

Dawson Moore sees new opportunity in one of Alaska's premiere arts events

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The Last Frontier Theatre Conference -- a cultural highlight of Alaska's summer since its founding 12 years ago by Prince William Sound Community College president Jo-Ann C. "Jody" McDowell -- was put under a cloud last November by McDowell's abrupt resignation.

Day-to-day responsibility for preparation of this year's conference fell to Dawson Moore, the college's coordinator of cultural events, a playwright himself and longtime conference attendee. With the conference set to convene Saturday, Daily News arts editor Mark Baechtel asked Moore a series of questions to take the measure of this year's event and find out what changes veteran attendees might expect in Valdez.



Dawson Moore is the new director of the Last Frontier Theatre Conference in Valdez. Prince William Sound Community College president Jody McDowell, the founding director, resigned last year.
(Photo by MARC LESTER / Anchorage Daily News)

Q. Given the controversy surrounding Jody McDowell's departure from Valdez, any list of questions would obviously have to begin with how things stand in the aftermath. Has the turbulence that attended McDowell's departure settled down, and in your estimation, is the Last Frontier Theatre Conference now on an even keel?

A. While this year is different in some ways, I think it is true to the mission established over the past 12 years by Jody. Many of the systems for making the conference happen already have strong templates for how to execute them. Largely thanks to University of Alaska Anchorage chancellor Elaine Maimon and the team at UAA, we raised more money this year than in any year in the past. Not only that, we have an increased number of donors over previous years. I've had more local volunteers this year than my two previous years here, so I feel good support from the community.

While not everyone is perfectly happy, we seem to be moving on. Hopefully, once we've thrown a great conference, things will continue to stabilize. One of the measures of a creator is how well their creations last after they're no longer around to push them. I hope to prove what amazing work (McDowell) did here by continuing to improve the conference for years to come.

Q. In an April interview with the Daily News, you were quoted as saying that "when someone of (McDowell's) stature leaves, it ... leaves a big hole." What has that hole been, in your estimation, and what have you done to fill it?

A. An event of this magnitude is more than just one person. I learned a great deal from her my two years working under her and am using that education to coordinate a conference that I would have loved to attend.

I've already mentioned how UAA made the fund-raising happen. In creating the schedule,

something I used to do with Jody, I consulted with my boss, interim (college) president Douglas Desorcie, and with a number of people who have been involved in the conference for a number of years. I'm very proud of the collection of classes and readings we've put together.

I will now do my best to make the conference an enriching, educational experience for the participants, as she did before me. People who know me know how important this conference is to me, how important playwrights are to me. I dedicated my artistic life to them years before anyone would pay me to do it. I am still on the board of the Playwrights Center of San Francisco. I still serve on the literary committee of Three Wise Monkeys Theatre Company. In the Overnighters, I've staged 44 new plays by Alaskans. I believe that my passion for this event will help it continue to be a success for years to come.

Q. Many of the luminaries who've attended previous theater conferences -- most notably Edward Albee, who has lent his name to the conference's most distinguished award -- will not be in attendance this year. In an interview with the Daily News in April, you said this might be salutary for the conference, rendering it less "an education in the history of American theater" and more of a working event. This may be interpreted by some as trying to make lemonade out of lemons, so maybe could you expand on this a bit, explaining why you see this change as being beneficial.

A. I don't mean for it to sound like I'm implying that this is beneficial. I'm sorry they won't be here. I certainly don't mean to say that I've not learned a great deal from studying with those masters. What I am saying is that we've been given an opportunity to reinvent the conference. Sometimes amazing innovations come from great turmoil. I think that my experience of seven years participating as a writer and actor at the conference, combined with my three years working on it and my years producing in San Francisco, gives me a user's perspective that can help the Last Frontier Theatre Conference continue to be important and relevant to both the attending Alaskans and people from Outside.

Q. This year's program is offering significant changes. Maybe you could enumerate them and talk a bit about the thinking that attended them. What's different, what needs were you trying to address with these changes and what feedback were they meant to address?

A. I've tried to work toward creating a schedule weighed toward classes, as that was one of the most frequent comments on our comment sheets. I worked with the teachers by asking what sort of classes they felt best about teaching, then guided them toward making choices that were diverse. The curriculum we're putting on has classes ranging from courses on how to develop as a writer (the business of play writing, how to work with new-play development processes) to writing various genres (10-minute plays, docudrama, children's theater). New York University's Gary Garrison is teaching a two-day workshop on structure in monologues. On the second day, participants have a monologue they've written performed by actors, then the actors have the chance to workshop the monologue on Friday with New York actor Ronald Rand. I've attempted to have synergy like that throughout the schedule. Jon Klein is teaching a class on writing docudrama, and we're presenting Perseverance Theatre's docudrama "Columbinus" in an evening slot; there are also corresponding classes on one-person shows and children's theater.

