

A Whidbey Island Retreat Offers Space for What's "Underneath"

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Posted in [Arts](#), Volume 38 No. 10

Hedgebrook is a magnet for writers. And that includes playwright Susan Soon He Stanton.

The Hedgebrook writer's retreat on Whidbey Island hosts women writers year-round, and in May, mounts the annual Hedgebrook Women Playwrights Festival. During the festival, Stanton presents a work in development, *The Underneath*.

Stanton comes to Hedgebrook from her current home in New York, and before that, Hawaii, which also serves as the setting for *The Underneath*, which she feels has benefited from her time at this northwest writer's retreat.

"I think when I came here, I had a lot of questions about my play and where I wanted to go with it," says Stanton. "I've been able to talk through those questions with dramaturg Liz Engelman, and she's also brought up interesting questions and thoughts, that have widened my perception of the play, and opened up some new possibilities."

Stanton's experience echoes that of many writers who come to Hedgebrook: "I'm really grateful that I have a safe room of fellow writers and dramaturgs where I can share and discuss new pages from a play in process."

Hedgebrook is providing Stanton with a true retreat from her usual environment and schedule, which entails work as a freelance journalist for *Audrey Magazine*, as well as work-related travel and a myriad of other income-producing activities. "I do pick up odd jobs, which can range from journalism, paid script reader, babysitting, to sous chef at a catering company," Stanton says, in order to make financial ends meet. "I would say it's not the pull of a 9-to-5 schedule that pulls me away [from writing], so much as the constant need to keep moving and stay afloat in the city."

Instead, Hedgebrook provides uninterrupted time to focus on writing. "Working at Hedgebrook is much better than my usual style, which usually amounts to running around and stealing hours to write whenever I can," says Stanton. "Normally, I come home after work and begin, sometimes 8 or 9 at night. Hedgebrook eliminates the distractions, so there is time to sit and think. I think this is the first time in years I've really felt like I have time to write, just write."

And write she has. Stanton began *The Underneath* two years ago at the Yale School of Drama, and later workshopped the piece at the Kennedy Center. The play focuses on the sudden disappearance of a young man, and an older brother's search. Stanton describes the play as being about the competitiveness of young boys, and the difficulties of an unexpected homecoming.

Since the Kennedy Center workshop, Stanton feels she has been unable to give the play much attention. "Although it feels strange at times to be writing such a difficult play in such a beautiful setting, I wanted to develop this play at Hedgebrook because I knew this was a place where I could really focus and take risks," she says. "During my rewrites here, I have been exploring the balance between genre and memory."

Memory is a theme that allows Stanton to hearken back to many of her key influences in theatre and film. "I'm inspired by Athol Fugard and the way he can have two characters enter a memory together through language," she says. "I love the idea of building a world or traveling through time with dialogue. There's something magical about that transportation, but also very economical and stripped down. I've also been thinking about Marguerite Duras's screenplay for *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, and the way the past can painfully inform the present."

In addition to exploring memory, Stanton reports that her play has also been influenced by *The Third Man*. "I'm interested in the portrait of Vienna during that film, and I wanted to see if I could turn Honolulu, often thought to be a bright and sunny place, into a darker shadowy landscape."

For Stanton, this stay in Hedgebrook's Cedar Cottage will remain a strong memory for her in the future. "Hedgebrook is such a special place that I'm not sure how I can translate that back into my normal life," she says. "But I'd like to start off the mornings as calmly as I do here, with a cup of tea and an early morning walk, even if the rest of the day does end up being crazy!"

"Hedgebrook Women Playwrights Festival" runs on May 15 at the Whidbey Island Center for the Arts, 565 Camano Ave, Langley, on Whidbey Island, and on May 16 at ACT Theatre, 700 Union St., Seattle.