

The Missing Piece

In the no-man's-land between workshops and professional premieres, a university production can be just what a new play needs

BY TOM JACOBS

A table read of *Appoggiatura* by James Still (right of center, in gray sweater), developed at Launch Pad at UCSB.

MAYNA RAWEY

"DESIGNERS," DRAMATIST JAMES STILL SAYS wistfully, "are some of the best dramaturgs I know. If a great lighting designer cannot light something like a transition or a cue, I've learned that it's usually my problem."

That's very valuable knowledge—or it would be, if it arrived at an opportune time.

Like virtually all of his colleagues who are struggling to birth new works, Still (whose nearly 20 plays include *The Heavens Are Hung in Black*, *Illegal Use of Hands* and *I Love to Eat: Cooking with James Beard*) seldom exchanges a substantive syllable with a designer until well into the development process. After all the readings and rewrites and workshops and drafts culminate in an actual production, the set, costume and lighting wizards finally weigh in. Only then—not long before subscribers and critics are due to arrive—does the writer begin to see, not just hear, what he or she has created.

Still wishes that moment of clarity could come much earlier in his plays' creation. Happily for him, he spent the first months of 2013 working in a place where such collaboration has been a regular feature for years: a university campus. He was there for a program called Launch Pad, the brainchild of Risa Brainin, chair of the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of California–Santa Barbara. Once a year, Brainin invites an established writer—sometimes a longtime friend, such as Still, other times a new acquaintance—to bring a work-in-progress to the oceanfront school.

Over a luxurious six-week (or longer) rehearsal process, the writer is encouraged to revise as much as he or she likes—all the way to the point where further changes aren't technically feasible. Then a mix of undergraduate and professional actors presents a fully staged "preview production" for paying audiences, giving playwrights an excellent idea of what is and

isn't working—insights that can be applied well before the play goes on to its professional debut.

"We can provide a missing piece," Brainin says. "There are new-play development organizations all over the country that do readings and workshops. There are theatres that present world premieres. But what's in between for a writer? Where can they see their work in 3-D?"

UNIVERSITIES ARE UNIQUELY SUITED ENVIRONMENTS for this kind of "in between" work. "There is a welcoming of experimentation in the very bones of a university," says Brainin. "Our audiences are eager and open to anything. After all, we are here to discover, to risk, to try new things."

In practical terms, that means "we don't have the pressures that professional theatres grapple with every day," she notes. "We don't have to worry about ticket sales in the same way; the theatre will not close down if we don't make our goal. Our rehearsal schedule allows for gestation time—something a new play needs, but is hard to come by on a tight, professional-theatre schedule."

Brainin raises about \$25,000 to \$35,000 per year through grants and donations to support the project, above and beyond the university's standard funding of a student production. (She is hoping to increase that figure over time.) The playwright receives a stipend, along with travel and housing expenses; additional funds are used for additional artists as needed: say, a music director, sound designer or choreographer.

Her collaborators have been a mix of faculty and guest artists, depending upon the needs of each particular play and the availability of specific faculty members. "To me, it is all about bringing in the right guest artists for the project to work with our faculty and students," Brainin said. "For example, if

a play needs a projections designer, I want to be able to say to the writer, 'No problem, we'll bring one in.'"

Launch Pad didn't get its formal name until 2010, but its history dates back to 2005, not long after Brainin arrived at UCSB from Shakespeare Santa Cruz, where she spent two years as interim artistic director. Her faculty job included directing one show per year with students (mostly from the BFA acting program, although anyone could audition). Hoping to do something unique with this opportunity—and feeling out of touch with living writers—she called a dramaturg friend, Liz Engelman, who was working at the time as literary director of the McCarter Theatre Center in Princeton, N.J.

"I said, 'I want to do a new play, or a play that has been done before, but the writer still wants to work on it,'" she recalls. "I wanted the writer here. Liz put me in touch with Sarah Ruhl."

The author of *The Clean House*, who was then on the cusp of becoming one of the nation's most-performed and most-acclaimed playwrights, was receptive to the idea, in part because she was living in nearby Los Angeles. She happily traveled north with a work she was still futzing with, *Melancholy Play*.

