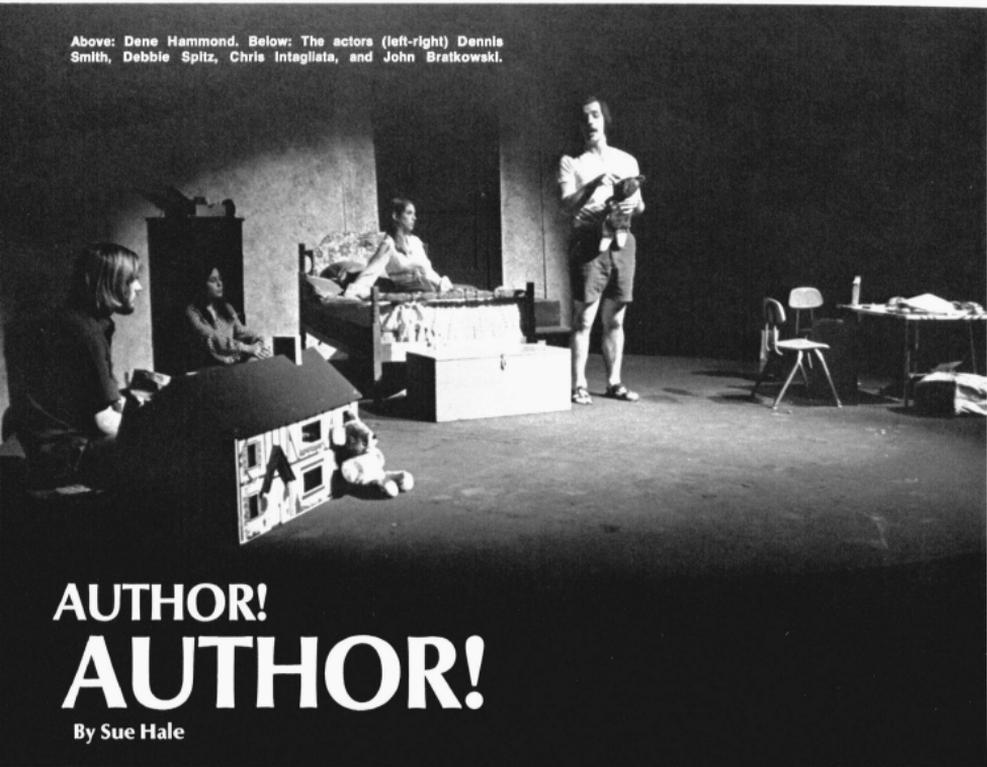




Above: Dene Hammond. Below: The actors (left-right) Dennis Smith, Debbie Spitz, Chris Intagliata, and John Bratkowski.



AUTHOR! AUTHOR!

By Sue Hale

When the house lights dimmed and the curtain rose for the production of “Teddy Bears Never Mate In Captivity,” there was at least one member of the audience who was as nervous as the actors—Dene Hammond, the playwright.

Hammond, a master’s candidate enrolled in the playwriting program on the Columbia Campus, won first place in the Annual Playwriting Contest for Original Short Stories with his “Teddy Bears” script. The contest is sponsored by the Undergraduate Theater Association of the University of Missouri-Columbia. “It may well be the only nationwide play

contest conducted by a university organization,” Dr. Sam Smiley, director of the playwriting program here, says.

“Teddy Bears Never Mate In Captivity” was chosen from more than 100 entries by students, professors, and playwrights from across the country. As first place winner, Hammond received \$250 and the chance to see his play performed on stage at the University Theatre.

He was nervous about the performance. “Production is a co-creative art,” he explains. “The director, the actors, the set designer, everyone involved with



Above: Ann (Rusti) Scott, a master's candidate in theater and drama and director of "Teddy Bears," and Dene Hammond, the author, (seated at left in aisle) wait anxiously for the curtain to rise.

the play adds something to the original script. I don't think I could see the production without some degree of trauma."

