

THEATER

Two Playwrights Who Listened to Their Elders

By JONATHAN MANDELL

CHRISTOPHER SHINN had wanted to be a playwright from the age of 15, when he took a trip to New York, fell in love with another boy, then went home to Connecticut and wrote a play about it. But in his four years in the dramatic writing program at New York University, not one of his plays was ever selected for production. When he was 20, he wrote a four-character play about two teenagers separately seeking out their first sexual encounters on the Fourth of July. He titled it "Four." It, too, was rejected, not just by the writing program but by several regional and New York theaters.

Bridgette A. Wimberly did not grow up wanting to become a playwright. Her first love was science; her second was history. For the last 10 years she has been a research scientist, doing work on AIDS at Stony Brook on Long Island, while writing poetry on the side. Several years ago, armed with a long poem that she thought might make a play, she joined the Lincoln Center Theater Director's Lab, and, as part of a writing exercise for that workshop, she wrote a two-character scene. With encouragement from the other members of the workshop, she fleshed out the exercise into a full-fledged play, about the life of an African-American abortionist over a turbulent decade of recent American history. She titled it "Saint Lucy's Eyes."

Both "Four" and "Saint Lucy's Eyes" are opening this month for commercial runs, each having already achieved for its author a level of praise and attention unusual even for mature playwrights. In a fulfillment of the most outlandish of student revenge fantasies, "Four" was produced at the Royal Court Theater in London to enthusiastic reviews, and recently opened in New York at the TriBeCa Playhouse. Commenting on Mr. Shinn's "smart, brokenhearted new play," in his review in *The New York Times*, Ben Brantley said the author promises "to be a playwright to reckon with."

"Saint Lucy's Eyes," which recently ended a run at the Women's Project, begins performances on Thursday at the Cherry Lane Theater's main stage, starring Ruby Dee. Reviewing the play at the Women's Project, Anita Gates said in *The New York*



Richard Termine for The New York Times



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Willis Burks II and Ruby Dee, left, in the play "Saint Lucy's Eyes," by Bridgette A. Wimberly, above, which begins a commercial run on Thursday at the Cherry Lane Theater.



Photographs by Sara Krulwich/The New York Times



Vinessa Antoine and Armand Riesco, left, in "Four," a play by Christopher Shinn, above, produced by the Worth Street Theater Company at the TriBeCa Playhouse.

Christopher Shinn and Bridgette A. Wimberly, beginners whose plays are flying high, were part of a mentoring project.

Times that it is an "insightful, largely satisfying drama" in which "Ms. Wimberly's language has the power of authenticity."

Both "Four" and "Saint Lucy's Eyes" were also among the five plays chosen three years ago for the first season of the Cherry Lane Alternative Mentor Project. A year-long fellowship, the project pairs emerging writers with established playwrights and culminates in productions of the chosen plays at the 60-seat Cherry Lane Alternative Space.

Charles Fuller, 62, best known for "A Soldier's Play," picked Mr. Shinn's play out of a stack of finalists and became Mr. Shinn's official mentor for a year. "He really loved the play, and he didn't think that I should rewrite it," recalled Mr. Shinn, now 26. "Which was great."

Mr. Fuller remembers it differently: "I

Jonathan Mandell, the editor of a Web site about New York City, *GothamGazette.com*, most recently wrote for *Arts and Leisure* about the musical "Once Around the City" and the Tony Awards television show.

told him: 'Cut, cut, cut. Less is more.'" In any case, both agree that the connection was beneficial. "We were able to talk to each other almost every day," Mr. Fuller said, "though we did it mostly by e-mail."

Ms. Wimberly's mentor was Wendy Wasserstein. "When I got the call that Wendy had selected my play, I was blown away," said Ms. Wimberly, who is reluctant to reveal her age, but appears to be in her 30's. "I had really enjoyed her 'Heidi Chroni-

cles.'"

During the mentor project's first year, Ms. Wasserstein, 50, told *Dramatics Magazine*, "I read a bunch of plays, and this was the one that stood out to me — this is a natural playwright." She tried to do for Ms. Wimberly, she said, what certain directors and dramaturges have done for her: appreciate the dialogue but help make sure the story moves forward.

