

Recasting the Last Frontier Theatre Conference
As bigwigs bow out, participants note a more practical, egalitarian tone

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It might surprise many Alaskans to know that the Last Frontier Theatre Conference has been around only since 1993. Despite its relative youth, it has quickly become one of the marquee events in Alaska's -- and perhaps American theater's -- summer season, every year inducing some of the leading lights of the stage to hie themselves to Prince William Sound for a week of hobnobbing with one another and critiquing dramatic works by the next generation of playwrights, Alaskans and Outsiders both.

Every year, that is, until this one.

Aye, there's the rub -- and a question too. In November, conference founder and Prince William Sound Community College president Jo Ann McDowell resigned her post amid a cloud of controversy, leaving responsibility for the conference in the hands of conference coordinator Dawson Moore.

In the wake of McDowell's resignation, conference fixture Edward Albee bitterly signaled his solidarity with her by boycotting this year's event. As went Albee, so went most of the other American theater luminaries who have made it such a high-profile event. While the University of Alaska system declared its strong belief that the show ought to go on, many wondered: Without McDowell and the big guns from New York and elsewhere, come June, would there be any "there" there in Valdez?

Early last week, we took a midconference pulse, asking a select group of conference veterans -- including three who have reviewed theater for the Daily News and other publications and two who have been active in theater in Juneau and Anchorage -- what the playwrights, actors and others attending this year's conference were talking about, what was working, what wasn't and what could be done better in future.

THE BUZZ

It was perhaps inevitable that speculation about McDowell's abrupt departure would continue during the conference. The murmuring has not, however, proved to be the dominant note



Jill Bess presented her one-woman play "The Mommy Dance" last week during the 13th annual Last Frontier Theatre Conference in Valdez. *(Photo by GEN HASEGAWA / Prince William Sound Community College)*



New York actor and playwright Ronald Rand performed his one-man play "Clurman" in a featured presentation at the Last Frontier Theatre Conference. *(Photo by GEN HASEGAWA / Prince William Sound Community College)*



Actors Molly Killoran, left, and Leif Sawyer read "Come Home, Kumbunches" by Kevin DiPirro

in the theater conference buzz.

"I would say the rumor mill is still quite active," said Jeffrey Herrmann, producing director at Juneau's Perseverance Theater, who has attended the conference four times previously and was present this year with his company's "Columbinus," a play about the Columbine High School shootings co-written by Perseverance creative director PJ Paparelli.

during the Play Lab. The lab, long a key event of the conference, lets up-and-coming playwrights get feedback on their works. *(Photo by GEN HASEGAWA / Prince William Sound Community College)*

"Everyone seems to believe that Jody's departure was, ultimately, not her choice, but no one knows for sure and no one who really knows anything is talking. Everyone seems to believe that Edward has retaliated by boycotting the conference and making sure his friends, who have attended year after year in the past, don't attend either. It seems everyone genuinely misses these people, both because of the star power they brought (and) the legitimacy they brought to the conference and its activities. A lot of folks had also formed friendships over the years with people who attended the conference year after year from New York, so there was this feeling of a reunion each June, which seems strangely absent this year."

That sense of absence didn't add up to a crippling nostalgia, however. Others said the gestalt among attendees was almost uniformly positive, that most seemed ready to move on.

"The mission of the conference is to serve playwrights," said Daily News theater critic Catherine Stadem, who has attended every Last Frontier conference. "My impression ... is that people are too busy doing what they came here to do to speculate on what happened (with McDowell)."

In addition to covering the conference for the Daily News, Stadem has screened scripts and helped shape the conference program as well as acting as coordinator for and panelist in the Play Lab.

"Many playwrights (who've come to Valdez) from around the world are first-timers and aren't interested in what was but rather in what is the current experience," she said.

The bulk of participant opinion she encountered seemed to hold that things were working smoothly, Stadem stressed; the food was better, and the faculty gave participants what they had come for -- "really helpful, constructive criticism."

"Dawson Moore's casting of the readings is also excellent this year," she said. "I've heard very few complaints from playwrights about their casts."

Kristina Church, who has been cast as a reader and actor during seven previous conferences and who has also attended as a director, was able to lend an actor's perspective. She counted herself among those who didn't miss what she called "the cult of personality" that tended to obtrude in previous years.

