

Emerging UCSD Playwright Featured in New York Theater Festival

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Just weeks after receiving a Master of Fine Arts in playwriting from the University of California, San Diego, Josh Tobiessen will see the professional premiere of his play, "Election Day," in New York City. "Election Day" first received acclaim at the Baldwin New Play Festival in 2006 and this summer will be a part of the Second Stage Theatre Uptown Festival from July 16 to Aug. 11. Tobiessen is currently in New York to oversee the production, but will return to UCSD in August to teach a summer session course.

"It is nice to hit the ground running," Tobiessen said. "So many people who receive this kind of degree have to tread water for a little bit, so it is great to get this momentum so soon."

The Second Stage Theatre Uptown Festival seeks out up-and-coming playwrights, such as Tobiessen. The institution has helped launch the career of other emerging playwrights, including Adam Bock (whose Second Stage Uptown 2005 play "Swimming in the Shallows," as well as last year's "The Thugs," produced by Soho Rep, were both named one of *Time Out's* Top Ten Plays of the Year), and Dan O'Brien (who recently received the prestigious 2006/07 Princeton University Hodder Fellowship).

Tobiessen is originally from Schenectady, New York. He received a philosophy degree from Grinnell College in Iowa before moving to Chicago to seek out a career in acting. Tobiessen struggled to find acting roles in Chicago, but took classes at the Improv Olympic with Del Close and Charna Halpern. Improvisation helped Tobiessen discover a talent for playwriting because he was creating stories and characters in his performances.

Tobiessen's interest in playwriting led him to move to Galway, Ireland in 2000, where he enrolled in a one-year master's degree program in theatre and drama. Upon completion of his degree, he started a Galway-based theatre company named Catastrophe with two other graduates. Over the next three years, eight of his plays were produced by Catastrophe including "Bag of Piranhas" (Dublin Fringe Festival '02), "Up the Yard" (Waterford Spraoi Festival '04) and "Parallel Parking" (Galway Arts Festival '04), for which he received a commissioning grant from the Arts Council of Ireland. He also taught playwriting classes at the National University of Ireland, Galway and improvisational acting classes at Galway Youth Theatre.

In 2004, Tobiessen was one of a handful of playwrights accepted to the Department of Theatre and Dance's playwriting program at UCSD. The Department of Theatre and Dance is ranked third in the nation. As an MFA student at the university, Tobiessen continued to hone his playwriting skills under the instruction of renowned professors, such as Allan Havis and Ken Weitzman. In addition to the "Election Day," Tobiessen had two other plays premiere as part of UCSD's annual Baldwin New Play Festival, including "Burnt Out" and "Red State Blue Grass."

He said he is excited about the professional premiere of the "Election Day" because the stakes are higher.

"The people working on this play have more experience in the real world and this show is going to be reviewed by *The New York Times*," Tobiessen said. "But we have a lot of good people working on it."

"Election Day" is a dark comedy about the price of political and personal campaigns. It centers around a young man, who desperately tries to reach the polls on Election Day, but he is interrupted by a series of unexpected guests.

Tobiessen wrote the play during the San Diego mayoral election and said it is about contemporary perceptions of political campaigns.

"I feel like a lot of people care more about the personality of the candidates than the issues," Tobiessen said. "If you ask the average person on the street where a certain candidate stood on issues, they might not be able to tell you, but the media seems to focus on how charming candidates are."

He said the play is especially relevant today because of the dominant coverage of the primary presidential campaigns in the media.

Tobiessen incorporates a lot of humor in his plays. He said living abroad in Ireland helped him develop his satirical voice as a writer.

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