

UC SANTA BARBARA

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Diverse Voices, Diverse Approaches to Theater

Among the myriad obstacles faced by playwrights of color, one of the most vexing might be the assumption that many want to write plays that revolve exclusively around race and race-specific themes and issues.

That this couldn't be farther from the truth is reflected in the second UC Santa Barbara BIPOC Reading Series Festival, which will take place Friday and Saturday, Jan. 7 and 8, on Zoom. The festival includes a play about Hollywood stuntmen, a documentary-style look at life under authoritarian dictatorships, a story set in a neighborhood beauty salon in Philadelphia and a romantic comedy.

"One of my best friends, who is an actress in New York, said, 'We fall in love and have sex and break up. I want to see your play about that,'" said Christopher Oscar Peña, whose play "Los Feliz" concludes the festival. "That's what I ended up doing."

Peña, who earned his B.A. in dramatic arts from UC Santa Barbara in 2006, concedes that the work does ultimately address "what our responsibilities are as artists of color." But it also asks whether there is any room in today's dating scene for a wistful romantic.

"I want to win a Pulitzer Prize someday, but I also love the Kardashians," he said. "My goal is to talk about serious stuff and have a really good time in the process."

“Los Feliz” is one of four plays that will be workshopped the week of Jan. 3 and then presented free of charge to adventurous audiences. Each play receives 16 hours of rehearsal time over four days, giving the writers a chance to respond to what they see and hear with quick, and sometimes extensive, rewrites.

“I say to the writers: This workshop can be anything you want,” said festival director Risa Brainin, professor of theater and dance at UC Santa Barbara. “No matter how the writers use the time, our students are going to learn the ins and outs of new play development.”

A collaboration of three initiatives within the Department of Theater and Dance — Amplify, New and Reimagined Work, and Brainin’s acclaimed LAUNCH PAD program — the festival was first held in April 2020, featuring six new plays. It was a direct outgrowth from the death of George Floyd, and the racial reckoning so many institutions went through in response.

“We’ve always had BIPOC voices as part of our programming,” said Brainin, using the acronym for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. “But at this moment, I felt it was important to create a series that was devoted to underrepresented voices.”

She contacted the National New Play Network, an alliance of professional theaters that collaborate to “develop, produce and extend the life of new plays.” “We’d been talking about a way to collaborate for a number of years,” she said. “We were looking for the right kind of project, and this seemed perfect.”

“We are delighted that we can help UCSB reach out to our amazing group of affiliated artists, which includes the network’s favorite emerging and established playwrights,” said Nan Barnett, executive director of the National New Play Network. “This opportunity to develop a script is a gift to all impacted: NNPN’s more than 125 core and associate member theaters, who had the opportunity to support the writers they are excited about by submitting them for this opportunity; students that get to work with professional artists; playwrights who have an opportunity to develop their scripts; and the American theatrical canon, which gains a new play by a talented voice.”

The plays featured in the festival encompass a total of 36 roles, all of them to be played by UC Santa Barbara students and alumni. “We’ll also have design students who are working with the playwrights and directors to create ideas for design,” Brainin noted, “as well as students who shadow the writers and assist the directors. I

take joy knowing that when our students leave UC Santa Barbara they are completely at home in the world of new-play development.”

Three of the four plays have already had workshops at major regional theater companies, including Chicago’s Goodman Theatre and Philadelphia’s InterAct Theatre. “Los Feliz,” which was nominated by Los Angeles’ East-West Players, is the exception.

“It’s the first draft of the play,” said Peña, who has written for major television series including “Jane the Virgin” and “Insecure,” and is currently developing a series for ABC. “Nobody has seen it. It’s important for me to hear how the students respond — to see if it feels authentic to their experiences.

“The other thing that’s important to me,” he continued, “is this is a great opportunity to audition your collaborators — in this case, director Jenny Koons. This felt like an easy way for us to begin a collaboration and see if we speak the same language.”

One play the students particularly loved from the first festival, Candrice Jones’ “A Medusa Thread,” will return to UC Santa Barbara in the spring, when it will receive a full preview production as part of the LAUNCH PAD series. Another example of diversity in theme and tone, it features a title character who offers customers one last hairdo before they transition to the afterlife.

“We’re always looking for pieces that provide rich acting opportunities for our students, and that connect to our times,” said Brainin.

The 2022 BIPOC Reading Series Festival will open with “Acetone Wishes and Plexiglass Dreams” by Stephanie Kyung Sung Walters at 4 p.m. (PST) Friday. “Happy Fall: A Queer Stunt Spectacular” by Lisa Sanaye Dring will follow at 8 p.m. Friday. “Memories of Overdevelopment” by Caridad Svich will take place at 1 p.m. Saturday; and “Los Feliz” at 5 p.m. Saturday. Q&As with the creators will follow each reading. For more information, go to <https://launchpad.theaterdance.ucsb.edu/reading-series/amplify>

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.