

CHARTING UNMAPPED CREATIVE TERRITORY

The Civic Theatre of Central Florida's Women Playwrights Festival spotlights three never-seen-before works by promising new talents. By Scottie Campbell

ORLANDO - This is a town where guaranteed theatre audiences exist only for precocious adolescents in curly red wigs screeching about tomorrow being a better day, or for well-endowed dancers dressed as felines droning on about their precious memories. For this reason, Civic Theatre of Central Florida is taking a big risk in dedicating an entire festival to original works by women. The brainchild of Civic's producing artistic director, Ellen Jones, the Women Playwrights Festival will bring to life three pieces of theatre never seen before. Jones, who also spearheaded Civic's courageous and well-received production of *Angels in America*, believes that charting this unmapped creative territory is the responsibility of community-based theater.

Preparations for the event began when Jones read approximately 75 scripts that were submitted for the festival. She was in search of pieces that were "interesting, unusual and not duplications [of existing works]."

Although actors will be paid, she was forced to rule out plays that had too many

locations or too many characters for budgetary reasons. Her challenge was to narrow the selection to just three works that would form a cohesive evening of theatre and yet be unique pieces unto themselves.

According to Jones, her only disappointment was in finding that so many of the scripts were better suited to television sitcoms or movies. She warns that the art of theatre may be "approaching extinction" when prospective playwrights are not aware of the craft involved.

Christine Robison's *All Women Left of Center*, a collection of contemporary monologues, will begin the evening. Although intended to be performed as one piece, Jones has broken *All Women* into four sections to create a framework for the other festival works. The play was developed over the course of nine years and tells the stories of real people Robison has encountered, particularly while working for the Women's Health Crisis. A couple of the monologues take a surrealistic bent, like one piece dealing with breast cancer, and another in which the

Virgin Mary is forced to deal with her unusual predicament in the 90's. "The Visit" is about a young lesbian visiting the grave of an older lover. And in "Chubby Piggy Café," a young woman tells the story of her brother and his male lover — a relationship she viewed as a friendship until her brother's death from AIDS.

Robison opted to direct her monologues herself because the piece has become so personal to her over the years. Perhaps the key to *All Women Left of Center* can be found in her main direction to her actors: this could have happened to you, so treat it like your story. Jones says Robison's work is unlike any other she has ever seen.

The Wicked Quarter Mile, written by Liza Lentini, will be presented as the festival's first full work, and *JuJu and the Dairy Dream* by Elizabeth Scales Rheinfrank will

be performed in act two. Both pieces are directed by April-Dawn Gladu, who has collaborated with Lentini and Rheinfrank previously at the Women's Project & Productions in New York City.

Gladu's career has emphasized the works of women playwrights because she feels the need to support this underdeveloped aspect of theatre. Her temperament seems ideal for dealing with original pieces, as she sees herself as a facilitator aiding



Playwrights ELIZABETH SCALES and LIZA LENTINI in New York City.

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in the development of new plays.

"A play never really belongs to the director," says Gladu. "It is born with the playwright, and the actor gives it life." Her respect and passion for development of new writers is palpable.

The Woman Playwrights Festival marks the sixth project on which Gladu and Lentini have collaborated. Over the various projects they have formed a strong friendship and trusting working relationship. One such project, *Drowning in Euphoria*, closed in New York City earlier this month.

Gladu admires Lentini's ability to create a new universe in her writing that looks remarkably like ours. *The Wicked Quarter Mile* takes a twisted look at dating in today's world, as a woman invites her ex-boyfriend to a diner to seek closure in their relationship — but that gesture proves less amicable than it appears on the surface. Jones says she was intrigued with the piece's stylized "Donna Reed meets Christopher Durang" sensibility.

Rheinfrank describes her writing style as "Southern Magical Realism." Although *JuJu and the Dairy Dream* is set in Mississippi, Rheinfrank was inspired to write the play while driving over a "nasty, rusty bridge" in Gorda, Alabama. She began imagining the people in this little town, and wound up with a play that brings three women from diverse

backgrounds together to discover their common ground.

Jones hopes to hold a festival of original works each season at Civic Theatre, provided her latest venture is received favorably. As with any production at the theatre, the success of the show is dependent on audience response. Jones urges theatre-goers to drop a letter or make a phone call to Civic to let them know your reaction to the festival. In a "one-critic town," reviews are worthless, and box office revenue is an otherwise unreliable method of determining a show's success.

The cast for works in the Women Playwrights Festival includes Jason Brantman (Civic's *Just Say No*), Laura Harn, Anthony Holsten, Jamie-Lyn Johnston, Paul Dale, Fiona Santos, Amanda Schlater, Terry Storrs (*House of Yes* at Theatre Downtown), and Miriam Saunders (a Per4mants favorite).

The prevailing sentiment among those involved with the festival is that people — women and men — should come and experience these new works. It may not alter your life... but then again, it just may. The opportunity is your's for the taking.

The Women Playwright's Festival runs on Civic's SecondStage from Feb. 25 through March 21, Thursdays through Saturdays at 8:00 PM, and Sundays at 2 PM. The Civic Theatre of Central Florida is located at 1001 E. Princeton St. in Loch Haven Park. Tickets are \$15 and can be purchased at the theatre's box office at (407) 896-7365. ♡



Actors rehearse a scene from Liza Lentini's *The Wicked Quarter Mile*.