"It's refreshing to focus on the work," said Church, who has reviewed theater frequently for the Anchorage Press and recently filed her first review for the Daily News. "The celebrities added a certain panache to the proceedings and helped make it more interesting to non-theater people, but there was far too much emphasis on honoring the Great Ones and not enough on nurturing the up-and-coming ones."

Perseverance's Herrmann said there

was almost universal support for the program changes Moore instituted.

"Before (Perseverance's performance of) 'Columbinus' on Sunday, Dawson spoke, as did PWSCC

interim president Doug Desorcie, UA president Mark Hamilton and (University of Alaska Anchorage) chancellor Elaine Maimon," Herrmann said. "There was applause every time one of them spoke about the great job Dawson was doing or how the conference was going to get through this transition and be stronger and better for it.

"I was impressed that everyone was acknowledging the sweeping changes and the difficulties that they were going to impose. People weren't ignoring it and acting like nothing had changed."

WHAT'S WORKING

Stadem, who attended many of the play readings as well as most of the playwright workshops, pointed to the emphasis on "how-to stuff ... hands-on workshops with very practical information (on subjects) such as self-producing."

Playwright and actor Mark Muro, also an occasional reviewer for the Daily News, seconded Stadem's sentiment about the value of this year's emphasis on practicality over personality.

Muro had one of his own plays read, and he read in plays by other writers and attended workshops and classes.

"The people they have brought in this year are terrific teachers," he said, "generous, helpful, sincere and totally devoted to theater. All the attendees are here to share what they know."

Shane Mitchell -- Anchorage actor and director, UAA faculty member and a featured artist on this year's conference program -- acknowledged that his involvement in this year's conference and the UAA system might seem to prejudice him positively to the "new" conference. But, he said, any reasonably objective observer would call this year's emphasis on acting workshops -- a sporadic part of previous programs -- "a really, really positive development."

"The conference has featured acting workshops and occasional directing workshops off and on, but ... the acting workshops this year have been extremely well attended and energizing," he said.

"In previous years, Hollywood or Broadway talent would show up to lead an actor through exercises in front of a group. But this year, everyone in the workshops is actively participating, not just watching one person be coached. I think this may be (because) people teaching these workshops are actual professors of theater. They're used to teaching people rather than being a person on Broadway who's the center of attention."

Benjamin Brown also has long experience as an actor at the Valdez conference, having attended "eight or nine" of them, serving as a reader each year in at least one Play Lab piece. This year, Brown -- a legislative liaison at the Department of Environmental Conservation in Juneau, member of the Alaska State Council on the Arts and chairman of the board for Juneau's public broadcasting group -- has been active with rehearsals for Play Lab readings.

"In years past, such rehearsals were strictly ad hoc affairs, and many times readers would take the stage cold to read a playwright's new work," he said. "The opportunity (this year) to interact with the playwright and the other actors in the context of at least one full group rehearsal vastly improves the quality of the readings and allows the panelists to respond to a much fuller picture of the playwright's artistic vision."

MORE ALASKAN

Perseverance's Herrmann said the de-emphasis on the opportunity to sit at the feet of stars has

had another salutary effect on the conference program, reversing a trend he saw as degrading the experience for the average conference-goer: the development of a hierarchy.

"While it was great to have all these luminaries walking around and so accessible to everyone, I think a very unhealthy caste system had developed where the people from New York were treated like stars (which, granted, they are) and everyone else like plebes," he said. "And that hierarchy (was) not only deeply un-Alaskan; I think it was antithetical to the very goals of the conference.

"The conference, under Jody's direction, was supposed to be about recognizing the contributions of our greatest playwrights and providing opportunities for emerging playwrights who (might) someday become great. These goals are terrific, and I think everyone stands behind them. Unfortunately, I think the caste system that was telegraphed ... by those at the very top of the conference to enable the former goal ended up inhibiting the latter. Every play-reading session was really about how smart and eloquent the stars were in critiquing the work of developing playwrights and not about the work of the developing playwrights.

