

## Valdez voices on conference

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Here are excerpts from comments on the Last Frontier Theatre Conference by participants from the Anchorage theater community. Read their remarks in full at [www.adn.com](http://www.adn.com).

"I had a terrific cast reading my characters, and the panel and audience gave useful feedback. I have taken plays to Valdez before Dawson (Moore) was the coordinator, and I can tell you there's a marked difference in the panels. These days, nobody tries to rewrite your play. Nor is this just a touchy-feely kind of workshop where everybody loves everything. The comments I heard were honest reactions delivered in knowledgeable and pragmatic terms to the writers.

"Valdez gave me the chance to bounce ideas off of a myriad of actors, directors, set designers, even the local museum curator, who helped answer questions about historical firearms for another project I'm working on. Somehow a small group of us playwrights managed to find the one quiet spot in the college to write every night, usually until 2 a.m. The mountains in Valdez make you dream big. It was great to just put crazy stuff down on paper."

-- Arlitia Jones, playwright, poet ("The Bandsaw Riots")

"In (conference founder Jo Ann McDowell's) time I really enjoyed meeting people who are honest-to-goodness theater legends. I enjoyed being onstage performing masterworks for the masters themselves. It was a very positive experience. However, equally positive is not being kept at a distance from the featured artists. Plus the new structure of the Play Lab is a blessing to writers. There is less of a rush. The whole conference feels very open, intimate and honest."

-- Shane Mitchell, artistic director, TBA Theatre Company

I think the Last Frontier Theatre Conference may well be the most significant event in the performing arts in Alaska. I have thought so for years and this year's is no exception.

This year's conference has Dawson's undeniable stamp. (Conference founder) Jody (McDowell) is a wonderful person and gave this state this conference as a legacy. When she was in charge of it she left her indelible mark on it. In a way it will always be her conference.

Now that Dawson runs it he will leave his indelible mark. For example, as a playwright, actor and director, Dawson has a first-hand knowledge of what stimulated him as an artist and tries to provide that stimulus to others. Conversely he knows what blocks him creatively and tries to remove those obstacles.

For the most part, change is neither good nor bad, but just different. In Jody's time I really enjoyed meeting people who are honest-to-goodness theater legends. I enjoyed being on stage performing master works for the masters themselves. It was a very positive experience. However, equally positive is not being kept at a distance from the featured artists. Plus the new structure of the play lab is a blessing to writers. There is less of a rush. The whole conference feels very open,

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-- Shane Mitchell, artistic director, TBA Theatre Company

"The quality of the plays in the labs was largely good. In the past, there have been some years where people have thought some of the plays weren't very good. Though some were raw and not ready for production this year, they all had great potential.

"(People) left their egos at the city limits. They walked into Valdez in the spirit that we're all in the same boat whether we're from New York, New Jersey or Nova Scotia."

-- Elizabeth Ware, actor, UAA adjunct professor

"I'd really like to see more artistic directors and producers attending the conference. If these young playwrights are ever going to get produced, they need to get their plays in front of the people who have companies that produce new plays.

"I'd also like to see a wider variety of plays selected for readings. I must say that I wasn't terribly impressed with the overall quality of the plays that were chosen this year. I should emphasize that there were some notable exceptions."

-- Kristina Church, Daily News theater reviewer, "Stagetalk" radio show co-host

"I just really enjoyed working with the panelists they assembled. In past years, some of the criticism was less than insightful, but this year it was wonderful.

"In the past, I also left the conference feeling exhausted and overworked. This time it wasn't like that. It was an energizing and inspiring process.

"I saw nine new plays, two-thirds of them promising. In previous years we often scratched our heads and wondered how some of the plays got there, but this time I saw that many great ones, and quite a few by Alaskans.

-- David Edgecombe, director, playwright ("Libby") and UAA theater professor

"The panels for the play readings are friendlier and more constructive in their criticism than I've witnessed in the past. And this year, two main stage evenings were dedicated to full productions of some of the scripts that were read at the 2005 conference.

"The conference for me and many other people I've spoken with has been far more positive since Dawson took over. I've made far more valuable connections with others in my field at the last two conferences than I did in the first 12 years of it."

-- Schatzie Schaefer, playwright ("Fourplay"), KRPM radio host

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