

2011 Professional Development Grant Report

Professional Premiere of *The Witches' Quorum*

David J. Eshelman, Ph.D., M.F.A.

Department of Speech, Theatre, & Journalism

September 6, 2011

B. Restatement of Creative Work / Professional Enhancement Activity

In June 2011, I attended the professional premiere of my play, *The Witches' Quorum*, at the Magnetic Field, an experimental theatre company in Asheville, North Carolina. More information about the theatre can be found on its website:

<http://www.themagneticfield.com/>

The play was directed by Steven Samuels, featuring a cast of Asheville-based performers.

C. Brief Review of Creative Work / Professional Enhancement Activity

The Witches' Quorum is a comedy about serious issues like race and gender as evidenced in literary representations of history. It takes two secondary characters from well-known novels---Mistress Hibbins from *The Scarlet Letter* and Cassy from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*---and puts them together in colonial Jamestown at the time of Pocahontas. Hibbins and Cassy are looking to escape their lives as they are---to leave Jamestown for the mythical land of Croatoan. However, they are thwarted by Hibbins's witch-burning brother and by the arrival of mail-order Puritan bride. Throughout, the play uses broad comedy to explore serious issues such as an examination of which characters are excluded from comedy and happy endings, and a consideration of the efficacy of contemporary literature to address past wrongs.

D. Summary of Outcomes / Experiences

As part of my attendance at the official opening of *The Witches' Quorum*, I attended the two preview performances of the show, where I got to speak with the actors and director, giving any final bits of advice and ensuring that my vision for the play had remained intact. I also attended the opening of the play with a champagne reception in my honor. At this event, I got to learn what audiences thought of my work and I got to network with Asheville-area artists.

During my time in Asheville, I had many conversations with the general manager of the Magnetic Field and with the artistic director. This type of networking is vital to the work of the dramatist because it can lead to future productions---either for additional productions of the current play or for possible future productions of other work. I should add that Steven Samuels, the director, is extremely well connected. He is a former editor of *American Theatre*, a major performing arts periodical. He is also former dramaturg to Pulitzer Prize-winning dramatist Tony Kushner and for Charles Ludlam's critically acclaimed Ridiculous Theatre. I am exceedingly glad to have had the chance to work with him. He and I continue our discussions of the relationship of my work to his theatre.

My endeavors as a playwright tie in very much to my job as a teacher at Arkansas Tech. At ATU, I teach courses that explore new plays---including writing courses like Writing for Performance and performance courses like Oral Interpretation. I also run two venues for new plays, the Arkansas Radio Theatre and the River Valley Play Series. In order to maintain an understanding of the contemporary playwriting world, it is necessary that I keep active as a dramatic author. Professional productions are the most important outlet for playwrights today.

E. Conclusions and Recommendations

The Witches' Quorum was reviewed favorably by two Asheville periodicals. After its close, *The Witches' Quorum* broke the record for highest-selling weekend at the Magnetic Field. Because of its success, the artistic staff is working to gain future productions of the play at other North Carolina theatres. They are also considering a re-mounting of the show in the distant future. Perhaps most promising of all, the artistic director has said that he would like to do another play of mine this coming spring. For that reason, I am currently working on my next script for the Magnetic Field.

I am extremely grateful for the Professional Development Grant.

Copies to: Prof. Anthony Caton, Department Head, Speech, Theatre, & Journalism
 Dr. H. Micheal Tarver Duncan, Dean, Liberal and Fine Arts
 Dr. John Watson, Vice President, Academic Affairs

F. Appendix

Review of the play accessible on the following website:

<<http://cvnc.org/article.cfm?articleId=4911>>