By the time of its full production, *Melancholy Play* still seemed to some critics more of a fascinating fragment than a fully fleshed out play. But Ruhl clearly valued the experience. In an onstage TCG discussion last year with Anne Bogart (which can be viewed at www.tcg.org/fifty/playwrights_streaming.cfm), she bemoaned the standard-issue play-development process. Ruhl recalled that at early rehearsals of another of her works, *Passion Play*, which premiered in 2005 at D.C.'s Arena Stage, "Everyone thought the third act was really finished and the first act needed work, because it was sort of unruly. And then when it got on its feet completed, the unruliness made perfect sense...It was written for the stage!" She discovered, in fact, that "there was something either wrong with or missing" in the third act. "I had written it for too many readings with chairs."

Still knows exactly what she meant. "Obviously, there are some plays for which a reading and a workshop are perfect," he says. "I've written some of those myself." But others don't fully reveal their strengths when actors are sitting around a table—and in his mind, that can be a big problem. "The truth is, you can only deal with feeling humiliated so many times, because you've written an ambitious

play that doesn't do well in a reading," he said. "So what are you going to do? You're going to start writing toward the form that the play gets rewarded for."

THE PROMISE OF A DIFFERENT

format is what drew Still to Launch Pad—that, and his 15-year friendship with Brainin. They met at Indiana Repertory Theatre in the 1990s, when she served as associate artistic director, and he was playwright-in-residence (a title he still holds).

"She and I talked about it off and on for two or three years," Still said. "At one point I said to her, 'There's never going to be a great time for me. So just tell me the year, and I'll do it.' She said, 'Okay—2013.'"

"We've always been artistic soul mates," Brainin says of Still. "Most new-play development projects are looking for something that's pretty close to done. We're really not. I'm looking for writers who will be cool to work with, who will hang out with my students, and develop something interesting. And he's an extraordinary person."

Still originally had a different project in mind for his stint at UCSB. But as he was

writing *The House That Jack Built*, which premiered at IRT this past fall, he realized the drama was actually part of a trilogy. So, using one of the characters in that play plus two others who are mentioned but not seen, he began sketching out *Appoggiatura*, the story of three generations of an unconventional American family who, after losing someone close to them, attempt to heal their grief by taking a trip to Venice. The result of this creative detour can be seen through March 9 at UCSB.

Still liked the resonance of having his emotionally lost characters physically lost in a foreign city. "Sometimes we have to go very far away to find ourselves—literally in this case, but also metaphorically," he says. "We need to let go of a lot of ideas about who we are, and who other people think we are, in order to get to that next place."

Brainin liked the setting because it gave her and her designers an excuse to spend a week in the fabled city of canals, where they took countless photographs, some of which guest artist Nayna Ramey artfully incorporated into her scenic design.

This is Ramey's third Launch Pad



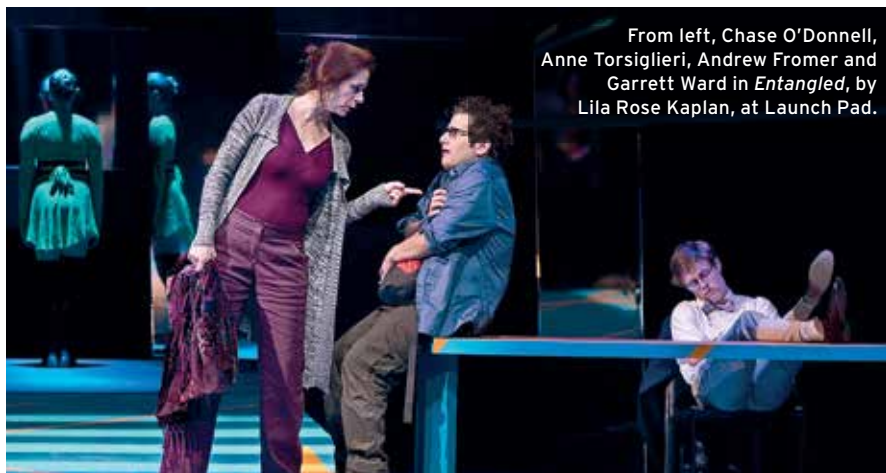
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From left, Chase O'Donnell, Anne Torsiglieri, Andrew Fromer and Garrett Ward in *Entangled*, by Lila Rose Kaplan, at Launch Pad.

