

MARCH 2011

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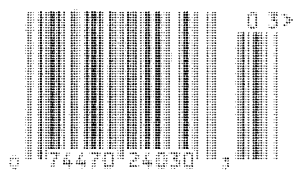
**The Playwrights Issue:
PlayGround Gets Its
Plays Produced**

- + **Jon Tracy**
- + **Rajiv Joseph**
- + **Philip Kan Gotanda**
- + **Local Markets
for Local Plays**

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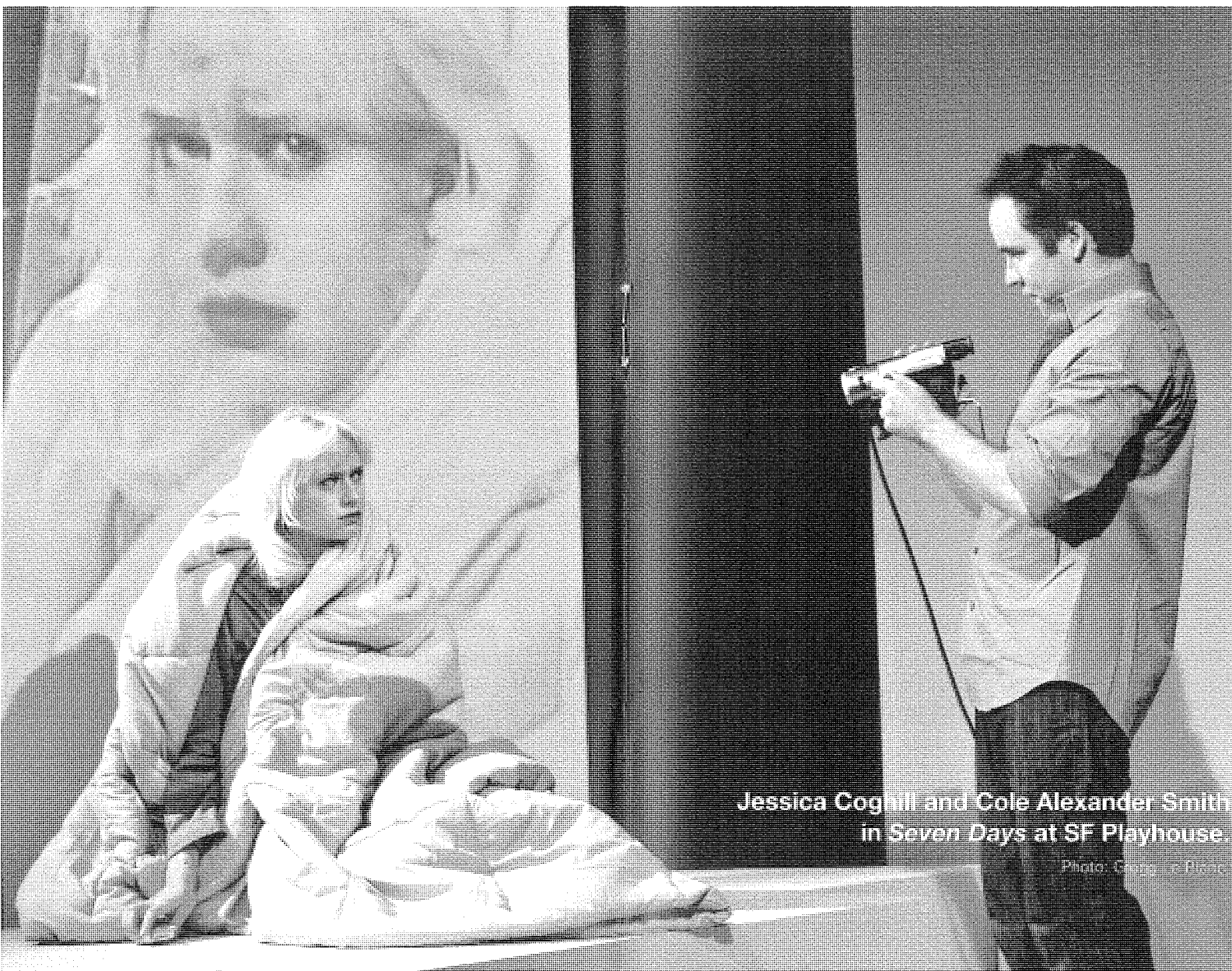
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BY CHAD JONES

Breaking OUT of the INCUBATOR



Jessica Coghill and Cole Alexander Smith in *Seven Days* at SF Playhouse.

