

So, if you are a young playwright looking for a wonderful artistic opportunity, or if you are a part of a theatre that has programming for young theatre artists, contact Dee Covington at dee@curioustheatre.org, and for more information, go to <http://curioustheatre.org/curious-new-voices/>.

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Connecticut

by Charlene Donaghy

One of our newest Connecticut Dramatists Guild members is a writer-producer-director-actor named Janice Luise-Lutkus.

When I received the notice of her joining, a toothy grin crossed my face. You see, Janice and I go way back to the days of Vogel Junior High School and a production of *Dracula, Baby*, book by Bruce Ronald, lyrics by John Jakes, music by Claire Strauch. I can still hear us singing "Transylvania after dark. Rather grim and rather goulsh!" and "Dracula, baby, don't be coy. Face the truth you impetuous boy. You can't go on like this, Dracula, baby!" It was a memorable eighth grade.

We have both, indeed, come a long way and as we sat down to chat one bright March day, we acknowledged that our theatrical beginnings were far from ghoulish and they led us exactly to where we are supposed to be.

Janice Luise-Lutkus studied theatre at the University of Connecticut. She began our interview by stating, "The one thing I wanted to be was an actress and no one could convince me otherwise." I think many theatre artists can relate to that.

Janice went on to a career in management and over twenty years in human resources, which gave her a great base in business while she continued to pursue her acting career. During that time she was thrilled to join an improv company. However, the company was only using actors from Boston or New York City, buying into the old adage that there are no good actors in Connecticut. Of course, every Connecticut Dramatists Guild member knows that is completely false: Connecticut actors bring a level of talent as sharp and formidable as *Dracula's* fangs.

With her left-brain analytical style, and her right brain creative side, Janice decided "...to put my money where my mouth was..." and began her own production company, AspenDream Productions, that only hires Connecticut actors. Janice's first script was a murder-mystery loosely based on her family and growing up in an Italian household. Now, seven scripts later, all the stories are grounded by the character of Uncle Franco whom Janice referred to as "...based on someone in my family who shall remain nameless."

The adventure of AspenDream starts the moment audience members walk onto the cruise ship, or into the room, or under the tent, or into any of a multitude of fundraisers AspenDream also supports. Audience members are fully immersed in the experience with an initial greeting from a "family member." And while murder and mayhem ensue, Janice notes that all the stories around Uncle Franco are relatable because they are the universal struggle between family and work.

Throughout 2016, eleven AspenDream shows will be running. Janice employs about 30 actors and her company is truly like family: they love, fight, support, laugh, and create wonderful art with their comedy and drama. And while Janice crafts all the scripts, improv is a big part of AspenDream Productions so the family dynamic thrives.

Janice has left her acting aspirations behind. She has gone on to study directing at Yale Drama Conservatory and make AspenDream Productions the longest running improvisational dinner theatre company in Connecticut.

"I never imagined, twenty years ago, it would be this big. I just started with a love of theatre. We all have problems—health, money—but I always looked at theatre for that hour, hour and a half, to just take us away from our problems. A tiny little piece: that was all I wanted to do and I thought if I could do that, it would be a success."

Janice has made a success, indeed. As-



Janice Luise-Lutkus

penDream is running six more shows from October through December of this year: <http://www.aspendreamproductions.com>

You can go on like this, Janice, baby. cdonaghy@dramatistsguild.com

Florida - West

by Dewey Davis-Thompson

Collaborative cross-pollination is in the air of West Florida and dramatists play a fecund role. But first, a few highlights from West Florida members.

The Tampa Repertory Theatre and Creative Loafing have teamed up to present Conversation Starters, a series of stage readings and discussions that brings works from the New Play Exchange to Tampa. The conversations started at the CL Space in April with *The Gun Show* by E.M. Lewis. Steve Yockey's *Blackberry Winter* was in May and June 13 is Dana Lynn Formby's *Johnny 10 Beers' Daughter*. Meanwhile in Sarasota, Starlite Players is now well into their second season including shorts by DG members Larry Parr, Jack Gilhooley, Marvin Albert, Heather Jones, Jo Morello, Richard J. Budin, Stephen Cooper, Tom Sivak, and James McLindon.

Both Matt Cowley and Sheila Cowley, who presented on radio theatre at the National Conference, were commissioned last year by March Forth Productions in New York to write dark, ten-minute plays about Kramusnacht that had to involve live Foley.

