A Personal History of the Huntington Playwriting Fellowship

by Ken Urban

For me, it started with a phone call twelve years ago. Ilana Brownstein, then literary manager, called to ask if I wanted to be a Huntington Playwriting Fellow. I had just moved from New York to Boston for a teaching gig. I knew no one in the theatre and I felt cut off from the ecology of off-off Broadway theatre that nurtured my early years as a writer. The call was truly a surprise. In those days, writers didn’t apply to become a fellow. The fellowship found you. Or more accurately, Ilana and former Artistic Director Nicky Martin found you. In any case, I was found. Three other writers and I would spend the next two years developing work at the Huntington, through monthly meetings, table readings and participation in the Breaking Ground Festival. Throw in a stipend and free tickets to Huntington productions; by the end of the call, this playwright was fairly ecstatic.

Now entering its sixteenth year, the Huntington Playwriting Fellowship (HPF) has gone through three distinct phases. During my time, it was two-year, invite only. To make the HPF program more energetic and the selection process more transparent, during Lisa Timpl’s reign as Director of New Work (2009-2017), it became a six-person writers’ group with new blood injected every year. Still a two-year commitment, admission was staggered; three writers would “graduate” each fall, with three new writers starting. These days, the HPF program is run by Charles Haufler, long time Huntington artistic staff member who was recently named Lisa’s successor. With new leadership, the goals of the program shifted again. In Charles’s words, “We are building an overall community rather than making the best writers group.” With a total of 35 writers now alumni of the program, developing and maintaining those relationships is a top concern for Charles and new Literary Manager Sebastian Alberdi. The Fellowship will now choose only two-to-three writers every eighteen months.

While the program might be getting slightly smaller in scale, it is clear that there remains a lot of love for the program. “What I enjoy most is getting to know a small group of writers really well,” Charles tells me, “I have read three or four drafts of most plays by HPF writers. And the depth of that relationship is very rewarding. It helps our literary department avoid the ‘churn and burn out’ that I hear other people in my field warn about. I have a clear vocabulary with these writers. When we go into rehearsals for a reading or a production with a play by an HPF writer, we are not starting at square one. We can hear each other because we all speak the same language.”

Of course, there is no promise of production for HPFs. Charles admits that it will always be “an uneasy marriage” when you have a writers’ group attached to a theatre: “You need to walk into that situation cognizant of that reality, but it’s worth taking on...

Melinda Lopez on the Mellon Foundation National Playwright Residency at Huntington Theatre Company

NEVER THOUGHT I would get married. It just didn’t appeal to me. When I was in my 20s I was very hard to pin down. Yes, I fell in love a lot, but commitment was a good way to send me running. [Continues on page 33]
that challenge.” I would argue that despite this concern, the Huntington has an excellent track record compared to other writers’ groups and fellowships. As of the 2018-19 season, nine HPFs have had thirteen productions on the Huntington stages.

The truth is that every phase of the HPF program, during Lana’s time, Lisa’s, and now Charles’s, has always been about creating “an overall community” of playwrights. The Huntington’s commitment to the HPFs has always extended beyond the fellowship period. Melinda Lopez, who was in the first “class” of HPFs in 2003, is now completing her time as the Playwright-in-Residence. Funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the residency created a staff position for Lopez, allowing her to sit in on meetings with the theatre’s artistic staff, and giving her time and resources to research and write. The Mellon Foundation also provided the Huntington financial support for productions of Lopez’s plays. Starting in 2017, alumni have started HPF University (huggerously nicknamed “HPF U”). These peer-led classes are an opportunity for playwrighting exercises and discuss various playwriting-related topics. Kristen Greenidge led a session on “Food and Family” where HPFs shared stories and favorite dishes, while Wilt McGough used a game of Dangons and Dragons as a model for collaborative storytelling. There is also a new program called “HPF on the Road,” which will provide travel expenses to allow!

New England-based HPF alumni to attend new play festivals nationwide. Charles sees this as a chance for HPFs to serve as “artist ambassadors” for the program. There are also plans underway for a writing retreat specifically for HPF alumni.

