



A scene from 2014's production of "Close Your Eyes" by James Harmon Brown, featuring actors Bruce Croker and Shay Port.

Top one-act plays to get world premiere in Carnegie

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CARNEGIE -

Aspiring playwrights across the globe will have their one-act plays staged for the first time ever at the Pittsburgh New Works Festival.

Nearly 230 submissions were received for this year's competition, with judges choosing the 18 best play to debut this Sunday through Sept. 27 at the Carnegie Stage on West Main Street in Carnegie.

A collaboration of 18 western Pennsylvania theater groups, including R-Act Theatre Productions in Rochester, will stage the plays, submitted from as far away as Spain and Los Angeles.

"For a city that has so much to be proud of, this is just one more feather in the cap for Pittsburgh," said Dave Joseph, a founding member of R-Act. "The people of this region need to have a better knowledge and awareness of the festival. Even if they are not regular theatergoers, this should be right up there with First Night, the Pittsburgh Arts Festival and Fireworks Night at a Buccos game."

This Sunday and again on Aug. 30, Carnegie Stage (formerly Off the Wall Theater) will stage free readings of three one-act plays starting at 7 p.m.

"That's a good way for someone to get a taste for what New Works Festival is all about," said Andy Coleman, spokesman for the 25th annual event.

From Sept. 3 to 27, chosen plays will be performed as fully imagined, with costumes, props and actors looking to wow an audience.

"It's a really intimate theater, with like a max capacity of 100 with additional chairs," Coleman said.

One of this year's premieres, "Nana's Home Movies," will be produced by the McKeesport Little Theater and was written by F.J. Hartland of Johnstown, Pa., who is a multiple winner of the festival's Donna Award for Best Play (named after Donna Rae, the festival founder who played Terminal Stare on the popular Pittsburgh TV show "Chiller Theater").

Another new work, "Two," written by Carnegie Mellon dramatic writing student Eugenie Carabatsos, centers on a pair of rag dolls in an attic planning their future together.

Befitting the festival's collaborative spirit, event publicist Coleman appears in "Pine," portraying a Grim Reaper type named Nigel in a play set in the late-1800s.

"The Green Eyed Monster," produced by the Baldwin-based South Hills Players, includes David Joseph and Fellow R-Act member Ruthy Stapleton playing romantic interests.

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Joseph also will pull double duty on Aug. 30, appearing as part of the cast for “The Turning of the Screw,” from Houston, Texas, playwright Warren Hollerman, while that same night, his Rochester theater group produces “The Girl in the Washroom” by Williamsville, N.Y. playwright Bella Poynton. This one is set in 1961 New York, where two women come to grips with their past failures and social class limitations.

“When you think of playwrights from all over the world sending their never-produced original works to Pittsburgh in the hopes of being selected, that’s impressive,” said Joseph, who previously won the festival’s Donna Award for Outstanding Supporting Actor.

This year’s lifetime achievement recipient is Economy resident and playwright Eileen Enwright Hodgetts, whose “War Brides” in 1991 was the festival’s first “play of the year.”

Hodgetts had four more of her plays selected by the festival in the 1990s, and said, “I was never disappointed in the productions or the interaction with the directors and actors.”

The New Works Festival levels the playing field for playwrights, she said, since works are submitted anonymously.

“More than anything else, New Works gives the playwright a boost of confidence,” Hodgetts said. “A playwright labors alone, just like an artist or a novelist, but the showcasing of the finished work requires the collaboration of many people. An artist can hang a picture on a wall, a novelist can hand someone a finished manuscript, but the playwright has nothing until the actors make it into something, and that is what New Works offers.”

Regional actors end up simultaneously auditioning for 18 theater groups that will produce the shows, which is intimidating but highly rewarding, Joseph said.

“It’s a chance to get together with members of 18 other regional theater troupes and exchange new ideas and energy to bring these works to life for the very first time,” he said.

The full schedule of Pittsburgh New Works performances is at pittsburghnewworks.org.



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