

Dennis Elkins mesmerizing audiences

The eighth annual Thingamajig Playwrights Festival opened last weekend in Pagosa Springs with “box.” Written and performed by Dennis Elkins, Equity actor, director and former chairman of the Fort Lewis College Department of Drama, the one-man show mesmerized Sunday’s matinee crowd and launched the festival with a spellbinder.

As Elkins revealed in the after-show talkback, “box.” has been in the works for about seven years, from the untimely death of his son, Isaac, when cremains arrived in a cardboard box.

“I had to pick up all his things, and that’s where the idea about the process of packing and unpacking boxes began,” Elkins said. “I worked on it then shelved it for about five years. I didn’t know how to end it.”

On Sunday, the 70-minute, solo performance unspooled seamlessly, like a well-crafted one-act play. “box.” Is a complex and deeply felt examination of life’s unplanned turns, deliberate shifts, blind alleys, devastating losses and late-discovered through lines.

Structured to reveal key markers and telling insights, the work balances a dark core of loss and grief with telling autobiographical details and exuberant shafts of humor.

The concept is fresh; the writing brilliant and insightful; and the performance thoroughly engaging.

Fans of solo shows and Elkins’ work in general have the opportunity to see “box.” this weekend at 7 p.m. Friday and Saturday at the Pagosa Center for the Performing Arts. For more information, visit pagosacenter.org or call 731-7469.

“box.” anchors the new play festival in Pagosa this year. Elkins will be an actor-reader in several of the plays to be examined. It’s a serious festival with straight-forward readings followed by workshop readings and finally a staged reading. Festival Artistic Director Melissa Firlit will shepherd the flock forward, and playwrights will be in attendance.

Elkins will present “box.” in New York City at the United Solo Theatre Festival on Oct. 24. General admission is \$47 To \$80 for single presentations. This is the ninth year the Solo Festival has been held.

It runs over 10 weeks, presents up to five shows each day,

with about 130 productions from a variety of writers and performers. Master classes are offered by winners of solo performance awards: by the likes of Billy Crystal and Olympia Dukakis.

If you want to learn more about this rich American playwriting and performance, check out the website: unitedsolo.org/ us, and make your reservation to see Elkins perform next week at Theatre Row, 410 West 42nd St.

“I guess I’m making my Broadway debut,” Elkins said with a smile at the Pagosa talkback.

We could have used a talkback after last weekend’s 10-Minute Play Festival at the Durango Arts Center. Now in its eighth year, the model and format are rather unusual and might do with some rethinking.

Fans who saw the semi-staged readings last May got to see fully staged performances of the top finalists. Each play benefited from lighting, sound design, props and costumes. Each play benefited from actors and directors working together. But a few still made one wonder how they made it into the finals.

Outstanding performance credits go to Joy Kilpatrick in Bob Kolsby’s “Good Taste”; Brian Devine in Rob Walker’s “The Mudgett Lattice”; and Rebecca Gilbert and John Garza in Mark Nutter’s “The Anonymous Donor.” This year, one comedy made it to the final evening: “Transforming Your Life Through Hula-Hoop”; one Alzheimer’s memory play: “After Her”; and one relationship drama: “These Boots are Made for Hikin.”

Three of the six plays had the bite of satire, and our local actors and directors tapped into that gratifying vein with a certain relish.

The DAC festival is a proven success, but that doesn’t mean the model shouldn’t be re-examined. It’s time to fine-tune the international call for entries, entry fees, tiered citizen reading panels, final selection, the semi-staged spring performance and the final fall production.

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