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# The Play's the Thing

Given that two of its plays will have their professional premieres next year, LAUNCH PAD is an apt name for a theater program that cultivates and nurtures new work and then launches it onto the national stage.

That's the idea behind the innovative model of new play development created by Risa Brainin, professor and chair of theater and dance at UC Santa Barbara. Since its inception in 2005, LAUNCH PAD has developed and produced nine plays with the playwrights working in residence at UCSB.

Attesting to the quality of both the work and the program, two plays produced by LAUNCH PAD — "Appoggiatura" by James Still and "Kingdom City" by Sheri Wilner — will be premiered by the Denver Center Theatre Company and the La Jolla Playhouse, respectively, as part of their 2014-15 seasons.

In addition, Barbara Lebow's "Killing Spiders" (part of LAUNCH PAD's reading series) was read at Urban Stages in New York City last March.

"This is exactly what we aim to do with the program — give the writers and plays the opportunity to develop in our safe environment at UCSB," said Brainin, who is LAUNCH PAD's artistic director. "We call them 'preview productions' because the plays stay in process through all of the performances;  we never open."

The production of "Appoggiatura" in Denver will be directed by Brainin herself (she also directed the reading of "Killing Spiders") and will feature new UCSB alumnus Julian Remulla playing Vivaldi. He created the role and performed in the original

preview production at UCSB as well as in subsequent professional workshops at the Perry-Mansfield New Works Festival in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, and the Colorado New Play Summit at Denver Center Theater.

Back at UCSB, the program is focusing on still newer works with “LAUNCH PAD: New Plays in Process,” its inaugural summer reading series. Beginning this week, the program brings three professional playwrights to campus over three consecutive weeks to work with UCSB students and faculty members as artists-in-residence. The collaboration among Brainin, the playwrights and a team of undergraduate designers, actors, stage managers and dramaturgs will culminate in open rehearsals and public readings on the evenings of Thursday, June 26 and July 3 and 10.

The rehearsals and readings begin at 7 p.m. in Theater/Dance West, Room 1507. Admission is free.

The first public event will be an open rehearsal of Lebow’s “Gun Play,” in which three generations of an American family experience the wrenching aftereffects of a mass shooting. In conducting research for the play, Lebow spent time at a day facility in Santa Barbara that supports people who have suffered traumatic brain injury. She investigated the possibilities for theater to connect with different experiences of perception, language and emotion as seen and heard from within the mind of the victim, as well as from the family and outer world’s view.

The following week, LAUNCH PAD will present a public reading of Jami Brandli’s “¡Soldadera!” The play, which is based on the Mexican Revolution, has a music component, and Brandli will be using LAUNCH PAD as an opportunity to study how the music integrates with the text.

The final event will be a public reading of Deborah Brevoort’s “The Velvet Weapon.” A backstage farce, “The Velvet Weapon” takes place at the National Theatre of an unnamed country in an unnamed city. A matinee audience rises up in protest over what is being performed on stage, demands something new and begins its own impromptu performance of “The Velvet Weapon,” a play by an unproduced playwright of questionable talent. The piece was inspired by Brevoort’s research in Prague in 2005, in which she interviewed 43 ringleaders of the Velvet Revolution. The revolution marked the end of Soviet rule in the former Czechoslovakia, and Brevoort constructs a humorous examination of populist democracy as a battle between highbrow and lowbrow art.

“I asked each of the playwrights what they wanted to work on, and turned it into a summer course for us,” Brainin said of the series. “We’re piloting the program this summer as an extension of LAUNCH PAD. Since we can only produce one preview production each year (for 2014-15 it will be Yussef El Guindi’s “The Talented Ones”), this course provides an opportunity for us to meet new writers and to continue working with writers we know well, like Barbara.

“It’s also a great opportunity to involve more students,” Brainin continued. “LAUNCH PAD plays have tended to have smaller casts because playwrights can’t get large-cast plays produced professionally. That’s a sad reality of the business these days.”

While LAUNCH PAD is hugely beneficial to the playwrights whose work is developed and tested, it also provides invaluable experience to the students. “The program gives everyone involved a real-life experience in a safe environment,” Brainin explained. “We try to mirror the profession as much as possible with our work in the department. Personally, I don’t believe college theater should be somehow different from professional theater; I think they should be the same. So students are getting a professional experience from top to bottom while they’re still in school.

“Because the nature of LAUNCH PAD means the students are interfacing with professional playwrights, professional actors (sometimes their professors) and professional designers who work alongside our faculty,” Brainin continued, “the whole experience is one that our students recognize immediately when they graduate and walk into the profession. Students who have have been through the LAUNCH PAD process know exactly how to approach working on a new play.”

According to Brainin, LAUNCH PAD doesn’t only produce good theater; it also represents cutting-edge research. “Here at UCSB — and this is true of most universities — we don’t have to worry about doing work simply to please our audiences,” she said. “We are in a place where experimentation *is* the thing. That’s the point. It’s very difficult to quantify research in the arts, but this is it; we’re an incubator for writers, and an incubator for new work that will go out into the professional theater world and make an impact.

“In curating LAUNCH PAD, I don’t look for plays; I look for writers,” Brainin continued. “And when I find a writer whose work I believe in, I say to him or her, ‘Here’s the opportunity we have at UCSB: We have these great, young BFA actors, we have professional actors on our faculty, we have a mix of guest and faculty professional

designers, we have a healthy rehearsal period and we have two great performance spaces. What do you want to write?’”

That set of circumstances makes LAUNCH PAD unique. Other universities commission plays for a particular set of actors or commission plays on a particular subject or topic. “That is a great model, too, but something entirely different from what we’re doing here,” Brainin said.

What really thrills Brainin is to see LAUNCH PAD plays go on to professional premieres (e.g. “Appoggiatura” and “Kingdom City”). “That is one exciting measure of success for us,” she said.

More information about LAUNCH PAD, including a complete list of playwrights and artists to date can be found at http://www.theaterdance.ucsb.edu/performance-programs/launch-pad.

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## About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.