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From Page to Stage, Experienced Guides Showing the Way

By STEVEN McELROY

PLAYWRIGHTS who bemoan those long periods of readings and revisions that rarely lead to a production must have been intrigued last fall when the Roundabout Theater Company announced Roundabout Underground, an initiative to help usher plays by lesser-known writers to the stage. Just a few weeks ago Lincoln Center Theater declared that this fall it would present the inaugural production of its new play enterprise, LCT3. And the Public Theater, already a venerable theatrical incubator, recently started an Emerging Writers Group, which, while not providing early career playwrights with productions, will offer other resources.

Certainly New York is teeming with companies that aim to present original works, but this season's new programs, coming as they do from established theaters with real budgets, suggest a heightened interest in cultivating nascent talent. In this landscape the Cherry Lane Theater's Mentor Project, now in its 10th year, is trying to remain both singular and solvent.

"In the last decade we were the pioneers, and now everyone is doing it," said Angelina Fiordellisi, the artistic director of the Cherry Lane, which has sponsored its Mentor Project matching up-and-coming writers with professionals since 1999.

"Everybody's copying, and they're taking all the funding too," she said. But if she seemed frustrated, she was pleased as well: a sharpened focus on young playwrights is a good thing. "I think what's become more and more important to people is the idea that in order for the theater to last, especially when we lose so many to film and television, we have to nurture these writers and give them hope," she said.

Ms. Fiordellisi started her program, which annually matches three playwrights and mentors, to fill a void. "There was this

black hole for playwrights between those who were students and those who had been produced in New York," she said. "That was a niche I thought we could fill." She found a kindred spirit in the playwright Michael Weller, who helped start the project and has been a mentor every year.

The project is offering "The Woodpecker," a dark comedy by Samuel Brett Williams, running through next Saturday. "The Young Left" by Greg Keller will follow in April and then Deirdre O'Connor's "Jailbait" in May.

Since the program began at the Cherry Lane in Greenwich Village, 36 playwrights have taken part. Each gets a reading, a rewrite period with help from a mentor and a stipend of \$5,000. Each play is also presented in the smaller of the Cherry Lane's theaters. The production, Ms. Fiordellisi said, makes the program unusual since many theaters offer only readings to emerging artists.

"It's important for you as a playwright to get your work up," said Anne Washburn ("The Internationalist"), whose mentor in

At the Cherry Lane Theater, new playwrights get much more than just a reading.

2000 was Craig Lucas. Ms. Washburn is a member of the playwrights' collective I3P, which has as its motto: "We don't develop plays. We do them."

The maxim is "saucy," she said, but the point is valid: A writer can gain only so much from readings. "You just need it up, and you need it up quick and dirty, and you need it up for a couple of weeks," Ms. Washburn said. "It's exciting to see theater that's done that way."

The production is not the only unusual



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aspect of Cherry Lane's project. After Ms. Fiordellisi accepts submissions from a nominating committee of a few dozen theater professionals, she chooses a handful of scripts for the mentors to consider. Each chooses a play, and the relationships at the heart of the project are born.

Mentors can provide anything from dramaturgical advice to a decent meal, and the way each pair functions is specific to the people involved. "They come in so many shapes and sizes, and what they need at any given time is so different," said Mr. Weller, who is working with Ms. O'Connor this year, mainly, he said, providing career advice.

"He's not just showing you how to do this one play and how to get through this production," Ms. O'Connor said. "He talks with this confidence that he's welcoming me into a world where I'm going to have a place."

The need for permission to enter the playwrighting profession is a recurring theme. "I especially appreciate the cheerleading," Mr. Keller said of his mentor, Gretchen Cryer. "I need some sort of inducting into 'Yes, you are a writer, you are accepted into the tribe.'"

Julia Cho ("The Piano Teacher"), who in 2002 had David Henry Hwang as a mentor, felt the same. "What I found invaluable was moral support," she said. "A kind of feeling that someone was in my corner no matter what."

Mr. Williams, 26, said the emotional support he is gaining at the Cherry Lane has increased his confidence. He grew up in Arkansas, attended Ouachita Baptist University and later earned a master's degree in playwriting at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J. But he still seems wide-eyed about New York and the professional theater.

"The director has told me that you need to have confidence in your script at this point," he said after his first rehearsal a few weeks ago. "He said sometimes it seems like I like it less than anybody else in the room."

Luckily, Mr. Williams has a mentor, Charles Fuller, to offer suggestions and encouragement. "He never lets me get too far from harbor," Mr. Williams said. "He lets me find my way back, but he leaves the light on, so that's good."

Deirdre O'Connell and Dan Moran during a reading of "The Woodpecker," which the Cherry Lane Theater is presenting through its Mentor Project.