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Tom Jacobs

Theater and Dance premieres student-penned original production

Many of us are used to watching television in our pajamas. Live theater, not so much.

But if the idea of seeing a play in your PJs appeals to you, you're in luck: For the opening and closing night performances of the new play "Night Night, Roger Roger," running March 3–12 at in the Studio Theater on campus, audiences are encouraged to attend in their flannel jammies — or any other apparel they lounge around in late at night.

"I thought it would create a fun environment," said playwright Roni Ragone, a UC Santa Barbara undergraduate student. "The play is cozy and warm; it makes you want to snuggle up. It also takes place at midnight. Who wants to wear jeans at midnight?"

"There's a feeling of fun and freedom that permeates the show," added director Julie Fishell. "We want the audience to come in their most comfortable, relaxed clothing, so they experience the play as an unforgettable sleepover."

As those sentiments suggest, "Night Night, Roger Roger" is a whimsical play, albeit with "some existential rumbling underneath it," as Fishell puts it. "It's not a children's play, but it's about that youthful core energy that we either nurture in ourselves, or we don't. There are also some haunting, phantasmagoric elements that

remind you of Maurice Sendak.”

“When I read plays, I’m drawn to absurdism,” Ragone said. “But when I write, a lot of magical realism comes out.”

The fact this production exists is somewhat fantastical in itself. This is, to anyone’s knowledge, the first time ever that the UC Santa Barbara Department of Theater and Dance has undertaken a full-scale production of a student’s work.

It was submitted for consideration by a friend of Ragone’s, fellow theater major Trinity Wicklund, who is on the committee that chooses the department’s season — a group composed of faculty, students and staff.

“I had no idea she did that,” Ragone recalled. “I heard people talking about it and thought, ‘Why are they talking about my play?’”

When it made the cut, Fishell, who had directed Ragone in an acting role in “The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee” last year, eagerly signed on. She said she was drawn by Ragone’s “mixture of slapstick comedy, farce and realism” and howthe characters express themselves in “profound, poetic ways.”

The unusual form of “Night Night, Roger Roger” reflects its pandemic-era roots. An Arizona native who moved with their family to Ventura County in their early teens, Ragone discovered playwriting while studying at Moorpark College, prior to transferring to UC Santa Barbara. When theaters shut down in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, they were asked by the Hillcrest Center for the Arts in Thousand Oaks to direct a Zoom production.

“The show we wanted to do wasn’t available, and we couldn’t find anything that fit,” they recalled. “It was my idea that I write something. This was in August, and auditions were scheduled for September. So the producer said, ‘OK, let’s give this a week. Write me a first draft.’

“I did not sleep a wink that week,” Ragone continued. “I did a lot of word vomiting. It was very messy and very different from how it is now. But we did a couple of workshops, and by the end of the experience, I thought, ‘We have a play here!’”

When the play was first done on stage — last year at a New Jersey high school — the playwright decided to keep its Zoom-mandated structure, with each character isolated in their own box (literal online, metaphorical onstage). “That reflects the

theme throughout the play of loneliness, and finding community in that loneliness," Ragone said. "It's a physicalizing of that metaphor."

Without that convention, "I'm not sure this play would be this play," Fishell said. "It's a play about overcoming obstacles and distances to connect with another person, and to find one's tribe."

"Night Night, Roger Roger" is structured as a series of vignettes, each of which introduces new characters and situations. Many of those characters are based on Ragone's friends and family members, including their grandmother and twin sister.

"It's a bit like a Rubik's cube that has been totally shuffled," Fishell said. "As the play progresses, the colors begin to line up. You begin to get a sense of how the lives of the characters are connected."

So why set these tales at midnight? "I wanted to do a play about nighttime because that's when people begin to let their guard down, and they aren't afraid to show who they really are," Ragone said. "I myself am a night owl, and I love the warmth that lives in quiet nights."

People are responding to that wit and warmth: The work is currently being edited for publication, which will likely facilitate more productions.

Ragone, 23, graduates in the spring, and is hoping to go to graduate school in playwriting. Long-term, "I will consider myself a success if I'm able to create work that excites people, that people connect to," they said.

Aside from the two PJ-optional performances, the UC Santa Barbara production is offering one additional sartorial opportunity. The March 7 performance is "vampire/monster dress-up night." There is "a group of vampires in the play, and a misunderstood monster who emerges from a kid's closet," the playwright noted.

"I love writing serious plays," Ragone added. "But I think that sometimes, as theater makers, we take our craft so seriously that we forget to find the joy in it. I think it's important to reclaim that."

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