

Artist's Statement Upon Completion of Our Stage / Our Voices Residency **Tim Crawford | April 2024**

I have said on more than one occasion that my Our Stage / Our Voices residency has been “my year of living the dream.” The dream, as realized in this residency, included being paid to write a play (a dream come true, in and of itself); having the confidence-building opportunity to take some big swings, with a planned preview event providing a built-in feedback loop; knowing I was not limited to four-to-six characters to tell the story I wanted to tell; feeling empowered to unleash my creative energies in service of my vision in collaboration with super-supportive UIS Performing Arts Center staff; and having office/meeting space when needed.

Meeting constant deadlines for my residency projects brought a level of discipline that emerging playwrights don't ordinarily have to come to grips with, because, alas, nobody is waiting for them to finish a project.

My project proposal stated: “My project also aspires to increase diversity and inclusivity in the voices that get heard on the region's performing arts stages” by leading the Writing for the Stage Workshop. I was pleased that multiple participants who identified as playwrights either enrolled in the workshop or told me they would have participated in the workshop if not for a conflict. I'm pleased that we were able to initiate the beginning steps of creating a coterie of local playwrights.

The Writing for the Stage Workshop provided unexpected inspiration and growth for me as an artist. It was an inspiring experience, which centered me and re-grounded me in the fundamentals of good storytelling. So, I'm pleased to say that I didn't expect the residency to help me grow as a playwright to the extent I did over the past year. Also, due to unfortunate circumstances stretching back to the spring of 2023, *Outraged* became my Springfield-area directorial debut.

Directing and acting in my own play is something I had done before, but my role in that one-act play was very brief and right at the end. This was a completely new experience. Although it was a perspective-enhancing experience that I will cherish, it is also not one I am eager to reprise.

For the preview reading in November, we had a chorus of four white Townsfolk, saying cruel, racist things so I could establish the tense situation that lead to the terror. Also, audience feedback led me to review the chorus concept both terms of how they spoke and how they interacted with each other and the audience. I thought, “I can do better.” I grew as an artist when I took on the challenge of creating a chorus of three that now speak in verse (my first conscious attempt at iambic pentameter), mostly, and are a diverse group that portrays and comment on the words and action of the white Townsfolk in 1908.

I was able to bring in an actor who is a wheelchair user and one who would portray characters of different genders. I also wanted an actor with a distinct accent to embody the immigrant voice. This last was more daunting than I had anticipated, perhaps because local theatre may not be perceived as welcoming to actors with pronounced accents.

Another challenge I faced in writing this play, was knowing when the “research phase” was over,

and when it was time to sit down and start writing the play. The key to overcoming this challenge, for me, was having a deadline. My residency was not just the catalyst to get me started writing the play, it also came with built in deadlines. The clock was ticking. I had to sit down and start writing, and that led to a surprise. It was something I had not experienced as a writer crafting plays set in contemporary America.

The surprise lesson I learned that will forever inform my process is that there is more than one phase of research when writing a play. In the case of a story based on historical events, I had to learn enough history and stories to start to write the play. However, when I finished the first draft, I realized that I had more research to do. I had to fill in the blanks for things that I had written that sprang up organically from creating characters who are not based on actual historical figures. That required me to begin my second phase of research to fill in the blanks that could validate and/or redirect my writing to maintain verisimilitude and stay connected with the history. For example, after completing the first draft, I needed to learn more about what is called the Battle of Virden or the Virden Massacre of 1898, because a new character who showed up in the penultimate scene of the play reveals that she had been on the train that was central to those events.

The corollary to that lesson, and this will be applicable to any future research projects, is that I could have started writing sooner.

Finally, there are two areas where the residency advanced my work as a playwright and will have a lingering influence on me as an artist. The residency not only gave me the chance to get out of my comfort zone, which had been writing character-based comedy, but also allowed me to present *Outraged* as my qualifying work to join the Dramatists Guild, which requires “a production performed in front of a paying audience.”