



Playwright's Lab  
at Hollins University

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# The Lab Report

Playwriting News from the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

Volume 03, Issue 07 (December, 2009)

## Crossing The Threshold by Maura Campbell Performed in Vermont



Maura Campbell adapted the inspirational story of Sarah Howell in 2004. Sara grew up in the 1950s and 60s with cerebral palsy. Howell refused to let her disability hold her back, and for 30 years rode and built a special relationship with a horse named Ringo.

"On my horse nobody could tell that anything was wrong with

me," She wrote in her autobiography *Ringo's Gift*.

Campbell's adaptation, *Crossing the Threshold*, has been performed regularly in schools around Vermont since it was first developed with Howell's input and blessing.

For this production at Randolph Union High School, which was

presented to the entire student body, Maura was also hired to direct

Maura said, "It was a wonderful cast of students, some of whom had never been on stage, some of whom had reading problems and other barriers to theater work. I was told later by the faculty that all of their teachers reported a dramatic increase in class participation and enthusiasm in general. My favorite kind of theater experience—transforming lives!"

Howell, a resident of Randolph, was on hand for rehearsals and hopes the play might be produced nationally. "The story creates a really comfortable atmosphere where (kids) can speak out," Howell explained. "That's what my horse did for me—unconditional acceptance."

[mauracampbellplaywright.com](http://mauracampbellplaywright.com)

## Student Spotlight: James L. Lewis

James L. Lewis is a new student in the playwriting program this past summer and is currently finishing up an independent study that has him writing a new play dealing with issues surrounding homelessness. As part of the coursework in developing the play, James has been conducting interviews with residents of a local shelter in his community. He sees playwriting as a tool for reform.

"The program at Hollins works well for me because of the full time position I have with a non-profit organization that allows me to have the summers off," Lewis said of his acceptance into the MFA program in playwriting. "I absolutely loved my time spent at Hollins and I

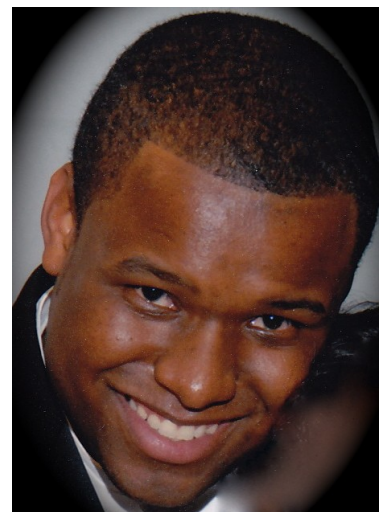
tell everyone proudly about the program."

James grew up in a single parent home with his mother who taught him the importance of education and hard work.

Lewis has always worked hard. His first job was at age 15 and in high school he played four sports, acted in theatre productions and sang in an Renaissance a cappella group. In college he sometimes worked three jobs, lead an on campus ministry group and maintained a 3.7 GPA with a concentration in technical theatre—though he often found himself playing principal acting roles in productions.

"As an only child with a mother who could not afford the latest

toys, I learned how to use my imagination," Lewis told us. "Creating plays is a calling greater than myself. I need help to fulfill this calling. I refuse to be silent when I can use my voice for change."

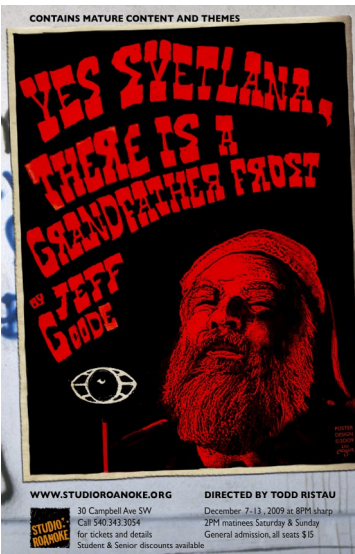


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## Yes, Svetlana, there is a Grandfather Frost by Jeff Goode at Studio Roanoke



Jeff Goode is a playwright, screenwriter, director and producer currently living in Los Angeles. Jeff is a frequent guest of the Playwright's Lab, and will be teaching courses this summer in adaptation and writing plays with music. He helped found the original No Shame Theatre at the University of Iowa and his work in film and television includes creating the animated series *American Dragon Jake Long*. His plays and musicals are widely published and produced all over the world.

