

International Playwriting Festival 2013

Produced by George Savvides and Ted Craig for Warehouse Phoenix

Fairfield Halls (Arnhem Gallery)

From 29 June 2013 to 30 June 2013

Review by [Howard Loxton](#)



Jos Vantylar in Honor Student

Although Croydon's Warehouse Theatre is closed, Warehouse Phoenix is keeping its spirit alive and this weekend presented the 27th International Playwriting Festival, hosted by Fairfield Halls, which turned its Arnhem Gallery into a theatre for the weekend. It is happening a few months later than usual due to the theatre's problems, but after running successfully for so many years this was not time to let down the writers who submitted 350 plays for consideration. They came from 15 different countries and from them the judges selected four to be given lengthy extracts in staged readings and one for a ten-minute "snapshot" presentation.

As usual, there was a presentation of a short play written, directed and performed by students of the BRIT School, but sadly the international partners in the festival were unable to take part this year. Europe's economic problems put paid to that (or rather lack of pay did). Teatro Ena from Cyprus had been offered government support for coming to London but had been forced to withdraw their offer and fares and Extra Candoni from Italy are struggling to go on mounting productions at home let alone finance a trip abroad.

The annual glimpse of new writing from those countries was sorely missed as were their company members but there was a surprise addition in a performance of Mark Norfolk's contribution to the recently staged *Blair's Children*. Mark, who was a selected dramatist for his play *Knock Down Ginger* in 2002, is an excellent example of the impetus that the Festival has given to the career of writers. That play, later given a full production at the Warehouse, went on to be produced elsewhere and Mark has developed a successful career as writer and director. I managed to catch two plays which had been sent in from the United States. Kyle John Schmidt's *Blue Point* is set in his native Mid-West. It presents a very real picture of two teenage boys boasting about their sex and masculinity and hinting at a dramatic back-story. Adrian Banks and Ashley Gerlach capture the boy's energy and self-obsession under George Savvides's direction but not enough was played to see where the play was leading, though it apparently has a truly horrifying climax.

Honor Student by Michael Erickson is another American entry, from Missouri, that features a creative writing student who submits a story reflecting real life events in America that is about a student like himself who begins to shoot his classmates and instructor. Its characters are clearly based on individuals in his class and his tutor sees it as a blueprint for something he is planning. It interestingly explores how far a writer can go in drawing his characters from life and the dividing line between fact and invention as he then produces another story that seems to be about the college Dean who tries to support him and, in a plot twist, has the student exposing his tutor's failures.

But is it really unusual for college students on creative writing courses to follow what happens in publishing? I would have thought that would be part of the course, so that element did not ring true for me and in the extract we saw there seemed to be a heavy reliance on direct narration, but perhaps full-length this may simply reflect the fact the play is about story-telling. Jos Vantylar became increasingly menacing as the student with Olivia Onyewaro as his tutor and Paul Prescott playing the Dean and they were directed by Ninon Jerome (Head of Artistic Programming at Fairfield Halls).

The Road to Nowhere by North London playwright Sean Cook was my favourite of the extracts I saw. Set in a house on a crumbling cliff on the Isle of Wight where homes are being lost to the advancing waves, it too features a lot of talking to the audience—or, in the context of the play, to Stan, a cat. Pensioner Geoff, whose house is beginning to disintegrate, is reminiscing about his youth and happy times working at the Holiday Camp nearby, his monologues intercut with visits from his lesbian gardener who has given up cutting his lawn as the cliff edge is advancing through it, and a camp former thespian who worked there. Cook has created three delightful characters, nicely played by Anna Savva as a spirited but caring Denise, Peter John as Gurth, elegantly elderly despite his colostomy bag, and Paul Prescott, snug in his armchair as Geoff and refusing to budge, and it is directed with excellent timing by Ted Craig. We had to imagine the set with its walls cracking as the action progresses and the cliff splashing into the sea outside but this recapturing of memory as lives crumble like their houses is both moving and very funny.

Other plays included in the Festival were *Supernova* by Jesse Batesond (BRIT School), *Kicking Snow* by Chris Dunkley (London), and *A Night of Dark Intent* by Patrick Carmichael (New York).