-length plays is important. With the peer group of people who have been commissioned, I feel like we came up at the same time, like this is my company. They talk about all these people who came out of Steppenwolf or Second City—well, we're going to be the people who came out of PlayGround." ❏

Sam Hurwitt is the associate editor of Theatre Bay Area. He is the recipient of an American Theatre Bay Area Commissioning Fund grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.