DAVID BAZEMORE PHOTO

production, and she's gradually getting used to working with an ever-changing text. "Last year, *Entangled* [by Lila Rose Kaplan] changed very much right to the very end, and I had anxiety about it," she admits. "This year, I'm embracing it."

Appoggiatura is also the third Launch Pad project for Broadway veteran Anne Torsiglieri, one of two Equity actors in the mostly student cast. *Entangled*, she recalls, "was a little mind-boggling. I had huge monologues that were all

rewritten. But it was a ball. There's nothing more exciting than developing new work—being in the room, with the playwright, while it's happening."

"Everybody has had to work outside their comfort zone," Still says. "We're all at a point where we're not assuming the old way of working is the best way. It's awfully good to have access to a process that lets you test it."


"Testing" is precisely the right term. UCSB prides itself as a research university

(its faculty includes five Nobel laureates), and Brainin gets part of her funding (beyond the basic allocation for a student production) through an academic senate research grant. But besides being laboratories for innovation, these productions also provide valuable training for the student actors. Brainin notes that when they "go out into the real world as an actor, one of the first things they're going to have to do is work on a new play." Undergrads outside the cast benefit as well: Still has already given a lecture on campus, and is teaching a playwriting class.

In mixing teaching with on-location rewriting, he is following in the footsteps of his six Launch Pad predecessors, all of whom either led a class or gave guest lectures. This list will be joined next year by Jennifer Haley, who won the 2012 Susan Smith Blackburn Prize for *The Nether*. Some of the writers have been present for the entire process, while others have chosen to come and go.

"We're hoping this will become a model for universities," Brainin says. "My dream is that, in a few years, people say, 'This is how you develop a new play in America. You do a reading at some place like the O'Neill [National Playwrights Conference]; then you do a preview production at a university; and then you do a professional premiere.'"

Brainin hopes all of the Launch Pad plays will ultimately go on to professional productions. So far that record has been spotty, but Still's script, at least, is guaranteed a continued existence: After he committed to bringing it to UCSB, the playwright received a commission from the Denver Center Theatre Company. He proposed using that money to further develop *Appoggiatura*, and the company happily agreed.

Still fully expects to compose another draft between his university experience and his trip to Colorado, and he's curious to discover how Launch Pad will have affected his rewriting process. The morning after the first UCSB rehearsal, his report is promising: "We did a first stumble-through last night, which was, of course, terrifying and not unlike watching a baby trying to bravely walk/run/skip/sprint. But moving, too. I had a greater sense of the play in real time—the big story in motion," he giddily declares. "My new play is a little older and wiser already." 

Tom Jacobs has served as theatre critic of the *Los Angeles Daily News* and performing arts writer of the *Santa Barbara News-Press*.

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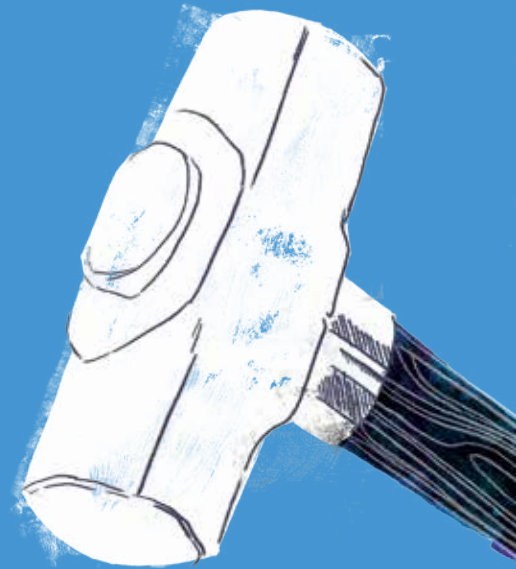
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