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All The World's A Stage

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Theater professor Pat Gouran reflects on his accomplishments in theater, film, and photography.

By Shandra Wendorff

He was born with a gift of laughter and a sense that the world was mad," reads a wooden plaque propped up against the wall next to Pat Gouran's cluttered desk in Pearson Hall. "That's how I live my life," says the associate professor in the music and theater department. "If there's anything I consider an accomplishment, it's not taking myself too seriously." Gouran had the plaque made after reading the line in the opening passage of Rafael Sabatini's novel, "Scaramouche." He says he feels so strongly about the phrase that he's considering having it engraved on his tombstone.

For 30 years, Gouran has been an omnipresent force in Iowa State's theater department as a professor, director, and actor. When he retires, which he says will be sometime within the next few years, he'll leave behind a legacy that will be tough to match. While at Iowa State, Gouran's directed between 40 and 50 productions, has taught classes ranging from introduction to acting to directing, has appeared in countless ISU Theatre productions, and has even appeared in two full-length films, "The Yoofoo Club," and "A Quiet Evening Home." You've probably even seen him on your television; he makes about eight commercials a year for Pioneer Seed, Maytag, Prairie Meadows, and the Iowa Lottery.

Gouran's interest in the performing arts started his freshman year of high school, after his older and very influential brother, Roger, suggested he try out for speech and school plays. "I think it was kind of me imitating my big brother by thinking, 'Well, it looks like he's doing it. That's what I should do,'" Gouran says. "I just never quit."

He acted in several high school and college productions, but Gouran wasn't positive that he wanted a career in theater until after his first year at Illinois State University. After he received his bachelor's and master's degrees, Gouran headed west to the University of Colorado for his doctorate.

Gouran enjoyed the Colorado scenery for two years, and then found his way to Iowa State in 1971 by accepting a teaching position with the theater department. At the time, he never imagined his stay in Ames would last more than a few years. "I know exactly what made me stay here," he says. "I really like the work ethic of Midwestern students. I like the students, the university treated me well, and all of a sudden, the two years I had planned on turned to five, then seven, then it was 10."

Gouran is modest about the impact he has...
had on ISU Theater. “I hope there have been some contributions I’ve made,” he says. “What I hope I did for students was give them avenues of exploration to go down if they want to. I don’t think you can teach acting or directing. I’ll say, ‘Here are some thoughts and some exercises. If some of this stuff works for you, great, if it doesn’t, throw it away.’”

Both students and colleagues have developed a healthy respect for Gouran. “Pat is a consummate professional,” says Eve Himmelheber, assistant professor in the music and theater department. “He is open to suggestion and welcomes collaboration with both students and colleagues alike. He also has a delightful sense of humor, which always infuses the work with joy. And the students love and respect him.”

Linda Pisano, assistant professor in the theater and music department, echoes Himmelheber’s sentiments and adds that Gouran uses hands-on and interactive techniques when he teaches, which many students find refreshing. “He makes us all laugh a lot,” she adds. “When he comes in to guest lecture for my classes, they all rave about his teaching style.”

One ISU student who raves about Gouran is Ryan Moe, a sophomore in accounting. Moe is a student in Gouran’s Introduction to Performing Arts class and says he appreciates his sense of humor. “You’re always on edge waiting to hear what he has to say,” Moe says. “You definitely don’t fall asleep in that class.”

Gouran takes a lot of pride in another one of his talents — performing. In February, he played an actor-drunkard, Selsdon, in ISU Theatre’s production of “Noises Off.” Selsdon and Father Farley, a role he played in last August’s “Mass Appeal,” rank as his favorite characters. “But usually the parts I play aren’t based upon anything other than the fact that we need an older guy for the part,” he says.

Gouran says it’s usually pretty easy for him to identify with his characters. The role that was most natural for him to play, he says, was George in “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?”, a part he played in 1981 and 1984. Gouran calls George gutsy, down to earth, and complex — all characteristics that he uses to describe himself.

His next play will be “Stonewall Jackson’s House.” Gouran will play two characters, including a theatre director who shows up in drag in the final scene.

Gouran is collaborating with Jane Cox, head of ISU Theater, on a book and play called, “Heroes Among Us.” Gouran will direct the play, which is about 12 World War II veterans. The production is scheduled to open Dec. 7, 2001, the 60th anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor.

When Gouran wants a break from theater, he turns to another hobby, photography. His interest was first piqued 16 years ago, and he began taking classes to improve his skills. “After one class I said to the instructor, ‘I want to be your apprentice, if you’ll allow that. I know I’m 40 years old. I don’t want any money. … I’ll carry your bags.’ He was a great photographer.”

Since then, Gouran’s hobby has evolved into a mini-business, centering on wedding photography. Although he doesn’t advertise or actively pursue assignments, Gouran says he could do 50 shoots a year from word of mouth. “I can’t do the amount of business that I’m requested to do and still maintain this job,” he says.

Gouran will be able to focus more on photography once he reaches retirement. “I sure as hell know that I’m not going to buy two different plaid shorts and shirts and wander around with black socks and sandals somewhere in Florida,” he says.

And once the curtain falls on Gouran’s career at Iowa State, he says he’ll leave with no regrets. “I never had any goals, so I didn’t have anything to achieve because there was nothing I set out to achieve,” he says. “If you are to be rewarded in the best sense of that word, it will be on the basis of what you achieve, not what your goals are.”

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