

New Play Fest stages first two-city alliance



Playwright-director Robert Ford (right), TheatreSquared's artistic director, leads an audience discussion at the 2010 Arkansas New Play Fest in Fayetteville.

By [Eric E. Harrison](#)

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LITTLE ROCK — Five new plays in various stages of development and a brand-new, first-time collaboration between two professional theater companies will be on display this week in the 2011 Arkansas New Play Fest.

The third annual festival, put together by Fayetteville's TheatreSquared, opens Thursday on that company's home stage, Walton Arts Center's Nadine Baum Studios, 505 W. Spring St., Fayetteville, with two staged reading performances each Thursday and Friday.

Part of the festival then moves to central Arkansas for the weekend, with, as part of a partnership with the Arkansas Repertory Theatre, two staged readings each Saturday and May 22 at the new Argenta Community Theater, 405 Main St., North Little Rock.

Meanwhile, somewhat less formal theatrical festivities will continue in Fayetteville, including a playwrights workshop, readings, an improvisational showcase and a preview of a new school touring show Saturday and a young playwrights showcase and a do-it-in-a-day play competition May 22.

The Northwest Arkansas lineup includes Thursday readings of *Disfarmer* by Arkansas playwright Werner Trieschmann, about the eccentric Heber Springs photographer whose Depression-era portraits of the locals caused a big stir when they were recently "rediscovered" by the art world; and *The Spiritualist* by Robert Ford, TheatreSquared's artistic director and playwright-in-residence, about an English widow who cooks for a school meal service and communes with the spirits of dead composers.

Friday's readings will encompass *They Want* by Minneapolis-based Alan Berks, a modern retelling of the *Oresteia* by Greek tragedian Aeschylus, exploring the private wartime struggles of a powerful family; and *In the Book Of* by New York-based playwright John Walch, a modern re-imagining of the biblical book of Ruth, involving two young widows, a U.S. Army lieutenant stationed near Kabul and her Afghan translator.

Saturday readings at the Argenta Community Theater will be *They Want* and *Disfarmer*; on May 22, *In the Book Of* and another Ford play, *Look Away*.

"I always want the Rep to be involved in new plays," says Arkansas Rep artistic director Bob Hupp. "But it has not been a large part of our mission here. We don't have space necessarily to develop new plays, beyond what we do with *Voices at the River*," a biennial summer festival for black and Hispanic playwrights.

"And I've always been interested in putting more Rep focus on plays by Arkansans about Arkansas, on our region of the country. And when I met the folks at TheatreSquared, and knew that they did a play festival; while it's not all about Arkansan playwrights or Arkansas themes, it is a focus of that project.

"So it seemed like we didn't need to reinvent the wheel because the wheel was already being invented in Fayetteville. It seemed like a win-win: a chance to partner with another theater company, to introduce their work and their company to central Arkansas, and to give Rep audiences an opportunity to hear new plays, works that they had never heard before."

Martin Miller, TheatreSquared's managing director, says Hupp "approached us earlier this year about the possibility of bringing the new plays that we workshop here in Northwest Arkansas down to Little Rock as well, and we're excited to do that."

SECOND ROUND

Trieschmann's *Disfarmer* is a return entrant. It debuted in the festival's first year, 2009, which Miller says was supported by a seed grant from the Department of Arkansas Heritage. "Each of the plays in that festival were Arkansas stories, and we've kind of kept the spirit of that by featuring two Arkansas playwrights each year," he says.

"This is my second time with the festival and it is with this same play, *Disfarmer*," says Trieschmann, who does freelance writing for the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* among his journalistic and literary endeavors. "I owe TheatreSquared so much, since they commissioned the play in the first place. A few weeks ago I went up to Fayetteville for an early workshop; I came away with some great ideas for interesting new scenes."

Trieschmann calls *Disfarmer's* life "absolutely fascinating - he's easily one of the most intriguing artists that Arkansas has ever produced, and the competition in that category is fierce. He died obscure and unknown in 1959. After his death, his work was discovered and today he's considered one of America's finest photographers.

"My play goes back and forth between *Disfarmer's* life and the frenzy that spun up in 2005 when two New York City galleries swept in to Heber Springs to buy *Disfarmer* prints, which were located in scrapbooks and attics of families in Heber Springs."

