

Tweaks and Trust

Creating an AACT NewPlayFest World Premiere



One read-through of *The Cayuga Canal Girls* was enough for Lori Poulin to realize the play's premise was strong and the characters compelling, with enough complexity in the story to challenge the actors and engage the audience.

It was also a new and unproduced script—one of several winners of the AACTFest 2020 NewPlayFest to be staged as world premieres by AACT-member theatres. And Poulin's theatre, Phoenix Stage Company in Oakville, Connecticut, would be one of them.

“As we read all the available scripts AACT sent us, this one really stood out,” she recalls. “And although I was originally tapped to direct our selection, after reading *The Cayuga Canal Girls*, I immediately changed my mind. I still wanted us to do it, but I wanted to be *in* the show!”

Both wishes came true.

“An Incredible Process”

In *The Cayuga Canal Girls*, by Laura King, five women who were childhood friends reunite to lay one of their own to rest. As they struggle to come to terms with the unexpected death, they reopen old wounds, face harsh realities, and confront the compromises each has made in her life. Ending on a hopeful note, the life-changing reunion opens a path to new possibilities in the women's lives.

As part of the process of preparing the production for its premiere, AACT would provide an opportunity for the playwright to work closely with the show's director and cast in a workshop setting. It's one of the reasons for the success of NewPlayFest, since the collaborative process often tweaks and improves a play in ways the author might not otherwise have considered.

When playwright Laura King arrived in Oakville, she found that the play's director, Ed Bassett, had assembled a cast of actresses who were both excited and nervous that she was there.

“They had been rehearsing for a few weeks by that point and were off book,” she says. “They gave their all during the rehearsals I attended, and by doing so they helped me see places in the script that needed my attention. Ed and cast members also had some insightful questions that helped me develop the script even further. And throughout, AACT dramaturge Kathy Pingel was by my side, whispering helpful comments and questions in my ear. Her background as both director and dramaturge added a wealth of theatrical experience and knowledge to the *Cayuga* team. And a team is what this experience truly felt like. Everyone in the room wanted nothing but the best for the production.”

Lori Poulin agrees. She had already determined that playing one



Paula Murphy

Opening Night of the final AACT NewPlayFest 2020 world premiere, *The Cayuga Canal Girls*, by Laura King at Phoenix Stage Company in Oakville, Connecticut

Front row (seated, left to right): Beverly Lord, AACT Region I Representative; Quiana Clark-Roland, AACT Executive Director; Laura King, *The Cayuga Canal Girls* playwright; Kathy Pingel, AACT NewPlayFest Dramaturge; Cathy Lee and Cliff Lee of the Jack K Ayre and Frank Ayre Lee Theatre Foundation

Second row (left to right): Lori Poulin (cast/Marta) Phoenix Stage Company Production Manager; Teresa Alexandru (cast/Eliza); Ed Bassett (director) Phoenix Stage Company Executive Director; Deb Goodman (cast/Lucy); KC Ross (cast/Jane); Cheyenne Walent (cast/Marianne)

of the *Cayuga Canal* women would be an experience to remember. And she was right.

“Being a part of this process was incredible,” she says. “Workshopping the piece with the playwright was one of the most cooperative endeavors I have experienced in all my years in community theatre. Laura was generous with her talents, and flexible with our interpretations of her work. She allowed the actors to provide insight into their respective characters. And, since the five cast members are friends in real life, we were able to lean into the energy of playing friends on stage.”

Watching and Listening

The workshop component was not part of the original NewPlayFest process, Pingel notes, “but we soon found that it was essential. A play begins in the mind of the playwright. They know all the characters' backstories, everything that has led up to this point. But the director, the cast, and the audience do not. All that has to be made clear in the play.”

The workshop typically takes place several weeks before opening, with both playwright and dramaturge taking part.

“We get to see the piece moving,” Pingel explains. “We watch and listen to their interpretations and begin to see how some changes might help. An actor may come up with a more conversational way to say a line, for example. A simple movement or gesture might be given to a

character to underscore the author's intent. Seeing the play in workshop can also flag some leaps in logic that the character would understand, but not the audience. You don't want a play to pose questions that it isn't going to answer. If you bring something up and then don't follow up on it, why say it at all?"

Pingel says that the workshop process sometimes involves negotiations between playwright and director. "It becomes a question of changing the script or helping change the director's perception of the script. Sometimes it's as simple as me saying something like, 'If you block it this way, it will work.' Because, ultimately, the author has the last word."

Even after the workshoping was over, communication continued, says the play's author.

"Kathy would check in, or our director, Ed Bassett, would call or email me with questions or comments," Laura King recalls. "Ed might suggest revisions, but never made changes without my input."

Most important, she says is that Bassett never gave up on the play, "even after we had an 18-month hiatus because of Covid-19. The show was scheduled to open in March 2020, but was pushed to October 2021, so it was with a sense of relief and gratitude that I returned to Connecticut for the premiere."

