

from the FOOTLIGHTS

JUNE 2013

“Life shouldn’t be all work and no plays.”

<http://www.footlightsdc.org>

June 17: Footlights to Discuss *The Hampton Years*

Part way through World War II and through *The Hampton Years*, Viktor Lowenfeld, an Austrian Jewish refugee from Nazi-occupied Europe who has established an Art Department at Hampton Institute, the historically African-American college in Virginia, receives a letter from the State Department. It tells him his entire family back in Europe is dead, murdered in the Holocaust.

One of his colleagues, Charles White, an African-American painter, expresses his horror and sorrow and asks, “Is there anything I can do?”

“No,” Viktor replies. “You all, you deal with so much, but you can’t know what this means. You’re forced to live in a segregated world. You have to ride in separate train cars and sit at the back of the bus. But with all this, they’re not burning you in ovens.”

The mass organized killing of the Holocaust and the mass organized segregation of the U.S. shape the attitudes and the characters of *The Hampton Years*, a new play by **Jacqueline Lawton**, who will discuss it with Footlights on June 17 at Alfio’s. She will be joined by **Shirley Serotsky**, director of Theater J’s current production of *The Hampton Years*.

Lawton’s play is set at Hampton Institute just before and during World War II, a time when the U.S., even the North, was still shackled with segregation. It tells of two groups – African-Americans and Jews – trying to adjust to and learn from each others’ pain. But it also raises other fascinating questions:

- What should be the purpose of art? Do you paint and sculpt what you see, as student Samella Lewis wants to do? Or do you paint and sculpt what you feel, as Lowenfeld challenges her to do? This conflict has been going on between the art world and greater society ever since the Impressionists, at least.

- What is the purpose of education? Hampton’s presidents, Dr. Malcolm Maclean and Dr. Ralph Bridgman, are skeptical of having an art department. Maclean comes from the tradition of having historically black colleges teach their students trades – and that the students, and other blacks “know their place” in a segregated society, and don’t openly challenge it. So why have an art department, then? Meanwhile, one of the students, drafted into the army, refuses to sit in the back of the bus on the way home, and is forcibly detained. He’s challenging “their place” and he also asks why blacks are fighting, a legitimate question for African-American servicemen in World War II.

- Lowenfeld argues for an art department, and, by extension, a liberal arts education, which encourages students to explore and think. Minus the “know their place” attitude, that question still roils relations between academics and the greater society. Should we just concentrate on the “three Rs” in our schools, emphasize rote recitation, and steer students to courses that guarantee jobs? Or should the curriculum be broad, challenging students to think for themselves and, by extension, question authority?

- Is fear the reason for prejudice? When another student, John Biggers, gets the first-ever show for a young African-American in New York, a critic gives his *Dying Soldier* a devastating review, calling it “propaganda.” Biggers is devastated, but Lowenfeld says the critic trashed his work because the critic was threatened by creativity of an African-American. And Lowenfeld looks on the positive side: Biggers broke yet another racial barrier, even if just in the art world. Is that positive?

The Footlights discussion of these topics and more will take place Monday, June 17 at Alfio’s, 4515 Willard Avenue, Chevy Chase, MD, on the ground floor of the Willoughby Apartments in Friendship Heights, a short walk from the north entrance of the Friendship Heights Metro station. Street parking is limited but valet parking is free at Alfio’s, if you drive. Dinner is at 6:30 and the discussion begins at 7:30 and ends at 9. Cost for dinner is just \$13, and that includes tax and tip. You will get a salad, bread, choice among six entrees, ice cream, and tea or coffee. Cash or check – no credit cards, please. Beer, wine, and cocktails are available from the bar. You may come for the discussion only if you wish. We appreciate a \$5 contribution to Footlights.

Make your reservations with Phyllis Bodin 301-986-1768 or phylbo@verizon.net. Reservations and cancellations will be accepted until noon of the day of the discussion.

“I am a Texas raised, D.C. based playwright, dramaturg, and teaching assistant” is how Jacqueline Lawton describes herself. She first spoke to Footlights back in February of 2009, when she was dramaturg for the Round House production of Sarah Ruhl’s *Eurydice* and Lawton brought along one of the three-ring binders of research notes she had prepared for every member of the cast and crew to guide them through the background of the play – and show members of Footlights precisely what a dramaturg does. She was also busy writing plays, and her *Anna K* – an updated *Anna Karenina* set in Paris in the 1920s – was a sensation at the Silver Spring Round House. (Incidentally it was directed by our other speaker, Shirley Serotsky.) Lawton has written

a dozen plays, teaches in her spare time – she is a Professor of Theatre at UDC – and is considered one of the leading black playwrights in this country.

Shirley Serotsky is the Associate Artistic Director of Theater J, and has directed productions for Catalyst, Forum, Theatre Alliance, Washington Shakespeare, Round House, Hub, and just about any other area theater you can name, as well as for Theatre J. She was a Musical Theatre major at the University of Michigan but then became interested in directing and this is what she studied at the North Carolina School of the Arts. Jacqueline Lawton recently interviewed Serotsky as part of a series she was writing on “Artistic Directors of D.C.” and the two have worked together closely on this Theater J production of *The Hampton Years*.

Read *The Hampton Years*: For those reserving for the dinner-discussion, electronic copies of the draft script are available. Copyright restrictions apply. The document is for distribution only to those attending the discussion. Contact Robin Larkin, robinlarkin@comcast.net or 240-669-6300.

See *The Hampton Years*: The play opened on May 29, running through June 30 at Theater J. Footlights members may receive a 20% discount off the ticket price for any performance by using the code FOOTLIGHTS. For more information, visit www.theaterj.org or call (800) 494-TIXS.

Calendar

- **Monday, June 17, 6:30 p.m.**, dinner-discussion of *The Hampton Years* by **Jacqueline Lawton**. Our guests are playwright Jacqueline Lawton and director **Shirley Serotsky**. At Alfio’s, 4515 Willard Avenue, Chevy Chase, MD. Mark Gruenberg moderates. Reserve with Phyllis Bodin, phylbo@verizon.net or 301-986-1768.
- **Wednesday, July 10, 6:30 p.m.**, dinner-discussion of *Caesar and Dada* by **Allyson Currin**. Our guests are playwright Allyson Currin and director **Lee Mikeska Gardner**. At Alfio’s. Barbara Reithmaier moderates. Reserve with Phyllis.

Robin Larkin for **FOOTLIGHTS**
5800 Nicholson Lane, Apt. L07
Rockville, MD 20852

July 10: Allyson Currin’s *Caesar and Dada*

WSC Avant Bard is producing the world premiere of DC playwright Allyson Currin’s *Caesar and Dada*. The Theatre for Truth, currently performing in post-World War I Zurich, is celebrated for its faithfulness to realism. However, when a young American actress arrives on the scene, what starts out as a foray into gender bending, veers dangerously into the realm of that strange new art movement, Dada. Realism faces off with Dadaism and results in a rendition of Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar unlike any other.

Footlights will meet at **Alfio’s** on Wednesday, July 10 for our dinner-discussion of *Caesar and Dada* – 6:30 p.m. for dinner with discussion beginning at 7:30. Our guests are playwright **Allyson Currin** and director **Lee Mikeska Gardner**. Make reservations with Phyllis Bodin, phylbo@verizon.net or 301-986-1768.

Draft copies of *Caesar and Dada* are available electronically to those reserving for the July 10 discussion. Contact Robin, robinlarkin@comcast.net or 240-669-6300.

About Footlights

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