


Playing in Durango

PlayFest brings cutting-edge works to local audiences



Actors Dan Lauria and Jodi Long in a past PlayFest reading for Lauria's play "Just Another Day," which currently has a two-month run production off Broadway./ Photo by Jennaye Derge

 Missy Votel - 06/20/2024

There's no doubt the Durango PlayFest is onto something good. Now in its 6th year, this year's event, which takes place June 25-30, drew an astonishing 230 entries, an exponential leap from the 19 entries submitted in 2023.

"This is the largest PlayFest so far, with nine readings of four plays," PlayFest Managing Director Mandy Mikulencak said.

Started in 2018 by a group of "very arts-minded friends," the idea was to bring well-known and emerging playwrights, directors and actors to Durango to incubate new plays, hold free community events and stage readings for local audiences.

"We wanted to bring a play-development festival to Durango. There are several prestigious ones around the country," Mikulencak explained. "The first one was thrown together in five months, and we've grown every year since."

Plays can be submitted throughout the year, then it is up to the selection committee, headed up by Felicia Lansbury Meyer, associate professor of the Fort Lewis College Theatre Department, to whittle it down.

"We're looking for a mix of comedy, drama and timely topics that appeal to a wide audience," Mikulencak said. "We are also looking for plays that represent diversity in race and age."

She said perhaps one reason the festival has grown is that each year, playwrights want to return the next season. "Once they're here, they want to come back," she said.

This year's festival features both award-winning and up-and-coming playwrights, along with Hollywood and Broadway actors including: PlayFest alum Ray Abruzzo ("The Sopranos," "Transparent"); Jane Kaczmarek ("Malcolm in the Middle," "The Simpsons"); and Pulitzer-Prize-nominated playwright Kathleen Cahill.

The festival also features two local actors, Siena Widen and Conor Sheehan, as well as several FLC students working as interns in various capacities. "Our goal is always to employ as many youth as possible," Mikulencak said.

Aside from the actors and directors, Mikulencak said the audience also plays a key role in the festival. "Audience members give feedback to the playwrights, directors and actors following each reading," she said. "Sometimes, PlayFest is the first time a playwright has heard their words spoken out loud."

In addition to the staged readings, which will all be held at the Durango Arts Center, there will be a free "Meet the Playwrights" talk for the public at 5 p.m., Wed., June 26, at Blue Rain Gallery .

"It will be a panel discussion, and people can ask questions," Mikulencak said. "It's going to be really casual. We find it's a really popular event."

A brief rundown of the plays follows:

- **"All that Remains," by Richard Dresser** - A couple living on a small island off the coast of Maine invites the neurotic husband's college roommate and his conservative trophy wife for a weekend visit – only to discover that long-buried secrets unmoor both couples and the "good old days" may not have been so good after all.

Dresser's plays have been produced in New York, regional theater and Europe. They include the widely produced "Rounding Third," "Below the Belt" and "Gun-Shy." He has also worked extensively in film and television, and teaches screenwriting at Columbia University.

- **"Circle Forward," by Deb Hiett** - Seventeen years after the loss of her young husband from cancer, Mia meets a teenager who believes he is the reincarnation of her late husband. When the teen and his mom come to Mia's house for lunch, his uncanny memories force Mia to face her doubts, her past and the whole truth.

Hiett is a playwright, actor and musician from Los Angeles. "Circle Forward" was a 2024 finalist in Boulder's Local Theatre Co. New Play Festival and a semifinalist for the 2023-24 Princess Grace Award in Playwriting. Her new musical, "The Sunny Survival Caravan," had its first reading as part of the 2023 "First Peek" Series in Los Angeles.

- **"Hop tha A," James Anthony Tyler** - During his late-night commute on the A train, Harlem native Tyrone tries to impress Niesha, his coworker at a nightclub, who just wants to read her book and pass the ride in silence. But as they travel uptown, the two forge an unlikely connection that extends beyond the confines of the subway car.

Tyler is a playwright and screenwriter from New York City and a rising star in American theatre. He received the Horton Foote Playwriting Award in 2018 and the Theatre Masters Visionary Playwrights Award in 2016. He is one of the inaugural playwrights to receive a commission from Audible's emerging playwrights fund. He was a staff writer for the OWN Network's "Cherish the Day" and currently is writing for a new Apple TV+ drama series.

- **"Mrs. Einstein," Kathleen Cahill** - A young Albert Einstein meets the brilliant Mileva Maric when they are physics students at Zurich Polytechnic. Their deep emotional, intellectual and physical connection results in a ground-breaking scientific theory - but only one of them gets the credit. We know what becomes of him. This is a play about her.

Cahill is an opera librettist, lyricist and Pulitzer-nominated playwright for her play "Charm." Another of her plays, "The Persian Quarter," was nominated for a Steinberg Award. She is the recipient of a Rockefeller Grant and a National Endowment for the Arts New American Works Grant, among many others.

