On Plays and Playwriting: A Jon Tuttle Residency at USCA

In the Spring of 2004, the USCA English Department hosted an extended residency by South Carolina-based playwright Jon Tuttle.

Thanks to a grant from the South Carolina Humanities Council, Tuttle visited USCA twice during the semester to interact with the faculty teaching his academic comedy The Hammerstone, to talk about his life in the theatre as part of the Oswald Writers Series, and to coach members of the USCA theatre program in a staged reading of his new play Holy Ghost. English major Cassandra Landy was one of 600 USCA undergraduates who read The Hammerstone in English and theatre classes during the spring semester.

Here is the text of an online interview that she conducted with the playwright.

Landy: What have you learned from your experience as a featured writer in this year’s James and Mary Oswald Distinguished Writers Series?

Tuttle: I must begin by emphasizing how much I enjoyed (and profited from) my visits to USCA. The Oswald series appears to be a tremendous asset to the university, and I am very honored to have been included in it.

Landy: What did you learn from the University Theatre’s performance of Holy Ghost?

Tuttle: The reading of Holy Ghost on March 17 brought to light the very things it was supposed to—the soft spots in the script, the moments when the energy drains away. The student actors were very helpful.

Landy: How do plays make better people?

Tuttle: Good question. Plays are, by their nature, more verbal than visual and therefore rely more on intellectual engagement than on spectacle. You expect to participate in a play—you can’t participate in a movie except by starting a fire in the theatre, which I don’t recommend. Sure, when you go to a play, you want to have a good time, and I think it’s right to expect that, but while you’re there, you’re part of a community who is being asked to confront certain issues collectively and participate, because it’s theatre.

Landy: You stated that “cynicism is emotional laziness.” How do you respond to the argument that the audience is cynical for good reason because of the unreliable narrator in your new play?

Tuttle: What you are referring to is skepticism. I’m all for skepticism. Good plays make audiences better skeptics. Cynicism is different. We’re all prone to it. But it’s still a sign that something in your heart has collapsed. Chronic cynicism is a form of exhaustion, and one feels sorry for chronic cynics, but damn they’re irritating. Also, how is it that some people never get exhausted, no matter how difficult the circumstances.

Landy: What advice do you give to aspiring playwrights?

Tuttle: Huge question. Al Pacino says, “Do your work, and the career will take care of itself.” Judith Kitchen advised, “Don’t say ‘I want to be a writer,’ say ‘I want to write.’” In other words, “Shoot up and write.” Stop wishing and start writing. I tell my students I can’t teach anyone to write. All I can do is to teach them to CARE. If you don’t care it shows in your work.
Department of English Welcomes Dr. Hampton

Dr. Jill Hampton, the newest member of the USCA Department of English, is originally from the Mid-west. Dr. Hampton received her B.A. and M.A. in English from the University of Illinois at Springfield. She earned her Ph.D. in English at Southern Illinois University.

While at Southern Illinois University, she fell in love with Irish literature and wrote her dissertation on late 19th century Irish women writers. She has long been interested in recovering literary voices pushed aside by the dominant canon.

Dr. Hampton comes to Aiken as an experienced writing instructor. Currently, she is finishing book reviews on Irish studies subjects and working on an article on May Laffan from a post-colonial perspective.

Dr. Hampton loves USCA and the Aiken community and takes every opportunity she can to ride a horse.

We welcome Dr. Hampton to the Department of English.

Dr. Jill Hampton

Dr. Tom Mack

In the areas of traditional and applied scholarship, Dr. Mack has had an active year. In the fall of 2003 he presented a paper entitled, “Henry James and the Pregnant Pause: Comic Strategy in The Aspern Papers” at the International Conference of the Association for the Interdisciplinary Study of the Arts (Atlanta, GA), and in the spring of 2004 he presented a paper entitled, “Cannonicity and Aesthetic Merit: A Pedagogical Exploration” at the national conference of the College English Association (Richmond, VA). Also, this year he published an article on contemporary American writer James Purdy in the revised second edition of Critical Survey of Drama (Salem Press).

Dr. Sue Lorch

Dr. Sue Lorch spent significant time this academic year in service to the University in a variety of activities. A major accomplishment was the development and approval of an interdisciplinary minor in Women’s/ Gender Studies for USCA students. She remained active on the Pickens Gala Committee which put together a second successful conference in conjunction with Women’s History Month.

In addition to her regular teaching responsibilities, Dr. Lorch is planning to fete the Department faculty and her students in celebration of Shakespeare’s 400th birthday on April 23. In the Fall semester, Dr. Lorch gave three lectures to the Academy of Lifelong Learning on The Tempest. Dr. Lorch has spent considerable time in research for a paper on Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale that draws from various fields including sociology and psychology.

A portion of the paper has been

Linda Lee Harper & Vicki Collins

Spring 2004 marks the beginning of Dr. Mack’s fourteenth year as chair of the Department of English and the fourteenth year that he has been writing a weekly

Vicki Collins and Stephen Gardner chat with visiting playwright Dr. Jon Tittle.
Karl Fornes

Karl Fornes presented a paper entitled "Required Visits Revisited" at the 2004 Southeastern Writing Center Association Conference in Atlanta, Georgia in February 2004. He continues to serve on the board of the SWCA as treasurer. He is currently preparing a presentation discussing the use of web logs ("blogs") in the writing classroom for the USCA Academic Technology Conference in April 2004 and, with Professor Jennifer Little (Library), a discussion of the roles of information literacy and technology in first-year composition for the Georgia Conference on Information Literacy in October 2004.

