

UC SANTA BARBARA

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New Plays Promise Laughs and Substance

Dying is easy, comedy is hard. That truism for actors also applies to playwrights, who are acutely aware of how difficult it is to keep audiences amused for an entire evening.

“Writing a comedy is like writing music,” noted Idris Goodwin, who is a breakbeat poet as well as the author of more than 60 plays. “There’s a rhythm to it that you cannot drop — ever.

“In film, you can create that rhythm through editing. You can’t do that on stage, so I want to make sure it is baked into the text as much as possible.”

Distinguishing the baked from the half-baked is a major goal of UC Santa Barbara’s LAUNCH PAD program, which provides writers the opportunity to experience their work, as performed by actors, at various levels of development. Its [2022 Summer Reading Series](#) gets underway July 10, and two of this year’s four works-in-progress are comedies.

For LAUNCH PAD Artistic Director Risa Brainin, that makes perfect sense, given that the last summer festival, in 2020, was conducted over Zoom. “Everything’s harder on Zoom,” she noted, “but comedy is especially hard.”

“I need live people who are laughing and responding,” agreed Goodwin. “I also need to know where jokes are bombing!”

The series, which is free and open to the public, kicks off at 3 p.m. Sunday, July 10, with a drama: Franky Gonzales' *One Month Along*, which is inspired by Harold Pinter's *Betrayal*. Like that classic, it moves backward in time to tell a story of a marriage endangered by an affair. Guest artist Daniel Andres Blanco, a UC Santa Barbara alum, will join an ensemble of student actors.

It will be followed by Christopher Oscar Pena's *Los Feliz* at 7 p.m. Thursday, July 14. Chanel Bragg, associate artistic director of the Arizona Theatre Company, will direct. Set in Hollywood, the play focuses on a queer Latino who is searching for true love. Scenes from the piece were read in January as part of LAUNCH PAD's Zoom-only 2022 BIPOC Reading Series Festival.

Goodwin's *What's Best for the Children?*, starring guest artist Austin Dean Ashford, follows at 7 p.m. Thursday, July 21. "It's about the politics of textbooks — how and what we teach our kids," explained Goodwin, the new artistic director of Seattle Children's Theatre. "It's a serious topic, so I wanted to give it some levity.

"The idea that there is a group of people in Texas who vote on what goes in and goes out of textbooks used throughout the country is totally ridiculous," he added. "I wanted to lean into that ridiculousness."

Originally written in 2017, the work has only gotten more relevant with the recent controversy over the alleged presence of critical race theory in the curriculum.

"At the root, we're talking about who defines what's appropriate, and what's useful, for a child to know," Goodwin said. "These are the questions we are asking. To me, a play is supposed to be a gathering place to engage, reflect, and hopefully spark some dialogue."

The series concludes at 7 p.m. Thursday, July 28 with *Plays About Longing* by James Still. It features a series of short plays written during the pandemic, which "will be curated with the student artists as part of the process," Brainin said.

"The plays share a poignancy that reveal the ways life is both vivid and transitory," according to Still. "All of the stories feature some kind of bittersweetness at their center, and explore the extremes of deep and unsettled sorrow, as well as deep and unexpected joy."

The series is part of a UC Santa Barbara summer course. For Brainin, giving students opportunities to learn the ins and outs of new play development is an important component of the program.

“Each week, we have 16 to 20 hours of rehearsals and exploration, followed by the reading and a Q&A afterwards,” Brainin explained. “Then we debrief the whole process with the students and guest artists. This year’s students include eight actors, two dramaturgs, one stage manager, one designer, one director and one playwright.

“It’s one of my favorite classes to teach, because the participants are encouraged to go outside their comfort zones,” she added. “An actor may try their hand at design, a designer may serve as a stage manager one week, a director may work on marketing. The students decide what aspect of the process they’d like to work on. I am always inspired by their willingness to take a risk and try something new.”

Still and Goodwin have both had LAUNCH PAD “preview productions” — full stagings of their works-in-progress — in recent years. Still’s *Appoggiatura* was presented in 2013, while Goodwin’s *We Want the Funk, a rustbelt lullaby on the one!* followed in 2016.

“I love having long-term relationships with writers like James and Idris, and the Summer Reading Series provides the opportunity to continue those collaborations,” Brainin said.

For his part, Goodwin is thrilled to be returning to UC Santa Barbara.

“Risa is such a great champion of new work,” he said. “She respects the playwright’s process. And she has such wonderful enthusiasm. She understands that developing a play is a tricky thing. We’re treated well and respected, and it’s one of the most beautiful places in the country. What’s not to love?”

All readings are at the Performing Arts Theater on the UC Santa Barbara campus. Admission is free. Audience members are invited to a reception 30 minutes before the event, and a Q&A with the playwright afterwards.

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.