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## Features



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Alaska theater entity Dawson Moore has served as the artistic director of Three Wise Monkeys Theater Company in San Francisco and has written plays that have been produced in New York and Italy.

# Local Alaska playwright champions new work

By Sam Dunham  
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Dawson Moore is everywhere in Alaska theater. Now living in Valdez, the award-winning playwright and UAA graduate organizes the popular Alaska Overnights theater series and heads Prince William Sound Community College's associate degree in theater. Last year, with the departure of the college's former president Jo Ann MacDowell, he took over coordination of the Last Frontier Theater Conference, one of the nation's largest theater festivals.

The Northern Light recently sat down with Moore to discuss the state of Alaska's theater community.

**Q:** You play many roles in the Alaska theater scene. How do you see the various parts of the theatrical fabric of this state functioning and interacting with each other?

**A:** My focus is on new work. I think that new work that is written by Alaskans reflects the Alaskan experience, and makes for valid theater that is important for people to see. My hope is that over the next couple of years the Overnights will begin to crop up all over the state, that communities will feel empowered to use their local talent and local writers to create new theater, and that theater companies throughout the state will embrace the idea of producing at least one new work a season. Because as the theater company supports the writer, the writer's work will get stronger and help support the theater company.

**Q:** Do you think Alaska theater has it's own flavor and style?

**A:** Yes, just like anywhere. Alaska has it's own style the same as New York or the Bay Area or

Atlanta or any other place you can name. There are some things that are particularly Alaskan. We have a lot of spirituality, particularly in connection to the land, and dead people being around. (With) Alaska theater, it seems like a third of the plays I see have ghosts in them.

Q: The Overnighters series consists entirely of short plays, the 10-minute play lab at the Valdez conference is thriving, and Alaskan venues are predominantly small. What effect do short style-plays have on theater?

A: You don't get the peak experience at a short play – that moment where two hours in you have an emotional epiphany – that's true. But on the other hand, you don't have that experience where you've been there for an hour and it's not going to be over for another hour, and you're stuck there having your brain ripped out by a bad play. Whereas short work is more of an entertaining way to spend an evening. I've never been bored for two hours at a 10-minute play. If you go and see six short plays, you're going to like at least one or two of them. With short work you don't get the extremes of theater, either positive or negative. But you do get interesting, engaging work. The advantage of them is if you don't like the play you're watching, wait nine minutes and it will be over.

Q: How was the Last Frontier Theater Conference different last year from previous years, and how do you think it will change over years to come?

A: I believe the focus has shifted so the playwright gets more opportunity to hone their craft and become better playwrights. We don't have the star power we used to, that's true. You won't get as many of those moments where you're like, "Oh my god! Patricia Neal just touched me on the arm." She's coming back by the way. One of the new things we're doing this year is giving the play lab writers one-on-one time with the panelists. So now they get that audience feedback, which is of course invaluable, and then they get to go off with a panelist and dig a little more in depth.

Another thing I'm trying to do is vary the topics of the workshops and discussions. You only need to hear playwright X talk about playwriting so many times before you don't need to hear him talk about playwriting anymore. I'll still have him lead a discussion, but I'll try to change the topic up from year to year, so we can keep getting new and different stuff every year.

Q: Do you think the changes that have happened to the conference during the last few years are predominantly positive?

A: Short answer, yeah. I don't mean that as any sort of disrespect to what went before but it kept getting better and better and will continue to get better and better. Does it suck to lose the people we had? Sure, you bet. But have the new people been amazing? You bet. They've been great.

I think it's a good idea, at an event like this, to have somebody running it who has been at the

bottom of the food chain, participating in it. I slept in the gymnasium – I had no money – so I could be here and have my play read. So, when I make decisions for the conference, I'm keeping myself ten years ago in mind. I'm keeping that guy sleeping on the gymnasium floor in mind, and what he needs, and what the next young person coming up is going to need in their development and their growth.

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