

New Career

MFA candidate Tom Gross pens musical, biography

Thursday, April 18, 2019

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Master of Fine Arts candidate Tom Gross is living the writing dream.

Not only has he garnered a book contract with Rutgers University Press, but he's also awaiting the second staging of a musical he wrote — "Crazy World," based on the life of Julie Andrews — at The Music Hall Loft in Portsmouth, Thursday, April 25, through Sunday, April 28.

Gross, a former military officer and physician, entered UNH's creative nonfiction program in 2016 shortly after his military retirement. He'd written and published articles about medicine previously and held a column for the California-based Marin

Independent Journal, but at this point in his life, he wanted to explore other forms of writing.

He wasted no time; after his first semester at UNH, Gross wrote "Crazy World," prompted by his partner Suzanne Cornelius '81 and his friend Sue Scannell Gilbert '78, who were displeased at the lack of meaty roles for women over 50.

"Sue said, 'I really want something I can sink my teeth into.' And Suzanne said, 'How about Julie Andrews?' Then she turned to me and said, 'You can write it!' It was winter break, and I had six weeks with nothing going on," he says.

Suddenly, Gross was reading all he could about the iconic actress. He and Cornelius listened to every song Andrews recorded, watched every movie she starred in. He learned of her impoverished upbringing in London, and how, after decades away from the theater, she returned to Broadway at age 62 to star in the stage adaptation of "Victor/Victoria." By that point Andrews had developed nodules on her vocal cords, and after six weeks onstage, she decided to undergo surgery to have them removed.

Andrews emerged from surgery with permanent damage, no longer able to sing. For Gross, this was the story.

"I was writing this play after I had retired from my profession. When you retire, you say to yourself, well, I can't do what I always used to do. What am I going to do now? But then you also say, who am I? I've been defined by this thing that I did, but that's not who I am. That's what this play is really about," Gross says.

The result, "Crazy World," is a one-woman musical containing music Andrews performed in various films. Gross wrote it with the help of Cornelius and "script doctor" John Thompson '81. It first premiered at the West End Studio Theatre in Portsmouth in October 2017 starring Gilbert, and this April's show at The Music Hall Loft stars Linette Miles '90. The whole production team is made up of UNH alumni, including the producer, Cornelius, director Thompson, music director Bobby Peaco '81, choreographer Kevin LaChapelle '81 and stage manager Jess Gero '18.

When he's not writing plays or doing homework, Gross is working on his book, a biography of his father, Mason Gross, who was the 16th president of Rutgers University. The opportunity, he explains, kind of fell into his lap while visiting family a few years back. He and his siblings were wandering through their old neighborhood, peering through the windows of their old house. The only other people around that day were a father and son playing football in the street.

"I walked over to them and said, 'I don't want to alarm you, but my brother and sister and I remember living in that house. They just wanted to look in and see it.' The neighbor then said, 'That used to be Mason Gross's house.' My father was very well-respected in his community, and even now, people remember who he was," Gross says.

It turned out this neighbor, Peter Mikulas, was a senior editor at Rutgers University Press. He and Gross became fast friends, trading book recommendations and conversing via email. Then, last March, Mikulas emailed Gross, telling him Rutgers

University Press was commissioning a biography of Mason Gross. Did he know any biographers interested?

Gross was intrigued; he and his father, who died in 1977, had never talked very much, and Gross knew very little of Mason Gross's professional life. He wrote back to Mikulas and asked whether he could submit a book proposal himself. Mikulas agreed.

Gross wasted no time digging through his father's old papers. He learned that, at one point in college, Mason Gross considered joining the ministry or becoming a professional musician; that his father's love for teaching began while coaching rowing at Cambridge University and that, despite anti-war and racial tensions, Rutgers suffered no violence in the '60s, even with President Gross's unpopular stance in favor of increasing minority populations on campus.

"I remember as a kid standing in line at a hardware store, and a guy was pounding his fist on the table, talking to the proprietor, saying, 'If I was the governor, I'd take Mason Gross out and shoot him,'" Gross recalls. "It's definitely [my father's] story — I don't want to write a memoir, and Rutgers doesn't want one, they want a scholarly biography. But the fact that I'm writing it is important. There's some insight I can provide."

Gross sees the book as a wonderful opportunity to learn about a man he hardly knew and to become a better writer.

"I didn't want to sit around and learn to play golf (in retirement). How boring! I wanted another career," he says. "And I'm taking this career, my new career, very seriously."

Crazy World

Where: The Music Hall Loft, 131 Congress St., Portsmouth, New Hampshire

When: Thursday, April 25, at 7 p.m.; Friday, April 26, at 7 p.m.; Saturday, April 27, at 2 and 7 p.m.; Sunday, April 28, at 2 and 7 p.m.

Cost: \$35 military and seniors, \$40 general admission, \$30 if purchased in groups of 10 or more

Contact: 603-436-2400 or visit themusichall.org

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GRADUATE SCHOOL



University of New Hampshire

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