Written by Mike Schulz
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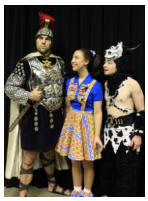


Every year, St. Ambrose University's theatre department produces four mainstage shows over the nine months that school is in session. It's somewhat surprising, then, that given the myriad authors to choose from, the university opted to reserve half of the slots in its 2011-12 season for works by a single playwright.

Yet what's more surprising is that the author in question isn't one of the usual theatrical suspects – Shakespeare or Williams or O'Neill. Rather, it's St. Ambrose student Aaron Randolph III, a 32-year-old pursuing additional degrees after graduating in 2002 from the school's music department. His family musical *Dakota Jones & the Search for Atlantis* will be staged in the university's Galvin Fine Arts Center December 3 and 4, and his comedy *The Plagiarists* runs February 24 through 26.

Corinne Johnson, head of St. Ambrose's theatre department, says this marks the first time that a current student has had an original play – let alone *two* original plays – produced on the Galvin stage. Yet the decision to produce Randolph's scripts back-to-back, she says, was hardly a tough one, considering the enormous educational possibilities in having theatre students not only work on debuting material, but alongside the plays' actual author. (Randolph is set to earn his new St. Ambrose degrees this May.)

"We're doing this for very personal, and also very academic, reasons," says Johnson, who will direct *The Plagiarists*. "I'm really encouraged and captivated by Aaron's diversity. But it's also exciting for our students, as well as for me, to see how a script is workshopped, and how it evolves and devolves – hopefully *e*volves – throughout the experience, and where it winds up at the end. I know *I* was thrilled about the opportunity of working on a new script with the playwright at my side."

Daniel D.P. Sheridan, the Davenport Junior Theatre artistic director who also serves as director for *Dakota Jones*, agrees. "I haven't worked with a lot of original plays," he says, "and what's great is that Aaron and I are always in the space together, so that even on the fly, I can lean over and say, 'Hey, let's give *this* a shot,' and he'll say 'Great!', and we'll see if it works. We make changes every day. And every single day of rehearsal, we come out of the process a little more excited about the show."

As for Randolph himself (who, like Johnson and Sheridan, is also an ensemble member with the area's Curtainbox Theatre Company – as am I), he says he feels lucky to have landed even one of his plays on the university's mainstage schedule.

"They've done student-written works in the *studio* space, and when Cory [Corrine Johnson] originally spoke to me about doing a show, I assumed that's what we were talking about. And then she said, 'Kris Eitrheim [St. Ambrose theatre professor and the mainstage set designer] will be the scenic director ... .' And I'm like, 'For the *studio*? *Really*?'" He laughs. "So I don't know. I'm very excited to be doing this, and I feel very blessed. But it's kind of crazy."

Creative Outlet

While not a theatre major when he first attended St. Ambrose from 1998 to 2002, Randolph was a frequent theatre participant, acting in such university productions as *Macbeth, Picasso at the Lapin Agile,* and *Play It Again, Sam*. Yet at the time, says the Davenport resident, he didn't feel a strong urge to write plays; *that* came once he entered the working world.

"After I graduated, I was doing all of these miserable jobs that I hated," says Randolph. "I'd been trying to find a career path, but while I was doing that, I did sales, I worked in food service ... – all these jobs that were not enjoyable.

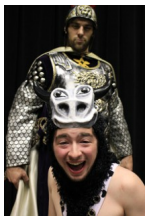
"I just needed some sort of creative outlet," he continues. "And I've always enjoyed writing, but I'd never really tried *play*writing. So I just started taking these experiences, and characters I'd meet – because in sales you meet all *sorts* of weird people – and writing little scenes about them."

Those scenes led to Randolph experimenting with longer scenes, which led to him writing several one-act comedies, which eventually led to his authoring a two-act, war-veteran drama titled *A Green River.* "It was something I could do on my own," says Randolph of playwriting, "that didn't require any special tools, and I discovered I really enjoyed it."

