Arts

Centre Stage hatching 7th New Play

By Ann Hicks
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That cute yellow chick Centre Stage uses as the mascot for its New Play Festival has grown into one heck of a hen over the past seven years, introducing a flock of new plays to delight its audiences.

The festival chairman, Dr. Brian Haimbach, has lovingly guided the free-to-the-public, five-day event, which this year runs Sept. 14-17.

"We're getting to the point now that a lot more people know about it," he says, adding the festival's audiences has grown each year. The competition has fewer entries this year than in previous years, when the number of submissions reached into the hundreds. But the good news, Haimbach says, is the quality has greatly improved. From the 109 entries, four finalists were picked by Centre Stage's 10 theater professionals.



Courtesy photo

Local actor J. Michael Craig has some fun with the symbol for Centre Stage's New Play Festival, a baby chick.

Those new plays will be read by actors Monday through Thursday.

Friday, "Class Dismissed," the latest work by 2009 playwright-in-residence Jeffery Sweet, will receive a staged reading. Haimbach, who heads the theater program at Greenville Technical College and focused his doctorate on new play development at the University of Georgia, will direct Sweet's work. The play is about the lives of five college students in the 1960s, and the formal reading will carry many elements of theatrical performance. A reception for Sweet will follow.

The four emerging playwrights are from "all around the country," Haimbach says, and play topics range widely as well.

YOU CAN GO

- What: New Play Festival
- When: 7 p.m. Sept. 14-18
- Where: Centre Stage, 501 River St.
- Admission: Free
- Information: 233-6733

Monday, in Barbara Lindsay's "A Death Defying Act," a cancer patient seeks the help of a witch doctor; Tuesday, Walter Thinnes' West Virginia-set drama "Coal Creek" swells with the bloody 1912-1914 battle the miners fought against the coal industry, told through a family conflict.

Wednesday brings another drama, Sherod Santos' "The Lives of Pigeons," probably the most serious of the plays, Haimbach says; Thursday, the mood lightens with Chambers Stevens' "Twain and Shaw Do Lunch," a comedy, based on a historical meeting between the two literary giants.

Festival

For those who hunger for plays-on-edge or for that different feel to stagecraft, the New Play Festival can mean a fresher focus, Haimbach says.

What is interesting, he says, is that the typical festival audience tends to be younger and not necessarily comprised of theater subscribers. The attraction is not only hearing a new writer's work, he says, but also the atmosphere of the post-performance audience discussion.

Haimbach says a playwright-in-residence of Sweet's stature (screenwriter, lyricist, critic, journalist, theater historian and award-winning writer) elevates the discussions to a higher level. "These professionals serve as sort of clean-up hitters after all the audience discussion is over, and they give their considered response."

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