The impact of the Huntington’s fellowship program

...can be incredibly profound. For me, being an HPF changed my career. During my two years as an HPF, the Huntington developed my play Sense of an Ending about the Rwandan genocide with an all-African American cast. They nominated the play for the Weissberger Playwriting Award. I won the award and was able to pay off my student loans with the prize money.

During her time as Director of New Work, Lisa developed the Summer Workshop series for HPF alumni. These two-week-long workshops are opportunities for alumni to develop a new play and each workshop concludes with a public reading. In 2013, my play A Future Perfect was developed in the Summer Workshop series. That play is a comedy about how a pregnancy announcement impacts a group of friends in Park Slope during Obama’s first term. The Huntington passed on the play, but another Boston theatre company, SpeakEasy Stage Company, saw the reading and produced the play in their 2014-15 season. I was again asked back to the Summer Workshop in 2015, this time with my play A Guide for the Homeless. The Huntington produced that play during the 2017-18 season.

I’m not going to lie. I was nervous about premiering Guide at the Huntington. It is a personal play about two Americans who meet at a hotel bar in Amsterdam and spend the night together. Both men fear they have

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As it turns out, marriage has been really good for me. I’ve been married 21 years, and I’ve leaned really happy to grow with a partner, a family. I’m glad I did it. I don’t know how it happened, I met someone, and it felt right. Being a playwright has been kind of the same. Playwrights date a lot of theatre companies. Some relationships are fast and passionate, and the faking out is bumpy and painful. There are a lot of one-night stands, and a regret. And there then are the steady, constant presents in your life as a writer—and the family you start to build with a few institutions that “get you.”

I had worked several times at the Huntington Theatre Company—as an actor in Our Town, A Misfit in The Country, and Persephone—and they had produced the world premiere of my play Sonia’s Nurse. I had participated in a lot of readings and was a happy Playwriting Fellow there. We had a really great on again/off again love affair. But I wasn’t sure I was ready for marriage. I wasn’t sure about the Mellon Foundation National Playwright Residency.

Still, The Huntington and I decided to apply. With the support of Lisa Timmel, Director of New Play Development, Peter Dubois, Artistic Director, and I put together a proposal. We talked a lot about boundaries. About respect. About honoring each other’s best qualities. We drafted a statement of intent, and I pitched a number of projects. I think more marriages would last if the couple had to sit down and apply for funding together. “What are your goals? How do you complement each other? Where do you see yourself in five years?”

And then I get married. *(Actually, that’s totally not true. I didn’t even get a ring from my spouse. No ring from the Huntington or Mellon. Just a commitment ceremony.)*

With the Mellon Fellowship, I came on board as Playwright-in-Residence at the Huntington. I got an office with a door. A computer. A name tag. I got a shit ton of freedom and a grab bag of responsibility—mostly to keep creating plays.

I started attending season planning meetings. I crossed my legs and tried to disappear into a chair as I saw what was going into selecting a balanced season, keeping an audience happy, honoring commitments to works in progress, making sure that gender equity and artists of color are working all the time, paying people, managing difficult visiting artists, felling in love with plays that you know don’t belong at the theatre... and also continuing to make my own plays. Sometimes the Art Staff would talk about my plays in the room with me. So awkward. I also get to hear them consider and reject plays I love by playwrights that I love. So painful. And yet, I also saw how the elements that go into the decision don’t reflect on the
The company of Man in the Ring
by Michael Cristofer

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quality of the work. That has helped me understand and process the continual rejection of this career.

I’m in my final year of the residency. I’ve written two solo shows (maybe that’s my response to budget crunches), a few giant plays with big casts, a historical lyrical drama, a political nasty drama, a new adaptation of a Lorca play, short plays, long plays, some bad plays, some pretty great plays. I recorded my own work for Audible and started an epic new work for the stage. I actually can’t count the projects I have completed.

I’ve given a million talks at many colleges, synagogues, libraries, universities. My plays were published in two languages. I saw my work produced in Cuba. I started an IRA and a SDF College Fund. I paid for two sets of braces and straightened 64 teeth. I taught writing classes for actors in the community and turned down a lot of work that would have taken me away from writing.

Writing so many plays, I have come to be less of a perfectionist and more of an omnivore; willing to take more risks and make more mistakes. I have had the luxury to know what it feels like to only take projects that are thrilling.