Sheila Cowley was also commissioned for Keep St Pete Lit's Fantastic Ekphrastic where a gallery hangs art to inspire written works that actors performed for four sold-out shows. She says she was "inspired by the painting by Lance Rodgers and the years my parents spent living in the Marshall Islands, eating canned Australian cheese and watching living seashells scoot between their toes." The combined work of *Bikini Atoll Bombshell* was awarded the People's Choice award for Best Creative Collaboration with actor Becca McCoy and visual artist Lance Rodgers. "It's really interesting and I am pleased that two commissions I've had recently are both

involving other art forms. One had to be involving manual sound effects. And Fantastic Ekphrastic—actually I thought they made this word up, but it's a real word, ekphrastic and it means writing about visual art—Fantastic Ekphrastic is where Soft Water Studios in St. Pete hangs an exhibit of paintings and sculptures by local artists, and writers get to pick one for inspiration."

Sheila Cowley was also inspired to create her own collaborative art event called *Synesthesia* with the help of Bob Devin Jones at the Studio@620. Cowley says she got the idea from Athena Theatre who got it from Electric Pear Productions. "Not being completely sure that it would work around here, I talked to Bob and we thought we would do it just one day as an experiment. And it actually worked amazingly well. It was a surprise to everyone how well and beautifully it worked."

The process started with a short story by ten-year-old Lily McDole who wrote with no adult intervention. "Her mom runs Keep St. Pete Lit, so I figured if you're going to ask any ten-year old to do it—this was the one to ask," said Cowley. The "very exciting" story, about a girl who buys a belt that lets her fly over a volcano, was given to actor Becca McCoy

who did a dramatic reading for dancers Helen Hansen French and Paula Kramer and sound designer Matt Cowley. An hour later that trio had crafted a performance piece where they playfully crafted a volcano by covering the performance space with bolts of cloth. They then danced for sculptor James Oleson who worked while songwriter Jonathan Cho watched a sculpture of a woman with a flowing skirt take form. Cho then composed a song which he sang for four actors (Jim Wicker, Elizabeth Brincklow, Lisa Powers Tricoli and Jim Rayfield) to devise a very short play that involved wrapping a woman in the cloth left behind by the dancers. Zulu Painter recreated that same image which inspired Maureen McDole to write a poem to inspire Carrie Judus to make yet another painting. Silent Clown Banks Helfrich appeared and to cap the program Bob Devin Jones wrote a call and response poem that involved the entire audience. At the end of the day a performance followed a picnic style meet and greet for the artists.

"It was a really beautiful collaboration with all kinds of artists. It worked better than we ever imagined," said Cowley. Look for more *Synesthesia* when it returns in the fall.

What's happening with your work? Send me your news!

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Kentucky

by Nancy Gall-Clayton

A Guild playwright from Kentucky, a play set in Kentucky, a second production at a Kentucky theatre, and a regional event in Kentucky with our new Youth Ambassador participating—very exciting!

The Guild playwright is Walter Wells May of Lexington, who, in addition to writing plays, is a lawyer and an Equity actor. After seeing *The Return of the Prodigal* by St. John Hankin at the Shaw Festival in Ontario some years ago, May began wondering what it would be like to retell the ageless tale in modern day Eastern Kentucky.

His play is *Gone Astray*. May's earliest drafts were written at Horse Cave Theatre's Kentucky Voices new play development program, a program that led to full productions of seventeen plays from 1981 to 2001. Created and headed by the theatre's founding artistic director Warren Hammack, Kentucky Voices was later led by Guild member Liz Bussey Fentress, first in Horse Cave and then in Louisville.

"I've known Walter's play since it was a blank piece of paper," Fentress says with a smile. "I read early drafts and attended at least two staged readings of *Gone Astray*."

After seeing the hugely successful premiere of *Gone Astray* in Lexington in 2013, Fentress, who lives in Louisville, passed the script on to Juergen K. Tossman, artistic director of Bunbury Theatre in Louisville. "It seems to me," Fentress says, "that Kentucky theatres should do plays by Kentucky writers, and Bunbury has a history of doing new plays."

Like May, Fentress is an Equity actor, and it is she who portrayed the mother in *Gone Astray*. May said the whole cast was "superb," and he was in "complete sync" with director Steve Woodring. One reviewer called the play a "roller coaster ride of self-realization, lies, deceit, forgiveness, self-awareness and love" and offered "kudos to the cast and director for realizing the nuances of the script."

The regional event was a reception co-



Becca McCoy
final pose in
Bikini Atom Bombshell