Realizing that "what I really wanted to have was a job that was flexible enough for me to also do theatre," Randolph decided to return to St. Ambrose in the fall of 2010, in pursuit of degrees in theatre and computer networking. ("You can guess which one is gonna be my day job," he says with a laugh.) And while St. Ambrose didn't offer a specific course in playwriting, Randolph believed he could at least receive a tangential education through other theatre classes.

"I knew that if I wanted to write plays, I needed to really know what I was doing. And I love acting, but if you also know about direction and design, you're going to be a lot better off. Plus," he adds, "I knew that if I went back to study theatre, I could take an independent-study seminar."

With Johnson as his instructor, Randolph did begin an independent-study course in playwriting, which is where *The Plagiarists* – and the first of its numerous drafts – originated.



"With everything I had written up to that point," says Randolph, "I had lots of time to develop the ideas. So what I said to Cory was, 'I want to see if I can come up with an idea really *quickly*. So I want you to give me a deadline and say, 'You will write a play by this date.' And that's kind of what we did."

As with his early stabs at playwriting, the idea that would eventually lead to *The Plagiarists* was, he says, "inspired by a real person," one whom Randolph has recently become fascinated with.

"The play," says Randolph, "is about an art student, Stacy, who gets to study with a famous artist she has idealized from afar, and who teaches her about his style and brings her under his wing. But he's a very *infamous* artist, because what he does is take pictures of *other* artists' work, crop them and blow them up, and present them as his work." (Off-the-record, Randolph names the artist that the concept is based on, but it should be easily gleaned by anyone familiar with the modern-art scene – especially considering that *The Plagiarists*' "infamous" artist character is named "Richard.")

Randolph continues, "So the play questions the idea of ownership, and the idea of 'Where does inspiration stop and plagiarism begin?' But I also wanted to make the play itself representative of Richard's art style. So what I did throughout the play, seamlessly integrated into scenes, was include scenes from other plays."

In the present draft of the comedy, says Randolph, *The Plagiarists*' original dialogue routinely leads to dialogue from a half-dozen published scripts, among them such well-known works as David Mamet's *Oleanna*, Yasmina Reza's *Art*

, and Paula Vogel's Pulitzer Prize-winner
How I Learned to Drive
. Which means, of course, that one of the plagiarists of the show's title – as its author readily concedes – is the author himself.

"I didn't want to pick plays that were brand-new," says Randolph, "because no one would know the dialogue. And I didn't want to pick plays that were *really* famous. But I did want people to hear certain lines and say, '*Wa-a-ait* a second ... !' The play's designed to have you ask, 'What's real?' and 'What's not?' and 'Is this a copy or is this original?', and so the style ties into the story. I mean, I'm not stealing lines and pretending they're my work. I'm intentionally using them because
no one
will think they're my work."

"I feel fortunate to be directing it," says Johnson of *The Plagiarists,* which she praises especially for Randolph's having "used inspiration that is so
provocative
. And saying that he worked on the play 'with me' [as an independent-study project] is really a misnomer. I think I just gave him deadlines, and read things along the way, and applauded, and said, 'Oh,
cool
.'"

Yet while she's a fan of *The Plagiarists* in its current form, Johnson adds that because February's production is an educational-theatre workshop of a debuting script, "I would really love for it to be re-written all the way through to closing night, even to the extent of my factoring in some rehearsals after the show has opened. Because I'd like Aaron to see how the audience responds, and if, indeed, he wants to try different things, he'll be able to interpolate or insert them even though our limited run."

That notion appears to suit Randolph fine, as the playwright says he greatly appreciates feedback on his works-in-progress: "It's always helpful to have an audience there. Because sometimes you'll think, 'This part is hilarious!' and no one will laugh at it, and other times you'll get to something you think is just a random line and they'll be like, 'That was *so* funny!' You have no way of knowing how people are going to react until they do."

Underwater Scene On-Stage

While *The Plagiarists* was decided on for St. Ambrose's 2011-12 season following its independent-study completion in the spring, Johnson says that *Dakota Jones & the Search for Atlantis* – for which Randolph not only wrote the script but composed the music and lyrics – was a project that its author was specifically commissioned for.

