

## Love with a twist inspires plays

By Richard Duckett  
TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF  
[rduckett@telegram.com](mailto:rduckett@telegram.com)

In fairly short order in 2000, Jody Handley decided to make her "escape."

She had what she originally thought was a dream job as an associate editor at Warner Books in New York City. However, "a confluence of events made me realize this was not the career path I wanted to take," Handley recalled.

Instead she took a path heading west and moved to San Francisco to pursue her goal of writing plays.

"I picked up and left and I've been here ever since," she said.

End of subject? Hardly.

But her one-act play "Subjects" will introduce area theater-goers to Handley's playwriting when it is performed as part of a program called "A New Pair of Shorts!" at the New Second Stage at the Worcester Foothills Theatre Company later this month.

Produced by the Redfeather Theatre Co., the program also features "The M Pill," a one-act play by Ann Marie Shea of Worcester. "A New Pair of Shorts!" debuts May 19, and Redfeather artistic director Timothy Smith hopes to regularly bring in new plays to the New Second Stage space.

As he read plays sent to Redfeather by aspiring playwrights, Smith's reaction to "Subjects" was short, and, as far as the 28-year-old Handley was concerned, sweet.

"Tim got back to me the next day, which is absolutely unheard of," said Handley during a telephone interview last week from her San Francisco home. "So that was very exciting."

As Handley has discovered, it is not easy for a playwright to get his or her work produced. In Worcester, meanwhile, opportunities and outlets for new works have been very limited - something Smith is aware of and hopes to try and remedy.

"I'd like to make it a major focus of that space to do original work," said Smith about the New Second State. The space also serves as the rehearsal area for Foothills productions. In its performance space incarnation it will seat about 70 people. Smith said that Foothills has been



Playwright Jody Handley gave up a dream job to write plays.

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extremely helpful and supportive of the project.

"Subjects" concerns a conversation between a woman and a man who shows up at her door. The subject is the woman's absent boyfriend. "The M Pill" is about an elderly couple who subject themselves to a scientific experiment.

Shea is a local theater legend who is about to retire from Worcester State College after teaching there since 1968.

Both plays deal with love and both have a twist, Smith said. "The work that they're doing is both special."

"Subjects" will be directed by Smith and features Fitchburg State College students Lindsey Flats and Anthony Cascio in the cast. "The M Pill" is directed by theater veteran Bill Sigalis, and the well-known cast includes Bill McCracken, Sally Earle and Kevin Moylan.

"I'm still being inundated with original plays, which is good," Smith said. "I've had people submit from everywhere in the country."

Smith is on a mailing list allowing people submit him their plays. Handley gets a mailing list of production companies accepting new work.

And so it is that Handley will have a play of hers performed in New England (and the Eastern Seaboard, for that matter) for the first time.

"She is unique. The breadth of things she's able to write about, the different styles is able to write, was amazing to me," Smith said.

"I tend to write about relationships," said Handley, who comes across as a vivacious 28-year-old. "My favorite kinds of plays are dramatic with moments of humor to relieve tension. One of the things I like about plays is you can leave them unresolved ... and I like suspense. You don't know what's going to happen."

Someone once told her, and Handley likes to retell it, that the telling of a joke can be better than the actual punch line.

Her mentor at Warner Books apparently could not believe the punch line he was hearing when Handley told him she was thinking of moving to San Francisco.

"He said 'I just think that's a ridiculous idea. Maybe you were born under some magic star.' "

Actually, she was raised in Greene County, the southwestern-most county in Pennsylvania. Being an editor at a book publishing company "was the career path I had been working on from a small town to going to New York."

She found, however, that being an associate editor was "90 percent business. And I was really bad at the business part. I loved editing, but was kind of disillusioned because I wasn't writing anything of my own."

Then there was another matter. "I was dating someone who was moving to San Francisco," she said.

Her interest in writing dates back to being engrossed by movies while growing up. Then in high school, "as far as theater went, it was my great escape."

In creative writing classes, "every story I got back said 'great dialogue,' but not much of anything else."

So she started writing one-act plays. But not screenplays. "Theater is a writer's medium. Movies are a director's medium," she said.

As a playwright, she soon made another potentially disappointing discovery.

"The thing you realize with playwriting - it's virtually impossible to live off it unless you're someone like Edward Albee," Handley said.

"The irony is that you can make more money winning (playwriting) prizes than being produced. But what you really want to see is your play on the stage. You have to find a theater that's a match for you."

Handley has written about 10 one-act plays and has had them produced mostly in the San Francisco area (she is also the producing director of the Playwright's Center of San Francisco), although her work has been seen as far north as Alaska. She recently finished her first full-length play, "The Moon Sees Me."

She's seen rejection slips and letters, but has adopted a healthily pragmatic approach to a playwright's travails. "To say 'My play was right and you were terrible (to the producer)' is the worst thing you can do. You have to realize that if you really want to get it produced - go back and work on it."

Handley has a "day job," working on Web development in the corporate offices of Gensler, an architecture and design firm.

"It's mentally taxing but entirely different than playwriting is. I was writing for them, but I didn't like that."

She does like her 30-hour work-week. "I have time to work on playwriting," she said.

And time, occasionally, to dream. Despite her pragmatism, has Handley ever imagined having a play of hers appear on Broadway?

"If there's any playwright that says they don't, they're lying - they're lying through their teeth," she said. "What everyone wants is immortality. I've been practicing one or two speeches since I was seven."

If Smith didn't have any problem finding aspiring and talented playwrights, that is doubly or trebly true of the many gifted actors who showed up for auditions. In addition to staging "A New Pair of Shorts!" this spring, Redfeather will be putting on an outdoors production of Shakespeare's "The Tempest" in August (with Ann Marie Shea cast as Prospero).

"We're at talent-based theater company, not budget based. But man, there's a lot of talent here," Smith said.

"I had no trouble casting three shows."