

New York dramas, Long Island theater

by Anthony J. Howard

The performers are all experienced, Broadway-quality actors, the scripts were written by award-winning playwrights whose works have played to New York audiences and critics.

Now they're going to find out what Long Island audiences think, during the second annual Professional New Play Readings Festival at Dowling College.

Organized by Dowling drama professor John Monteleone, the five-night festival features the work of four professional playwrights and one student author. All in various stages of development, the plays will be read by professional actors in seated and staged readings at the college's Performing Arts Center.

One of the final steps before production, the readings are an integral element in the play's creative development. Often, it is the first time a playwright hears the words they've written spoken aloud in a theatrical setting.

According to Monteleone, the informal venue provides playwrights with a pressure free environment to gauge audience reaction. Then they can decide which parts work and what needs rewriting.

"It's all part of the creative process," Monteleone said. "It allows the playwrights to see the play, to hear the play as it's going on, to get a sense of what is going to work, and they can do that in part by seeing the audiences' reactions."

It's not just the immediate reactions writers are looking for. After each reading, the proverbial fourth wall between the stage and audience will be removed. Audience members will then be invited to critique the play, offer suggestions and, in effect, guide its creative direction.

You don't have to be a drama critic to assess each work. All the writers ask for is an honest, thoughtful reaction to the way the play made them think. Different audiences will react in disparate ways, but every one is equally legitimate and welcomed. "Everyone is capable of responding out of their own inner life, because we all have different life experiences and education,"

Monteleone said.

It's that personal, unbiased reaction of ordinary theater-goers that student and playwright Sal DiVincenzo is anxious to hear. "That's what the play reading is all about. I want to hear what the people think of my work," said DiVincenzo, who will have two readings featured on Sunday December 17, at 7 p.m.

"For me, I don't necessarily want to hear the perspective of the critic, I want to know what the audience thinks. Were you entertained? Did it bother you? What was it all about for you?" said the Dowling senior, who expects to graduate this December with a degree in management.



The Workshop playwrights with work in Dowling's Play Reading Festival are, from left in back, Joe Lauinger, Robert Trumbull, Sheila Walsh and John Monteleone. In front is director Ahvi Spindell.

DiVincenzo was bitten by the theater bug after taking an improvisation class taught by Monteleone last year. Though still a business student, the class showed him where his dreams really are. "John was the teacher and he just inspired me to do what I always dreamed about doing," he said. Last May, DiVincenzo produced his first play, "What? If!" for Dowling's student production.

The first DiVincenzo play to be read at the festival will be "Trilogy One," consisting of three separate short acts that deal with the weighty subjects of life, death and sex in a lighter fashion. "It's a very silly, funny play, that's different than what I usually do. I'm really curious to find out what the audience thinks about this one," he said.

His second reading is titled "Fear the Woman," which explores a group of abused Long Island women who begin to devolve into the men who disrespected them.

The festival is the second to be organized by Monteleone, a playwright and actor whose work "The Lamp" will be featured on December 16. Held over five nights in early December, the readings are all free and open to the public at Dowling College's Performing Arts Center in Oakdale. Last year's reading featured the work of novelist Joe Pinturo and television writer Gary Kott, along with Monteleone.

This year's crop includes some lesser-known, but experienced, writers who are members of a New York City cooperative of actors, directors and playwrights known as The Workshop. Located on Theater Row, where many Off-Broadway productions are staged, The Workshop gives members an economical means to stage their work for interested producers and audiences.

The festival opens on Saturday, December 8 with Robert Trumbull's "Question of Mercy," which deals with a son's struggle to fulfill his father's wish to assist his suicide. Then on Sunday, December 9, award-winning playwright Sheila Walsh's "Two Sides of the Story" will explore the relationships between eight very different characters.

After a successful New York premier reading at The Workshop, Joe Lauinger's "Dirty Work" comes to the Dowling Reading Festival on Friday, December 15. Lauinger's play focuses on the struggle to fulfill our life's dreams and aspirations.

The festival concludes with the reading of Monteleone's "The Lamp" and DiVincenzo's two works on December 16 and 17. All readings start at 7 p.m. and are free to the public.

Monteleone is hoping the Workshop and Dowling College can create a synergistic effort that will provide writers with an arena to develop their work. In exchange, drama students and local theater audiences will be given the opportunity to participate in the creative development of the authors' works. And the college can offer this artistic venue for a minimal outlay.

"I can expose Long Island audiences to exciting, innovative work that is being developed in New York, for very little money," Monteleone said.

While Long Island audiences are devoted theater-goers, most Island playhouses offer just the basic fare of commercially popular hits. The works offered at Dowling's Reading Festival are, in Monteleone's words, "more challenging."

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not against commercial theater. Some of its very good. But we're about artistic development and raising questions about culture and humanity in our plays," Monteleone said. ■

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