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Tom Jacobs

UCSB’s LAUNCH PAD, Ensemble Theatre Company partner on new play readings at the New Vic

The best way to learn a craft is by working alongside a professional. For the past year, UC Santa Barbara’s Department of Theater and Dance has offered students that kind of hands-on experience through a new collaboration with Ensemble Theatre Company. Students have attended plays, observed rehearsals, shadowed creators and, in some cases, performed at Santa Barbara’s only Equity theater.

The partnership takes center stage Thursday, Aug. 27, when the department’s LAUNCH PAD summer series presents staged readings of two plays in progress. Hosted by Ensemble at downtown Santa Barbara’s New Vic Theatre, the first-of-its-kind event will feature UC Santa Barbara students, alumni and faculty.

“I have always wanted our program to be a bridge to the professional world,” said LAUNCH PAD artistic director Risa Brainin, a professor of theater at UCSB. “And the opportunity to share our work with the downtown audience has long been a dream of mine.”

This partnership between town and gown “had been talked about for years — raised again every so often, and then, for one reason or another, never actually created,” said Scott DeVine, executive artistic director of Ensemble Theatre Company (ETC). “What changed is that Risa Brainin and I sat down to lunch and both walked away

committed to figuring out how to make a real collaboration happen, not just a friendly one.

“From there it became a series of meetings between the UCSB faculty and our team at ETC, and what came out of those meetings wasn’t a single program — it was a set of open doors. Tickets for students. Students on our stage. Students working alongside our artists as assistant directors and assistant designers. Our professional artists in their classrooms as guest speakers. Design and directing students invited into our rehearsals and our tech process, where the real work of a professional production actually gets done.

“The goal was never a one-off event. It was to make two institutions that sit a few miles apart genuinely permeable to each other.”

Thanks to this program, DeVine said, two current and one former UCSB drama student appeared on the Ensemble stage at some point last season.

“Two more, Olivia Escobedo and Veda Arndt Schreiber, served as assistant directors,” he added. “And UCSB faculty member Pesha Rudnick directed ‘The Shark Is Broken’ for us. Alongside that, design and directing students sat in on rehearsals and tech, which is where you learn how a production is actually assembled.”

“We hope to continue to grow the program,” he added, noting additional students may be cast in the company’s upcoming production of “Rent.”

The summer reading series, under Brainin’s direction, began in 2014. Each season has featured UCSB students, faculty and alumni working with playwrights to refine works-in-progress.

That basic structure remains, but the schedule has been shifted to accommodate a repertory of two readings on the same day, Aug. 27, at the New Vic, 33 W. Victoria St.

At 4 p.m., Kate Bergstrom, artistic director of the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis, will direct a reading of “Banana Factory” by Julia Izumi. At 8 p.m., Julie Fishell, a continuing lecturer at UCSB, will direct a reading of “The Rink at the End of the World” by Megan Tabaque. Tickets are free, but reservations are suggested; they can be made here.

“Both plays center around high school students,” said Brainin. “‘Banana Factory’ is about a group of students who are becoming activists. It’s about how this generation of youth is finding its way to change the world.”

“Rink” focuses on a group of American figure skaters — also-rans chosen at the last minute — who travel to Croatia to compete in the world championships. Their personal challenges and squabbles are juxtaposed against a menacing international atmosphere and the threat of nuclear war.

“Both plays ask: ‘How are young people coping with the chaotic world we live in right now? How are they finding their way?” said Brainin. “They also both have quite a bit of humor. The writing in both is very fresh and quirky — and dark at the same time.”

Brainin has already chosen “Rink” to have a full “preview production” on campus in February.

The 16-person ensemble includes many alumni of UC Santa Barbara’s BFA program, as well as several current students, director of the BFA acting program Annie Torsiglieri, and Mitchell Thomas, professor of theater at Westmont College.

DeVine has two goals for the day-and-evening event. “The first is to deepen the connection between ETC and UCSB — to give the partnership a public face rather than leaving it as something that happens inside our rehearsal rooms and their classrooms,” he said.

“The second is to help LAUNCH PAD expand off campus and into the heart of downtown Santa Barbara, where new work can find an audience that might not otherwise drive out to see it.

“As for future summers,” he added, “my hope is that LAUNCH PAD downtown is a huge hit and becomes an annual event.”

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