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The Process Is the Thing

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Andy Bragen, who teaches an undergraduate playwriting class, also is collaborating with students on a new play commissioned by the International Theatre Program. A free reading of the work-in-progress is planned for December 5 and 6 at Todd Theatre and is open to the public. The premiere of the finished play is scheduled to open on April 23. (Photo by Brandon Vick)

Adding, detracting, altering, fine-tuning. So goes every morning in Rochester these days for New York City playwright Andy Bragen, known for his humorous, darkly innovative works, such as *Spuyten Duyvil (In Spite of The Devil)*.

“Writing a new play here at the University of Rochester has been a wild and woolly process,” says Bragen, who has been working this semester with students on a new play commissioned by the University’s International Theatre Program as part of the New Voice Initiative.

In addition to teaching a playwriting class for undergraduates, Bragen’s semester-long residency includes the writing of the original play to be directed in the spring by Nigel Maister, artistic director of the International Theatre Program. Learning from a working artist offers natural benefits. “I’m working quite quickly, discovering the play day by day, in and out of evening rehearsal with students and interacting with their feedback,” says Bragen, who describes the process of playwriting—for beginners and experienced writers alike—as “wrestling with problems more than solving them.”

“I am going through that process right now, and a student can clearly see that in my play as well as in their own work,” adds the up-and-coming playwright, also the Tennessee Williams Fellow for 2008-2009 at Sewanee: The University of the South in Tennessee. “There is a fun and joy in this process—I’m excited to see where we will end up in April.” The work-in-progress, Bragen says, is about “tennis, love, and New York City history”—as seen through the eyes of “characters who meet on those cracked-up public courts”—with a focus on issues of community and the notion of home.

“It’s an awesome experience, an open process, like going to an English course, where you read and discuss the text, and throw ideas back and forth,” says Taryn Kimel ’09, one of 13 student actors currently in rehearsal for the new play.

A free reading of the work-in-progress is planned for December 5 and 6 at Todd Theatre and is open to the public. The premiere of the finished play is scheduled to open on April 23, 2009.

The New Voice Initiative, a program that develops new work for the theater by underwriting a contemporary playwright’s residency and commissioning a new script for full production at the University, provides not only a great opportunity to educate students, but also to further the career of a promising American playwright, says Maister. The initiative is funded this year by a gift from alumna Leslie Braun ’71.