Goode is perhaps best known for his irreverent Christmas play *The Eight: Reindeer Monologues*, which led to carving out a niche

for himself writing unconventional holiday offerings such as *Seven Santas* and *Marley's Ghost*.

His most recent play, *Yes, Svetlana, There is a Grandfather Frost* had its world premier this month at Studio Roanoke, directed by the Lab's program director Todd Ristau.

What would an established writer like Goode get out of premiering a play in Roanoke rather than in New York, Los Angeles, or Chicago?

"I knew that the production would be top notch," Good explained. "I've worked with Todd Ristau for many years and he has vast experience developing and producing new work. So, the thing that surprised me most was how valuable the city of Roanoke itself was to the production. You see, living and working in Los Angeles, I have a pretty good grasp of what will or won't work in that theatre community. And sometimes I can extrapolate that to New York. But it's much harder to determine whether a show that was a hit on one of the coasts will transfer to the South or the Midwest without actually going there and putting up a staged reading or a workshop production to test the



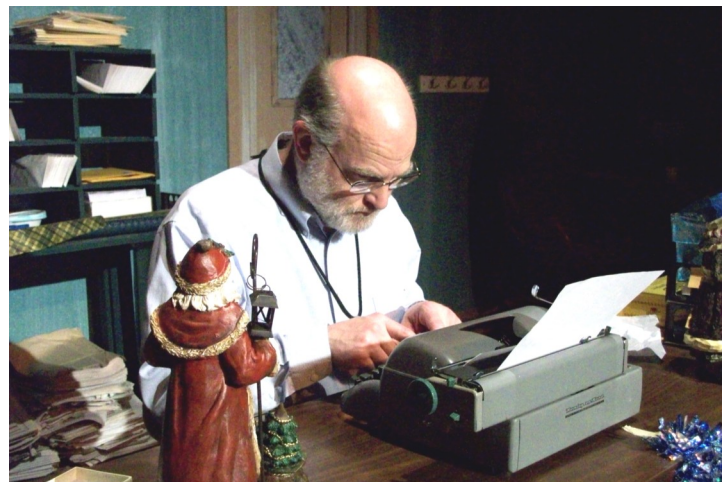
waters. Roanoke's uniquely diverse and heterogeneous theatre-going crowd provided an amazing opportunity to be get feedback from audiences of all political stripes all in one night. Premiering the show in Roanoke and taking part in the talkbacks at Studio Roanoke saved me months of work-shopping the script and I was able to get the play ready for publication much faster than usual because of it."

In fact, the play is already scheduled for publication with Original Works Publishing.

Ristau, too, was excited about working with Jeff again.

"I love Jeff's work," Ristau said.

"I think this is his best play yet and has the widest appeal. It has a unit set, no swear words, and a wonderful message that everyone will enjoy regardless of religious faith or political leanings. Because Jeff and I both cut our artistic teeth at No Shame, I know his sensibilities humor, timing and rhythms—it was easy to cast the right people from our own local No Shame pool. Everything just fell into place. I'm very proud of this show. And I'm glad that the program, in partnership with Studio Roanoke, is able to provide growth opportunities for our faculty and our local actors by building on what they've learned at No Shame and transferring it to a larger stage."



[www.studioroanoke.org/svetlana](http://www.studioroanoke.org/svetlana)

## The UnXmas Story by Jeff Goode and directed by Kenley Smith at Studio Roanoke



**The UnXmas Story** is a short play written by Jeff Goode that made a perfect companion piece to the production of *Svetlana*. Kenley Smith, the first graduate of the program and founder of Studio Roanoke, directed the reading.

Kenley said of the experience, "It was cool to do a Jeff Goode piece as part of the Lunchbox Series. We're used to working with brand new playwrights and here's a guy who is very established with a great reputation. It was a little intimidating to have him right there, looking over your shoulder."

*UnXmas Story* takes some liberties with the traditional Christmas narrative, a risk for a free reading in a region known for taking religion pretty seriously.

