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Can you share a little about Liberation Theatre Company and its mission?

Liberation Theatre Company was established in 2009 by Spencer Scott Barros and myself, as a home for creative emerging Black playwrights, providing resources to develop their work, nurturing and inviting them to express themselves in a supportive and focused environment. Liberation is a development home. We don’t have a lot of money, so we
rarely do full productions, except in collaboration.

The Black voice is wide and varied; LTC acknowledges that and asks you to celebrate in full voice. What we do ask is a commitment to excellence, to breaking stereotypes, and to take a stand in bringing new conversations of Race and Culture to the theater. LTC is committed to helping Black playwrights bring their stories close to production ready. This process starts with our Black Playwrights’ Group; a facilitated group that meets monthly, allowing playwrights to share pages of their works-in-progress, get feedback, and participate in impassioned conversations about the changing landscape of theatre and how we can impact it.

How have your experiences as a writer and dramaturg shaped your approach in designing the new Writing Residency Program at LTC?

As a writer and dramaturg myself, I know that life gets in the way of writing. It is very easy to procrastinate - to convince ourselves that many things are more important. Writing can be lonely. A year later, your play is still not written. Writers need deadlines. Writers need incentives. Writers need a dedicated listener. The Writing Residency gives four playwrights an opportunity to write a new full-length play in nine months with the carrot of a $500 honorarium (Thanks to the Mary Duke Biddle Foundation). Playwrights agree to meet monthly with LTC where we will share pages and offer feedback on wherever they are in the process. Twice during the 9-month term there will be table work with a cast and director. It’s our inaugural year for the program, so we’ve invited theatre professionals to meet with the playwrights, procured tickets shows from various theatres, and looking into time away from the city to write. We are looking forward to an amazing year.

What are your goals and hopes for the future of the Writing Residency Program?

My vision for this residency is that this will become the starting off point for many black playwrights. They will recall Liberation Theatre Company’s Writing Residency as one of the first places they felt safe to express themselves and their singular stories. Where they knew that someone was committed to the integrity of Black stories and how it can impact society. LTC is not here to define Blackness, but to support the exploration of it. I also want the residency to be a place where playwrights learn the business of theatre; that there is craft, accountability, deadlines, feedback, re-writes, collaboration.

Interview by Megan McClain
Tell me a bit about you. How did you develop your interest in the rights of theater artists?

I came to New York at 24 as an actor, started a family in my 30s, and wanted to have more security than I could get as a working actor in New York. Nobody was knocking on my door to join their entertainment law firm in New York City after graduation, so I joined the Bronx County District Attorney’s Office as an Assistant DA. I was there for almost four years as a trial attorney and then started to build my entertainment law practice. In fact, I was doing it long before: part of the fun I had as a performer was negotiating my own contract.

What’s the nature of your practice?

My practice is focused in the entertainment industry, including dramaturgs, literary managers, directors, choreographers, and a wide array of other individuals and interests in the field. I have a client who is developing and shooting a documentary film and we’re creating a life story rights agreement with the subject. I have concert performers where contracts are new every time, and producers for whom I’ll seek to get option agreements. I develop new kinds of arrangements that haven’t existed before.

How and where did you connect to LMDA?

I met [LMDA President] Ken Cerniglia during development of Disney’s Freaky Friday at Signature Theatre in Virginia in which my wife [Heidi Blickenstaff] plays the mother role. Ken and I discussed issues that dramaturgs experience, including the lack of standard contracts. I have worked for associate directors and choreographers in the Broadway
community, who are not under the jurisdiction of any union and have no collective bargaining agreement, creating contracts with the general managers of the Broadway League. It’s a similar exercise in trying to change customs and practices for literary managers and dramaturgs, who are so integral to the development of new work, but their status, their position, their compensation far undervalue what they contribute to development.

What is your arrangement with LMDA?

The arrangement is pretty general to start. My hope is that I can help create continuity between existing agreements, change the culture on the general management side of what these deals look like (and increase receptivity), and create continuity in representation for the people of your organization, which ultimately furthers the field. It’s a slow journey that can be taken in steps.

What are some of those steps?

When I saw LMDA’s sample contracts, I could see that an immediate powerful contribution I could make was formatting, aesthetics, creating continuity, and coming up with contract terms that general managers are used to. I’ll take the biggest contracts and flesh them out, while formatting them to fit what folks are used to seeing, and we’ll then work our way through the other agreements.

Interview by Martha Wade Steketee

events

June 22-24 - 2017 LMDA Conference: Access, Activism & Art, Berkeley, CA