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Play fest a big dream come to life

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People dare to dream big up on East Montague Avenue in the Olde North Charleston business district.

And the biggest dreamer of them all probably is **Mary Gould**, founder of the South of Broadway Theatre Company, which, along with the Olde North Charleston Merchants' Association, is presenting staged readings of new full-length plays at the Greater Park Circle Play Fest.

With two readings under their belts at the 100-seat theater, four more will be read by well-known local actors such as **JC Conway** of theatre verve and **Rodney Lee Rogers**, co-founder of Pure Theatre.

"I got the idea of having the play fest after going to the Players Club in New York, where readings were held each Monday," says Gould, a singer formerly involved in the music and theater scene in New York.

Playwrights are coming from New York, Minneapolis and Missouri to see their works read in front of a paying audience.

Only one of the playwrights resides in the area. He's **Matt Hampton**, who studied playwriting at the University of Missouri and has been stationed for five years at the Charleston Air Force Base. Hampton, who lives in Summerville, is the dramaturge and resident playwright for South of Broadway.

Having had a full-length play staged at the University of Missouri and written 40 scripts, Hampton has made contacts among new play festivals throughout the nation.

"For the Park Circle Play Fest, I got the word out to playwrights I knew, and it spread from there," says Hampton. "We received 50 scripts and selected six."

"Like Heaven" and "Geography" have already been presented.

One of the scripts chosen was "Not Then, Not Now" by **Michael Kramer**, a communications professor at the University of Missouri. The play, which will be directed by **Andrea Studley** and last about 90 minutes, will be read at 2 p.m. today.

In an e-mail, Kramer explains that "Not Then, Not Now" was inspired by a number of things.

"I got the idea because Facebook and Classmates.com are connecting old friends," he says. "We

think of this as a good thing, but what if these renewed contacts lead to people locating old girlfriends or boyfriends, arranging meetings and perhaps starting affairs, which could threaten their marriages.

"Although definitely a drama, it has some humor and a positive ending," he adds.

Kramer says he and his wife planned to fly to North Charleston for the event. "We already have our plane tickets!" he writes.

New York playwright **Kristen Palmer** has penned "Local Story" to be read at 6 p.m. Sept. 19. In an e-mail, Palmer says the script involves a woman who has been loved by several men in her hometown who are waiting on her return after a long absence. "It's about lost love, married love, secret love and love of place," says Palmer.

"The Brethren," a play by **Marilyn MacCrackin** of Minneapolis, will be performed at 6 p.m. Sept. 26.

The play is set in Texas, where a religious sect known as The Brethren lives and works, shut off from society. Once a year, the outside world infiltrates the walls of the compound, and secrets are revealed.

In an e-mail, MacCrackin says she was inspired to write "The Brethren" after seeing news reports several years ago of authorities removing children from a religious compound in Texas.

"I began to wonder what it would be like to live in a totally sheltered world as a child and then have that world turned upside down," says the playwright. "How would a child react to this?"

MacCrackin says she plans to make the trek from Minneapolis to North Charleston to see the reading, directed by Hampton.

Winding up the play fest will be Hampton's drama, "Burning the Saint," to be performed at 2 p.m. Sept. 27.

Having grown up in an Irish Catholic neighborhood in Kansas City, Hampton says, "I saw gang violence around me, and later when I studied Greek tragedy, I started also thinking of how American tragedy is like Greek tragedy."

The play tells of a young man who joins a gang because he feels he has no place else to go, explains Hampton, who says he loves the classics containing "a higher power at work that affects one's life, for the good or for the bad."

"Working with South of Broadway has really helped me through three tours in Iraq and two in Afghanistan," says Hampton. "It was especially hard being on C-17s loaded with bodies being brought home. Theater is a great healer."

The South of Broadway Theatre is at 1980 E. Montague Ave. in North Charleston. Tickets are \$7.50 for one play; \$20 for three plays and \$27.50 for four plays and may be purchased by calling 745-0317 or at www.southofbroadway.com. Tickets also may be purchased at the door.

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