

## Q&amp;A with the New Playhouse

**ARTISTIC ASSOCIATE BARI NEWPORT**

By Natalie Hamingson

As recipient of the Theatre Communications Group New Generations Grant producer/actor/director Bari Newport will add “Artistic Associate/Literary Manager” at Pasadena Playhouse to her already impressive resume. Newport discusses her new job, which includes leading the “Hothouse at the Playhouse” new play development series, apprenticing under Playhouse Artistic Director Sheldon Epps and more.

**When did you decide you wanted a career in theater?**

I saw a traveling production of *Annie*, at the Palace Theatre in Columbus, Ohio when I was five or six and had a very visceral reaction. Soon after, I began singing really loudly around the house and my parents finally, reluctantly allowed me to audition for local kid roles. Later, my family moved to Connecticut and I had the great fortune to work at some of the country’s great historic summer theaters. From a young age, if I was not onstage, I was backstage or in the office.

**How did you first meet Sheldon Epps?**

After spending successive years away (I attended USC), I returned to Los Angeles at 25 and promptly wrote to every Artistic Director in town, asking if I could meet with them. Out of everyone I contacted, Sheldon was the only one who responded, and the only one who agreed to meet me. He has been a supportive presence ever since.

**What will your mentorship with Sheldon entail?**

This mentorship allows the rare opportunity for me to intimately observe Sheldon, a real master at his craft and an icon of modern American theatre, while at the same time putting what I observe into practice. I focus a good deal of my time producing Hothouse at the Playhouse, Pasadena’s new play development program. This

provides fertile ground for growth as a young artistic director, as the great risk inherent in artistic freedom is coupled with the safety net of Sheldon’s watchful eye.

**What made you aspire to someday becoming an artistic director?**

Often theatre people describe their devotion to theatre as a call from Destiny. “It is what I was meant to do,” they say. I have always been tuned



Bari Newport, the new Artistic Associate for Pasadena Playhouse.

into this. For people who feel they are “purpose-driven” it is not as much a question of “aspiration” as it is a series of circumstances, which add up to a whole. Being Artistic Director is a very demanding and difficult position. If the time comes that I am entrusted with the vision, insight and responsibility that goes with having your name at the top of the stationary, I want to look back and know I did everything I could to learn and prepare.

**How does working on a play in its preliminary stages (as you will do in your position as Artistic Associate) differ for an actor, writer, and director?**

The main difference in working on a new play is that the playwright is

in the room. Imagine Shakespeare writing and rewriting Hamlet based on what he was hearing and seeing in the rehearsal room. There is only so much one can do in one’s head. Actors bring dimension, and because they are seeing the story from a specific point of view, they provide valuable insight to the truth of character and dialogue and thru-line. By maintaining an overarching perspective, a director can help the playwright identify where the story loses focus or the climax falls short. As a producer, it is an art to find a play in an early draft and believe in its future so greatly that the valuable resources needed to support its development, are found.

**What criteria do you have for choosing scripts feature in the Hothouse at the Playhouse series?**

First, we receive more scripts than we can possibly develop. Hothouse plays may not have had prior productions and writers must be available and desirous of continued work on their play. Plays that are considered for Hothouse fall into one of three categories: new plays which we are committed to producing on the mainstage; plays by a playwright whom we would like to form a relationship with; plays which we believe will have a future (as a number of past Hothouse plays have) at other theatres around the country. More and more we are looking to tell Californian stories.

**What can Hothouse reading attendees look forward to about the upcoming season?**

Brand new plays by established playwrights Stephen Metcalfe, Theresa Rebeck and Nilo Cruz plus dynamite new work by Allison Moore and Jason Aaron Goldberg. Next up Pastoral, by Frank Tangredi - starring Angela Bassett. Can you beat it!?

- Natalie Hamingson is a UCLA alum and freelance journalist currently writing for Covers Magazine and Chicks With Guns.