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Up Close: Letting plays (and life) surprise you

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Randall David Cook '91 is a successful playwright who lives in Manhattan.

UP CLOSE

Letting plays (and life) surprise you

Each day, Randall David Cook '91 carves out time to sit at his desktop computer in his Upper West Side apartment and write.

On special days, he takes dance classes—hip-hop, jazz, ballroom, even Bollywood.

As a professional playwright working in Manhattan for the past 18 years, Cook works to keep the creative juices flowing and maintain a consistent ingredient in his writing—the element of surprise.

“You have to give people the unexpected. You can’t be boring,” says Cook, who presented his latest work in

Alaska this summer at the Last Frontier Playwrights Conference, co-founded by renowned playwright Edward Albee. “At the same time, you have to be honest to your material. If you try to force something, it won’t work.”

Cook discovered his love of theater as a business major at Furman when, on a whim, he decided to put down his tuba and audition for the Department of Theatre Arts’ production of *All’s Well That Ends Well*.

After writing a host of successful plays produced off-Broadway and around the world, Cook found his

way back to Furman in 2013 and 2017 as a Duke Endowment Fine Arts Initiative Artist-in-Residence. During these semester-long stints he taught courses and directed the on-campus premier of two of his works: the comedy *Pomp and Circumstance* (2013) and the thriller *Kappa Kappa Scream* (2017). One play is set on a southern college campus. The other takes place during a sorority retreat.

“I wanted to write shows for and about college students, and those plays allowed almost everyone involved to stretch artistic muscles

heretofore unexplored,” says Cook.

Those experiences also stretched Cook’s boundaries as a mentor, and he developed a newfound passion for teaching.

My experience at Furman has been a game-changer for me, a real discovery. I love being a playwright and a professor, so I think my future is going to include both of those titles and responsibilities.”

How and when might that happen, Cook doesn’t exactly know yet. He’s found that it’s best when life surprises you.”

— by Erikah Haavie