

Author to Author: Bill Bruehl

Playwright Bill Bruehl has seen more than two dozen of his plays performed in venues such as New York City, San Francisco, Chicago, Phoenix, and Rome, Italy. The productions sometimes bring tears to his eyes. Not always of joy.

“I’ve had performances in New York that I loved, pieces that both director and actors nailed,” the Seneca resident said. “It was as though they were both reading my mind and finding things I never thought of.” On the other hand, he said, when a piece he wrote, commissioned by a large pharmaceutical company, opened in Cincinnati, “I couldn’t sit through it. I left before the intermission. The drug company had butchered it. I still feel a tightness in my stomach when I think of that night.”

Bruehl, active in the theatre since he was a boy, remains passionate about the playwriting life—with all its ups and downs. “I love to play, and writing is my play,” he said. An author, performer, and a director with more than 100 professional and university productions to his credit, Bruehl holds a PhD in dramatic literature from the University of Pennsylvania. Before moving to Seneca from New York several years ago, he served as Playwright-in-Residence at the Institute for Medicine in Contemporary Society at the University at Stony Brook Medical School. Although playwriting and medical school may seem an unlikely combination, Bruehl’s role was to write plays for the institute that focused on ethics in medical practice. “We’d bring in New York actors, rehearse the material I wrote and perform it for the student body and their clinical professors who would later discuss the ethical dilemmas,” he said. One play, based on an actual event in California, featured the story of a Hmong girl whose Buddhist parents wouldn’t allow her to undergo surgery for appendicitis. “The piece focused on the arrival of the police, the confrontation, the battle between the police and the family, and the girl, who agreed with her parents. It caused a big stir.”

A history buff, Bruehl often writes plays based on historical figures, although he is careful “not to let imagination be bound by historical fact.” Clemson Little Theatre in Pendleton is considering producing his play, “Short Haired Grace,” about a little-known but actual female pirate. “Queen Elizabeth I tried for 40 years to put down this woman who ran a gang of 400 sailors and controlled the seas off the west coast of Ireland between about 1560 and 1600,” Bruehl said.

He acknowledged that scripts for stage and screen have a common challenge: “Audiences are conditioned to go to sleep in dark rooms,” he said. “The screenwriter and the playwright both have to devise ways of keeping ‘em awake for two hours.” The playwright has to make sure language and action together do the trick, he said. “On stage we deal with emotional truth too, but those truths are carried more in words than in subtle behaviors.”

In the classroom, Bruehl likes to keep things positive. He reminds students that “mistakes are opportunities,” he said. His upcoming six-week workshop on playwriting, which begins Feb. 28, will focus on “the joy of creating a dramatic structure that engages and

holds an audience's attention," he said, with an emphasis on the value of first drafts. "I want them to see they can indeed write everyday. I want them to understand the value of that. I call it a vomit draft. Just get it out." When class members bring in pages each week and respond to each other's work, "it is a powerful learning experience," he said. "This is not about good or bad, but learning what works."

Sidebar:

As part of its series of writing workshops, The Writing Room will offer **"Introduction to Playwriting: Get in on the Act" a six-week workshop** taught by playwright Bill Bruehl. In the course of the workshop, participants will create a script of approximately 30 minutes playing time.

6-week workshop. starts February 28, Wednesdays, 6:30 – 9 p.m.

Location: Innovate Building Conference Room, 148 River Street, Greenville

Fee: \$180/nonmember; \$150/Emrys member

To register, email mindyfriddle@yahoo.com, visit www.emrys.org, or call Mindy Friddle at 864-884-2403