ON A SWELTERING NIGHT IN EARLY JUNE, a group assembled at the Labyrinth Theater Company in New York City for a reading of Micheline Auger’s #Love95Times. As friends greeted each other and everyone made their way to their seats, they watched as prominent stage actors, including Daphne Rubin-Vega, walked up onstage to sit side by side with young college students, who gasped upon seeing who’d just shown up to occupy the space beside them. Someone remarked the two groups on the stage were like “the Jets and the Sharks”; the crowd laughed.

Auger’s play, which deals with sexual assault on a college campus, is part of the Farm Theater’s College Collaboration Program, an initiative started by Padraic Lillis, artistic director of that Brooklyn-based company, to help emerging playwrights develop new plays by teaming up with college drama departments. The program, which Lillis modeled after the National New Play Network, has playwrights choose pressing social issues to write a play about, then collaborate with students and professors at three different schools where the play will be produced. In a mutually beneficial relationship, playwrights develop new work and students get involved in the process of making a new play.

“One of my goals was to create mentorship opportunities,” Lillis says. “Playwrights get to strengthen their artistic voice working with students; they treat them like equals but also educate them. It empowers everybody, but it also creates dialogue, which is what theatre should do.”

By the time of the New York reading of #Love95Times, the play had already been produced at the College at Brockport, a State University of New York campus in upstate New York, the University of West Florida, and Centre College in Kentucky. For Auger, the playwright, the appeal of the program wasn’t just its value for her own work but its benefit for students as well. “I really believe in supporting other artists and growing artists, and this was a perfect blend of that,” she observes. “I’d be building and growing a play in a holistic way, but also contributing to the growth of future theatre artists and me as an artist. It was a win-win situation.”

Matthew Hallock, a professor at Centre College, agreed. “For years at Centre College we’ve had an institutional priority within our theatre department to introduce our students to the process of working on new plays,” he says, adding, “It’s a challenge to find good new plays.” Until now.

THE FARM’S PROGRAM IS ONE OF SEVERAL initiatives around the country in which theatre companies create partnerships with universities to develop new works by emerging playwrights. At Barnard College in Manhattan, there’s New Plays, led by Alice Reagan, an associate professor of professional practice, done in collaboration with the Off-Off-Broadway company New Georges.

There’s some variation to the selection and development process for each program. For the Farm, early-career playwrights submit ideas to Lillis. The selected writer works...
on their piece over a year and a half, the only requirement for the scripts being that they should contain at least five characters who are 30 or younger, so that undergraduate students can conceivably play them. Each playwright selected for the Farm’s College Collaboration Program gets to have their show produced by three different schools, so they spend a few months working with the students in each.

At Barnard, the focus is even more specific. The college commissions early-career female writers, who are still underrepresented in U.S. theatre, and they get a full production at the school. “Barnard is a women’s college, so we want to do plays by female-identifying writers,” Reagan explains, adding, “I’m mostly interested in work by women for women, to further my not-so-secret feminist mission.”

And student actors star in the plays while student designers and technicians assist on it, further developing their skills. “When I came to Barnard in 2010, we hadn’t done a new play in nobody knows how long,” Reagan says. With the New Plays program, which produces one new work every season, “We are hopefully changing the landscape and cultural offerings on campus.”

New Plays at Barnard began with Lauren Feldman’s The Egg-Layers in the 2011-12 season. Feldman recalls that she never got to interact with living playwrights when she was in school, since most of the works she and classmates did were revivals by established (and predominantly male) writers. “I never had a cool opportunity like this, where a play would be developed with me as a student; there wasn’t this transparency of process,” she notes.

According to Feldman, programs like New Plays give students some much-needed real-world experience. “We want to give them an idea of what a professional workroom looks like,” she says, “and if they never have a playwright in there, they’re missing out.”

While the initiatives at Barnard and the Farm Theater take a more traditional approach to new-play development, with a playwright at the center, other companies, like Brooklyn’s Target Margin Theater, are focused on teaching students how to devise work. “We don’t have a regular program; every year we find new partners to work on different things,” says Target Margin artistic director David Herskovits. “The most intensive experience we had was when we partnered with LaGuardia Community College’s Hallock. "It’s sort of remarkable to hear characters in plays talk like our students do. It ends up being a really wonderful example of representation and what that can mean. It makes the theatre-going experience kind of thrilling.”

For Feldman, the process of working with the students in a well-resourced university gave her the chance to expand her play from a 45-minute one-act into a two-act play featuring a cast of 12 student actors, which seemed positively massive to a playwright more used to paring down length and cast size due to budget restrictions.

“I think colleges are braver in their choices than regional theatres would be; they’re saying yes to a crazy oddity of a play like mine,” she enthuses. “It has people transforming into animals and two Greek choruses. It’s a great way to develop something experimental.”

Dipika Guha—whose play Blown Youth, about a young actor who realizes she can’t act, was developed at Barnard with a cast entirely composed of students—talked about the liberating feeling that comes with being
assured a college production. “This is not often something you know with a new play commission,” she says. “To write toward a production forces your hand in really productive ways as a playwright, because you know it has to work for the people you’re making it with. This expedites a lot of the second-guessing because you’re immediately able to see if it’s working or not, and this information can make its way onto the page. I think the play found its form quickly because I was able to see it on its feet very soon after it was written.”

The learning goes both ways, and not all of these students are even theatre majors. When #Love95Times was done at the University of West Florida, there were honors students involved. And when Target Margin Theater collaborated with the entire City University of New York network to develop a play based on O’Neill’s Marco Millions, students from several schools were involved. Even if they didn’t drop their majors and move to drama, they developed skills that weren’t part of their regular curriculum.

“It’s the shaking up of what’s familiar and habitual,” says Herskovits. Target Margin has even had students with criminal justice majors come in and devise work. “For the John Jay College student who will be in the justice system, the greater their capacity to encounter a person or experience they would never have dreamed of, they will be able to understand it and connect to it on their own terms. That’s a powerful thing.”

Other program veterans have indeed caught the bug and switched majors to theatre. “One of the actresses in the Florida production was not a drama student—I think she was a biology major,” Auger recalls. “She offered to read to help out, and then they kept asking her to read more, and they realized she was really good.” So did she, and the rest is history. Another student, Auger says, chose to make a documentary about the experience.

And then there’s Rachel Kent, a theatre major at Centre College, who put aside her love of acting to stage manage #Love95Times. After participating in the Farm’s program, she’s more determined to be an artist than ever.

“I think I’d like to go into theatre, specifically for social justice, devising pieces that matter and help make the world a better place.”

Who said college idealism was dead?

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