

**WOMEN'S**  
**INVITATIONAL**  
ASHLAND NEW PLAYS FESTIVAL

Three Women

Three Plays

One Extraordinary  
Weekend

March 25–27  
2016

## Kyle Haden and Ashland New Plays Festival

By Mary Silva

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In a town brimming with ways to experience exceptional theater, the Ashland New Plays Festival (ANPF) has created a truly unique theatrical experience. For nearly 25 years, ANPF has given voice to some of the country's most talented new playwrights, and has given audiences the opportunity to experience new ideas and directions in American theater.

ANPF has gained such national recognition that it received a record number of submissions - nearly 600 plays from around the country - for its 2015 season. Last year, the Festival also hired a new artistic director, Kyle Haden, whose goal is to continue pushing the boundaries of what we can expect onstage.

“ANPF is now established and well recognized,” Haden says.

“This is the perfect time to take things to a new level.”

That new level will be evidenced in just a few weeks, when ANPF presents its first-ever Women's Invitational. The Women's Invitational will stage the works of three women playwrights, chosen from invited submissions from the country's leading female writers. The event will be held March 25 to 27 at Southern Oregon University's Music Recital Hall.

Haden believes strongly in giving a voice to writers who might otherwise be overlooked. Women and minorities have long been under-represented in American theater; the Invitational is a step in changing that, he says. "I am passionate about diversity and inclusion, and we need to tell different kinds of stories. There is something great about reading a story about a different culture or experience and finding something in that we can relate to. It brings us closer together."

Haden partnered with Laura Jacqmin of the Los Angeles-based Kilroys to extend invitations to 50 promising young women playwrights around the country. The Kilroys is a group of playwrights and producers whose mission is to give women equal representation in American theater. Jacqmin says the Women's Invitational is an ideal way to help bring recognition to talented women writers.

"Kyle approached me in spring of 2015 to talk about his larger goals for the festival and how he wanted to specifically support new plays written by women," Jacqmin says. "We did some

brainstorming about how to best serve those writers. While I personally find development is helpful, cold, hard cash is the kind of vote of support that's hard to match. The Women's Invitational provides both."

Haden, Jacqmin and a small group received and read through 30 submissions before selecting their top three. The 10 finalists and three winning playwrights were recently announced and can be found on the ANPF website ([www.ashlandnewplays.org](http://www.ashlandnewplays.org)).

Haden is well suited to raising the bar in a community where great theater already abounds. His own impressive list of theatric accomplishments includes actor and director, writer and teacher. Among his many directing credits are *The Shape of Things*; *365 Plays/365 days*; and *Noises Off*. He is currently assistant professor of Theatre at Roosevelt University's Chicago College of the Performing Arts, and is understudying Othello in the Chicago Shakespeare Theater's production. It is a role he has played before, along with other lead roles in Shakespearean performances around the country.

He is also part of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival Institute Faculty and spent two years at Southern Oregon University as an assistant professor of Theatre.

But the theater was not where Haden thought his life would take him. As an undergraduate at Wake Forest University, he

majored in politics. But during his senior year, while taking an ethics in politics seminar, the Starr report came out, detailing the alleged misdeeds of President Bill Clinton. It was a turning point for Haden.

“I remember sitting at my kitchen table on a Saturday morning reading the report, and thinking, ‘I just can’t do this. I can’t go into politics as a career.’”

He’d had some experience in theater over the years, in middle and high school, and had an interesting introduction to theater in college.

“They were doing a production of *Big River*, and they needed black actors,” he recalls. He signed on, not realizing it would be the path to his future. When he decided against a career in politics, colleagues who’d seen him perform suggested he pursue theater in graduate school.

“I remember thinking, ‘Really? You think I could do this?’”

After completing his MFA at Columbia University in 2002, he never looked back. His first audition out of grad school won him a job with the Colorado Shakespeare Festival. While Haden was in his third year there, David Dreyfoos at OSF “saw something in him,” and offered him an opportunity to come to Ashland.

“It was at OSF that my horizons started to expand,” he says. “Libby Appel (OSF artistic director from 1995 to 2007) encouraged me to grow. I was making my living as an actor, but trying to figure out how to get to the next step.”

That next step for Haden turned out to be artistic direction. As much as he loved acting and directing, he found himself drawn to the bigger picture that artistic direction allowed - overseeing all aspects of a theater company, supporting the actors, and providing overall creative direction.

“I like helping to foster the environment for a great experience, whether it’s being in the ensemble or directing or being the artistic director. I think there’s art in that.”

When the opportunity to work with ANPF presented itself, it was one he couldn’t resist.

Under Haden’s leadership, ANPF audiences can look forward to theatrical experiences that will continue to explore new territory. He is delighted to have the best of both worlds - a platform where new plays can be developed in a serious but unpressured environment, and the ability to draw on the resources and talent of the OSF.

That talent will be in full evidence at the Women’s Invitational,

Haden says. He is thrilled to have “exceptional” directors and actors lined up to work with the playwrights.

“It’s great that these top playwrights are coming to the Rogue Valley. It’s an awesome opportunity for people to be involved in the next generation of theater,” he says. “This is an opportunity to help these playwrights develop their stories in a supportive environment, with experienced and knowledgeable audiences. It’s always exciting to watch someone grow and develop, and Ashland is the perfect place for it.”

For more information about and tickets to the Women’s Invitational, go to [www.ashlandnewplays.org](http://www.ashlandnewplays.org) or call 541.488.7995.