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## Playwrights Festival Presents Six New Works

by Jean Schiffman

Death, loss, the afterlife and questions about mortality emerged as a thematic trend among the 500 or so plays submitted for this year's 36th annual Playwrights Festival. Amy Mueller, artistic director of the Playwrights Foundation, which produces the festival, was surprised; during the past five years, the top themes tended to be about war and government policies. "This year, oddly not," she says.

Of the six ultimately chosen to be workshopped at the festival, three are by playwrights with local connections, and two of those three, by Erin Bregman and Prince Gomolvilas respectively, mix elements of science fiction with meditations on loss and death. The third, a musical by Joan Holden with Daniel Savio, takes a look at the famous Free Speech Movement at U.C. Berkeley 50 years ago.

The prestigious Playwrights Festival is the most important new-plays development center in the West and one of the top six such centers in the country. It was founded in 1976 by nationally renowned director Robert Woodruff (Sam Shepard's director of choice when the two premiered his works at the Magic Theatre) and boasts such illustrious alumni as locals Philip Kan Gotanda, Amy Freed, Octavio Solis, Marcus Gardley and John O'Keefe, plus, from elsewhere, Anna Deavere Smith, Paula Vogel, Maria Irene Fornes, David Henry Hwang, Liz Duffy Adams, Katori Hall, Annie Baker, Pulitzer Prize-winner Nilo Cruz and recently announced Obie Award-winner for best new play (in a tie with Lisa D'Amour) Julia Jarcho.

Over the course of several weeks, the six selected playwrights meet for a three-day retreat where they read and discuss their plays amongst themselves, then rehearse them with actors, directors and dramaturgs. That process is followed by public staged readings with talkback sessions, another week to rewrite and re-rehearse, then final staged readings.

Erin Bregman, participating in the festival this year for the third time, writes parables that unfold like a piece of origami, says Mueller. Bregman's new play is a metaphysical journey (working title: "Before and After"). It originally sprang from two ideas that Bregman had as she began to write it for the new play lab at San Francisco's Just Theatre: She wondered what the world would look like if, before birth, kids got to pick their parents. And she was also interested in the structural concept of a one-minute play.

As she developed it, the play separated into several sections that explore the plight of Anna, a soul about to be born who is destined to live only until age 18. In one section, a series of micro-scenes, Anna previews 40 different potential sets of parents. In a long monologue, she actually

dies. "I'm definitely looking much more at the macro cycle of life than we usually think about," says Bregman, who has received commissions not only from Just Theatre but also from the Magic Theatre and PlayGround. "Not in a religious sense. Everybody thinks about the before and after.... I'm looking at why a life matters, and how it comes down to the things we remember not necessarily being the big, important things but, in the end, the most menial ones." She herself lost a friend at age 19, one whom she'd grown up with, and she watched the friend's family struggle afterward. That tragic event influences most of what she writes. "It all comes back to life and death," she says.

Mueller calls Prince Gomolvilas' play a "science fiction mystery detective story." You think it's going to be a complete spoof, she says, but it takes you by surprise. "Most of my plays are comedies with some kind of supernatural element," agrees Gomolvilas, who continues to premiere some of his plays here although he now lives in Los Angeles, where he is the associate director of the Master of Professional Writing program at U.S.C. This time, he wanted to use the horror genre to explore a theme larger than any he's worked with before.

For "The Brothers Paranormal," he imagined two Thai-American brothers, the younger one born in America, the older one an emigr  as a teenager. They are investigating an affair of an African-American couple haunted by a ghost.

"I'm dealing with the normal stuff," says Gomolvilas, "cultural stereotypes and understanding and the tension between different generations of Asian immigrants and their offspring.... But dealing with ghosts gives me an opportunity to explore issues of death and dying and legacy and the way they apply more specifically to Asian cultures.

"It's interesting how, between immigrants, five to ten years' time makes such a huge difference in how they experience the United States, how they adjust," he continues. In his play, the older brother believes in ghosts; the younger one does not. "It's not just about believing or not in ghosts," he says. It's about culture clash.

"The Brothers" goes from comic to horror to tragedy. A three-time veteran of the Playwrights Festival, Gomolvilas expects this fourth go-round to help him modulate the tone for the different genres that the play encompasses.

It was a no-brainer to choose longtime San Francisco Mime Troupe playwright Joan Holden's musical, "FSM," for this year's festival, says Mueller. The Playwrights Festival is collaborating with Stagebridge, an Oakland community-based theater for seniors, on the ambitious project, which will premiere at Stagebridge in 2014.

Holden teamed up with composer Daniel Savio for the piece, about the iconic student protest movement of the 1964-65 academic year, and celebrates the movement's 50th anniversary. Also on board is Holden longtime Mime Troupe musical collaborator, Bruce Barthol.

"FSM" has to be more important than a mere celebration of an anniversary, though, says Holden. "It also has to look at the Free Speech Movement with the perspective of 50 years later--and it has to make sense to younger generations. What's the connection to the present?"

After reading histories of the FSM and talking to dozens of people who'd participated in it, she decided the play would be an epic--"the right way to treat a mass movement," she says.

Framing it within two crucial months of the protest, she invented three archetypes--a sorority girl, a serious small-town kid and a jaded grad student--and included the real-life student leader, 21-year-old Mario Savio (composer Daniel is Mario's son) and his perceived nemesis, then-chancellor Clark Kerr, using some of their speeches verbatim. (Mario, a brilliant orator, died in 1996 at age 53, Kerr in 2003.)

"In people's minds, the FSM blended with everything that happened in the '60s politically," notes Holden, "but actually, it was civil disobedience in the tradition of SNCC [the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee] and the Civil Rights movement."

Other plays at the festival this year are Laura Schellhardt's "The Comparables," a satire in which three women at a high-end agency attempt to shatter the glass ceiling; Kimber Lee's "brownsville song (b-side for tray)," described as "dark, deep and emotional" and poetic, with "dream-like sequences"; and Jiehae Park's "Hannah and the Dread Gazebo," which "draws you into a dream world where wild animals exist," says Mueller; the primary character is a Korean-American medical student dealing with a family crisis.

For festival audiences, this is a chance to see the best new plays--sometimes written by emerging playwrights--at an early stage of development. Eighty percent of the plays read at the Playwrights Festival go on to full productions elsewhere, and, says Mueller, many of the participants become the most significant writers of our time.

Playwrights Festival, July 19-21 and 26-28, Thick House, 1695 18th St.  
[playwrightsfoundation.org](http://playwrightsfoundation.org)