

For the First Time Anywhere:

Emerging Playwrights at the Hangar

In 2001 the Hangar Theatre decided to produce new plays and support emerging playwrights. Without the engagement of a theatre, director, cast, and audience, a script can never reach its full potential.

Artistic Director Kevin Moriarty explains why the Hangar took on the task. "In my first year as artistic director it was important to me that we make a strong, clear statement that one of our artistic values is to nurture and develop new plays and emerging writers. I was fortunate to have an Executive Director and a Board of Directors who were so willing to make this commitment with me from the start."

The first new play selected for production was Cherylene Lee's *The Legacy Codes*, which has since gone on to productions at Theatre Works in Palo Alto and the Pan Asian Repertory in New York City. Recently we caught up with a few other playwrights whose Hangar premiere plays have gone on to runs in other theatres across the country.

Iramar Moses' *Bach at Leipzig* premiered at the Hangar in the summer of 2002. Since then it has appeared at Florida Stage, Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, and A Contemporary Theatre in Seattle. Early in November it will receive its New York City debut Off-Broadway at the New York Theatre Workshop.

"The Hangar was one of my first professional productions ever," recalls Moses. "I look back with enormous fondness on the experience. I learned a lot—the difference between how you imagine a play on the page, and how it interacts with the audience—things that are vitally important for a playwright to learn." And, he adds, "I feel forever grateful to Kevin and others at the Hangar, who took a chance on my work when absolutely nobody knew who I was."

Moses has a new play, *Celebrity Row*, which will be workshopped at the Portland Center Stage in Oregon this summer and performed on its mainstage in March of 2006.

Also in the summer of 2002, Betty Shamiel's one-act, *Architecture*, was chosen from over 140 submissions to be performed as part of the Lab Company's New Play Festival in the Wedge. Since then Shamiel has reworked it into a full-length play, *The Black Eyed*. It premiered at San Francisco's Magic Theatre in May of this year and will soon be produced Off-Broadway at the Culture Project.

Shamiel spent two weeks in Ithaca while *Architecture* rehearsed. "It was critical for me to see a successful production of the play at that time," she says. "The play is quite experimental, so the chance to see it on its feet working well gave me the confidence to keep developing



Bach at Leipzig, Mainstage 2002

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the play. The artistic staff at the Hangar, particularly Kevin Moriarty, were extremely supportive." Shamiel later asked her Hangar director, Sam Gold, to direct her play, *Chocolate in Heat—Growing Up Arab in America*, which had three acclaimed Off-Off-Broadway runs and toured universities across the country.

Last summer, Kenny Finkle's *Indoor/Outdoor* premiered at the Hangar, and now three more productions are in the works. The New York City Summer Play Festival chose it as one of 16 out of 1,500 submissions, to have a week's run in an off-Broadway theatre in mid-July. The Colony Theatre in Burbank, California will produce the show in August. And next year Kevin Moriarty will re-create his Hangar production at Trinity Repertory Company in Providence, Rhode Island.

Before *Indoor/Outdoor*, Finkle had already done a lot of work with the Hangar. He was selected as a Lab Company playwright in 1998 and went on to work as a Hangar Theatre teaching artist in the Ithaca and Trumansburg school districts for four years. When Kevin Moriarty became artistic director he commissioned Finkle to write *Josh Keenan Comes Out to the World* for the School Tour program.

"Although I went to Columbia grad school for playwrighting, for me the Hangar feels more like grad school," Finkle says. "They've supported me artistically and financially. They've helped me find my voice. I don't think I could have done it without them. Kevin has been an amazing collaborator and believed in my work in

ways that I haven't been able to at times."

Doing these world premieres presents unique challenges for a theatre, explains Moriarty. "You have to introduce the audience to the play from scratch - you can't count on the recognizability of the title. To some extent a title such as *My Fair Lady* or *Cats* can sell itself; the audience already has a sense of the show, and can decide relatively easily if they want to see it."

It also takes more resources to produce a new work, says Moriarty. "We bring the playwright to Ithaca in the winter for development workshops and readings, and then in



Indoor/Outdoor, Mainstage 2004

the summer they're in residence throughout the rehearsal process to work with the director, cast and designers. We also have to budget extra money for production expenses, because when working on a new play the scenery, costumes, and props can change radically as the script develops. For instance, last year when working on *Indoor/Outdoor*, Kenny added a new character to two scenes of the play at a rehearsal several hours before opening night. It made the play much better, but it also required the costume designer and shops to design and build two new costumes very quickly, and we had to adjust the light cues, as well."

But it's all worth it, according to Moriarty. "The challenges pale beside the joys of introducing our audience to work that is fresh, dynamic and exciting, and our vital contribution to the national theatre community through our commitment to nurturing and developing plays and playwrights who are changing the face of the American theater." ■ Judith Pratt