Sabbatical fuels theater professor’s writing; culminates in two new plays

On your last break from work, did you dedicate upwards of eight hours each day to increasing your commitment to your profession? That is the nature of the faculty sabbatical: Time away from classroom and campus tasks to recharge, reinvent and renew professionally. And, sometimes, to reinvigorate and replenish the very field you work in.

By Monica M. Walk

Communications and Theater Arts Professor Richard Gustin, M.F.A, with 20 years teaching in the UW Colleges and a decade more as a professional actor, aimed for these goals when he applied for a sabbatical from UW-Fond du Lac for the spring semester of 2014. He had ideas and stories he wanted to share, concerns and content that could speak to the larger community we all belong to.

So, he spent his days writing. Week after week after week. Consulting with a mentor. Taking notes. Incorporating comments and feedback. Revising.

At the end of a semester, he had written two plays. And, started a third.

"I knew I had limited time in spring, so I wrote and let it fly," said the playwright, who has now completed nine scripts, six in the last three years. "It is a reflection of being older in my life: I ponder things. All of us have our windows of opportunity: If not now, when? We get stuck in thinking now is not the time. Three years ago, I got serious about writing."

He credits his decision to work with a mentor as a catalyst in his sabbatical productivity. Gustin sought out John Schneider - Fond du Lac native, long-time Milwaukee actor, and Marquette University resident artist. Gustin has known Schneider for 40 years, as brother Tom Gustin and Schneider were colleagues in Milwaukee's Theatre X, the Obie Award-winning experimental theater.

"I looked up to Theatre X as a teen," Gustin said."My daughter had John as a professor at Marquette in 2004-08 and we reconnected firmly then. We are both in Milwaukee. It seemed a perfect choice."

The duo met four times over the semester, spending two hours together each time, going page by page through notes and comments on five of Gustin's scripts. Then, Gustin would give Schneider new pages from his works in progress. "That really helped. I wanted to put something new in his hands while I worked on what he had critiqued," Gustin said.

When the two new scripts felt complete, Gustin brought performers in to test his work.

He expresses sincere appreciation for the camaraderie shown by Marquette faculty, where Performing Arts Chair Stephen Hudson-Maier graciously allowed Gustin to use the St. Norbert Theatre, a "jewel of a little 90-seat proscenium, a lovely small space," Gustin said.

The staged reading for "Being Seen" had two professional actors working on stage with the script before an invited audience. The audience comments led Gustin to write an additional 30 pages and to revise the ending. He plans to enter the two-character piece in the New York Fringe Festival this summer.

A separate staged reading for "A Sparrow Falls" brought together 15 professional actors to interpret the show for another invited audience. The show, featuring a Greek Chorus, will premiere in the UW-Fond du Lac Prairie Theater in March 2015. Inspired by the events of the Holocaust, Gustin hopes to honor both Anne Frank and a young Christian boy killed in a hate crime at a Kansas City Jewish Community Center in 2014. Gustin also reread and found inspiration in the works of Karl Jung.

"Society wants us to forget the Jewish Holocaust... and the black holocaust and the Native American holocaust in our country. There is ethnic cleansing throughout the world. Remembering is absolutely, fundamentally important," Gustin said. "We need to remember to know who we are today. And, there are life-altering experiences that you don't just move on from; Western Society wants us to move on, but it doesn't work that way."

Despite the serious theme, "A Sparrow Falls" is a satire, and Gustin hopes audiences will be entertained, while thinking more deeply about their lives and relationships with others.

"Theater is about spreading understanding and compassion for others," Gustin said, recalling the words of director John Reinh, whom he worked for at the Kansas City Repertory Theatre early in his career.

"It is so gratifying to see other actors perform what you have written," said Gustin. "When you see it performed, it's almost like someone else wrote the play. It has a life of its own, beyond you."

"As a playwright, people say anything you want them to say," Gustin said. "There is great freedom in that - satisfaction, empowerment, purpose. I feel very much a different person after the sabbatical: more courageous, less afraid of what people think of my work. I hope to communicate that to my students, to say 'Let's take a greater risk here.' In theater, we can exercise ourselves freely... we can get in trouble or be unpopular, but that's the job of the arts."

Mulling on the creative process and his recent opportunity to engage deeply in it, Gustin said, "Don't be afraid to spend time alone with yourself and plumb your depths. There is a well of self within you to be expressed. We are all creative - it just takes a little bit of practice. Say 'yes' to your creativity: Take up your pen or brush, or go into the kitchen. You are so much more than you think you are, and there is a limited time to do it."