

CATALYST

RESOURCES FOR CREATIVE LIVING

Theatre: Midwiving the Birth of a New Play **Salt Lake Acting Company's New Play Sounding Series**

By Barb Guy

Actors sit at music stands reading a new script aloud before an audience. There's no scenery, no costuming, no moving about the stage, just reading out loud. It may not sound like much, but it's a technique a theater company can use to get a feel for a play, to see how it is received by theatergoers. For the playwright, it's an opportunity to hear how her or his written words actually sound when in the care of professional actors.

It's like theater, unplugged. That's how David Mong, literary manager and media relations guru for Salt Lake Acting Company, describes their New Play Sounding Series. Over the course of a given year, the company performs free, public readings of three or four different plays. Sometimes a play will go on to find its way into SLAC's regular season.

In an effort to build relationships with new and established playwrights, SLAC began the New Play Sounding Series in 1994. They also use the series as a way to work on plays they're developing in house. Mong says, "We sometimes get to bring in actors and directors that we

haven't worked with before. It's a relatively low pressure way to get acquainted with new people. It's a brief commitment, but it's the real meat. It's one of my favorite parts of my job."

Julie Jensen, SLAC's resident playwright says, "Almost all of my work has been [in the Sounding Series] at one time or another. You get to hear really good actors work on your material, you have the advantage of someone like David Mong talking about the play, about what works and what doesn't. You get a chance to fix things or try them in another way. It's a fabulous team of people. As a playwright, one of the luckiest things you can have is a chance to work in that environment."

David Mong says audience members are a key part of the process. "Audience members find it a worthwhile experience and they contribute a lot of valuable feedback, shaping what the play becomes," he says. "A lot of times people will come and see the reading and if we later actually stage the play, they'll come back and see it and have a great sense of ownership," says Mong. "People really get to see a

play grow. And it's such a great opportunity to talk to our audience and for them to talk to us. Playwrights are always impressed with our audience."

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