

UC SANTA BARBARA

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The Play's the Thing

A family gathers to commemorate the 25th edition of Martha Fisher's celebrated volume of poetry. Absent, however, is Martha herself, who committed suicide soon after the book's original publication.

Haunted by the past and by events they can't explain, Martha's family struggles to reconcile the Martha who wrote so brilliantly about the joys of living with one who took her own life.

"What Martha Did," actress and playwright Enid Graham's darkly funny drama about regret, facing the truth and finding forgiveness, is presented Nov. 15-24 by LAUNCH PAD, the innovative playwright-in-residence laboratory at UC Santa Barbara.

"I feel like I've hit the jackpot with LAUNCH PAD," said Graham. "I feel really lucky to be having this experience in a place with so much talent and devotion to the process."

"What Martha Did" is the 15th preview production to come out of LAUNCH PAD, a program founded by theater professor and artistic director Risa Brainin. The program enables a playwright in residence to see how all the elements — actors included — come together when a play is fully staged and designed. Among those working on "What Martha Did" are costume designer Ann Bruice, scenic designer Ann Sheffield, lighting designer Michael Klaers and undergraduate composer Gaurav Mishra.

Graham's "jackpot" got that much better when special guest artist Julie Fishell, a lecturer in the theater and dance department, joined the cast. Graham and Fishell

were colleagues at The Juilliard School in New York. “Having her work on my play is a dream come true,” said Graham.

In addition to Fishell, the cast includes Brian Harwell and seven students from the theater and dance department’s BFA Acting Program.

“Our preview production has all the talent of the professional world without the pressure,” said Brainin, who is directing the fall production. “It’s exciting for the actors and the audience. By staying in previews, the playwright gets to make changes all the way through. We are thrilled to launch this powerful play.”

“What Martha Did” will be presented at the campus’s Performing Arts Theater.

Later in November, in “The White Card,” a dinner party thrown by an influential Manhattan couple for an up-and-coming artist sets the stage for a moving and revelatory distillation of racial divisions as experienced in the white spaces of the living room, the art gallery, the theater and in the imagination itself.

The production at UC Santa Barbara marks the first time the play by award-winning writer Claudia Rankine has been performed on a college campus. Directed by Shirley Jo Finney, “The White Card” opens Nov. 21 and continues through Nov. 24 in the campus’s Studio Theater.

“The White Card is an important story of a well-intentioned family trying to heal and confront themselves through art, identity and politics,” said Finney.

The play is composed of two scenes: the aforementioned dinner party, and one set a year later, in which Virginia and Charles visit Charlotte’s art studio. “The White Card” stages a conversation that is both informed and derailed by the black/white American drama,” explained Rankine. “The scenes in this one-act play, for all the characters’ disagreements, stalemates and seeming impasses, explore what happens if one is willing to stay in the room when it is painful to bear the pressure to listen and the obligation to respond.”

An award-winning writer, Rankine was elected chancellor of the Academy of American Poets and is a recipient of the Jackson Poetry Prize. She is the author of five collections of poetry, including “Nothing in Nature is Private,” “Citizen: An American Lyric,” “Don’t Let Me Be Lonely” and “The End of the Alphabet.”

Tickets for “The White Card” and for “What Martha Did” range from \$13 to \$20. Advance purchase and additional information about the productions is available at www.theaterdance.ucsb.edu.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.