I am a trophy wife. A soccer mom. A pampered startet. I’ve worked my ass off—all for love. Because I didn’t need the money. That’s an incredible luxury.

This experience has helped me focus more on the people who make theatre—and less on the people who consume it. Of course, I’m clear that without audiences, there is no work for any of us. But some of the most meaningful time with the company has been spent writing plays.

- I helped write the Core Values Statement for my theatre company
- I helped start a forum for Employees of Color

- I want in the conference room when my candidate lost, surround-

ed by weeping accountants and marketing people.

- I worked with incredible actors and artists and producers and dra-

maturges and apprentices and box office managers and scenic artists and the people who reviewinvites and credit card receipts and who create posters and rescue actors who have locked themselves out again.

- I think more than anything, I have learned that it is so unbelievably hard to run a theatre company. And that the producers and admin-

istrators I have come to know and love, work so hard—harder than I ever understood before I was married to the company. That they are opening the theatre in the morning and closing it at the end of a ten out of twelve. That budgets are incredible works of engineering. That cubicles are sort of horrifying, but also cozy. That receptionists set the tone for the whole building. That the Company Manager doesn’t take vacations or get sick. That everyone I work with is an artist. That budgets are also horrifying.

- That no one gets paid enough.

- That blowing up as an artist is fun, but it doesn’t last, and that’s okay too.

- That audiences are great and terrible, and smart and stupid and not every play is going to make everybody happy. And that’s okay.

- And that no one gets paid enough again.

- It’s been amazing.

Thank you, Melton Foundation. Thank you, Huntington Theatre Company.

MELINDA LOFFZ's plays include Male (Emerson), Back the Night (BTP), Becoming Cuba, (North Coast Repertory, Huntington Theatre), Car-

dine In Jersey (Williamstown), and Sonia Fine (Huntington Theatre, Stevens-

wolf and others). Melinda is also an actress, teacher, and does other stuff.

betrayed the friends that needed them the most. The play came out of my time interviewing volunteers from Doctors without Borders, and researching the rise of anti-gay violence in Uganda. I didn’t quite know what it would be like to do this intimate play for a subscriber audience who hasn’t always embraced work with gay content.

Hands down, rehearsing Guide was one of the most rewarding experiences of my career so far. Director Colman Domingo and our cast (McKinley Belcher III and Samuel Levine) were given free reign to probe deep and work hard. During previews, I’ll never forget watching the stiff-upper-lip Boston audiences respond so emotionally to the play. We made something powerful and it is a testament to Artistic Director Peter DuBois and Managing Director Michael Moso’s belief in us. As a result of the Huntington production, the play opened in the West End this past fall.

I detail these personal successes because it is representative of the HPF program, that is, the ripple effects that it has on one’s career. Eleanor Burgess, whose play The Niceties premiered at the Huntington this season, concurs: “It’s a tremendous gift for a writer to have a home base—to have a sustained, flexible relationship with an institution that really knows your plays, where you feel comfortable sharing your growing work from its earliest stages. It’s the place that introduced me to some of my favorite long-term collaborators, and a place where I get to hang out with a full community of artists.”

Kirsten Greenidge also remembers how “ahead of the curve” the Huntington was during her time as an HPF: “I had a new born when I entered the HPF program and another newborn when I left. But I felt supported. Recently, there has been a lot of attention paid to being a working parent and being a theatre artist. When I was doing the fellowship, the Huntington allowed me to be both artist and parent, without making me twist into the painful position of having to compromise on either role. Once Lisa came on board, all bets were off. I was never a second-class citizen because I had kids.”

Kirsten and I were in the same “class” of HPFs and our fellowship happened (gulp) over a decade ago.

These days, I call New York City home again, but the Huntington remains a home away from home. I now run the dramatic writing program at MIT (yes, MIT has a theatre program and a pretty excruciating one). During the semester, I am often in People’s Republic of Cambridge. But even if I wasn’t here for teaching, I would still make the trek to Boston for Huntington events. Attending opening night for Michael Cristofer’s Man in the Ring, I got to catch up with Peter, Michael and other staff members, and say hello to a few Boston-based directors and actors. It is nice to walk into a party and be genuinely asked, “What are you working on next?”