

Student playwright debuts

Senior Jeff Denight's first full-length production adds to portfolio of work

BY EMILY BATTMER, Features Editor

Friday was a big night for senior Jeff Denight. Sitting in the audience, he watched as a symbol of his accomplishments unfolded on the stage in front of him.

"Pictorial Anatomy of a Dogfish" was much more than just a script he wrote — it represented his first full-length play to see the stage, and it was this piece of work that landed him a spot in the graduate creative writing program at the University of Oxford in Oxford, England.

"Pictorial Anatomy of a Dogfish" started as a project for Denight's creative writing senior seminar last semester, he said. The play follows two main characters who discover they are the son and grandson of Charles Manson. Denight said the play examines their struggle to understand their relationship to this notorious man and what it means for them and their own identities.

Denight said he got the idea for the script after reading a CNN.com article about two men who were related to Charles Manson. "Dogfish" is Denight's fictional adaptation of the article and his examination of what such a situation would do to the characters involved.

He said the experience of writing the script was interesting because it required so much research. Because Denight's character had just discovered his relationship to Charles Manson, that character was doing the same research in the script that Denight was doing to write the script. Essentially, Denight said he was discovering the material at the same time his character was.

"For me, playwriting is sort of first digging in and doing research and figuring out what people are going through, being able to create something from just a little inkling, a little spark in my mind and being able to build off of that until it's something grand and performative that allows people to see the kind of thought process I've been going through," Denight said.

Despite Denight's current passion for playwriting and his future writing at Oxford, it wasn't until his junior year of college that he began writing scripts. Friends and family often told Denight they could see him going into playwriting, he said, but it wasn't something he agreed with at first.

"For a while I resisted [playwriting] a lot and tried to find a background in poetry and fiction," he said. "It wasn't until my junior year that one of my professors offered a playwriting class ... From there I was like, 'Yeah, I get this form, I get this genre.' So I dropped fiction and poetry and started working in the form of script."

Since then, Denight said he has been involved with the playwriting process, to the point where he and his playwriting professor have talked about creating an advanced playwriting independent study class. This semester, that idea became a reality when he and two other playwrights established an advanced playwriting class, and Denight traveled to Chicago to meet an established playwright.

He's also been involved with Truman's theater department beyond playwriting, he said. He directed the well-attended production of "Gruesome Playground Injuries" last fall.

"I feel like playwriting and directing are very similar in a way because you're both being a storyteller," Denight said.

He said it's interesting going from a playwriting experience and being on one half of the storytelling process to interpreting someone else's script as a director.

On the other half of that creative process for "Pictorial Anatomy of a Dogfish" was sophomore Erin Schwob, who directed the play. Schwob said she got involved with the play after publishing a Facebook post asking for written scripts she could direct. Denight sent her his script, and she said she knew it



Anna Grace/Index

The actors of "Pictorial Anatomy of a Dogfish," freshman Russell Pagano, junior Rachel Hoffman and sophomore Zach Venturella pose for a photo after the performance Friday night in Baldwin Theater. Senior Jeff Denight wrote the play, which was the primary work in the portfolio he submitted to Oxford University, where he was accepted.

was something she wanted to work with.

"I really enjoy the complexity of the characters," Schwob said. "I like how heavy the show is and the way [Denight] has it written, the way the characters speak overlaps and it sounds very musical, the way the consonants and vowels and different words play off each other."

Schwob said she felt a personal connection to the script. She is adopted and has a daughter who doesn't live with her, so she said she identified with Denight's characters.

She understood the characters and the psychology behind the actions they were taking and the things they were saying, she said.

"The show ... deals with these characters not necessarily knowing who they are or where they come from and desperately trying to hold onto something they can call their own," Schwob said. "Not having strong family ties is something I can relate to very personally."

Denight's play is the first full-length production Schwob has ever directed, she said, and it has been a fun and rewarding experience. She said there is immediate gratification working with actors and audiences to help them find common ground.

Because "Pictorial Anatomy of a Dogfish" never had been performed before, Schwob said there was a lot of pressure to make sure the performance lived up to Denight's expectations and intentions. She said they talked extensively about what Denight wanted to see happen with the play.

Sophomore Zach Venturella, one of the three actors in the play, said that pressure was what inspired him to give the best performance he possibly could.

"I really wanted to do this for [Denight]," Venturella said. "Because this was a very big thing for him and actually got him into Oxford, I felt it was important that I was a part of it."

Venturella, a friend of Denight's, said it has been an interesting experience acting as a relative of Charles Manson and exploring the deep, psychological inner workings of the character.

He said this was the most experimental and psychological work he has ever done and it was very intense and difficult at times. Because the play is written as two monologues sometimes overlapping into dialogue, Venturella said it's the longest piece he's ever had to memorize.

"A lot of those moments when I was kind of like, 'This is difficult, this is something I may have to end up dropping or stopping or taking my time with,' doing it for [Denight] is the thing that kept driving me to do better and work harder in rehearsals," he said.

"Pictorial Anatomy of a Dogfish" is Denight's first full-length production to see the stage. He's also written two other full-length plays, one of which is a one-person show he said will be performed by the end of the year. He said he's also written a slew of 10-minute plays as writing exercises and hopes to write more during his time at Oxford and after graduating.

Denight said he is interested in telling the stories of people in regions where plays aren't usually written. He said many playwrights finish school and go straight to New York City, Chicago or Washington, D.C. to start writing, but there is a whole world of regional theaters where "new play development isn't



Jeff Denight

really ripe for the picking." That's where Denight wants to go, he said, so he can understand what is happening in those communities and write about it.

Meanwhile, Denight said he enjoys working with actors and directors to put his scripts on stage.

"What I really enjoy about [theater] is that it's the collaborative nature of art," Denight said. "You're not just doing this thing by yourself. You're working with other people, you're building off of other people's ideas, you're sort of creating a community within the art form. I really enjoy being able to have a ton of voices involved in art because I think art should naturally speak to people who are viewing it and if you're not incorporating a bunch of different voices, you're not telling the whole story."

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