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Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas

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Melonnie Walker is a graduate of the University of Missouri-Kansas City’s Master of Arts program in Theatre History. She has served as production dramaturg for Seven Guitars at the UMKC Theatre; Fences at the Kansas City Repertory Theatre; and is contracted for Radio Golf in the upcoming season for KC Melting Pot Theatre. She is an executive board member of the August Wilson Society, and Dramaturgy Editor for the August Wilson Journal. As a theatre enthusiast and independent scholar, Melonnie is inspired to combine her love of learning with her love of theatre to help preserve theatre history for future
generations.

The *August Wilson Journal* will make its debut later this year as an online scholarly journal dedicated to promoting the “study, teaching and performance of Mr. Wilson’s work.” It is sponsored by the August Wilson Society in partnership with Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, and published by the University of Pittsburgh. Dr. Michael J. Downing and Dr. David L. Anderson serve as Editor and Managing Editor. Scholars are invited to submit academic material such as research, performance studies, analyses and other critical approaches to exploring the work.

**On Dramaturging Wilson for the First Time**

Although I was somewhat familiar with Wilson’s work, my introduction to studying the American Century Cycle was while dramaturging for a production of *Seven Guitars*. My director encouraged me to go back and read all ten plays back to back. I was immediately struck by Wilson’s use of language and story-telling, and the way he entwined the narrative with bits of history. I fell in love with the work and felt a personal attachment that I was compelled to explore. With each production, my goal is to help the cast and crew make connections of their own.

**On Providing Tools and Context to Wilson’s Stories**

One of the primary roles of a dramaturg is to help make connections between the text and the production, and I find that task easier to achieve after making a personal connection first. I often think of tackling Wilson’s American Century Cycle as being akin to wrestling Sutter’s ghost. There is enormous weight, history and power in these stories, and often a bit of pain to weave through, but there is glory at the end. As we study and interpret the plays, we witness the characters as they wrestle with their lives, identity and worth in this world. We provide the tools and context that help the cast navigate through these complexities. Other dramaturgs and scholars would benefit from sharing these kinds of experiences.

Another task of dramaturging the plays of August Wilson is to honor the playwright's sense of culture and to provide the production team with the framework they need to tell these stories through an accurate cultural lens. Wilson often placed more emphasis on the cultural truths in his stories than the historical accuracies, since he never professed to be a historian, just a playwright who used history. In his playwright’s note at the beginning of *Seven Guitars*, he says,

“Despite my interest in history, I have always been more concerned with culture…. I am not a historian. I happen to think that the content of my mother’s life – her myths, her superstitions, her prayers, the contents of her pantry, the smell of her kitchen, the song that escaped from her sometimes parched lips, her thoughtful repose and pregnant laughter – are all worthy of art.”
On the August Wilson Journal’s Engagement with Dramaturgy

One unique feature of the journal will be a section that is devoted to interviews from dramaturgs of August Wilson plays that have recently been produced. As the Dramaturgy Editor I will interview these artists about their experience collaborating with the cast and crew. They’ll also be asked to share how they discovered new meaning from the work, fulfilled any special requests from the director, or anything else that can be shared about their contribution to the production.

The August Wilson Journal’s dramaturgy section will be a useful resource for Wilson dramaturgs to find new perspectives and strategies, while encouraging further investigation into the work. Together with fellow August Wilson scholars and theatre artists, I believe we make an important contribution to preserving and protecting the legacy of his American Century Cycle.

For information about the journal click here: https://augustwilson.pitt.edu/ojs/augustwilson

Interested in contributing to the August Wilson Journal? See the CFP here: https://augustwilson.pitt.edu/ojs/augustwilson/announcement

LMDA Crossing Borders Conference Preview

Last month you heard from Joanna Falck, one of the lead organizers (along with VP Conferences Corianna Moffatt) of LMDA’s 2018 Conference, who walked us through the conference planning and building on previous conferences and conversations. This month, we are thrilled to highlight just a few of the powerful and engaging sessions you can look forward to in Toronto!

Thursday

The Dramaturg as a Catalyst for Organizational Change
This panel and facilitated conversation investigates the power of the dramaturg to affect organizational change, particularly in organizations that have restrictive mandates (i.e. a festival that only produces one playwright; a playhouse that presents work of a single genre, or a company that represents a specific community). These companies seem to be the most challenging places to affect change, yet to stay relevant they must be responsive. This panel posits that we can learn from the dramaturgs working within those organizations in a way that will empower the rest of us to affect change in our communities.

"I wanted to host a panel that empowers dramaturgs in their position! So often, we focus on the very real need to justify our positions in organizations - so rather than focus on the challenges we face, I wanted to flip the script and take a look at how I believe dramaturgs are perfectly positioned to make change. This panel brings together a number of community change-makers to offer ideas on how we can inspire or provoke seismic shifts within the institutions and organizations we serve." - Jenna K. Rogers

Friday

Crossing Borders: From the Academy into the Profession
(Moderator: Judith Rudakoff; Panelists: Collette Radau, Aaron Jan, Adam Corrigan Holowitz, Elise A. LaCroix, and Sabah Haque)

This panel will introduce five emerging dramaturgs within five years of completing their university training. Participants will share highlights of work they are currently engaged in, as well as offer practical examples of strategies and tactics for moving out of the academy and into the profession.

"In this session five diverse Canadian ECDs will share their experiences, strategies, and tactics on moving past the walls of the academy, stepping out of their comfort zones, and plunging into the profession. Part confessional, part advertorial, these ECDs are eager to bring their work to the table and actively engage in discussion with the membership. Please support them by attending." - Judith Rudakoff

Saturday
"Teach Yourself to Fly": Exploring Dramaturgical Power and Possibility
(Moderator: Patrick Denney)

This workshop is centered around the exploration of the power of dramaturgical presence within the rehearsal process using performance methodologies adapted from new music. Starting with a performance of one of Pauline Oliveros’ Sonic Meditations, which focus on developing a sense of ensemble within a group, as well as examining and more deeply understanding the self and the space it inhabits, we seek explore new models of dramaturgy that could potentially create better understanding, and perhaps lead to a re-imagining of, our own positions as dramaturgs in contemporary theater.

"This workshop takes for granted that dramaturgs, and the art they practice, is vital and necessary. If there is a radical notion within, it is that this exploration places the physical presence of the dramaturg as one of their critical, and often overlooked, attributes. It this spirit, our goal here is to explore the ways that these bodies can act in tangible ways to influence the rehearsal process. Also, there is no need to fear the word 'sonic.' No musical experience is required to fully engage in the workshop." - Patrick Denney

Be sure to check out the Conference Sessions Manual on the LMDA website for details about all sessions!

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*Are you coming to the 2018 Conference in Toronto?*
Reserve your spot, and get the latest on programming, accommodations, and social activities, at lmda.org/conference.

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Join the conference conversation online by following us on Twitter (@LMDAmericas) and stay in touch with us on Facebook!

Please use #LMDA18 when tagging posts so we can track the virtual conversations and save them for our archives. Don't forget to #keepcalmandtrustthedramaturg
Are you hearing about your regional meetups? If not, visit lmda.org/map to find out who your LMDA Regional Representative is.

If you are working in a region that does not yet have a region-specific group, and you would like one as a way to connect with others, apply for program funding, and other benefits, please reach out to VP Board Member Jacqueline Goldfinger: regional@lmda.org.

Interested in contributing to the next newsletter? Have content ideas?
E-mail communications@lmda.org.

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