"Lunchboxes aren't as edgy as the usual Studio Roanoke fare," Kenley said. "But, that doesn't mean we don't take chances with them. A Jeff Goode play is always about something else, and in the end we find out it is alright because all these strange goings on are really a case of mistaken identity. And it was a lot of fun, the audience was alright with it because Jeff is a hell of a great playwright and

gives you a great narrative and vivid characters so you're really involved—even in a short piece like this—because there are enough twists and turns that you don't have time to be offended, you're too busy being entertained."

Jeff participated in talkbacks with audiences after both *Sventlana* and this reading, and thinks that can be as useful for the community as for the playwright.

Goode said, "I have always found that being able to present a range of work—even if it's just two pieces—is a fantastic way to get to know a writer. Because it's natural to assume after seeing just one

play that everything else they've written is exactly the same. But, when you can see a second piece, or some of their work at No Shame Theatre, you start to get a broader sense of that writer's voice and whether you want to find out even more about them."

MFA playwright Ben R. Williams performed in the reading along with Ross Laguzza (of Big Lick Conspiracy), Austin Alderman, Shay Mullins and William Penn (who serves on the Studio Roanoke Board of Directors).

[www.jeffgoode.com](http://www.jeffgoode.com)

## Area Highlight: MyScoper.Com is one BIG Regional Calendar

**Beth Deel** is an intra-disciplinary artist living and working in Roanoke, VA. She has an MFA in Dance from Hollins University and American Dance Festival and holds a BFA in painting and printmaking from the Kansas City Art Institute in Kansas City, MO.

Ms. Deel has teamed with design maven, Wendy Schuyler, to create Roanoke's first ever intra-disciplinary design and event action firm, upUPperiscope.com. Their most exciting and popular projects to date include the brilliant

interactive online calendar [www.myScoper.com](http://www.myScoper.com) and it's new sister publication *A Useful Paper*.

Beth and her staff work hard to have on MyScoper.com a comprehensive list of every event with a 2-3 mile driving radius of the city of Roanoke crossing all ages and categories: Art, Dance, Theatre, Music, Night Life, Sports, Women Only events, Kids, Tweens, Teens, Food, Wine, Libations—everything!

"It's really easy to use," Beth

said of her creation. "Your cat can do it. You can check out events, you can submit events, you don't need an account or a user name. You get in, you get out, you see the goods, and then you leave!"

All submitted events then appear on 11-15 other local sites, blogs, and even WDBJ7.com because MyScoper is actually the TV Station's Community Calendar.

The "MyScoper Girls" are artists, and they wanted to create a useful calendar for artists and art related events as a useful resource with easy to access information for the

"twenty-something" crowd in Roanoke...one of our region's primary economic drivers.



[myscoper.com](http://myscoper.com)

## Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

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### From the Director: Pressing the Hot Button Issues

I'm in the process of preparing to teach a class next summer on banned plays which is going to focus on controversial topics explored on the stage, why segments of the community reacted strongly enough to protest the performances and what are the motivations, dating back to Plato, for seeking to place restrictions on what is and is not allowed to be performed in front of live audiences.

The research and the reading have been pretty amazing so far—and while I'm not going to try and squeeze a lecture on the history of controversial theatre into this short column, I do want to share a few thoughts about playwrights wanting to explore hot button issue-oriented themes in their work.

While controversy generates press, and press generates ticket sales, and ticket sales are one measure of success—being controversial for controversy's sake isn't as interesting as fearlessly saying something that might be, to paraphrase Al Gore, an inconvenient truth.

Ibsen didn't write *Doll House* because he hoped people would rip up chairs and throw them at the stage in outrage over watching a mother abandon her husband and children. He wrote it because he wanted to dramatize an idea he had about the importance of self-actualization. And when he bowed to pressure to change the ending so that Nora returns to her husband, the rioting went away, but so did the ticket sales.

Now, controversial plays can draw an audience wanting to be shocked, but they can also drive away funders, get you chastised in the press, and can...believe it or not...genuinely offend people. Sometimes offend them so deeply that it doesn't matter what your message is, they can't stomach the messenger.

I think the real key to a successful issue play is to give us a character we care about who must deal with the issue in personal way. Believe me, nobody likes to be lectured in the theatre. Don't moralize. Let the audience do the moralizing after the plight of your character has sufficiently moved them to do so.



**Todd Ristau, Director**