

SERVING NASHUA AND SOUTHERN NEW HAMPSHIRE

## Early Stages a springboard for new, untested plays

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By MARILYN SOLOMON

It is a long way from Nashua to Broadway. The clock registers one hour by plane and four hours by car, but for a playwright with opening night dreams, it can seem as distant as the moon.

Tuesday night at the American Stage Festival, the bright lights of the theater beckoned Michael Bettencourt, a playwright with ties to New Hampshire and the ASF. His play, "When The Phones Came To Liberty Creek," was aired at Early Stages, a showcase series for new plays at the American Stage Festival.

"A play doesn't just spring from the head of Zeus," said Michael Dell'Orto, the artistic director of the series. "These plays are works in progress, in the process of becoming."

During the summer season, four untested scripts are given a reading by professional actors under the guiding hand of a director. After the reading, the play is critiqued by the audience. Hearing the play is an illuminating experience for the author, as is the audience reaction.

"The play comes alive," says Dell'Orto. "Before that it is just words on a page."

Since the audience is one of the collaborators in the theatrical process, says Dell'Orto, the public is invited to sit in on the first "flowering" of a play. There is no admission charge. In fact, there is a bonus for attending: the rare opportunity to tell the playwright how the play can be improved.

To be in on the birth of a new play is an exciting and often exhausting experience for both the audience and the writer. The delivery process brings to light the script's strengths and weak spots. Hours of rewriting follow to refine the characters, tighten the plot and sharpen the point of view before it comes to the stage as a finished work. And even then, the rewriting continues.

Tuesday night, some 50 people came to play the role of critic in the Court Street theater. By 7 p.m., they filled the section facing the stage. All but the center stage was darkened. Scripts in hand, nine casually-clad actors sat in a semi-circle on the bare stage with the set for "Travels With My Aunt," the MainStage production, behind them. The gray-bearded playwright sat below and off to the side, reading the stage directions.

Conceived six months ago, "When the Phones Came to Liberty Creek," was inspired by a news story about a small town in the state of Washington that recently was wired for phone service, an amenity most places take for granted, but this hamlet occupied a territory where the installation had been too costly.

Whether modern technology is a curse or a blessing propels the plot and the characters of the play. Their reaction makes for some funny, touching and often ironic moments.

### **In love with theater**

At 48, Michael Bettencourt is not the stereotypical aspiring playwright, if one exists, and his definition of success is tempered by maturity. Taking a few detours to Broadway does not trouble him, and if his

plays never get beyond the boards of small theaters in the hinterlands, so be it.

"There are lots of good theaters throughout the country," he says, adding that Broadway or off-Broadway may be the end of the line, but it is not necessarily the best.

Long before he became a playwright, Bettencourt fell in love with theater, working as a stage manager, a public relations person and a photographer at the Palace Theater in Manchester in the early '90s, and subsequently at the Seacoast Repertory Theater in Portsmouth and the American Stage Festival.

It was at brunch with theater colleagues that he decided to direct his talents toward writing plays.

"It was Dec. 28, 1996, at 11 a.m. in Manchester," says the affable playwright, pinpointing the exact moment of enlightenment. Since then, while freelancing as a writer "to put food on the table" he has written several award-winning plays. His play "Dancing at the Revolution," about Emma Goldman, will be produced at the Playwrights Forum in Memphis, Tenn., in August and again in the Theater Cooperative in Somerville, Mass. In the fall, Bettencourt and his wife will move from Boston to New York, where he has been accepted in the master's program in theater arts at Hunter College.

For the reading of his latest play at the ASF, Bettencourt was both author and director. Tuesday afternoon, he met with the cast at the ASF for the only rehearsal of the reading. The actors, seven of them members of the Actors' Equity Association, donated their time with only a dinner break before going on stage.

Jonelle Margallo, the last to arrive at the rehearsal, was warmly welcomed, and after catching up with the news about each other, the convivial group soon got to work.

"It's a small world," said Donna Sorbello, referring to the tightly-knit community of theater people in the Boston area. "We enjoy each other's company."

All the actors were recruited by Dell'Orto, who knew their talents and convinced them to read their roles. "It's an actor thing, to support each other," remarked Sorbello.

And with one run-through, they all assumed their roles with ease for the reading that evening. Using just their voices they became the small-town characters in the play.

"They're really putting themselves into their parts," Bea Emmer commented to her husband, Abe, and Betty Winberg during the intermission.

The reading had attracted more people than the first in the series, a more straightforward comedy.

Theater-goers Chester Abbey of Litchfield and his wife, Marion, brought houseguests from Rhode Island. For Denise Forest and Christine Chase, both teachers who live in Auburn, it was the first ASF program they had attended. "I teach writing workshop to first-graders in Goffstown and at the end have the kids read what they have written. It was interesting to see the same process at a higher level."

Chris VanZant and Donald Christy came from Ayer, Mass., to see fellow performers and hear the new play.

Always interested in anything to do with the stage, Linda Ayer and Pat and Jerry White, longtime members of the Nashua Theater Guild, were among the smaller group that stayed for the discussion after the 2½-hour reading.

"I hear echoes of 'Greater Tuna,' with the radio station," offered Jerry White.

"That's my fault," answered John Davin, who read the role of the folksy radio announcer with a Texas twang that was not in the script.

A number of people commented on the distraction of a sub-plot, the election campaign of two outsiders, a Chinese-American woman and a black man from Trinidad, running for the same town office.

"It's almost another play in itself," said Linda Rosenwein, a summer resident of New Boston. She and her husband, Robert, a psychology professor at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania, have been attending AFS Early Stages for many years.

As the discussion came to an end, Phil Soletski of Brookline, an ASF season subscriber, suggested, "I really see it as a play about conflict more than communication."

"Miscommunication," said the playwright who had been scribbling notes to himself throughout the reading.

Almost 300 plays had been submitted for an Early Stages reading. The four chosen were different and distinctive works, with an interesting subject or approach to the theater, said Dell'Orto. The last two are "The Interview," a drama about a victim of the Holocaust by Faye Sholiton, Aug. 7 at 7 p.m. and "Kong's Night Out," a madcap comedy by Lowell, Mass., writer Jack Neary, Aug. 28 at 7 p.m.

"He is finishing it as we speak," said Dell'Orto.