

# New Plays for Actors

BY JOANNA ROTTÉ

**A** NEW PLAY FESTIVAL, seeking to “have an impact on the national scene,” energized theatre in February in Philadelphia (“where theatre begins”). The Wilma produced an adaptation by Sarah Schulman of Isaac Bashevis Singer’s novel, “Enemies: A Love Story,” that demonstrated how difficult it is to adapt a novel to the stage. Unlike in the novel where we can read what’s going in the heart and mind of the main character, on stage

the “Enemies” protagonist has no opportunity – no narrative, no monologues – to express his internal world. He comes off unjustified, as a superficial man given to ignoble behavior.

More compelling was Theatre Exile’s grouping of five new one-acts under the title “Hearts and Soles,” featuring plays by Bruce Graham and Michael Hollinger (both former students of mine) and Arden Kass. Even in short form, the playwriting aims to reveal character. The most delightful of the plays came from Michael Hollinger, “Truth Decay.” It’s a very funny play about couples coming to terms with interrelated fears. Bruce Graham’s wry one-act contribution was “Full Figured, Loves to Dance.”

Bruce is able to bring sympathy to the creation of male characters that are oblivious to or unconcerned with the emotional lives of women; in counterpoint, he creates vulnerable women entering into a sense of self-worth through sexual empowerment. His new full-length play, “Dex and Julie,” produced by the Arden Theatre brings together a college boyfriend and girlfriend twenty-five years later.

One of the new play offerings that will likely enjoy a life beyond Philadelphia is “Nerds: A Musical Software Satire,” (book and lyrics by Jordan Allen-Dutton and Erik Weiner; music by Hal Goldberg), produced by the Philadelphia Theatre Company. The play fancifully

depicts the historic battle for intellectual property dominance played out between Bill Gates and Steve Jobs since meeting as youngsters at the “Homebrew Computer Club.” Unlike, say, the hard driving music of “Spring Awakening” on Broadway, the “Nerds” tunes adhere to a pop musical upbeat sound. Much of the book is built on jokes winsomely delivered in the Philadelphia Theatre Company production.

I too participated in the new play phenomena, performing the female lead in a staged reading of Wendy Wasserstein’s final work, “Third,” which, new to Philadelphia, was produced at Villanova University, directed by Peter Reynolds, during a weeklong Wasserstein commemoration marking the first anniversary of her death. Ironically, at the time I was in rehearsal for “Third,” one of my Villanova undergraduates turned in a script analysis paper on “Moon for the Misbegotten” that I believed was plagiarized. As it turned out, there was clear and present evidence the student had lifted more than half of the content of her paper from Travis Bogard’s Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O’Neill and presented it without attribution. In “Third” it’s never definitely stated if the young man did or did not officially plagiarize. The truth of the play is ironic, disconcerting, and ultimately Chekovian, revealing the notion of art imitating life.

Actors need new plays to work on. That’s how the acting



grows and how the tradition of develops. The plays of Shakespeare taught actors in his day how to act. Chekhov in a later changed the way actors act. So did Brecht. So will others. For the health of the theatre, it’s incumbent upon producers to produce new plays. As Walter Bilderback, the Wilma’s dramaturge, wrote in his program notes to “Enemies:” “One of the greatest and most important risks for a theater is to present a new play – a work receiving its first or second production ever. A ‘name’ playwright can ease the risk, but any playwright of note has had failures. A theater doesn’t always know how much a script may change in the course of rehearsal . . . But this is a risk that is essential to take.” ♦2007

Written exclusively for “The Soul of the American Actor.”

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*“Don’t paint yourself into a corner; leave enough space so that when the things come to take you, you’re free to let all the props fall on the floor and go.”*

– Geraldine Page

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