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KEITH BEDFORD/GLOBE STAFF

Centastage's Joe Antoun

By Terry Byrne | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT AUGUST 29, 2015

Twenty-five years ago, Boston playwrights had few outlets for their work. And yet, says playwright, director, and teacher Joe Antoun, a lot of people were writing plays. So Antoun and John Schumacher launched Centastage, a theater company dedicated exclusively to producing world premieres of plays

by New England writers. The company's latest production is "Academy Fight Song," by Andrew Clarke, which runs Sept. 10-26 in the Calderwood Pavilion.

"Once the word got out about our mission, we had 50-60 scripts sent to us every year," says Antoun, who serves as artistic director while Schumacher is executive director. The company produced two or three plays each season, sometimes grouping short works together, such as "The Xmas Files" (holiday-themed plays) and "Boston Sings Boston" (cabarets of new songs by local songwriters. Centastage also co-produced the Women on Top Festival with Underground Railway Theater for six years, showcasing new work by women.

Award-winning playwright Melinda Lopez, whose first full-length play, "The Order of Things," was produced by Centastage in 2000, calls Antoun "a tireless champion of interesting, challenging, quirky new voices."

"Joe saw a very early draft of the play, which was about quantum physics and cancer and Cuba," Lopez says, "and he thought that was a perfectly natural subject."

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With Antoun's help, the play went on to win the Kennedy Center Fund for New Plays award.

“It was the first time I realized maybe there is something to this new play thing,” Lopez says. “Maybe a person can write plays for a living.”

While Antoun says he focuses on the script, Lopez and others say he often sees something in writers at a critical early phase of their career.

“Centastage produced ‘Emerald City,’ one of my first plays, in 2001,” says award-winning playwright John Kuntz.

“Emerald City” was a very loose adaptation of “The Wizard of Oz” that included a first-act climax with the cast dancing to “Downtown” by Petula Clark.

“It was a wacky, ambitious play,” says Kuntz. “I’m not sure who would have produced it besides Joe. I didn’t know I could write a play like that at the time, so it was a very important moment for me as a playwright.”

Antoun also provided a platform for artists new to the Boston theater scene, including the Gold Dust Orphans’ first production of “How Mrs. Grinchley Nearly Swiped Christmas” in 1999.

“Joe was always very kind to me,” says award-winning playwright Ryan Landry. “We were quite the demanding ladies back in those days, and we might have driven him a bit crazy, but he encouraged us, which was so important then.”

After several years of producing a regular season of plays, including “Heart of Jade” by Gip Hoppe, “More Than What” by Janet Kenney, “Boy X Man” by Ed Bullins, and “Dancing Downstream” by Bill Lattanzi, Centastage stepped away from mounting full seasons.

“We felt we weren’t serving the playwrights,” says Antoun. “Selecting the plays began to feel like a contest, and sometimes we were pushing plays out there too early.”

Centastage shifted its energies into play development, launching Write On!, a writing group for playwrights, hosting a Dark Night series of play readings, and producing plays only when Antoun felt they were ready, which now means once every couple of years.

“That approach allows us to latch onto a script, either through the writing group or in the staged readings, and then we can work together on it,” Antoun says. “That’s how we found ‘Fakus’ [by Joe Byers, which Centastage produced in 2013] and ‘Academy Fight Song.’ ”

“Academy Fight Song” follows a college professor who agrees to appear at an academic conference with a former student who has become a literary star, in the hopes of receiving job security. His appearance, however, goes horribly wrong, and trouble ensues.

Clarke says he’s worked with Antoun on the script on and off for the past five years, but he’s known him for nearly 20 years, as they both teach playwriting at Emerson College.

“I trust Joe’s instincts,” says Clarke. “Besides, he knows exactly who to cast, and I’m always amazed at what actors bring to the table.”

“The plays that appeal to me have a strong voice,” says Antoun. “I’m glad we’ve been able to help some writers get their work onstage, but I’d be just as happy to see other theaters in other cities produce these plays.”

Academy Fight Song

Presented by Centastage.

At Nicholas Martin Hall, Calderwood Pavillion, Boston Center for the Arts,

Sept. 10-26.

Tickets: \$20-30.

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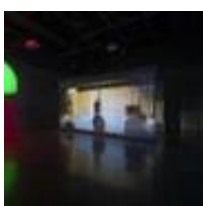
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