"It certainly delighted the audience, I think, to hear Edward (Albee) or whomever gleefully tear someone's play to shreds, but was it helpful to the playwright? I don't think so. I stopped going to these sessions because it was just too depressing.

"I think the direction the conference is moving in now is much healthier," he said. "Clearly, in the absence of stars, Dawson is trying to focus it back on the work -- also, in celebrating the Alaskan theater community, which is really important. I think the featured artists who were invited up to Alaska this year (were there) because they are great teachers and instructors and (would) really be able to help the developing playwrights hone their craft in ways the stars couldn't or were not interested in doing."

Church seconded this sentiment, saying the removal of what she called the "top tier" allowed an increased focus on works from within the state.

"I'm enjoying the evening entertainment offerings because they focus on great Alaska theater works," she said. "There is so much talent here in the state, and it's nice to see that honored and appreciated for a change. (There's) a much more egalitarian feeling this year compared to the past. It feels like we're all just folks who love theater and are here to support each other in our craft."

WHAT'S NOT WORKING

But these conference-goers acknowledged a certain wistfulness for the stars of previous years.

"I miss the occasional lightning-bolt insights that people like Albee, Guare, Kushner, Linney, Richards et al. sometimes provided during their responses to some of the play readings," Stadem said.

"This year's panelists that I've observed so far are very good ... don't get me wrong." But, she continued, there's something special about having Albee, Paula Vogel and others with vast experience providing insights into the craft of play writing.

Celebrity aside, that the stars could speak from the other side of the mountain up which many attendees saw themselves struggling was encouraging to people like Muro.

"They could tell you what it was like to be fabulously successful," he said. "And it was nice to know that there is a lineage, that you are part of a continuous literature with people like August Wilson,

Arthur Miller, Jack Gelber and so many others. I'm very glad to have had the fortune to listen to and speak with them."

Church admitted to missing one of the guilty pleasures of conferences past: Watching as the more shameless of her peers tried to schmooze the stars.

"I miss making fun of them," she said, "but I can live without that kind of entertainment."

WHAT OUGHT TO CHANGE

The Last Frontier Theatre Conference has changed, perhaps forever. But, if given free rein, how would these conferees change it still more?

"I'd have some hands-on work, such as the Alaska Overnights" -- a manic write-and-produce-a-play-in-24-hours marathon introduced to Alaska in recent years by Moore -- "with mainstage performances, followed by an analysis of the process involved in each playwright's experience," Stadem said. "That would be very instructive, plus it would provide some great theater for audiences. Also, the rehearsals of Overnights could be open to the public, which would also be very instructive."

Brown said advancing the cause of greater public involvement could also be served with scholarships, so people who otherwise might not be able to attend could make it.

"I also hope to see the Fringe Festival expand, as it is clearly meeting a real need and providing a lot of entertainment to a rowdy, late-night crowd," he said.

Herrmann called for the restoration to the program of at least one "significant playwright."

"I know Dawson worked hard, to no avail, to make it happen for this year, and I know he is making plans to attract people for next year," Herrmann said. "If he can maintain the emphasis initiated this year on supporting the work of developing playwrights -- with all the great instructors and teachers who have joined them this year -- and at the same time be able to host and recognize the great playwrights, he will succeed in accomplishing both goals of the conference simultaneously, and this would make for a truly outstanding and important annual event."

Church would like to see more involvement by producers.

"Creating more of a relationship with the theater companies, who have the resources and opportunity to produce these plays, would be a bridge to the next step toward getting wonderful new works on their feet and seen by a wider audience," she said.

UAA's Mitchell, who regularly works with young actors, said the conference would benefit by providing a greater scope to those interested in producing work for children.

"One of the things that's really exciting for me this year is that I'm sitting on a panel for playwrights of children's theater," he said. "It's a serious part of American theater, and I'd like to see more focus on it. I mean, David Mamet has written children's theater, and when Shakespeare wrote 'Midsummer Night's Dream,' he saw it as a family entertainment.

"Oftentimes, as kind of an advocate for the young voice, at least in Alaska, I'll sit in on these play labs and people will say, 'This is how kids talk,' and I'll say, 'No, they don't. Every kid has their individual voice, just as every black person or gay person or Jewish person does. To elevate awareness of that stuff would be great."

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