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Youngbloods: Lauren-Shannon Jones

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In the first of a series profiling emerging new artists and companies, Youngbloods talks to playwright and film maker, Lauren-Shannon Jones, currently writer-in-residence at the New Theatre, Dublin, where her latest work, “Olympia” will preview October 12th.

Talking over coffee in The Joy of Cha, the soft spoken Lauren-Shannon Jones appears a paragon of politeness. As conversation deepens you become acutely aware you’re in the presence of a writer of fierce intelligence and passionate intensity. Completing an honours degree in film production from Wolverhampton College this year, her graduate film “Enclave” was awarded best screenplay, best direction and best overall production of the class of 2015. She’s also a member of both the Irish Playwrights and Screenwriters Guild and the Screen Directors Guild of Ireland.

Lauren-Shannon Jones is a lover of words and theatre. Growing up without a television, she immersed herself in literature and credits this with informing the lyrical richness she aspires to in her writing. Her latest work “Olympia,” developed at FRINGE LAB as part of the Tiger Dublin Fringe, is adapted from the classic horror tale, “The Sandman” by E.T.A. Hoffmann and inspired by the tradition of the Grand Guignol.

“We wanted to do something with horror, especially coming up to Halloween. So naturally, when you look at horror in theatre, we looked at the Grand Guignol. When you think of horror today, it’s usually on the screen and there’s that remove, that distance. In theatre the experience is more immediate. The same with gore. That’s been done and that has its place. With “Olympia” we wanted to look at creating something that has that atmosphere of horror, that sense of wrongness about it.”

The royal “we” is something she slips into frequently, referring to her co-collaborator, New Theatre director-in-residence, Nora Kelly-Lester. There’s a sense that, theatrically, Nora Kelly-Lester brings a compositional arrangement to compliment Lauren-Shannon Jones lyrical writing. This is their



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third joint venture after “Grow,” in 2013 and “The Assassination of Brian Boru,” in 2014, and their symbiotic relationship suggests they’re two sides of the same coin.

“When we began working on “Olympia” we read Hoffmann and deconstructed it, looking at the things that interested us. Then I went away and wrote it and Nora would give me feedback, keeping me grounded so I didn’t go off into my head. The same when Nora’s directing, I’m still involved in the process and she’ll ask me things, and we work things out together.”

“Olympia” tells the story of Nathaniel, a neurotic but brilliant medical student, who falls madly in love with the strange daughter of his anatomy professor. Professor Coppola’s obsession with matching him with her daughter reveals itself to be something much, much darker, and Nathaniel’s pragmatic fiancée, Clara, and his hedonistic roommate, Lothaire become his only hope to survive. In “Olympia” Lauren-Shannon-Jones gender swaps the villain of the piece, making the charismatic Doctor Coppola a woman, highlighting the aforementioned intelligence at work on the issue of gender;

“That was really interesting. Themes like motherhood and possessiveness began to emerge.”

Produced under the curious name Pygmanckenstein, their stated aim is to generate a new horror movement in Irish theatre.

“The name comes from the idea of creating something, bringing something to life. You have the myth of Pygmalion, which is about a man bringing a statue made from clay to life, and in Frankenstein the monster is brought to life. And there’s the horror reference too.”

But there’s a sense that horror might be too restrictive a genre for Lauren-Shannon Jones to stay confined within. “The Assassination of Brian Boru” worked from a more historical perspective. Might the associations with horror be something they might get branded with?

“That’s something we’re thinking about. We’re still working out our identity. And I’m finding my voice as a writer. I have lots of different things I want to write about, so that’s something we’re definitely looking at. We’re finding our sea legs, figuring out who we are and what interest us artistically. Maybe it might be something we do once a year, around Halloween.”

With many young companies feeling the need to treat their artistic vision like a business plan, Lauren-Shannon Jones and Nora Kelly-Lester are grateful to have the opportunity to be able to explore and nurture their artistic vision during their yearlong residency at The New Theatre. Brainchild of The New Theatre’s Artistic Director, Anthony Fox, the New Theatre’s Artist’s Residency provides artists with support to develop, rehearse and produce new works, along with financial, practical and technical support in staging two productions a year over four weeks.

“After “Olympia” we’re booked in for another production next July. I’m working on an idea inspired by a dream tentatively called “Love Box”, though that could change. It’s very different from “Olympia.” It’s like a stream of consciousness for all these ideas and pieces that don’t have a shape yet. It’s great knowing we have a place to explore that. It feels like home already.”

Lauren-Shannon Jones works off the Columbus moment. That moment when, like Columbus, you look out to the horizon, overwhelmed by a hunch that if you keep travelling in a particular direction you'll arrive somewhere undiscovered, even if the received wisdom is you'll fall off the edge of the earth. There's no map, maps are for where people have been already. This is uncharted territory, you just need to find people crazy enough to get into the boat with you and set sail. You may not arrive exactly where you thought you might, but maybe somewhere more wonderful.

"Yes. That resonates with me. You set out on this journey and you may arrive in India instead, but it's always where you wanted to go."

Thanks to The New Theatre writer, Lauren-Shannon Jones, and her collaborator, director, Nora Kelly-Lester, will have an opportunity to articulate their shared, artistic vision. But the next twelve months will also be about sharpening their own individual voices. Something Lauren-Shannon Jones is well on her way to doing.

"I was talking to someone the other day about my works to date, which are all very different. They were saying they could see connections between all three. Ideas and themes that overlap. I'm looking forward to exploring that more over the next year."

"Olympia" by Lauren-Shannon Jones, developed at FRINGE LAB as part of the Tiger Dublin Fringe and as part of the New Theatre Artist's Residency, opens Oct 14 after two nights of previews on Oct 12 and Oct 13. Doors open: 7.30 pm

Tickets: €15 and €12

For further information visit [The New Theatre](#)



Chris O'Rourke

Theatre Examiner

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