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The Show Goes On

Since 2005, Risa Brainin has served as artistic director of LAUNCH PAD, the pioneering UC Santa Barbara Department of Theater and Dance program that brings together professional playwrights, guest artists and students to develop new plays. These works in progress are then staged as full preview productions during the year, and as readings during the summer.

There is a bit of a twist to LAUNCH PAD's "staging" this year: Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, each play in its 2020 Summer Reading Series will be performed virtually.

"Well, not to be cliché, but 'the show must go on!'" Brainin said. "In all seriousness, theaters around the country, both professional and in the academy, have all adapted to working online. We have no other choice at the moment but to innovate. The summer series is connected to a class called LAUNCH PAD: New Plays in Process. Eleven students are enrolled, and I want to give them a rich experience working with professional playwrights, actors and directors."

The LAUNCH PAD Summer Reading Series kicks off at 7 p.m. Friday, July 17, with Barbara Lebow's "Once Upon a Family," directed by Brainin, about a multi-generational, middle-American family that is forever changed in the aftermath of a deadly shooting. Lebow was one of LAUNCH PAD's earliest participating writers, with preview productions of her works "Plumfield, Iraq" and "La Niñera, the Nursemaid." To watch "Once Upon a Family" click this Zoom link.

The new lineup also includes “Shanghai,” written by Linda Alper and directed by UCSB alumna Sara Rademacher, on Friday, July 24, at 7 p.m. The third and fourth performances in the series, also available for viewing via Zoom, are also directed by Brainin: James Still’s “THE CRATCHITS (in America),” at 7 p.m. Friday, July 31, and “Elocutia Do(es) Pygmalion,” written by Cheryl L. West, at 4 p.m. Saturday, August 8.

“One particular joy for me as an artistic director is that all four incredibly talented writers in the series have worked with us before. They are big fans of the program and our students, and we adore them,” Brainin said of this season’s slate of plays. In addition to Lebow, Still and West have had plays preview with LAUNCH PAD; Alper, Still and West also participated as playwrights in the program’s recent “Alone, Together,” a virtual festival of monologues and short plays written expressly to be performed online.

“The Summer Reading Series is different because not only are these plays written to be performed on stage, but we are doing workshops ending in readings,” Brainin said. “The goal is not a polished performance, but rather to explore the very first steps in the life of a new play.

“The audience plays a major role in this process — even bigger than they might in a finished production,” she continued. “When working on a new play, we don’t know what we have until we put it in front of an audience. One challenging element about the online platform is that we can’t hear the audience reactions in the moment. So, we create a Q & A afterwards in order to get their responses. Over the years, we have discovered that certain audiences really like being in on this kind of process — there is a very particular thrill of witnessing and participating in the birth of a new play!”

The Summer Reading Series features current UCSB students, recent alumni actor Martin Wong, and designers Kaede Kogo and Allison McSwain; faculty artists Irwin Appel, Michael Bernard, Julie Fishell and Annie Torsiglieri; and professional guest actors Chuck Cooper, Michael Keck and Shaunyce Omar.

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