The Show Opens, the Work Continues

Seeing her play performed for an audience was a final, important step in the process, she says. Listening for their laughter in comic moments, and their rapt attention during dramatic scenes, was key to shaping the script for future productions.

"Opening night is exciting, of course, but the flurry and festivities make it difficult to focus on what revisions the play might require. It was at the matinee performance where I could really see where changes were needed. And, as usual, Ed Bassett and Kathy Pingel were there, so I could bounce my ideas off them."

Bassett, a founding member of the Phoenix Stage Company, believes that the strength of the long-standing relationships among the cast members, as well as their close contact with the playwright, illuminated the performances in important ways. He is grateful to King for trusting them with her work.

continued on next page ►

Paula Murphy



Marta (Lori Poulin), Jane (KC Ross), Lucy (Deb Goodman), and Eliza (Teresa Alexandru) begin a food fight with funeral sandwiches in the Phoenix Stage Company production of *The Cayuga Canal Girls*

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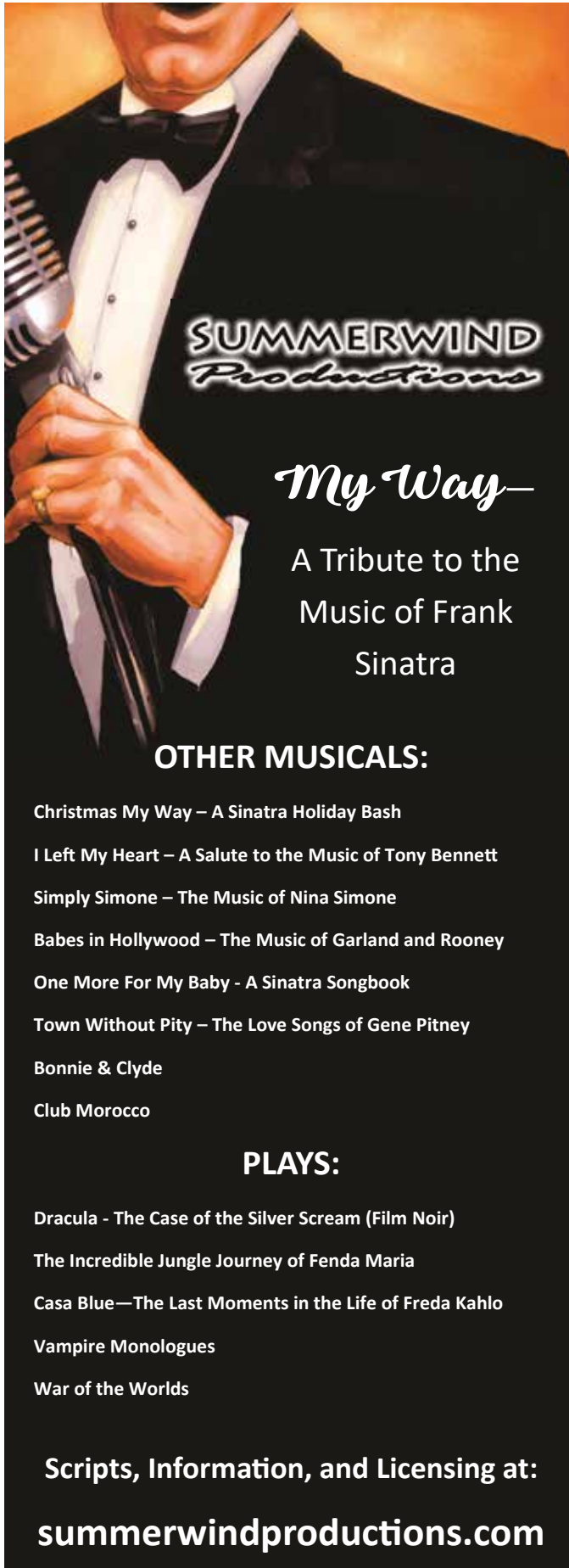
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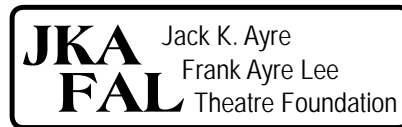
AACT NewPlayFest 2020 continued from page 23

It's clear that in workshopping a NewPlayFest production, both director and actors become invested in it, because they have helped shape it. It's a process that the playwright appreciates, as well.

"Having my play in the AACT NewPlayFest was both productive and joyful," says Laura King. "It was collaboration at its best. I now want to submit a play to the contest every two years, just for the chance to experience it all over again."

The AACT NewPlayFest 2020 world premiere of *The Cayuga Canal Girls*, by Laura King, opened on October 2, 2021, at Phoenix Stage Company in Oakville, Connecticut. The play received an outstanding production and was well received, running through October 16.

AACT NewPlayFest 2020 was sponsored in part by **The Jack K. Ayre and Frank Ayre Lee Theatre Foundation**. The foundation provided a grant that supported each Producing Theatre in all aspects of producing and marketing a world premiere production.



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