

Written by Mike Schulz

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Over the years, Davenport's New Ground Theatre has prided itself on the presentation of new works by emerging authors. But this year, even Artistic Director Chris Jansen is shocked to find the company not only producing eight new works in a season, but eight new works – the majority of them by local authors – over a two-night span.

Boasting what Jansen calls “everything from farce to tender, tears-come-to-your-eyes stuff,” New Ground Theatre's Playwrights Festival (running at the Village Theatre April 19 through 28) will attempt something experimental for the area: the presentation of eight one-act plays performed in repertory, with four being staged on April 19, 21, and 27, and the other four on April 20, 26, and 28.

As opposed to the offerings in 2012's Sudden Theatre event, which also found New Ground commissioning new (*really* new) works by area writers, the selections in the Playwrights Festival have been able to enjoy the benefits of re-writes and weeks of rehearsal that weren't available to the authors involved that 24-hour challenge. And while Jansen didn't originally intend the first night of this new festival to be any kind “to be continued ... ” experience, it quickly became clear that performing the one-acts in repertory style was the way to go.

“I think we must have done a really good job of getting the word out,” says Jansen of the

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play-submission process, “because we even had to turn some [playwrights] away. But that’s a luxury, to have so many good scripts that you have to say to some people, ‘I’m sorry, but we can’t fit you in this year.’”

Among the Playwrights Festival’s offerings are William Allen Pepper’s *Ferguson Payne’s Sole Problem*, in which a

writer wages war with the characters in his head; Shea Doyle’s *Potsdam*

, a coming-of-age tale set during World War II; Mary Katherine Gale’s *1706 Farnam*,

a homecoming drama about an estranged mother and daughter; and Devin Hansen’s *The Red Oven*

, which, according to Jansen, concerns “a slacker kid whose life is stuck, and gets un-stuck with visits from people like John Wayne and Mae West and Jimmy Cagney.” (A promising movie/theatre mash-up for those of us who remember Hansen as the proprietor of Rock Island’s former, beloved Brew & View venue.)

New Ground’s repertory event will also feature offerings by burgeoning Quad Cities playwrights Jason Platt, Dee Canfield, and Dana Moss-Peterson – the latter of whom has *two* titles on the festival docket – who, below, offer a few thoughts, insights, and anecdotes regarding their playwriting experiences.



Nuggets of Inspiration

Although Jason Platt’s *The Backfired Message* hasn’t yet debuted, the play’s author states – with tongue somewhat in cheek – that he’s already envisioning its two-act expansion.

“It’s gonna end up like every other silly romantic comedy out there,” says Platt. “Where two

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people don't mean to fall in love, but 'Oh my gosh! Look what happened! Look at *us!*' I see the Sandra Bullock/Matthew McConaughey movie poster where he's, like, at an angle, being reluctantly pulled towards her"

That probably sounds formulaic. But in its present form, Platt's *The Backfired Message* is really quite surprising, because its narrative actually reveals itself gradually, hint by hint, over the script's 21 pages, and its biggest mystery – one referenced several times during the play's latter half – isn't solved until 10 seconds before it ends. Not for nothing does Platt say, "When I was asked to give a description of the play, the only one I could come up with was: 'When a fortune cookie's fortune goes wrong.' I mean, how do you describe it without giving away the angle?"

A familiar and prolific area performer who has appeared in such New Ground Theatre productions as *August: Osage County* and *God of Carnage*, Platt reveals that *The Backfired Message* was initially a far different work from the one it ended up being.

"Sometimes I just start writing," says Platt of the play's origin. "And the first scene I wrote was what's now the play's *second* scene, where a girl is talking to her friend about her boyfriend dumping her. I was trying to do some sort of romantic comedy, but it really wasn't working the way I wanted it to. And then I went to another scene with two guys at an office Christmas party, and you find out the guy's divorced, and they talk about what he's gonna do And it just didn't have a hook for me, either."

But the hook eventually revealed itself during dinner with friends. "We got our fortune cookies," Platt says, "and we were all joking that the fortune-cookie thing would probably help the show, and suddenly I was like, 'Oh my God! Absolutely!' And I went home and changed the whole premise. It just kind of unfolded before me."

"You gotta listen to those little nuggets of inspiration that come to you, and realize that in the creative process, things are always up for change."

Working on the play for "an hour a day for a couple weeks," Platt says, he focused much of his time on "finding a natural form of speech" for his characters, adding, "I think that's a problem with a lot of plays – they're not written the way people actually *talk*. No one has a clear view of

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what they're saying all the time, and so I love writing with [characters] changing their minds about what they're saying, and re-directing conversations another way

"It's kind of a [David] Mamet-y type of writing," says Platt of *The Backfired Message*, "but even though you can be influenced by style, it's important to not try to *copy* a style. Because then it becomes very obvious that you're trying to be something you're not."



Another Zone

"I guess I don't really think of myself as a playwright," says Dee Canfield, author of the reconciliation drama *The Return*. "I think of myself more as a short-story and fiction and memoir writer.

"But once I agreed to do it," she continues, "it was amazing. I mean, I had days where I'd wake up at five o'clock in the morning and sit in my pajamas and work – and then realize it was noon, and I was still in my pajamas, and I hadn't had anything to eat. I really got *involved*."