Ford, who has written two of the works on the festival card, one of which - *Look Away* - he will be directing himself, and is also the director of a third - *They Want* - says that while it took a team to put the festival together, "in terms of play selection, the buck ultimately stops with me."

Ford explains that the plays in the festival are in various stages of development. Some of them will involve more staging than others, but none of them will be "blocked," that is, have fixed movements tied to specific lines.

"In *Look Away*, I will imagine that the actors will be standing at music stands and they probably won't venture too far away from that," he says.

HARD-HITTING VARIETY

Ford promises that the plays in the festival will offer "a great variety of stuff," but warns that some of it will be "pretty hard-hitting adultstuff," with "some strong adult language." *They Want*, based, as it is, on a Greek tragedy, features some inherent violence, and *Look Away* is centered on a near-lynching. So he's pretty much

recommending that the kids stay home.

Hupp, Miller and Ford agree that nobody involved necessarily gets any leg up on producing any of these plays.

"Every play we put in the New Play Fest we have a bit of an eye toward a future production possibility, and that's no exception," Miller says.

"But I will say that's exactly the track that Sundown Town blazed just this last year: It was developed at the Arkansas New Play Fest, commissioned for it, and this year it was a record-setting production for us." The show drew 2,800 people in an extended run in the 150-seat theater space.

There are no specific plans for the fledgling partnership between the Rep and TheatreSquared - say, for future co-productions, but Hupp, Miller and Ford are all hoping the relationship will continue.

"This is an experiment for us; it's our first partnership with TheatreSquared and it has gone very smoothly," Hupp says. "I'm hoping it will be the beginning of an ongoing partnership."

There has already been one case of unplanned crosspollination: The Rep's production of *The 39 Steps*, which opens June 10, includes two members of TheatreSquared's 2010 cast: Avery Clark and Jason Guy.

Lineup

The Northwest Arkansas lineup, at Walton Arts Center's Nadine Baum Studios, 505 W. Spring St., Fayetteville:

Thursday

5:30 p.m.: Opening reception (sponsored by BHK Kafe, Jammin' Java) 6:30 p.m.: *Disfarmer* by Werner Trieschmann 8:30 p.m.: *The Spiritualist* by Robert Ford

Friday

6:30 p.m.: *They Want* by Alan Berks 8:30 p.m.: *In the Book Of* by John Walch

Saturday

1 p.m.: Works in Progress, Arkansas Playwrights Workshop, a group of Northwest Arkansas writers who meet monthly to read and develop new scripts, read from works in progress (free).

3 p.m.: National Writing Project Readings. Northwest Arkansas teachers participating in the National Writing Project, read from works developed during the current school year's writing initiatives (free).

6:30 p.m.: *The Poe Show* by Jordan Haynes, Morgan Hicks and Kris Stoker. A fast-paced, interactive "and somewhat unorthodox" take on the works of Edgar Allan Poe. TheatreSquared will tour the show to Arkansas junior high and high schools in the fall.

9 p.m.: Comedy Improvisation Showcase, featuring Northwest Arkansas troupes Dan's Party and Phunbags Comedy Improv and musical guests Black & Tan

May 22

2 p.m.: The Arkansas Young Playwrights Showcase, in partnership with the University of Arkansas Brown Chair of Literacy, public readings of five scripts by area students (free) 6:30 p.m.: The 24-Hour Play-Off, in partnership with Fayetteville-based Ceramic Cow Productions. Six teams of five write, rehearse and perform a new 10-minute play within 24 hours, competing for a \$500 prize, sponsored by Fayetteville businesses.

Except as noted, tickets are \$7, \$10 for the improvisation showcase and the 24-Hour Play-Off; \$30 New Play Pass. (479) 443-5600; waltonartscenter.org.

At the Argenta Community Theater in North Little Rock, 405 Main St.:

Saturday

4 p.m.: *They Want* 8 p.m.: *Disfarmer*

May 22

3 p.m.: In the Book Of 7 p.m.: Look Away by Robert Ford

Tickets: \$7 per show, \$20 for all four. (501) 378-0405; therep.org.

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