



Boston Public Works Playwrights; Jim Dalglish, Jess Foster, and Kevin Mullins.

The Play's the Thing

Boston Public Works Theater Company puts the writer in charge

It was the ultimate DIY project. Two Boston playwrights, frustrated by the lack of opportunities to get their work produced, took matters into their own hands and—with Mickey and Judy gusto—decided to simply put on a show.

Fast forward two years and Boston Public Works Theater Company (BPW) has expanded to a loosely-knit group of dedicated and accomplished local playwrights committed to bringing their best work to audiences. Most have MFAs in theater; their plays have been produced in festivals and at colleges; and many have won prestigious awards and fellowships.

But commercial success in the theater, as in all artistic venues, is elusive. “Theaters are reluctant to take a risk on an unknown playwright. You send out a script and wait and wait. I just got tired of hearing, ‘We love it but it’s not right for us,’” says John Greiner-Ferris, BPW co-founder. “With the number of playwrights in Boston, you should be seeing a lot more new, full-length plays by local playwrights.”

Greiner-Ferris’s “Turtles” was among the three full-length plays that BPW staged in its first season in 2014 at the BCA, along with “In the Deep” by Cassie

M. Seinuk and “Three” by Emily Kaye Lazzaro.

In giving playwrights the opportunity to exercise more control over their work, BPW is also addressing gender inequality in commercial theater. The June production of “Three,” for example, boasted a female writer (Lazzaro), director (A. Nora Long), producer (Amy Spalletta) and starred three women. “I got a little sick of seeing so many talented young women at auditions without enough roles,” said Lazzaro. So, thanks to BPW, she was able to do something proactive.

BPW modeled itself on New York’s 13P, 13 playwrights who were concerned about “...what the trend of endless readings and new play development programs was doing to the texture and ambition of new American plays.” But Greiner-Ferris points out that the world has changed dramatically just in a few years, thanks to social media. Now all artists are taking a

more active and entrepreneurial approach to getting their work into the world, often bypassing traditional methods completely. But BPW is still one of only three playwright-based production companies in the nation.

For each BPW show, the writer is his/her own artistic director, in charge of casting, hiring crew, etc. "What this does is put the power of the production into the playwright's hands," says Greiner-Ferris. The collaborative effort means not just championing each other's creativity but assisting in the practical demands of producing a show. Various BPW members take on the tasks of budgeting, marketing and publicity.

The new BPW season kicks off Nov. 20 at the BCA and showcases the work of three local LGBT playwrights (it just happened to work out that way; not all of them have gay themes in their work).

Running Nov. 20- Dec. 5 at the BCA's Calderwood Pavilion is Jess Foster's "Hard and Fast: a love story," directed by Dawn M. Simmons. It's about Roger, a struggling mechanic with a passion for restoring classics. He's finally found his

dream car, "Audra", a 1958 Austin Healey. When a wealthy lawyer wants the car for his 16-year old son Parker, the offer's too good for Roger to refuse. He makes one stipulation: Parker must help finish the car's restoration to understand its true value.

"I grew up around car guys," says Foster, adding that her play "explores the sacred and complex relationships men have with their cars. This fascination, which at times can be overtly sexual, represents freedom, independence and masculinity. It is also the story of how three men's desire can take a dangerous turn."

Running January 8-23, 2016 at the Calderwood is "Citizens of the Empire" by BPW co-founder Kevin Mullins. Set 800 years in the future, "Citizens of the Empire," which will be directed by

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Lindsay Eagle, represents the kind of work that deserves to be seen but that most commercial theaters resist.

"All of my plays are based in genre. I write big science fiction plays for the stage. ... I don't want to write 90-minute intermission-less plays about white middle-class people and their problems. I'm interested in telling stories that are epic in nature," says Mullins who describes his play as "a space opera with noblemen turned revolutionaries, union organizing robots, inter-galactic garbagemen, and a madam of a space brothel. Against a backdrop of Imperial balls, space stations, and border planets, a plucky band of rebels risk everything to take on an Empire and change the course of the galaxy forever."

Jim Dalglish's two-act psychological thriller "Unsafe" comes to the Boston

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Center for the Arts Plaza Theatre from Cotuit Center for the Arts, where it will run March 31 – April 10. The BCA production runs April 14 – 30, co-produced by BPW and CCftA. “Unsafe,” which Dalglish also directs, is the story of a New York family trying to pick up the pieces of their lives two years after 9-11.

A semifinalist at the National Playwrights Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in 2008, “Unsafe,” says Dalglish, “is an apocalyptic drama about one family’s refusal to wake up to the frightening realities of a post 9-11 world. It’s a play about the flimsy barricades we all build and the fantasies we fabricate to keep this terrifying new world at bay – a world that through our arrogance, neglect

and self-deception we helped create.”

“Unsafe” is a multi-character play that features a gay character, Will, a street hustler who survives by befriending successful men online and taking advantage of their generosity. One of the subtexts of the play is the “devastating wave of crystal meth addiction that swept through gay society in the early 2000s,” notes Dalglish, “a wave that has parallels to US society in general during the years that followed 9-11.”

By providing a showcase for these playwrights to present their unique voices in multiple genres, BPW is proof that taking matters into one’s own hands pays off—for both the artist and the theater-going public. [x]

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