And Canfield – who's also a frequent area stage actor – says she discovered just *how* involved she was during rehearsals for the recent Prenzie Players production of

Antigone

. "I had a small role in that," she says, "with only about five or 10 minutes on stage, and learning those lines was

agony

. I had thought that performing in a show and writing a play would be complementary activities. But they're not at all. I found that my mind was so taken with what I was writing that I was almost

living

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it, and so focusing my energy and concentration elsewhere was really almost painful. You are just totally in another zone.”

Calling her one-act the journey of “a young woman who goes in search of the truth about her father, and learns some things she didn’t expect to find,” Canfield says that *The Return* “is inspired by my relationship with my own father. I don’t want people to think that it’s a depiction of reality, because the characters in this play are

characters

, and

the story is fiction. But there’s an emotional truth behind it. I’m writing this to try to honor my father, and hope that I do.”

As her play shifts time periods between 1932 and 1975, with staged flashbacks revealing what *The Return*

’s “father figure” was like years before his daughter ever knew him, Canfield says she occasionally found

The Return

difficult to write “because I was really estranged from my father during my growing-up years. I mean, he served in World War II, he was hospitalized – I think he probably had what we now know as PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder] – and I really didn’t have my father around much. And when he

was

around, it was a scary experience.”

But she adds that “after he died – and I don’t know how to phrase this – I really began to reconcile myself with him through prayer, and through writing, and feel that I’m healing my relationship with my father even though he has passed. The theme of the play is about returning home. Returning to one’s self, or being restored to the family, so to speak. And my hope is that the growth of the characters on the stage, in the play, sort of reflect that.

“Of course, I don’t know how that’s gonna be taken by an audience,” adds Canfield with a laugh. “I mean, as a piece of writing, I’m happy with it. But how it reads on the page and how it plays on the stage You know, this is a whole different thing than writing a novel.”

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An Invasion with No Budget

Authors can, of course, take weeks, months, or years to finish a script. For his first playwriting attempt, Dana Moss-Peterson reveals that the one-act *Saying Goodbye* was begun and completed in “probably only 30 minutes, to be honest.”

You shouldn't, however, attribute that to undue haste. Because as Moss-Peterson explains, time was absolutely of the essence; *Saying Goodbye* was first staged last year in New Ground's Sudden Theatre event, in which authors were given a thematic prompt for a short play that had to be conceived, written, rehearsed, and performed in one 24-hour block.

“I was given the theme ‘invasion,’” says Moss-Peterson, “and that gave me a little trouble at first. I was kind of sitting there going, ‘Man, I don't know how to do an invasion with no budget ... !’

“But then I came up with this story about my grandparents,” he says of *Saying Goodbye*. “It's kind of an idealized version of them. My grandpa died in 2010, and my grandma had died about two years before that, and I had this idea about a play that was like a goodbye to Hannibal, Missouri, where I'd go in the summers to visit them. And I thought about my grandparents talking, and my grandfather saying to her, ‘You invaded my heart, and life hasn't been quite the same since.’

“So I kind of cheated,” Moss-Peterson admits. “But once I figured out how to incorporate the ‘invasion’ theme, it all clicked. I had a picture of my grandparents by my computer where I write, and it was like they were looking right at me I don't know, I just feel like my grandparents are looking over me and really rooting for me, and have a hand in a whole lot of great things that have happened to me.”

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The *Saying Goodbye* author, who's also a songwriter and is currently portraying Biff Loman in the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre's production of *Death of a Salesman*, says that one of those great things is having not one but two plays showcased in the Playwrights Festival, with his other contribution titled *Leap Day*.

"I don't know exactly how that came about," says Moss-Peterson of the play's inspiration. "But *Leap Day* is an extra day once every four years, and any time *Leap Day* comes around, I try to do something kind of fantastic, something out of the ordinary, that I normally wouldn't do. And I really liked the idea of someone taking an opportunity that they wouldn't otherwise."

The one-act concerns a pair of ex-lovers who – against what Moss-Peterson calls "apparently astronomical odds" – run into each other at a café, and engage in a conversation that "kind of leads her toward her dreams, and encourages him to let go of the past." Despite the play's melancholy theme, though, *Leap Day* viewers shouldn't expect the characters' reunion to be a wholly downbeat one.

"I sometimes think the universe wanted me to be a writer," says Moss-Peterson, "because some weird things have happened to me in my life. Just weird coincidences and funny stories, and when I thought about *Leap Day*, I knew I could get five or six of them included so the play wouldn't be too sad.

"You know, life can be kind of boring. *I* can be kind of boring. That's why I like writing short things. You can cut out the boring parts."

On April 19, 21, and 27, the plays in New Ground's festival will include The Backfired Message by Jason Platt, Ferguson Payne's Sole Problem by William Allen Pepper, Saying Goodbye by Dana Moss-Peterson, and

Repertory Stories: New Ground Theatre's Playwrights Festival, April 19 through 28 at the Village Theatre

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The Return

by Dee Canfield.

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The Red Oven

by Devin Hansen, and

Leap Day

by Dana Moss-Peterson.

Performances at the Village Theatre (2113 East 11th Street, Davenport) begin at 7:30 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays and 2 p.m. on Sundays, and admission (\$15-18) is good for either one set or both sets of one-acts. For tickets and more information, call (563)326-7529 or visit [New GroundTheatre.org](http://NewGroundTheatre.org)