



## Risky Business

TheatreWork's New Works Festival rolls the dice on art.

By Julie O'Shea

As TheatreWorks' new works director, Kent Nicholson has become something of a gambling guru. Each spring for the past five years, Nicholson has rounded up some of the country's brightest up-and-coming playwrights, composers, and lyricists and put them on test drive before live Silicon Valley audiences.

So far, the gamble seems to have paid off. The New Works Festival has become such a beloved fixture on the Peninsula theatre scene that producers have decided to expand its run this year from one to two weeks, adding three more shows to the lineup and a plethora of Broadway-caliber talent, including composer Andrew Lippa and playwright Paul Gordon.

For Nicholson, it's all about nurturing art, which means opening the doors to spectacular failure as well as gratifying success. Most of the shows in the festival lineup are still in their infant stages. For many of the participating artists, this will be their first chance to see what works – and what needs to be axed – from their scripts, songs or score. Some pieces will no doubt become instant crowd pleasers, while others will likely have to go back to the drawing board.

Adam Bock, one of the featured playwrights in this year's festival, says he watches audiences' reactions just as much as he follows what's happening onstage. If a bit that he thinks is hilarious gets zero response from the crowd, he may consider dumping it.

"It's nerve-wracking," the fledgling New York playwright confesses. Bock's romantic comedy *The Drunken City* will close the festival this year.

The experience benefits not only the artists, but audiences as well. "I think people understand the importance of risk," Nicholson says. While playwrights may be a bundle of nerves, Nicholson says the whole experience makes audiences "feel much closer to the act of creation."

TheatreWorks' New Works Festival is one of the few in the Bay Area that combines staged readings and workshops of musicals and plays. Most of the shows this year will be staged readings, with the exception of *Emma*, a musical based on the Jane Austen classic, and *Mezzulah, 1946*, a World-War II drama. These two will be performed as workshops – a full staging of the show using minimal props and costumes. For many of the eight shows on the 2006 lineup, actors will have just about a week to rehearse before the curtain goes up.

The festival takes about a year to pull together. The artists asked to participate are a "mix and match" of people Nicholson knows personally and people TheatreWorks would like to get to know. Sometimes a playwright will approach Nicholson about snagging a spot on the festival lineup. Others come recommended by theatre colleagues.

A lucky few may see their play or musical picked up for a future TheatreWorks season – a payoff those involved are all keenly aware of.

“There is a sense of being judged,” admits composer Georgia Stitt, who participated in the festival a few years ago and was asked to return. *Big Red Sun*, a musical about family secrets and wartime pride that Stitt has been working on with John Jiler for the past two years, will be making its regional debut.

The show’s first act was read before a theatre audience last summer, but the Mountain View staging will be the first time it is performed with the musical score.

Stitt is also nervous, but for different reasons than Bock. As of mid-March, *Big Red Sun* was still not completely done.

“I am nervous about finishing my work,” she admits. “But I don’t think I am not going to get it done.”

It’s a gamble she’ll have to take.

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*TheatreWorks’ New Works Festival opens April 25 at the Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts. For a complete list of shows, dates and times, visit [www.theatreworks.org](http://www.theatreworks.org). Tickets are \$10-\$15.*