Q. When we chatted back in December, you said that, as conference coordinator, you wanted "to make sure that Alaskans are as supported as they need to be" and that "they get what they need out of this (conference)." What have you done to achieve this goal, and what identified this need for you in the first place?

A. Theater is, for me, a local occurrence, and training the people who are commenting on the life around you is crucial. When I lived in the Bay Area, I worked with writers there. I live here now, and it is important to me that Alaskans are enabled to tell the stories of their communities. As we continue on into next year, increasing the conference's personal connections with different communities throughout the state is at the top of my priority list. If you're involved in theater in

this state, I want this to be somewhere you come every year to be rejuvenated, inspired and educated.

Q. I'm assuming one of the changes you've made to the program involves the Play Lab. Maybe you could talk a bit about what makes the Play Lab the centerpiece of the conference, what reasoning backstopped the changes you've made this year and how these changes will help it retain or even boost that "centerpiece" status?

A. The lab has changed format almost every year since it began, and I expect that evolution to continue. This year we're doing plays 45 minutes and under. We'll see how that goes, then modify as appropriate. There will always be a variety of opinions on what would be best for the lab, and many intelligent people think it's crucial for the lab to include full-length plays. My take is that, more than developing individual plays, we develop playwrights here in Valdez, and 75 of them are joining us this year.

Q. In past, the theater conference has attracted up to 800 attendees. Where does registration stand now?

A. We expect about as many participants as we've had in the past.

Q. In a statement made to the Daily News, McDowell has left the door open for the possibility she might start a theater conference in Omaha, Neb., where she has taken on the presidency of Metropolitan Community College. This raises the specter of competition for Alaska's theater conference and begs the question: Why ought a playwright-in-training think favorably of the Valdez conference? What is it -- aside from the unparalleled natural beauty of its surroundings -- that the conference offers to its attendees to make it unique and valuable in comparison to other, similar events?

A. I believe in the teachers who are joining us this year. Intelligent, passionate educators are the basic unit of a conference such as this one. They and the participants are further inspired by the amazing physical beauty that surrounds them here. I also think the basic structure of the conference that has arisen here over the past decade is unique in that it keeps people going for eight days from 9 in the morning till late at night, creating a creative boot camp. After his first year attending the conference, playwright Scott McMorro said, "I learned more in a week in Valdez than I learned in my entire play-writing graduate program." He's been back every year since.

Q. This might be seen as an extension of the previous question. Nine years ago, Arthur Miller attended the Valdez conference and received one of its special awards. In a conversation at the time with the Daily News' Mike Dunham, Miller lamented that the conditions leading to the broad popularity of Greek and Elizabethan theater don't exist in American society "and probably won't exist again." He tempered his pessimism, however, saying that the Valdez conference was "in line with their legacy in that it strives to extend theater to the ordinary person." Was Miller onto something here? Is this something you've strived to produce in designing the conference's program? And do you see this extension of theater "to the ordinary person" as a necessary part of the conference's mission?

A. How to make people who have cable television and "Doom 3" available to entertain them think that they should go to a play isn't a challenge that's going to go anywhere soon. We've included in our schedule this year a few shows that people who live here can bring their children to, and we're getting the word out with increased radio advertising. I hope they come, and I hope more people make theater a part of their life. My main emphasis for this conference, however, is on established theatergoers and practitioners. They are the base audience for this event.

Q. According to Valdez Mayor Bert Cottle, the city is looking into forming a nonprofit organization

to take over management of the conference. Is there sufficient public will and an infrastructure that will support the city taking on such a project?

A. I remain hopeful that we'll all be working on this together next year. I have trouble seeing any one group in this community creating this event and even more trouble with the idea of dropping the college from an event that is educational. The university (UAA) and college have both been involved since it began 12 years ago, and their continued involvement is essential to its continued life.

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DAWSON MOORE'S WISH LIST for future Last Frontier Theatre Conferences:

- A higher percentage of Alaska's theater practitioners attending on a regular basis.
- An endowment.
- More productions in Alaska of plays from the Play Lab.
- A continued influx of exciting new teachers.
- More returning featured artists from years past.
- A new president for Prince William Sound Community College who loves the arts.

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