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Valdez: Influence, inspiration, impact
Conference brings them home for Alaskans
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Who would have thought that Valdez would become known as one of the most important spots in American theater? After all, Alaska is known more for its beauty and mystic impact than for its artists. The powers of beauty and mysticism, however, drive artists to create timeless works that influence, inspire, and impact. Alaska's mysticism and beauty has influenced many a painter, poet, photographer and playwright. Valdez is a fitting place for artists to gather and share, learn, communicate and explore.

The sixth annual Prince William Sound Community College Edward Albee Theatre Conference two weeks ago featured some of the foremost leaders in American theater. August Wilson was there to receive the Edward Albee Last Frontier Playwright Award, Mark Brokaw to receive the Marshall Mason Last Frontier Directing Award, and scores of Outside playwrights, many well known in the world of theater, joined Perseverance Theatre's new artistic director, Peter Dubois, and many more from Fairbanks, Seward, Soldotna, Nome, and Anchorage.

So what is it that makes a theater conference in Valdez successful? Throughout the week, artists are inspired to create, explore, and share their creative energy. Marshall Mason, an award-winning Broadway director and founding member of New York's Circle Repertory Company, explained: "(Besides) the incredible sheer beauty, it's wonderful to come up here and re-experience the wild, so to speak. I end up physically exhausted when I leave, but spiritually rejuvenated."

Mason continued, "I was speaking to an actor who said he'd begun to have thoughts like, 'What do I have to say? What could I write?' and I think that's incredibly good and important. What separates this conference from others around the country is that it encourages people to explore their own creativity."

This is exactly this kind of impact and influence Michael Warren Powell, head of the conference's play lab, wants to create. "If I inspire or put the confidence in someone and help them realize their own voice, I feel successful in my work."

The cycle of impact-influence-inspiration seemed to run throughout the week in Valdez. Sunday night, I performed Eric Bogosian's *Pounding Nails in the Floor with My Forehead*, reprising the one-man monologue I had performed in Anchorage. The response was extremely positive, although some people found the material offensive: Tidewater Marine, a corporate sponsor for the evening, apologized to the community in a local paper. The impact of theater can sometimes be gauged by community response.

Impact can also be found in a playwright's outrage. Eccentric Theatre Company performed Edward Albee's *Death of Bessie Smith* on Monday night. Albee's pre-show video commentary stressed the influence and inspiration jazz and blues played in his life. Albee was a big fan of Bessie Smith and was inspired to write a play when he read how she died. The play expresses Albee's disgust with Jim Crow laws, which may have contributed to the great blues singer's death. The impact influences and inspires.

When those who have excelled in their craft share with those who are climbing the ladder, magic happens. Sharing, learning and simply communicating are at the center of the conference. Playwright August Wilson, with two Pulitzer Prizes, was the most influential playwright at the conference this year. He has written eight plays already and influenced an entire generation by chronicling the African-American journey through the 20th century. Hollywood actors Delroy Lindo and Ella Joyce were on hand to read some of Wilson's work, providing tangible inspiration to those in audience.

Hobnobbing with people like August Wilson is a truly magnificent, monumental experience. In life-changing moments like these, we find ourselves, validate our existence. To be surrounded by the greatness of these established artists and to share in the joy and merriment of those exploring their potential — that is when you are truly alive.

New York-based director Marshall Mason captured the essence of the conference's influence better than anyone when he said, "I think it's important for people not to just sit around and wait for theater to happen. It requires people to take matters into their own hands and say, 'I have a vision. I have something that I want to say and I want to express it.' That spirit of experimentation and enthusiasm is what regenerates this conference."

It is that spirit of experimentation and enthusiasm that will charge Alaskan artists and indeed, Alaskan audiences, to continue to create, explore, challenge and channel the beauty and mysticism of Alaska into something that influences, inspires and impacts not only ourselves, but the entire world.

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