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In push for arts, Stanford builds nest for plays

WITH N.Y.'S PUBLIC THEATER, PAIR OFFER 'INCUBATOR' FOR NEW WORKS

By Karen D'Souza
Mercury News

Break a leg, Stanford! University officials today will announce a partnership with New York's Public Theater to create a new play incubator. Building on their successful collaboration on the alt-rock musical "Passing Strange," the prestigious college and the legendary theater are teaming up to develop new plays from marquee names as well as from emerging playwrights.

The mission is to feed the American theater

by nurturing new works because they have something to say, not necessarily because they will sell tickets.

"We have the possibility of creating something special, something that hasn't been done before," Oskar Eustis, artistic director of the Public Theater, said last week. "Both institutions share a deep commitment to the non-profit goals of culture."

"In society now, where everything is judged by its relationship to the marketplace and its ability to sell, the university is the last bastion, a place that understands there are val-

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'YELLOW FACE'

What: A staged reading of a new play by David Henry Hwang

Where: The Roble Studio Theater, 375 Santa Teresa St., on the east side of the Stanford University campus

When: 8 p.m. Feb. 12, 15 and 16

Tickets: free; contact (650) 736-9017 or <http://publictheaterny.stanford.edu>

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ues that can't be measured by the marketplace."

Eustis said the university will act as a haven where artists can explore works that may or may not have commercial potential. The open-ended project will include playwright residencies, script commissions, production workshops and student fellowships.

"Stanford is one place you can incubate plays where the bottom line is not an issue," said Bryan Wolf, co-director of the Stanford Institute for Creativity and the Arts. He estimates the university's tab for the project at anywhere from a few hundred thousand dollars to half a million a year, depending on the size of the piece being developed.

"But this is not just a think tank," he said. "It's an attempt to tackle something

real, to make new plays."

Long a home for plays

The Public Theater was founded in 1954 by the legendary producer Joseph Papp as the Shakespeare Workshop, later becoming the New York Shakespeare Festival. The organization's goal was to showcase the works of up-and-coming actors and playwrights. Papp also launched free Shakespeare productions in New York City's Central Park. Those outdoor summer productions continue today.

In the 1960s, the Shakespeare Festival became the Public Theater. It was known as a home for plays that challenged society's taste and sensibilities. "Hair" was first produced at the Public Theater. So was "Two Gentlemen from Verona," "That Championship Season," David Rabe's "Sticks and Bones," which

took on the Vietnam War, and "A Chorus Line."

Stanford alum David Henry Hwang is headed back to campus to launch the project next month. The Tony-winning playwright will lead a test run of the production for "Yellow Face," his mockumentary riff about racial identity and colorblind casting in the theater.

"It's going to be beneficial for both institutions," said Hwang, the first Asian-American to win the Tony for best play, for "M. Butterfly" in 1988. "The Public gets funding to do the workshops, and Stanford gets to be a part of the life of one of the most important theaters in America. This is a win-win."

The cast and crew of "Yellow Face" will settle in at Stanford for about two weeks in February to participate in open rehearsals and staged readings that will be open to

the public. They aim to put the finishing touches on the piece before it opens at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles this spring.

Hwang, whose well-known works include Disney's "Aida" for which he co-wrote the script and a radical adaptation of Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Flower Drum Song," will be participating in lectures and seminars. He said he is looking forward to tapping into the rich intellectual life on campus.

"Personally, this means a lot to me," said the playwright, who lives in New York. "I wrote my first play in the dorms there."

The collaboration between the college and the theater has sprung from the friendship between Eustis and Wolf, who met when they both taught on the East Coast years ago. For Stanford, it's a sure-fire way to raise the pro-

file of the arts on campus.

"The overall mission is to recognize the power of the arts in a liberal arts education," Wolf said. "The arts help us think critically about the world around us."

The next generation

For the famed Public, this is a way to scout the next generation of theater innovators. Stanford students will be eligible for apprenticeships with the company. Both organizations say that fostering a diversity of voices in the American theater is a key objective. "There's been a deep anti-intellectual bias in the American theater," Eustis said, "and if we can break through that, we can really push the culture forward."

Joanne Akalaitis, former head of the Public, has been tapped to participate in 2007-08, when she will lead a test run for a new production of

Euripides' "The Bacchae" with music by Philip Glass.

Last year, as a pilot project, Stanford and the Public joined forces to create a production workshop for the alt-rock musical "Passing Strange" before the show made its world premiere at Berkeley Rep in October. It is slated to debut in New York in the spring.

Through a wider lens, this is a chance for Silicon Valley — famous as a breeding ground for gadgets, not Go-dots — to play a bigger role in the national arts discourse. "Whether or not it's true, people associate New York with the center of the theater world," Hwang said, "and bringing artists of that caliber to campus puts Stanford on the map."

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