Photo: George F. Pincus

MOST THEATRE COMPANIES RECOGNIZE THE importance of producing new plays and forging relationships with emerging playwrights. But unless you're one of the big guns—a Berkeley Repertory Theatre or an American Conservatory Theater—commissioning plays and putting unknown authors on the stage is a tremendous financial responsibility and ultimately a gamble. PlayGround, the Bay Area's self-described "leading playwright incubator," feels that pain and wants to help.

Founded in 1994 by Jim Kleinmann, Brighde Mullins and Denise Sharma, PlayGround originally focused on the creation of 10-minute plays in its monthly staged readings of work by its pool of writers. The best of those short plays are

featured in an annual roundup that gives top PlayGround writers that much more exposure.

After eight seasons, Kleinmann, who serves as PlayGround's artistic director, had hoped to see support from other theatrical institutions kicking in once promising writers began to emerge from the PlayGround incubator. But that support, especially from small and midsize theatres, just wasn't there.

So in 2002, Kleinmann and his organization got into the business of commissioning full-length plays. First came the annual June Anne Baker Prize, named for the late wife of a PlayGround benefactor, which would go to a gifted female playwright. That was followed quickly by the annual PlayGround Fellowship for a "distinguished

PlayGround alumnus."

Four years later, recognizing that PlayGround writers were getting first but not second or third commissions, Kleinmann and his board, with foundation support, launched three alumni commissions each year to previously commissioned PlayGround writers.

In a little more than a decade, PlayGround went from creating 10-minute plays to commissioning five full-length plays a year. The next step in this swift evolution came in 2008 with PlayGround coproducing with SF Playhouse the world premiere of *First Person Shooter* by Aaron Loeb, one of PlayGround's emerging stars.

And the evolution continues apace. In 2009, PlayGround

received a \$25,000 economic recovery grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Kleinmann convened his board for a September retreat and created a task force to find ways to make this grant make a real difference. Of the 20 ideas that came out of that retreat, the first was the creation of PlayGround's New Play Production Fund. Guidelines were written in a week, a contest was announced in December and award recipients were selected a month later.

"One of the things I love about PlayGround is that when we have a good idea, we jump on it and implement it," Kleinmann says over coffee in a Berkeley café. "From the retreat to the selection of plays was five months."

The fund's aim is simple: Support Bay Area productions of new plays by local playwrights. The first recipients will see their shows produced this year. San Jose Stage Company received \$25,000 to produce Trevor Allen's *Lolita Roadtrip* in April, and Just Theater received \$5,000 for Erin Bregman's *Nightmare Play* later this year at the Berkeley City Club.

"Most theatres don't have the infrastructure to develop new work," Kleinmann explains. "They don't have a dramaturge on staff or have a way to manage deadlines and readings on top of everything else they're already doing. We've got systems from the last eight years of commissioning to support the theatres that want to commission PlayGround alumni."

Expanding even beyond the existing commissioning programs, Kleinmann has entered into a three-year deal with SF Playhouse to provide plays for its Sandbox Series of bare-bones world premiere productions on its second stage. The black-box series launched in February of last year with PlayGround favorite Geetha Reddy's *The Safe House* and continued last October with Daniel Heath's *Seven Days*.

From Heath's perspective, that production of *Safe House* did just what SF Playhouse founders Bill English and Susi Damilano set out to do. "They put a new play on its feet and gave me a chance to work with some terrific talent and learn about my script and my craft," Heath says. "There really is nothing like those intense, last-minute rewrites, walking into rehearsal with new pages literally still warm from the printer, and immediately seeing how they work—and how they don't."

Heath wrote his first play as an application to join the PlayGround writers' pool, and only a few years later, he's a produced playwright. He's so enthusiastic that he doesn't even mind when it's not his play selected by programs like the New Play Production Fund.

"When my peers write good plays, I feel that's good for all of us," he says. "Theatre is not a zero-sum game. Good theatre begets good theatre. The more good productions of good local

Breaking Out of the Incubator

writers, the better, I think, for all of us.”

