Centre Stage presents festival of new plays

Audiences, playwrights meet at staged readings

By Paul Hyde
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Centre Stage's New Play Festival offers Greenville audiences a rare opportunity to see a new theatrical work in the developmental stage — and to offer creative input.

Four new plays by emerging American playwrights were chosen from among 200 entries from around the nation for staged readings, featuring Greenville actors, this week at Centre Stage.

"I really do feel that the overall quality is the best yet," said Brian Haimbach, director of the festival, celebrating its ninth year.

Two plays were presented Monday and Tuesday.

Two more admission-free readings remain tonight and Thursday, both at 7 p.m.

An additional staged reading of a play by the festival's playwright-in-residence, Arlene Hutton, will be offered Friday night, also admission-free at 7 p.m.

One of the four plays (Hutton's is not in contention) will be chosen to receive a full production by Centre Stage in January.

The winner will be selected based largely on audience response. Following each play, audience members are given a ballot and invited to assess the play based on several criteria.

The audience also is invited to provide feedback during a post-reading discussion with the playwright.

"The biggest benefit for the playwright is to be in the room during the performance and get a read off the audience," said Haimbach, who also is head of the theater department at Greenville Technical College and a frequent stage director at local theaters.

Centre Stage takes pains to make sure every staged reading is professionally presented, Haimbach said.

Actors are chosen by audition, and each reading is rehearsed three times with a director.

"You have to have good actors who contribute to the process and a director to give it a focus," Haimbach said.

Hutton, the festival's playwright-in-residence, also offers comments following each reading.

Hutton is an award-winning Off-Broadway playwright who served as playwright-in-residence for the festival in 2008.

"We asked her back because she did such a good job," Haimbach said. "More than one person had said after her discussions, 'It's like a mini-master class in playwrighting' because she gives such succinct and insightful comments."

Haimbach said Centre Stage hosts the New Play Festival as a way of encouraging new works and contributing to a living theater.

"It's important for theaters to do this," Haimbach said "No play ever makes it to a full production without going through a development process similar to this."

The admission-free readings remaining this week are:

» **Wednesday:** "The Kiss of Caiaphas," by Terrance Hughes. A professor at an Ivy League college is confronted with a powerful father of one of his students and is forced to sacrifice his academic and artistic principles, all the while mourning the death of John Lennon.

» **Thursday:** "You Are Here," by Steve Totland. An autistic father tries to raise his "normal" son and keep him from moving away forever after he is accepted into a college far away.

» **Friday:** "Vacuum," by Arlene Hutton, the festival's playwright in residence. A scientist discovers a cure for cancer and a huge corporation wants to use it as a beauty cream. The play deals with issues of corporate medicine, mental illness and marital guilt.

For more information, call Centre Stage at 864-233-6733.