It seems that trauma was associated with "Teddy Bears" from the beginning. Hammond was in the hospital with flu and a slight case of pneumonia in February 1970 when he first got the idea for his play. "I went through a great deal of insane mental activity due to my high fever," he says. "A sort of hallucination."

The result of this "hallucinating" was a creative effort of more than a year and a half that ended in a play dealing with isolation and loneliness. "Loneliness is the single force that drives people. Most activity is an attempt to overcome it," Hammond says. Playwriting itself is an isolated thing, he adds. It's an interesting observation, considering the main character of "Teddy Bears" had isolated himself in a single room in order to write a handbook for mankind.

The play was written to fulfill a requirement for an advanced playwriting course Hammond was enrolled in. "I would have written the play anyway, but the course was a reason for doing it then. When you get credit for doing creative work, you don't feel you're stealing time from your studies. I guess that's why the playwriting program has been such a great help to me. I feel I have really gotten credit for work I've done."

Hammond is not referring to academic credit alone. Besides winning first place in this year's contest, two plays written by him in a beginning



playwriting course took first and second prizes in last year's contest.

"Dr. Smiley, who teaches the beginning and advanced playwriting courses, is one of the best creative writing instructors I've had," Hammond says. "When you do something bad, he tells you it's bad and why it's bad. But he also tells you when you do something good, and he encourages you to go on."

Smiley came to the University in the summer of 1969 with the primary intent of developing a playwriting program on this Campus. Perhaps the best tribute to his success is the fact that all three of the winning plays in the 1970 Annual Playwriting Contest were written in his beginning playwriting course.

An established playwright himself, Smiley also has written two books, *"Playwriting: The Structure of Action"* and *"The Drama of Attack."* The former is used as a text.

"The study of playwriting is not just for persons who want to become playwrights," Smiley explains, "The classes are generally one-third theater majors, one-third English majors, and one-third journalism majors. The courses allow students in other areas of theater to better understand plays and they allow journalism and English students another form of creative outlet. In fact, Dene was a senior in the English Department when he took his first playwriting course."

The program itself involves more than playwriting. Courses in creative writing, dramatic literature, philosophy, psychology, and in other areas of theater, such as directing and acting, are included in the study program.

"Writing a play takes in the whole program, not just the playwriting courses," Hammond says. "Ev-

erything you live and experience goes into a play. You have to visualize an entire production: the action, the characters, the actors, the set, the philosophy behind the action, etc. Philosophy played a large part in the writing of "Teddy Bears."

The playwriting contest, although not actively a part of the program, is an added incentive. "The contest encouraged me to do more writing," Hammond says. "For example, I worked from 2:30 a.m. until 5:10 p.m. the day of the deadline to finish typing a second play to enter." The play, "If Stars Were Made of Fire," finished among the top seven plays in the judging.

The contest also gives students from other theater areas an opportunity to create. The production of the three winning plays is entirely a student affair. Students direct the plays, act in the plays, design the sets and the costumes, and even work the lighting and sound in the theater. It is the only major production on the main stage that is run completely by students.

These students also compete for the annual H. Donovan Rhynsburger Production Award, given to the best produced play, irrespective of their placement in the writing awards. The production award is named in honor of Professor H. Donovan Rhynsburger, who has been a member of the drama faculty here since 1925. A plaque for this award with the names of the play, author, and members of the production is permanently placed in the University Theatre. Professor Rhynsburger was the first person to suggest that the winning plays be produced in what was in 1926 Lathrop Auditorium. The contest had started three years earlier and was sponsored by the Dramatic Arts Club, a group of faculty and townspeople.

Of all the playwrights entering the contest in past years, perhaps the best known is Tennessee Williams. As a student at the University, Thomas Lanier (Tennessee) Williams, submitted one play each of the two years he was in residence. These plays both received honorable mentions. In 1969 when the University awarded him an honorary degree, he autographed these original manuscripts which are housed in the main library.

Today students as well as other writers continue to submit original unproduced and unpublished plays to this national playwriting contest, and the contest now 49 years old, continues to fulfill its purpose to encourage original writing in the field of drama. □