

THEATER

Trinity Rep to stage trifecta of premieres over 3 months

By **CHANNING GRAY**
JOURNAL ARTS WRITER

Curt Columbus says he is met with disbelief when he tells colleagues about Trinity Repertory Company's next venture — three premieres created with the help of the acting company that will run in rotation for the next three months.

"It's a terribly crazy idea," he concedes, but one that he hopes will resonate with audiences who have shown a preference for new work. The company has been spending time workshoping home-grown scripts in recent seasons, providing actors for readings and, in some cases, shaping the material. What is unusual about this project is that Trinity found itself with three plays in the pipeline, all of which had supporters from among the acting troupe.

So Columbus decided to stage all of them.

The series opens Thursday with Columbus' own "Sparrow Grass," which looks at how unspoken secrets end up poisoning a family. A cast of five makes up a blended family of a mother and daughter, a father and son, and a Guatemalan maid. The setting is a homecoming for



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The series opens Thursday with director Curt Columbus' own "Sparrow Grass."

the father, an Army colonel just back from several years of deployment.

"It's about sex and violence at the end of the empire, our empire," Columbus said.

"Sparrow Grass" takes its inspiration from Racine's "Phedre," written at the end of the French empire. But it is not an adaptation, he said.

Columbus began the play in 2005, a year before he was hired as Trinity's artistic director, a job that sidelined his efforts to complete the script. But company member Brian McEleney, who is

directing the show, read a draft and urged Columbus to bring it to the company's workshop session, the beginning of a two-year process.

"I don't work in a lonely environment," said Columbus. "After I do a first draft I have to get it up in front of a company. That's the only way I can work." "Sparrow Grass" opens Thursday in previews, with opening night Feb. 21.

Then resident playwright Deborah Saleem Smith's "Love Alone" follows in previews on Feb. 28.

Smith, creator of Trinity's "Boots on the Ground" and "Some Things are Private," wrote her play without input from the company. While her two earlier efforts were based on real-life characters, "Love Alone" is fiction, the story of a woman who goes into the hospital for routine surgery and ends up dying. Her female partner of 20 years and their daughter sue, and the play looks at both sides of the issue, from the partner's perspective and that of the doctor.

"It's very gray," she said. "It's a play about people figuring out who they are after something happens they can't control."

Smith, who teaches playwrighting to students in the Brown University/Trinity Repertory MFA Acting and Directing programs, worked on the two-hour play for a couple of years, talking to doctors who have been sued and reading transcripts from her partner's father, a Midwestern lawyer who deals with medical malpractice cases.

After the workshops, there was a lot of rewriting. And even before it has been produced "Love Alone" picked up two awards, one to help with the mounting of the play, and an honorable mention from the Jane Chambers Award, the country's premier women's playwrighting award.

George Brant's "The

Mourner's Bench" opens on March 7. Brant is based in Cleveland these days, where wife Laura Kepley is the associate artistic director of the Cleveland Playhouse. But for years, while Kepley was working at Trinity, he was based in Providence.

Brant, 42, grew up in the Chicago suburbs and studied acting at Northwestern. But when he wasn't getting good parts, he decided to write his own. He went on to get a graduate degree from the University of Texas at Austin, and has garnered several awards.

Brant said the 90-minute "Mourner's Bench," which he began in 2009, is one of his most personal plays, inspired by cousins who were orphaned at an early


age and brought up by his grandparents. The play is set in a suburban living room, and follows three sets of inhabitants who are haunted by the past.

Brant calls it an "emotional puzzle play." The play, written in the summer and fall of 2009, was essentially finished when Trinity asked to produce it, although he concedes he will probably be tweaking the script until opening night.

"There are always discoveries to be made," he said.

All three plays run through May. Tickets are \$26-\$66. Call (401) 351-4242 or visit trinityrep.com.

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