

## Playwrights in mind

### Dawson Moore steers annual Valdez event toward emerging writers

By DAWNELL SMITH  
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Dawson Moore took over the Last Frontier Theatre Conference in the wake of Jo Ann C. McDowell, who resigned as president of Prince William Sound Community College, the conference's sponsor, amid a cloud of secrecy and controversy in November 2004. As founder of the conference, McDowell had shaped its mission and atmosphere for a dozen years.

Last year, in a Daily News interview, Moore spoke of his vision of the conference as a working event focused on emerging artists rather than luminaries, plays rather than stars. We caught up with him again after this year's conference, which ended June 24.

Q. This was the first full conference under your tutelage, your vision. How do you think it lived up to your hopes?

A. The conference has always had an ongoing evolution. Every year is different than the year before. This year we took more steps in helping writers in the development process during our play labs. We also had three evening performances, plays that were at last year's labs and were now presented as full productions. We added an individual mentorship program too, so that all 56 playwrights had a meeting with their panelist, plus comments from the public readings.

The featured artists were really generous with their time. Some of the featured artists even said they weren't worked hard enough. Next year, I'll be happy to oblige.

We also did Overnights here (in which participants write, rehearse and produce a play in 24 hours). The reason I started Overnights four years ago was because of the energy of the conference, and now I'm taking that energy and putting it back into the conference. It's come full circle.

Q. In the past, the stated number of participants reached up to 800 people. Do you think you got that many people in the door this time?

**A. The realistic registration is around 300 people. When you hear those numbers, they include people coming to the evening performances. Those numbers always get inflated, really, but I know for a fact that we had the best local participation this year.**

Q. What were the highlights for you?

A. My highlights of the week were having Patricia (Neal) come back to us again. Combining the shows was a real peak moment for me -- the Overnights and conference at one place. The conference is a surreal thing for me because I get cornered and told what a great job I've done like 50 times. As a Leo, I love that stuff.

But actually, the wrap-up session was my best highlight. We held a brunch and talked for about an

hour about what we can do with the conference. At one point, someone asked about getting written feedback (on their plays), but I'm not real excited about that. People sometimes get harsh when they write feedback, so I asked the whole group if anyone thought they didn't get enough feedback about their work and not one raised their hand.

Q. McDowell, now president of Metropolitan Community College in Omaha, Neb., had her first Great Plains Theatre Conference there just a few weeks before the Last Frontier. Several people went to both. Did anyone mention their impression of the Omaha event?

**A. A few people did. It sounds like it was a good conference too. One thing I notice about the Nebraska conference is that McDowell really started big. She had some great people there, but we shared some of them. Everything I heard was that it went really well down there, but that conference is different. My basic idea is to nurture playwrights. It's really craft-based. The Nebraska conference seems to be more about understanding American playwrights and theater.**

Q. Do you think you influence the conference by being a playwright, by wanting it to appeal to the creative process?

A. I (start) with the playwrights in mind, the people who sleep on the floor and don't have money and want to write plays. I try to throw the conference I would have wanted thrown for me 10 years ago. From 1998 or 1999 on, I thought I could do a good job running this event, but I never took active steps to do that. But here I am.

Q. Last year, some were talking about organizing a nonprofit group to run the conference rather than having it run by the college. Is there still discussion about that?

A. There was a worry that there was more going on than a resignation last year and that the staff here couldn't run it without the woman who started it. But after last year's conference, everyone calmed down. After this year's, nobody's worried. No one's taking the theater conference anyplace but with the university. It's a huge endeavor, and you need the college involved.

I'd be very surprised if anyone worries about it now. I'm not going anywhere. The college isn't going anywhere. Doug Desorcie (president of Prince William Sound Community College) isn't going anywhere.

Q. Do you foresee any changes in next year's conference?

**A. It's way too early to say. We might shorten the conference by a few days, do fewer evening shows, and extend the working days and craft workshops. I love doing theater in the evenings, but maybe we need less of that. Next year I'm going to bring up some new featured artists, people who haven't been here before. There will be all sorts of changes -- there always are.**

**I definitely want to continue producing work by Alaskans in the Play Lab. There (are) a million little things that need to happen, but in terms of the big ones, we haven't made any decisions.**

**We tell people it's a bad idea to rewrite a play right after they hear the responses, and the same goes for the conference coordinator.**

Q. Last year the work in the Play Lab focused on plays 45 minutes or under. How did you change that this year?

A. That changed in a big way. This year we had full-length plays and short plays, everything from 10 minutes to two hours. The change was well received. We also had rehearsals the day before, and mentors as well.

The lab is my specialty, in a way. The lab was so important to me as a playwright, the main reason I kept coming back. When they accepted my plays, I came back and when they stopped accepting my plays, I came back as an actor participating in the play. In this way, the theater conference is really collaboration between something like 300 people.

Q. Do you plan on sticking around?

A. I'm gifted with being able to do exactly what I want for a living. I can't think of a better job than to coordinate the conference that inspired me. They may kick me out, but I'm doing exactly what I want, living where I want to live, making a living and being in the city I want to be in. My boss is excellent, the best I've had.

Unfortunately, this is happiness. Now I just have to worry that I have a chemical imbalance.

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