Reddy, who won PlayGround’s June Anne Baker Prize in 2005, says she admires the way PlayGround inspires writers through the short-play cycle or the commissioning programs. “Now the New Play Production Fund lights a fire under local theatres that may have a tendency to overlook local writers,” she says. “For me personally, I want my plays produced locally. I write for Bay Area audiences. I love the local actors and directors. And above all, my friends can see my plays.”

Randall King, San Jose Stage’s artistic director, is a firm believer in producing new work—he produced Allen’s *Tenders in the Fog* in the 2005–06 season—but says the current economic environment is “prohibitive and puts a nonprofit in potential peril at the box office.”

“It’s a sad but true fact of theatrical life,” King continues. “Money doesn’t talk. It swears! PlayGround removed that profanity from the Stage Company budget, and their support of the local playwright gives a buffer to relieve that financial pressure. The \$15,000 grant is a tremendous amount of production budget for a theatre our size, and it will be used to great effect.”

King also sees greater impact from PlayGround’s support of local playwrights and theatres. “An organization like this can attract writers to the region, which enhances our talent pool further,” King says. “PlayGround has been a conscientious collaborator for our regional playwrights and a conduit to nonprofit theatres to actually premiere the playwrights’ artistic effort. We probably would not be premiering new work this season without Jim Kleinmann and PlayGround support.”

San Francisco playwright (and former Theatre Bay Area staffer) Allen isn’t afraid to go hyperbolic when talking about the New Play Production Fund, which he says “equals new life!”

“I’m a card-carrying member of the Dramatists Guild, so I have a license to be dramatic,” he says. “I don’t feel I’m being overly effusive when I say receiving the grant means that my new play gets a chance to come alive.”

Allen’s involvement with PlayGround also includes a commissioned work called *Golden Gate Fair*, which received a staged reading at the 2010 Best of PlayGround Festival. And recently, PlayGround announced a partnership with San Jose Repertory Theatre for its first co-commission: Allen will write *Valley of Sand*, inspired by the myths and legends of Silicon Valley back to the days when orchards outnumbered software startups.

“We hear it all the time: Playwrights need productions,” Allen says. “Plays need to be played. New plays only live

in fully staged productions. Live, paying audiences are the necessary final element that allows a new play to evolve and hopefully go on to further productions and truly take on a life of its own.”

This year’s New Play Production Fund winners have been expanded to three. Shotgun Players will receive \$15,000 for the world premiere of Ken Slattery’s *Truffaldino Says No* to be produced in the summer of 2012; SF Playhouse was awarded \$5,000 for Kenn Rabin’s *Reunion* to fill this October’s slot in the Sandbox Series; and Impact Theatre scored \$5,000 for Lauren Yee’s *Crevise* at La Val’s this November.

“I feel nationally we’re doing some of the most important work in creating models for new play development,” Kleinmann notes. “Locally there’s a perfect storm happening. The Playwrights Foundation is hitting an incredible stride. Crowded Fire is rebirthing itself and coming out strong. Impact is having tremendous success in launching new writers and creating long-term relationships. There’s a lot of interest here in new plays in general, but that’s not really new. We have a tremendous community of local writers including Octavio Solis, Anthony Clarvoe, Philip Kan Gotanda, Peter Sinn Nachtrieb, Amy Freed, Brian Thorstenson, Aaron Loeb, Erin Bregman, Geetha Reddy—it’s an incredible list.”

Playwright Reddy adds that she’s encouraged to see that PlayGround is helping find more venues for local writers. “That means more playwrights will bring or keep their work here,” she says. “That sets the bar higher for all of us. Also, it makes playwright pub night more fun.”

For the record, PlayGround has developed more than 550 short plays by more than 160 Bay Area writers and in the last eight years has developed 28 full-length plays with seven more currently under way for the 15th annual Best of PlayGround Festival in May. But for Kleinmann, it’s not just about creating a play and getting it produced. His master plan concerns the life of the plays and the livelihoods of the playwrights.

“Think globally, act locally,” he says. “We can trace every dollar we spend going to someone who works here, lives here, wants to make a living here. We think there’s something to be said for that. We want to create a whole generation of playwrights you’ve never heard of who will change the theatre. It’s about investing in a writer over and over again. It always goes back to investing in the person.” ■

For information about PlayGround, visit playground-sf.org.

Chad Jones has been writing about Bay Area theatre since 1992. He blogs at theaterdogs.net.