Dr. Stephen Gardner

Stephen Gardner's poetry collection The Uncertain Matrix of Desire was a finalist in the 2004 Ohio State University Press/The Journal competition. Over 500 manuscripts were entered in this contest.

This spring, he also embarked on a large editorial project. In collaboration with USCA English graduate William Wright (2002), he is working on The Southern Poetry Anthology: South Carolina. Gardner and Wright are soliciting submissions from poets who have a South Carolina connection. From these submissions, they will select works to fill what may be a substantial anthology. After completing the South Carolina volume, they plan to tackle other states, such as Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia, and Texas. This year William Wright, a native of Johnston, SC, will receive his M.A. in English from Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, TX, where he also works on the editorial staff of The Texas Review.

Dr. Phebe Davidson

As she looks forward to her retirement in May of 2005, Dr. Phebe Davidson is particularly pleased with some of her achievements since the last newsletter. Her book of new and selected poems Back to Square One was published in a hardback edition by the Mellens Poetry Press in fall 2003. A reviewer for the Journal of New Jersey Poets calls it a collection of poems that "chop at the heart and then elegantly sew it together." Additionally, her work as editor of the Paganum Poetry Press has also received excellent reviews for books published in the past year. Identified in Literary South Carolina as one of this state's "most distinguished contemporary poets," Davidson also takes her work as scholar and teacher very seriously. The past year has seen her present conference papers on science fiction writers Karen Joy Fowler and Ursula K. Le Guin and on South Carolinian writer Mary Chesnut, and she is currently working on a presentation for the national College English Association. She serves on the steering committee of the University of Chattanooga's Civil War Symposium.

In her own words, "This job--teaching at a small university--is as busy and challenging as ever. And just as wonderful." She is currently working on two more books of poems and continues to perform readings of her work throughout the Southeast.

Dr. Bill Claxon

In addition to continuing to teach the courses he loves: composition, fiction writing, non-Western literature, Southern literature, William Faulkner, and Flannery O'Connor, Dr. Claxon divides his professional leisure time between writing fiction and studying Southern literature. His current scholarly project, destined to be a book, is entitled The Marginalized Male in Twentieth-Century Southern Fiction. In September 2003, he presented the paper "Marginalized Males in Contemporary Southern Literature" at the Southern Writers Symposium at Southern Methodist College. In October, he took a few students from his Southern literature class to the Flannery O'Connor Symposium in Milledgeville, Georgia. He applied for, but did not receive, an NEH Fellowship for 2004-2005. He will be on sabbatical Spring 2005.

Dr. Lynne Rhodes

In the past academic year, Dr. Lynne Rhodes has continued to direct writing assessments at USCA. She gave a presentation at the National Conference on Composition and Communication in New York in the Spring of 2003, and she will be presenting at the National Writing Across the Curriculum Conference in St. Louis in May of 2004. She has contributed to First Year and American Democracy Project task force work at USCA in the past year as well.

Editorial Staff

Each year the "Department of English Newsletter" is compiled and edited by students majoring in English at USCA.
This semester Senior English Major Phillip Grayson has been interning at *The Aiken Standard*. Since beginning his internship, Grayson, who was, in his own words, “previously best known for drinking milk through a straw,” has been credited as a staff writer at the paper, initially working on formatting press releases for publication in the paper, then moving on to larger original stories. Grayson says that he has enjoyed learning how to write journalistically and master the software used at the paper.

Over the course of the semester, Grayson has written stories on the military mail service, bird watching in Aiken, and the Triple Crown. Currently he is working on a story about youth voter turnout in the Aiken area. It is his longest and most challenging piece yet, but Grayson says he enjoys it. “Gathering all the information, checking the numbers, then figuring out what it all means, it’s a challenge, but seeing it start to come together is really rewarding,” he says.

Grayson’s internship ends April 23rd, and next semester he will be attending graduate school, but, as he says, “I think this has been a nice opportunity, and it’s made me consider some different options of what I might want to do in the future.”

ENGLISH HONOR SOCIETY INDUCTS NEW MEMBERS

The USCA chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, the International English Honor Society, inducted seven new members at a special dinner meeting at Shoney’s of Aiken on March 22. Those inducted include Charity Barclay (Aiken, SC), Monica Budnichuk (Aiken, SC), Zeke Miller (Aiken, SC), Michael Clune (Salley, SC), Jason Mouzon (Batesburg, SC), Alison Rodgers (New Ellenton, SC), and Jessica Thomas (Aiken, SC). Established in 1986, USCA’s Epsilon Upsilon chapter of Sigma Tau Delta is dedicated to supporting the international society’s goals of recognizing student accomplishments in literature and linguistics and promoting interest in the discipline of English on college campuses and their surrounding communities. The Epsilon Upsilon chapter, in particular, provides an annual undergraduate scholarship to a USCA student majoring in English or English education and helps host visiting writers as part of the James and Mary Oswald Distinguished Writers Series.

At this year’s induction dinner Dr. Jill Hampton, Assistant Professor of English, gave a short presentation about her decision to major in English and dedicate herself to a life of the mind.

This year’s chapter officers include Francesca Pataro, President; Sarah Barber, Vice President; and Phillip Grayson, Secretary-Treasurer. The chapter sponsor is Dr. Tom Mack.

2004 HONORS CONVOCATION

The following students received special recognition at this year’s academic convocation:

Francesca Pataro
Outstanding Student in English

Monica Budnichuk
The Oswald Freshman Writing Award

James C. Howell
The Oswald Creative Writing Award

Robin Brubaker
The Kaplan Writing Award