"Musicals are wonderful opportunities for our students," she says, "as well as for the younger students seeing the shows. And while there are many to choose from, we've already *done* a lot of them, so I always have a hard time finding a script that I really like – one that's smart and interesting, and that suits our student-actor population. But Aaron had an undergrad degree in music, so I said, 'Why don't *you* write something?'"

Despite limited experience in songwriting – "Occasionally, I'll write a cheesy love song for my wife," he says with a chuckle – Randolph had done a fair share of music composition, and was enthusiastic about giving an hour-long children's musical a shot. "And my first thought was to do a children's version of [Jules Verne's] *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. I really liked the idea of having this underwater scene on-stage, which I thought would be really neat to see.

"But evidently," he continues, "that was too terrifying. They thought the giant squid might be a little too scary for kids. And it probably *wouldn't* have been a good idea. But I knew that's where I wanted the play to end up – underwater – and so I said, 'How can I *get* to this?'"

The story that he eventually came up with, says Randolph, "is about this little girl who likes to go

on adventures in her imagination. And the premise is that, one day in class, she learns about Greek mythology, and decides to go on an adventure to find the lost city of Atlantis. Poseidon has this magic trident that's broken into three parts, and Dakota has to find each part of the trident with the help of different characters in Greek mythology. So it kind of becomes like *The Wizard of Oz*
, with Dakota meeting all these wacky people on her journey."

With *Dakota Jones*' story in place, Randolph says that the show's songs consequently "all came out of the story. And because mythological characters are so visually diverse – things like like the minotaur, with the bull's head, or Medusa – I knew I wanted the show to be really musically diverse. So I've tried to include music from a lot of different categories. Some of the songs are your standard musical-theatre fare, like Rodgers & Hammerstein, and some have more of a calypso sound, and one is kind of like a torch song ... ."

As Randolph tells it, though, composing the show's music proved far less taxing than composing its lyrics. "Having to write lyrics is ... *torture*," says Randolph with a laugh. "I am not a lyricist. In fact, I had asked other people if they would write the lyrics to it, but ultimately, it fell on my plate. I think they came out fine, and in some cases
good
, but I am certainly not a poet."

According to director Sheridan, whatever failings Randolph might have in the poetry department are hardly hindering the production as a whole.

"The chemistry of the characters he's put together just clicks," he says. "And the actors are bringing so much to it that I feel like at this point in the process [Sheridan spoke to me two weeks before *Dakota Jones*' premiere], the show is starting to steer itself. Which is the way it should be. We're able to get out of the way and just try to be good listeners in terms of what helps the story, rather than trying to *force* anything."

With Randolph also serving as the production's music director, he says that the *Dakota Jones* r ehearsal process "has worked out really well, because people can come up to me at rehearsals, and I'm there to bounce ideas off, and I can be there to make changes to music and the script ...

. I've really been overjoyed with how well it's working."

He adds that he's also thrilled for the chance to help stage a family production of such lavish spectacle and professionalism.

"In theatre, I think we sometimes discount children's shows because they're maybe not as 'artistically important' as, you know, Tennessee Williams or Arthur Miller," says Randolph. "But I think it's really important to get kids excited and interested in theatre. I mean, my first memory of the theatre is seeing this really fun production of *Snow White* as a little kid. I just loved it, and I wanted to be a *part* of it, you know? And that's how I still feel. Even if it's not going to be a full-time source of income, it's a huge part of my life. I just want to do it *more*."

And does the currently ubiquitous St. Ambrose author have another playwriting project on the horizon? "Oh, *no*," he stresses. "My other project right now is *sleeping*."

Dakota Jones & the Search for Atlantis *runs December 3 and 4,* The Plagiarists *runs February 24 through 26, and both shows will be staged in St. Ambrose University's Galvin Fine Arts Center. For tickets and more information, call (563)333-6251 or visit SAU.edu/galvin.*