

KEEP AN EYE ON: WILLIAM BIVINS, PLAYWRIGHT

THE 2009-10 SEASON HAS BEEN a big one for William Bivins, propelling him from an unproduced playwright to the most produced local writer in San Francisco.

Last summer his one-act "Grunion Run" won PianoFight's audience-voted short play competition *ShortLived 2.0*, winning him a full-length commission for the company that season. That led to his writing *The Position* for a PianoFight premiere this February, in which six finalists compete for a mysterious job at a shadowy corporation.

In the meantime Bivins had produced his own evening of saucy Bible stories, *Pulp Scripture*, in last September's San Francisco Fringe Festival, winning eight festival awards including best new comedy. That led to a second run with PianoFight in November with mostly the same cast and a new director.

At the same time that *Pulp Scripture* was playing at Off-Market Theaters, Bivins's brain-transplant comedy *The Afterlife of the Mind* was playing nearby at StageWerx in a Virago Theatre Company premiere that began at Berkeley's Ashby Stage. *Afterlife* went on to a second production in Anchorage, Alaska, this January.

Now Bivins has his "agricultural noir" *The Apotheosis of Pig Husbandry* coming up at SF Playhouse starting May 22 as part of the new Sandbox series of bare-bones world premieres on the company's second stage.

Born in New Mexico, Bivins moved to San Francisco in 1988 because his wife was in law school here and has stuck around ever since, aside from a few years away to take care of the family farm.

Although he had long appreciated live theatre from afar, Bivins only started writing plays in the last 10 years.

"I guess I got into the dramatic writ-

ing thing through making films just for kicks back in the late '80s," he says. "I was taking film classes here in the Bay Area, mostly just to get hold of the equipment for free. Through that I got into screenwriting, and I did that with a writing partner for a number of years in the '90s. We had a bunch of scripts that were optioned, so we got money but nothing produced. It was pretty clear to me that you have to live in L.A. if you want to make a success of that. So I gave up on it and started writing plays instead."

After a decade of toiling away quietly in writing workshops, Bivins says his sudden flurry of premieres isn't due to a prolific writing jag or even a big push in submissions. It just sort of happened.



William Bivins.

Photo: Richard Morgenstein

"I've been writing these things for many years now," he says. "I'm really bad about submitting plays. I know various people just through being part of the theatre community, and some of those people are artistic directors, and they contact me and say, 'Hey, we're doing this reading series,' or 'We're starting this new play series. You have something to submit?' With *The Afterlife of the Mind*, Laura Lundy-Paine saw me at the TBA Playwright Showcase in 2008. I performed a two-person scene from *Afterlife of the Mind*, and Laura said, 'Hey, why don't you submit this for our

summer reading series?' So I did, and based on that they accepted it for their season."

Pulp Scripture was originally commissioned, surprisingly enough, by the church he attends, the Episcopal Church of St. Mary the Virgin. "I had written some really off-color plays about the Old Testament and performed them at this parish retreat," he says. "They got so off-color that I couldn't perform them at the retreat anymore, because there were kids there. So Beth Kelly, the associate rector, said, 'Well, we'll have an adults-only thing. We can plan a whole evening, and you can write a whole bunch of them.' So we did them in the church. I thought I was going to get struck by lightning, because these stories are really messed up."

The Position was the only one of these plays that was written on the spot over the last year. "They were like, 'We want six to eight actors, this age range; we want it to be an ensemble piece,'" Bivins says. "They wanted a drama, which was interesting because they usually do comedies."

Currently absorbed in rewrites for *Apotheosis*, Bivins is still working on finding a home for his first play, a drama called *Out from Under It*. Other than that, he's focusing on finding second productions for his plays, inspired by the discussion at Theatre Bay Area's recent *Outrageous Fortune* event that touched on second productions as a major hurdle for playwrights.

"Now that I have all of these premieres under my belt, I have to shepherd all of these plays to see if I can get second productions," he says, mindful that he's gotten this far without really sending out submissions. "How's that going to work? I don't have an inkling."

—Sam Hurwitt