

playing the odds

BY JAY WEITZ
PHOTO BY WILL SHILLING

You have to wonder why some playwright somewhere couldn't have made it an even thousand. For its ninth-annual Theatre Roulette festival, MadLab claims to have received 999 short play submissions, which they have whittled down to nine by nine different playwrights.

And although the proliferation of nines has a certain purity about it, that one play short of 1,000 does kind of nag.

MadLab Managing Director Andy Batt has been around since the Roulette wheel began spinning back in 2000, and he recalls how it started as a happy accident. It seems MadLab co-founders Eric Myers and Dan O'Reilly both had shorts they were working on around the time they met current MadLab Artistic Director Chris Lane, who also had a short.

"They then had the idea to present a shorts festival and found a few more writers about town ... to put up works as well," Batt remembered.

Roulette's format hasn't changed all that much over the years: Three different programs of short plays rotate over the course of several weeks, concluding with an all-day marathon of the complete collection. Grueling though it may be, that final day seems to be Batt's favorite.

"That is such a great day ... There is this sense of camaraderie and togetherness that

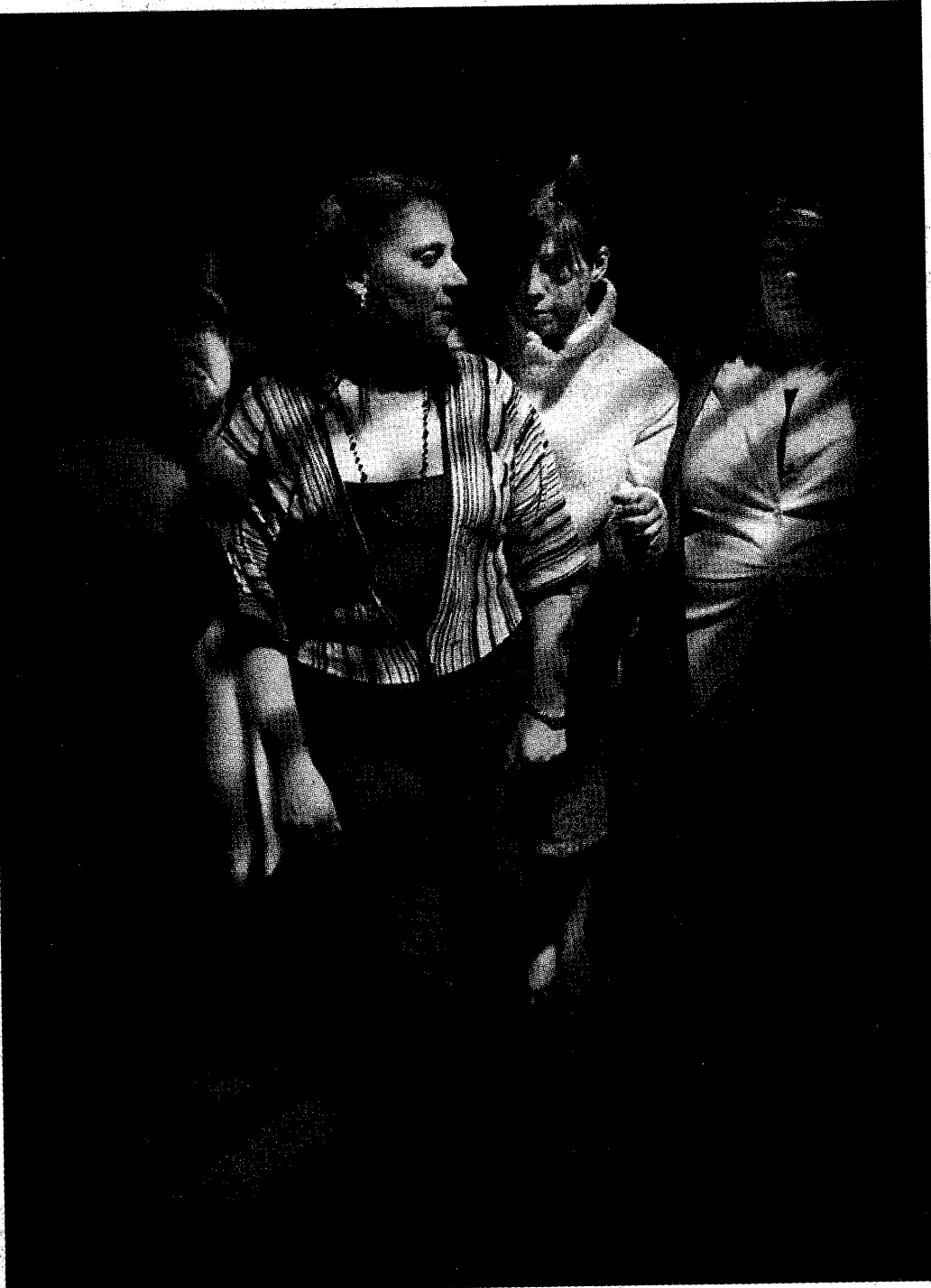
is unlike any other I have in theater," he said.

One big change in the Roulette routine occurred in 2005, when MadLab opened play solicitations to the world beyond Central Ohio. In Batt's view, the move increased both the complexity of the process and the quality of the product. For the 2008 edition, works by playwrights from six different states were chosen.

It so happens that both Ohio playwrights are from the Cleveland area, and their works are featured on the same program, called "Shenanigans."

Greg Vovos, an OSU alumnus from Rocky River, contributed *Today's Special* to the 2005 Roulette. Batt describes Vovos' *The Memo* as "a very silly, but poignant and thoughtful, comedy that says a lot about being stuck in the rat race of strict corporate politics and rules."

John Busser from Parma has written *Dr. Wu Has Been Eliminated*, a comic take on spy films, which MadLab Publicity Co-Chair Stephen Woosley cites as one of his 2008 festival favorites.



Rounding out "Shenanigans" are *Duet for Virtual Particles* by the award-winning playwright William Borden of Texas, and *The Rental* by Californian Mark Harvey Levine. Levine's *Surprise* was part of the 2005 Roulette.

A honeymoon cruise gone horribly wrong is the subject of Delaware playwright Kristyn Leigh Robinson's *The Raft*. In her theater blog, Robinson calls it "a cute little comedy that seems to make people laugh — and that's the whole point."

It shares the bill entitled "Schisms" with *Postcards from a Dead Dog* by Pittsburgh's F.J. Hartland and *This Bird* by

Paul North of Arizona.

As his other two favorites of this festival, MadLab's Woosley chose the pair of one-acts that make up the program called "Shylocks."

Dark North, by Pennsylvania theater professor David Skeelee, premiered at Scotland's Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2006, where it received a Critic's Choice award and positive reviews. Woosley said *Dark North* "has a creepy *Twilight Zone/Outer Limits* feel to it."

Noir Lite, a parody by Richard Martin Hirsch of Los Angeles, was a finalist in the Spokane Civic Theatre's Playwrights' Forum Festival in

2005. Hirsch is the playwright-in-residence at L.A.'s Chandler Studio Theatre.

Woosley has been involved in Theatre Roulette since 2005, but was long ago convinced that the whole process of choosing plays, directors, casts and crews brings out the best in MadLab. This year, you might say they're dressed to the nines.

**THEATRE ROULETTE
2008**

WHERE: MadLab, Downtown

WHEN: Through May 24

WEB: madlab.net