

# Growing New Playwrights

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Contributing Writer

There was enthusiastic agreement among the six participants that Aurora Theatre's Crash Course for Young Playwrights was a resounding success.

The Franklin Parks Performing and Visual Arts Center co-sponsored the three-session workshop, which was led by Meredith Bean McMath, the founder and artistic director of the Aurora Studio Theatre.

During the first session, McMath encouraged students to write a 10-minute, one-act play, and enter it in a competition to be held on Feb. 4, the evening of the final session. The plays would be given a dramatic reading and the winning play would be performed at Franklin Parks Performing and Visual Arts Center in July.

Excitement was high as participants, judges, friends and family assembled to watch the plays. The playwrights had been given four props with which to work—a chair, a top hat, a candlestick and a pillow. The writers were then introduced to two

actors from the Aurora troupe, Penny Hauffe and Phil Erickson, who would be performing the final readings. At the last session the students had an opportunity to rehearse their plays with the actors.

McMath, herself a prize-winning playwright, said she was happy that all of the students who signed on not only attended every session, but submitted a play to the competition. While the fact that the winning play would receive a public performance was an incentive, the opportunity to see the two actors perform their play was an important part of the learning experience for all the participants.

The winner was Rachael Barksdale, a 16-year-old junior at the Douglass School. Her play, *Thrice Ait's So Bad*, is a dialogue between a woman and a genie, about the three wishes that he has promised to grant her. The judges and the audience agreed that her play was outstanding. It will be performed as part of the evening's entertainment on the six nights when Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is staged by the Franklin Park center this summer.

Each performance will begin with a half-hour "Green Show," modeled after similar pre-performance skits that were popular in Shakespeare's day.

Barksdale is active in the theater program at her school, but this is the first play she has written. She said that she found it helpful to be in a program with other writers, and she thought that McMath gave the group encouragement and many useful tips. In one exercise, McMath set an egg timer for 10 minutes and told the group to write until the timer sounded. She said that she found this to be a very helpful technique for overcoming writer's block. She said she hopes McMath will offer more workshops in the future.

The other five plays were *Top Hat*, by Abe Annis, *Love is Fickle* by Kelsey Baker, *When it Comes to Men and Women* by Bethany Jurasechek, *The Spoiler* by Adam Macudzinski and *Million Dollar Pillow* by Patrick Robinson.

Annis, a poet, said that the workshop helped him to understand the transformation that takes place

from an original concept written down on paper, to the director's idea of the play, the actor's rendition, and everything which an audience brings to the performance. This is an important lesson for any writer, he said. He is 16 years old, and a sophomore at Heritage High School.

Baker, a 14-year-old eighth grader at Harmony Elementary School, said she loved the workshop and didn't want it to end. She has acted with The Growing Stage, but these days she is more interested in writing. A short story she has written, *The Sign*, will appear this summer in a collection of works by young authors, published by Community Voice Media, a small press started by Purcellville writer, Bobbi Carducci.

Jurasechek said that she appreciated the way McMath conducted the workshop, creating an atmosphere in which she felt free to express herself. All of the participants mentioned that they really appreciated the opportunity they were given to meet Michael Kinghorn and Robert Leembruggen, and to learn more about the workings of professional theater. Kinghorn is a playwright, and former literary manager of Arena Stage. Leembruggen, a professional actor, is currently directing a Franklin center production of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, which will open on March 17 with student actors from Loudoun Valley and Loudoun County high schools.

The judges in the competition were five board members of Aurora Studio Theatre: playwright Margaret Levy, and published writers Gale Waldron and Pam Oldham; Diane El-Shafey, co-director of Aurora's upcoming performance of *Cinderella*; and former professional radio actor, Maxine Bean, who is presently active in Loudoun community theater. In a conversation after the event, they concurred that the quality of all of the plays was high.

At the beginning of the competition Jeff Stern, manager of the center, welcomed everyone and said he wished that he had been given the opportunity of attending such a workshop when he was younger. He also said that several adults, who had learned about it, had requested a similar series for adult playwrights, and that he and McMath were considering the possibility. Anyone who might be interested in attending can call the Franklin Park Center at 540-338-7973. ■

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