

## SEVEN DAYS

## PERFORMING ARTS

# Two Tense New One-Acts to Play Burlington's Off Center

State of the Arts

BY **ERIK ESCKILSEN** [03.02.11]

Prolific Burlington playwright **Maura Campbell** blurs the lines between comedy and drama — and between the stage and screen — with *Out of Control*, an evening of two original one-acts to run at **Off Center for the Dramatic Arts** this week.

The first play, “20/20,” directed by **Nathan Hartswick**, is a family farce involving murder, betrayal and a guy from Jiffy Lube. It emerged from an assignment in Campbell’s MFA program at Hollins University that required her to write six plays in 72 hours. Despite her self-described “terrible reputation for rewriting,” the play is “bullet proof,” she says.

The second play, “Ou Topos,” might be called a moving target. Originally just one scene in length, it was performed last December at a benefit for Burlington’s Committee on Temporary Shelter — and then was selected for inclusion in the *Best 10-Minute Plays of 2010*, an annual collection published by Smith and Kraus. “Ou Topos” is about a dystopian society populated by sociopaths; the title comes from the Greek word for “no place,” a pun used by Sir Thomas More in coining the term “utopia” for his 1516 novel of that title.

According to Campbell, she has been struggling with this work for years. “I could never finish the play,” she says. “I felt like I was just working too hard to create something.” When she hit on the idea of incorporating film, some of the pieces began to fall into place. She calls the result a “hybrid,” in which the hourlong story is told alternately on stage and on screens positioned around and above the seating. This artistic decision also has the practical advantage, Campbell adds, of sparing her from having to create a separate world on the same stage the work will share with “20/20” this week.

An experienced screenwriting instructor, Campbell is new to filmmaking. She enlisted the help of her former Burlington College student **Aron Meinhardt** for the videography. They shot footage in varied locations — in offices and bathrooms and out on the Lake Champlain ice — to represent the parallel universe from which the play’s characters begin receiving transmissions. According to Meinhardt, the film work alternates among literal depictions of story events, visual metaphors and more abstract elements — all “working together and playing off each other to tell a story and comment on each other.”

The new approach has kept a final script elusive, as Campbell responds to what she and Meinhardt capture on camera. Her actors have had to roll with it. “I think I had to undo any kind of expectations,” says **Marianne DiMascio**, who also appeared in the December version (with **Wendi Stein**). “It’s been a great experience in being present and working with what you get handed that day.”

Campbell is billing “Ou Topos” as a workshop production, which gives her, the piece’s director, license to experiment right up to show time. “I don’t see any other way to do something new than just do it and show it,” she says. “Using the word ‘risk’ is something I’ve really had to do,” Campbell adds. “This one’s big. But I’ve made it this far, and I’ve been scared many times.”

