

November 11, 2008

D.M. man's 'Sleeping Dogs' heads for stage

By MICHOLYN FAJEN
community@dmreg.com

A drama that centers around the emotional and disturbing circumstances of two mothers seeking details of a car accident that involved their sons is the winner of the third annual Iowa Playwrights Workshop.

"Sleeping Dogs," submitted by Robert John Ford of Des Moines' west side, will premier in January with Tallgrass Theatre Company, which hosted the competition.

"I read quite a few scripts," said Jessie Phillips, artistic director for Tallgrass, who reviews every workshop script that is submitted. "This is one that absolutely grabbed me and brought me in within the first couple pages - and that doesn't happen with every script. It was very engaging. I felt like I went on the journey with the characters in that initial read."

Phillips said with each new read, Ford's script gets better and reveals new things. But the work, written for a two-person cast, still is being adapted.

Ford and his script will go through an in-depth process before hitting the stage in January. That process begins with table readings of the script with the Tallgrass artistic and technical staff.

Then Ford will receive feedback, which he can incorporate into the script before staged readings in mid-November. Writers, professors, actors and community members will be invited to the staged readings to also share an outside viewpoint. Ford will then hand final script changes to the director for the stage production.

And that's the benefit of being selected - a playwright's work just gets better, Ford said.

"I feel very comfortable collaborating with Tallgrass and turning my work over to them," said Ford, an award-winning playwright, composer and lyricist. His theatrical works have been produced or are scheduled for upcoming productions in New York, California, Alaska, Minnesota and at Hoyt Sherman Place in Des Moines.

Ford calls "Sleeping Dogs" one of his more serious works, in juxtaposition to his current repertoire of musicals and comedies.

"I need to have a balance of all types of scripts going at one time," he said. "When writing one gets too dark, I shift gears to the lighthearted comedy I'm working on or compose a piece for a musical."

Admittedly, Ford performs best in chaos. That's why he'll be juggling two productions at the same time in January. His musical, "Six on Six," which he will direct, opens at Hoyt Sherman Place as "Sleeping Dogs" debuts simultaneously in West Des Moines at the Rex Mathes Auditorium.

Ford calls Iowa home again. Born in raised in Fort Dodge, he spent a few years on both coasts to gauge the theatrical barometer before returning to his roots.

"The works I write all have Iowa themes and I was promoting them in California. It just made sense to move back to the Midwest, because the Iowa audience responds to those works best," Ford said, adding that the market is extremely saturated in both New York and Los Angeles.

That's precisely what Tallgrass works to promote through the theatre company's Iowa Playwrights Workshop, created in 2006. The purpose was to develop and showcase fresh new works by Iowa writers. "The audience members who come to see nationally known works are also returning to see shows they have not heard of before," said Phillips. "The goal is to give exposure to local writers and show that you don't have to live in New York to have works produced."