The mentor project, which last month

finished its third season, has so far enlisted 10 such well-known playwrights, from Edward Albee to Alfred Uhry, to help develop 15 new but relatively polished playwrights and their plays. Five already have gone on to commercial runs.

"There are many programs for budding playwrights in New York," said Mr. Uhry, who has been a mentor at the Cherry Lane twice. "What's different about this one is that you have to have never had a play

produced in New York City; you have to be selected by a playwright; and you get a full-scale production."

The fellowship program began as the inspiration of the playwright Michael Weller, who was himself inspired by the film director Milos Forman. Some 20 years ago, Mr. Forman hired Mr. Weller, then best-known for his play "Moonchildren," to write the screenplay for "Hair."

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Playwrights Who Heeded Their Elders

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"He began mentoring me to direct movies," Mr. Weller said. "He even had me direct a few scenes in 'Hair' and then in 'Ragtime.'" Mr. Weller was impressed by this unsolicited effort to pass on the craft to the next generation. "In Europe, it's just assumed," he said. "But I didn't see that happening in the theater." So Mr. Weller began hiring promising playwrights, recommended to him by literary managers from regional theaters, as apprentices, which meant little more at first than sitting in during the productions of Mr. Weller's plays.

Several years ago, Angelina Fiordellisi, the new owner of the venerable 178-seat Cherry Lane Theater, created the nonprofit Cherry Lane Alternative, a place to develop theater artists, and built a second stage at the Cherry Lane. When she found out what Mr. Weller had been doing for so long, she asked him to help make it a formal program. Mr. Weller took to the task with a passion, enlisting colleagues who became as eager as he was to assure a future for the project, which now operates on a budget of about \$250,000 a year, raised from foundation grants, donations, benefits and, yes, ticket sales.

The playwrights say they have more to offer young writers than directors or dramaturges or professional teachers do. "A playwright has been there, and he is also usually going to be on the side of the playwright," Mr. Uhry observed. "Ev-



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Marsha Norman, left, and Cybele Pascal, mentor and protégée, in the Cherry Lane playwriting project.

erybody else is going to say, 'This isn't written right,' when often the problem is that you haven't gotten the right actor or the right director. It's easier to pick on words than such intangible things as direction."

Marsha Norman, the author of "Night Mother" and "The Secret Garden," sees the project as the continuation of a long tradition. "Playwriting is a craft," she said, "and it's been handed down for centuries. The

fact that this is still going on is the reason we still have a theater."

It is fitting that the play Ms. Norman chose to mentor in the season just ended was Cybele Pascal's "Allegory of Painting," about the 17th-century female painter Artemisia Gentileschi, who fought to be part of the master-apprentice system in which Italian art flourished.

There is no such formal system anymore, of course, for either painting or for playwriting, though there have been many tiny individual efforts, like those at the Cherry Lane, to bring it back.

Ms. Norman, for one, is happy to keep it tiny. "It's returned to a decent level of impossibility for a new voice to emerge," said Ms. Norman, who is also on the faculty of the Juilliard School's playwriting program, which accepts only 4 of about 400 applicants each year. "The 1980's was a very easy time for any playwright to be produced; every regional theater had a playwriting contest. The result was a glut of mediocre

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plays."

The playwrights concede that mentoring won't transform mediocre work into great art. "You can't communicate art, really," Mr. Weller said. "But you can communicate the basic carpentry."

Mr. Fuller also has doubts: "I don't know if there is a whole lot you can teach someone about writing plays. I'm not sure that's possible." But, he continued, that is not what programs like the Cherry Lane Alternative Mentor Project can best offer anyway. "What a writer needs," he said, "is not, 'Cross your T's and dot your I's' but: 'Hey, don't let this get you down. It's just a play.' Some people get so tense and anxiety-ridden that they can't get the work done. I think a lot of what Chris needed was somebody to talk to about the work, and about what he was going to go through."

To Mr. Shinn that meant: the actors who would make up their own lines, the agent he wanted to fire, the rehearsals where nothing went right, the silly newspaper interviewers.

"I already knew how to write plays," Mr. Shinn said, agreeing with his mentor. "But I didn't know how to be a playwright. Charles prepared me for the humiliation of being a playwright." □



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times