

New play development is booming in Colorado

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Hamlet had it half right.

Were that moody prince of Denmark living in Colorado at the moment, he surely would have amended one of his famous lines.

After all, if the energetic work of area theaters is an indicator, then "The *new* play's the thing."

From the area's biggest theaters to its wee-est, from established companies to fledgling outfits, new-play festivals, staged readings and workshops are on the rise locally. So are regional premieres of work by contemporary playwrights.

They are not cheaper to do, necessarily. And newness is hardly a sure thing with audiences trained to love their classic dramas and their go-to musicals. Yet here we are. This weekend, two events have been introducing patrons to new work: the Local Lab new play festival in Boulder and the Athena Project Arts Festival in Aurora.

In fact, "rise" might be an understatement. The trend has the feel of a boom — and a boon to local theatergoers.

"Doesn't it feel like there's more new-play development than ever before?" said Bruce Sevy, director of new play development at the Denver Center, a few days before the center's 9th Colorado New Play Summit. "Wouldn't it be cool if Denver became the center of new play work?"

Thursday the Denver Center unveiled its 2014-2015 season, including which plays that were read during February's summit would receive world premieres.

The answer won't come as a surprise to attendees, both theater professionals and ardent theatergoers: "Benediction," the third installment of Eric Schmiedl's adaptation of Colorado author Kent Haruf's trilogy about the denizens of the fictional rural town of Holt; and "Appoggiatura," James Still's utterly lovely tale of grief and rebirth in Venice.

That's all well and thrilling for next year. And the Colorado New Play Summit, which will be expanding to two weeks from one, is the gold standard. But what about now?

Focus on growth

This burst in new works suggests that far from being mini-museums or music boxes, a number of area theaters and their creative players are intent on bringing in new audiences by enlisting fresh storytellers as well as expanding the repertoire of their more seasoned and curious patrons.

Breckenridge's Backstage Theatre recently completed the successful world-premiere run of "The 10th." The first in artistic director and writer Christopher Willard's Ski Area Play Cycle tells the story of two soldiers in the famed 10th Mountain Division.

The production broke box-office records for a winter show, said Willard via e-mail. The play's success bodes well for the 2015 premieres of the two remaining plays.

At month's end, the burgeoning Boulder Ensemble Theatre Company will present the world premiere of

science historian and best-selling author Dava Sobel's maiden play, "And the Sun Stood Still," about the scientific and spiritual challenges faced by astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus. In May, BETC will wade further into new-play development officially with a staged reading of David Valdes Greenwood's "Full Code," winner of its first Generations new-play competition.

The list is getting longer but also goes deep.

For instance, Curious Theatre Company has been a member of the National New Play Network for 11 years, a consortium of regional theaters committed to doing "rolling world premieres" of a new play.

Next fall's will be the Robert Caisley comedy "Lucky Me."

Bold undertaking

It costs money and time to take a play from page to stage. Even a reading's seemingly spartan approach done well requires actors, the writer, and director to convene and rehearse days in advance of a public reading.

The best public readings take seriously the audience — and the play.

Yet, there's no guarantee subscribers will follow.

"At first, our audience was not sure of their interest in new work. We were a new theater company and, add to it that we were doing new 'stuff,' " said Rick Yaconis, Edge Theatre Company artistic director.

In 2012, Edge commissioned local writer Jonson Kuhn to create a work specifically for the theater. Not only did the company's subscribers embrace the gritty drama "Newark Violenta," it was nominated for the Colorado Theatre Guild award for best new play. In December the company world-premiered Carrie Printz's family dramedy "[Gifted](#)." Edge will hold its second "On the Edge: Festival of New Plays (July 18-Aug. 3).

Why new plays?

"It's interesting that we even poke at the question of why we do new plays," says Mare Trevathan, who directed Local Theater Company's Lab reading of James McLindon's "Faith" and is the group's associate artistic director.

"Because it's not a question that comes up at all in other storytelling mediums. It's not asked of film or TV or novels. ... Theater should reflect the world that we live in. It doesn't yet."

The trend toward more fresh work can be seen as a corrective, an ongoing commitment by thoughtful theater professionals to make theater matter to more people, by broadening the spectrum of storytelling.

"With investing in new-play development comes the chance or opportunity to influence the American canon, said Local's artistic director Pasha Rudnick.

"I know that sounds kind of lofty but it's nice to invest in the American canon." She pause slightly.

" 'A Street Car Named Desire,' was a brand-new play once."

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