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Playwright Stefanie Zdravec Wins 2013 Francesca Primus Prize

By Michael Gioia
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The American Theatre Critics Association has named Stefanie Zdravec winner of the \$10,000 Francesca Primus Prize for her play *The Electric Baby*.

Jointly sponsored by ATCA and the Francesca Ronnie Primus Foundation, the Primus Prize is given annually to an emerging female theatre artist. Playwrights, artistic directors and directors are eligible to apply.

Zdravec's play, *The Electric Baby*, according to ATCA, "vividly portrays the power of myth, magic, and stories to transform our daily lives. When a miscellaneous group of Pittsburgh residents — an older childless couple, a lonely waiter, a young man with a stutter, and an angry young prostitute — are involved in a traffic accident, their lives intertwine and intersect with those of an African immigrant cabdriver, his Romanian wife, and their magical dying baby. The play's intriguing fusion of the everyday realities of urban life with Romanian and Yoruba folklore and folktales subtly reinforces the importance of family and community in coming to terms with loss and grief."

Zdravec's young son was diagnosed with a rare disease while she was writing the play. She became fascinated by "the irreversible sentences — a terminal diagnosis, a car accident, a sick child — that turn your world upside down, leaving you paralyzed and isolated while the outside world rushes past. I was interested in how some people manage to carve new lives from tragedy while others remain stuck." The result is a lyrical play that is simultaneously mythic and tragic and illuminates the extraordinary in the ordinary.

The Electric Baby received its world premiere at Quantum Theatre in Pittsburgh, had a subsequent production at Two River Theater Company in Red Bank, NJ, and is currently playing at the Rivendell Theatre Ensemble in Chicago. It was nominated for the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize and received the Women in the Arts & Media Coalition's Collaboration Award. *The Electric Baby* was developed with support from Theater of the First Amendment's First Light Discovery Program, Playwrights Realm and the 2011 PlayPenn Conference.

Zdravec, who teaches playwriting at Einhorn School of Performing Arts at Primary Stages, was selected from 20 award applicants by ATCA's nationwide committee of critics, chaired by Barbara Bannon (Salt Lake City, UT) and composed of Julie York Coppens (Juneau, AK), Marianne Evett (Arlington, MA), Michael Howley (Montgomery, AL), Lynn Rosen (Bellingham, WA) and Herb Simpson (Geneseo, NY).

The committee also gave special commendation to director Lear deBessonet for "her exceptional work in expanding the boundaries of conventional theatre to include nontraditional actors; attract a new, broader audience; and involve the community in inventive ways into the dramatic process. The scale and vision of her productions mark her as one of the most brave and dynamic directors working in theatre today."

"The Francesca Ronnie Primus Foundation was established to recognize and support emerging women

artists who are making a difference in the theatre community in which they work," said Barry Primus, the foundation administrator, in a statement.

Founded in 1997 in memory of actress, critic and ATCA member Francesca Primus, the Primus Prize was originally administered by the Denver Center Theatre Company. ATCA began overseeing it in 2004.

Previous recipients of the Francesca Primus Prize include Julia Jordan (*Tatjana in Color*), Brooke Berman (*Wonderland*), Melanie Marnich (*Blur*), Brooke Berman (*Playing House*), S.M. Shepard-Massat (*Some Place Soft to Fall*), Alexandra Cunningham (*Pavane*), Lynn Nottage (*Intimate Apparel*), Michelle Hensley (artistic director of Ten Thousand Things Theatre Company), Karen Zacarias (*Mariela in the Desert*), Victoria Stewart (*Hardball*), EM Lewis (*Heads*), Jamie Pachino (*Splitting Infinity*), Michele Lowe (*Inana*), Caridad Svich (*The House of the Spirits*) and Tammy Ryan (*Lost Boy Found in Whole Foods*).

ATCA is the nationwide organization of theatre critics and an affiliate of the International Association of Theatre Critics. It also administers two playwriting awards, the \$50,000 Harold and Mimi Steinberg/ATCA New Play Award and the M. Elizabeth Osborn Award. ATCA members also recommend a regional theatre for the annual Tony Award and vote on induction into the Theatre Hall of Fame.

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