

Playwrights-In-Residence:

By Diane Lefer

WHAT DOES IT MEAN to be a playwright-in-residence? For Caridad Svich, a residency at the Mark Taper Forum's Latino Theatre Initiative (funded by the National Endowment for the Arts/Theatre Communications Group) meant \$25,000 for an 18-month stint, an office, desk and computer. The Taper then extended her stay "on their dime" for another six months. During her residency, Svich wrote two plays (one of which, *Prodigal Kiss*, was published in the Best New Plays of 1999), conducted writing workshops, edited two books and assembled her Lorca translations for publication. "The ability to sustain a living, however modest, made the world of difference to my growth as an artist," she says.



Playwright Caridad Svich

Today, with theatre labs such as the Latino Theatre Initiative a thing of the past and most LA theatres operating on a shoestring, has the playwright-in-residence concept become obsolete?

"Not at all," says Aaron Henne, in residence at Son of Semele Ensemble, the small company that produced Svich's play *Iphigenia Crash Land Falls on the Neon Shell that Was Once Her Heart* (a *rave fable*). Henne became a dues-paying member of SOSE—and the only playwright in the company—because "we seemed like a really nice match stylistically. Obviously, I sure as hell hoped they would produce my work—I'd be lying if I said otherwise—but I went ahead with no guarantee."

The company did produce his play *King Cat Calico Finally Flies Free!* in June-July 2006. He's collaborated with SOSE to develop *Labo(ur)*, about wealth and poverty and the English working class, from a concept by Alex Wells. The company provided five weeks of development and a two-week workshop of a play Henne suspected had problems but needed to see on its feet. Also, he has used the SOSE space for some of the playwrighting classes he teaches.

"Residence suggests habitation, living in a place," says Robert J. Litz, senior playwright-in-residence at the Elephant Theatre Company which collects no dues and includes a growing roster of playwrights. Among them, Gena Acosta, Zibby Allen, Jonathan Caren, Kerry Carney, Jackie Christy, and Dan McCoy were all represented last March in the company's annual short play production, *Love Bites*.

"For all of us, it's a theatrical home," Litz says, adding that "in smaller theatres with their

marginal economics, it really is a lot like living in a 'fixer-upper.' Let's just say that over the years, I've acquired an intimate hands-on knowledge of the company's inventory of power tools."

Litz's play *One Fell Swoop*, opening in July under the direction of Chris Game, offers a bracing look at our threatened right to privacy: an untenured professor of constitutional law

becomes a media celebrity when her mentor is nominated to fill a seat on the Supreme Court. "I enjoy watching her get intoxicated by that first taste of celebrity," Litz says, "but I also revel in observing the hangover."

While he calls the play "a comedy of manners," his wit seems more corrosive than gentle when you consider that he refers to contemporary

24/7 news coverage as "not so much a dumbing down as it is a dulling assault & battery."

As for being "senior playwright," Litz shrugs it off. "I'm just the oldest." Cheryl Huggins, who serves along with Gia McGinley as one of the directors of the play development committee, calls him a "guru to the other playwrights." Litz is particularly high on Tony Foster's *Asleep on a Bicycle*, about a woman who loses herself in the labyrinth of her own dreams. Like many of the company playwrights, Foster also acts. "Anyone who wants to be a playwright should take acting classes," Litz says. "I've always seen scriptwriting as part of a performing art rather than a literary art. I encourage actors to write because they understand that."

McGinley and Huggins, however, coordinate play development precisely because neither has any intention of writing. "We prefer not to have writers on the committee," McGinley explains, "because it's so hard to be objective about your own work." She and Huggins organize readings and workshops for company writers. "They are our life's blood. Two of our most successful productions were Bob's play *One World* which was nominated for Best Play of 2004 by the NAACP, and Louis (Doug) Jacobs' *7 Redneck Cheerleaders*."

How does a playwright join the roster of this non-dues-paying company? "We'll read anything anyone sends in," says Huggins. "We're sluts that way."

While the Elephant is known for contemporary realism—Foster's dream-labyrinth notwithstanding—Son of Semele Ensemble looks for frankly experimental works. Henne says he writes with the company in mind but not for specific actors. "I

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—CARIDAD SVICH



SOSE Playwright Aaron Henne

A Home to Dream In



Cheryl Huggins, Robert J. Litz and Gia McGinley of Elephant Theatre Company

dream big," he says, "something you can't always do when you know you're working with limited budgets and small spaces. For *King Cat Calico*, he envisioned 40 cats onstage, clearly a financial and logistical impossibility but he knew SOSE would find a way to simulate that multitude with only

other companies produce his work, he now offers his work to his artistic home and no longer makes an effort to submit plays elsewhere.

Henne, on the other hand, seeks out other opportunities around town. He wrote *Sliding into Hades* in collaboration with Ron Sossi's KOAN

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six or seven actors, "or even just three. Son of Semele has so much expertise in masks and puppets, high impact movement and dynamic staging," Henne continues, "I trust that whatever I write, they'll find a way to make it work."

Litz also trusts the company. "I don't write roles with specific actors in mind. With a company of more than 60 talented people, there are always at least two or three people who'd be great." However, when one company member said, "Write me a part. I want to play a smart, funny lesbian," he was inspired to add a scene to *One Fell Swoop* and now thinks it may be one of the strongest in the play.

Litz has also been successful as a screenwriter and television writer, having written the original script for *Twister* and worked with such luminaries as Katharine Hepburn. The business of movies and TV "more than covers my more commercial and professional ambitions." As for his "theatre jones," working with the Elephant satisfies it. While he's happy if

ensemble. This theatrical work, inspired by the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, opened in April at the Odyssey Theatre. "But Son of Semele is my home," he says.

Ironically, Svich's funded residencies have made her a nomad who's found temporary sanctuary and support in places including New York City; London, England; Cambridge, Massachusetts; Columbus, Ohio; and Independence, Kansas. Given her itinerant life, it's no surprise that NoPassport, the Pan-American coalition of theatre artists she founded, holds meetings and conferences in cities around the country but convenes most often in cyberspace.

A residency, then, can be a gift of money to buy, in Svich's words, "Time and space to explore the creative act of dreaming new realities and to reflect on the world." For Litz at the Elephant, "It's a love and family thing, without the holiday bickering." And for Henne, "It's the guarantee that artistically I have a place to grow and that the company can also grow from me." ■

ONE FELL SWOOP

Opens July 13;
plays Thurs.-Sat., 8 pm;
through Aug. 18
Tickets: \$20
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6320 Santa Monica Blvd.,
Hollywood
323.960.4410 or
www.elephantstageworks.com