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MAT is ready for 24-hour playfest this weekend

By [Stephen Real](#)



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Grant Olson of Montana Actors' Theatre greets the crowd at Triple Dog Brewing Nov. 17, 2017, and begins the process for writing, rehearsing, directing and performing in 24 hours of theatre in MAT's first 24-hour play festival.

This Friday and Saturday, Montana Actor's Theatre is offering people the chance to become part of a team that will take one day to write, direct and perform a play.

The themes are picked out at random and the final productions will be performed Saturday starting at 8 p.m. in the Little Theatre of Cowan Hall at Montana State University-Northern.

The event kicks off this Friday night at the Old Station Brewing Co. from 7 to 8.

Grant Olson, Ph.D., MAT's associate artistic director, said this is also when the writers for the plays find out what their theme is, who their director is and how many and who their team of actors will be.

The theme is based on several news headlines and must be used at some point in the production Olson said.

"On the day that we do the drawing," Olson said, "I'll go through the New York Times and Washington Post and The Guardian and find about five or six different headlines that could theoretically fit as dialogue. I look for things that aren't going to be hard for the writers to fit in, but something that's topical from that day. The night of the drawing we'll draw out one of those headlines and each one will fit in as a bit of dialogue. ... That keeps it fresh."

Once the writers have their theme, they have to come up with a 10- to 15-minute play. Olson said there may be a room for the writers to use if they want to sit together and write or they can go home. He added they have a Facebook group going so they can keep each other updated on the progress of their scripts.

"Last year, it was so funny, Jay (Pyette) and Rachel (Dean) were done with their first drafts by midnight and completely done by about 1 in the morning," Olson said. "And my wife, Morgaine, was writing and at 2 in the morning she had thrown out all her ideas and had a blank page sitting in front of her. She was like 'I hate everybody! I'm never doing this again!' Then she managed to write this great comedy."

The finalized scripts are handed over to the director the following morning at 8 a.m. The director looks over the script for about a half an hour before the actors show up and begin rehearsing at 9 a.m. which, Olson said, is "the earliest any actor gets up in their lifetime."

Olson added that the directors and actors rehearse in different classrooms at Northern.

"Each director has a different process really of how they get their actors into it," Olson added. "Rehearse through, block it out, give them some time to look at their lines while the directors go down and manage some tech things. We have to find costumes, some props and get the lights set up for them."

Rehearsals on the Little Theatre stage in Northern's Cowan Hall begin at noon, Olson said, and the different teams rotate stage time.

"We've really only had the actors for about three hours before we're on stage," Olson said. "We kind of set it up if you want lots of tech things then you're going to have a little bit less time to rehearse. So it's really kind of up to the director. ... You've got this hour chunk so you can do whatever you want with it so use it wisely."

The actors then have a little time for a dinner break before they perform the finalized show.

This is the second year MAT has performed this kind of production and Olson said it's something he has done before during his time in Missoula. Olson added that he and the rest of MAT would like to add more shows like this and not just in Havre.

"We'd like to extend it out to other communities and maybe make a bit of a festival out of it," Olson said. "One of the things we're thinking about is doing a 24-hour play in different places up and down the Hi-Line and do it almost as a competition, like an audience-votes competition. Then the playwrights would all come to Havre for a big one at the end, and the directors and the actors. Then they'd write all new plays."

Olson said directors are picked on a volunteer basis and the slots are filled up, but the slots that filled up the quickest were for writers.

Olson said he likes the frantic energy and having a seemingly impossible deadline. He added the writers have it easy, despite having to come up with a play in a few hours, because once they're done, their part in the production is over.

"People were really wanting to write," he said. "I think it's a great way to cultivate new writing, too. In that really short deadline, you can see the whole process in one day, which is really encouraging to playwrights. So often as a playwright, you write a play and then never get to see it live on stage due to different circumstances. This way, you get the writing all out of the way and it goes right into production, so it must feel very fulfilling."

Olson added they could still use some actors and that he blames the shortage of actors on "Jay for writing 30-minute monologues."

"It was amazing because (a practiced actor) and Jay's daughter, Jessa, ended up in Jay's play," Olson said. "And he's like 'Well I know these guys can memorize so I wrote them good things.' It turned out really nice. It was a really poignant piece."

He said it's fun and surprising how good the quality it is. Other members of the group last year were worried about the quality and were surprised at how well it was.

"That nervous energy just leads to some amazing performances," Olson said. "There's no time to be pretentious or really actor-y or anything. You got to say your lines and get it done. The quality is surprisingly high. You've got 24 hours, how can you get anything meaningful done? I think just the setup of it, people shine."

"I hope people come and check it out," Olson added. "It's great fun for the audience, and the audience last time had a lot of fun. It's one of those things that it could be a train wreck. The circumstances could be a train wreck, but every time I've done it, the performances have been phenomenal. Like, tear-jerking performances that happen in a day. That's impressive to see. The good thing about the 10-minute shows is if the play isn't to your taste, it's like the weather here, you wait five minutes and it'll be different."

"We're hoping to encourage discussion, and people go get a drink in between the shows and we chat a little bit and the other actors come out and watch," he added. "It's just a lot of fun. That's it. Come see something fun."

Tickets are available online or at the door. Adults are \$15 and students, seniors and military are \$10. The show starts at 8 p.m. Saturday and the backstage lounge opens at 7:30 p.m.

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