Stepping out of your comfort zone—and venturing hard work—do it—is characteristic of the development of the U of A Department of Drama’s New Works Festival. Thrust this with in balancing a full course load and you may end up with an experience that artistic director and fourth-year Damena major Benio Dooley describes as filled with “lots of drinking and lots of tears”—something most university students can relate to.

Entering its fifth season of operation, the New Works festival continues to keep things fresh by exclusively featuring six original, unproduced works. The completely student-run festival explores the essence of university life by pushing both boundary and time schedules—and as co-ordinator Michelle Low explains, it’s all in the spirit of fostering artistic growth.

“Our main goal is to facilitate the development of work by emerging playwrights, so we try to provide development opportunities to new emerging writers who might not be able to get them through a different company. We consider ourselves, a lot of the time, to be a stepping stone to other projects or festivals,” says Low.

Dooley explains that development opportunities couldn’t be done without an arsenal of collective volunteer work done out of “labour of love.”

“Sometimes we have friends, siblings or significant others that well you know, so we do things, but for the most part, everyone on the executive and all of the writers, directors, designers, actors and dancers pitch in some way other than in the scope of their field,” says Dooley.

“I’ll be painting,” adds van Leeuwen.

“And I showed up for a lighting hang today,” Dooley laughs.

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—Michelle Low, executive co-producer, New Works Festival

In addition to a volunteer force of U of A students, the festival also incorporates a mentorship aspect. Artistic director and dramaturge at Theatre Yeast Heather Inglessi, U of A Playwright in Residence Greg MacArthur and local director Trevor Schmidt—a tried Dooley describes as “The Holy Trinity”—worked with and mentored the festival’s participants throughout their preparation.

However, as MFA Directing candidate and festival participant Simon Bloom explains, the most learning and personal growth comes from stepping outside your field of practice.

“It’s completely student run, so it’s a learning experience for a lot of people. So that’s something that we all ways have to keep in mind. Tonight is someone’s first time hanging lights,” says Bloom, who directs festival play, The Tragedy of the maiden Play Deed Girl.

Bloom’s play offers a feminist response to the character type of the ‘Maiden Play Deed Girl’ found in films such as 1990’s Days of Summer and Garden State, where the protagonist, impoverished female lead being the role out of the monstrosity of his own life. Written, directed and performed by a crew of 20-somethings, Bloom explains that this play along with the other shows in the festival, are geared towards the university campus.

Although Bloom admits it’s sometimes difficult to work on a smaller scale with a more intimate group of people, he’s confident that the challenge is rewarding, and ultimately contributes to the learning experience of student-run theatre. As a 15 year veteran of theatre, van Leeuwen says that in the end, it’s all part of the game.

“I think within theater, there’s this idea that you go through — not that I’m advocating for that should always be or anything — but it’s all part of the process.”

For TV junkies, nothing worse than discovering a new show and falling in love with the characters, only to have it cancelled after a few short weeks — as is the case with Emily Owens, M-D, a medical drama sadly coming to an end after just 13 episodes. The show—which will inevitably draw comparisons to programs like Grey’s Anatomy—was cancelled after only six episodes, though the network thankfully decided to let the rest of the season air.

The show revolves around Emily Owens, a young intern who gets a job at the same hospital as both her high school nemesis and her university crush, who also happens to be her best friend. While it’s admittedly true that the show doesn’t have the most creative concept, what it lacks in originality it makes up for in heart. This is mostly thanks to lead actress Mami Gummer, playing the quirky, slightly nerdy main character who has a special touch with her patients.

Watching the show, it’s no surprise that Gummer comes from good stock. As Meryl Streep’s daughter, it’s obvious Gummer has picked up a few cues from her mother’s career. She especially shines when she shares the screen with actor Michael Ryan, who plays a doctor with a crush of his own on Emily. The pair’s evolution from friends to almost lovers has been admirable to watch over the series, and the world’s TV is going to be a little bleaker without them.

While it’s a crime to take it off the air, Emily Owens, M.D. deserves to be classified as one of the finest things in pop culture before it’s banished from our screens.

The Finer Things is a semi-regular feature in which Gateway pop culture pundits point to a particularly relevant or pretentious example of art celebrating it for all of its subjective merits.