

The Performance of a Lifetime

A renowned Scottish playwright finds an unlikely muse — the U-M Health System.

BY LAUREN CRAWFORD



PHOTO: ANNICK ODOM

Rob Drummond is a Scottish playwright known for taking risks.

In 2014, he performed *Bullet Catch* at the Arthur Miller Theatre in Ann Arbor as part of the University Musical Society's, or UMS, fall season. Drummond played the role of a magician undertaking the trick by "catching" a bullet between the teeth. Per his usual methodology, Drummond immersed himself in the craft for months,

learning how to masterfully execute illusions and sleight-of-hand, understanding the nuances that make magicians and their artistry so mesmerizing.

While *Bullet Catch* was playing in Ann Arbor, Drummond spoke to a group of medical students, residents and doctors in the [Medical Arts Program](#) after a showing. The group, which connects the humanities to medicine and medical education, inspired Drummond and got him thinking about the roles doctors play in people's lives. He decided to write a play about it.

“When I met the Med Arts students and discovered how relevant to their medical experiences they had found [*Bullet Catch*], it opened up a whole new avenue for me,” Drummond says. “That day we had a deep and meaningful discussion ... It wasn't like a normal post-show discussion. It meant something.”

Drummond was so transformed by the interaction that he decided to return to U-M for an extended educational residency through the UMS, which works closely with the Medical Arts Program. He contacted Joel Howell, M.D., Ph.D., the Victor Vaughan Professor of the History of Medicine; professor of internal medicine; of health management and policy; of history, science and the arts; and co-founder of the program, to help him plan and coordinate the stay.

For two weeks, Drummond shadowed residents on rounds, interviewed medical professionals and conducted workshops on improvisation for both art and medical students. Drummond soon realized that drama students and medical students are strikingly similar.

“In both cases, there is a desire to do something that means something to the world, to connect with actual human beings ... and to try in some way to fix the problems that come with being mortal,” Drummond says.

Those involved in the [Medical Arts Program](#) were likewise captivated. Much of what the program emphasizes is understanding the humanity behind medicine — an important concept that is sometimes buried beneath the complex layers involved in healing and health care — and the importance of addressing a patient as a person and not just an illness.

Drummond's workshops allowed the students and residents to approach the difficult concepts of medicine, like death and dying, head-on in creative and unexpected ways.

“I felt that I learned something about myself and how I handle those topics,” says Evie Coves-Datson, a medical student interviewed by Drummond. “To me, Rob's work addresses what's known and unknown to us and how we feel about that uncertainty, which are powerful themes for any human.”

One component of the workshop was a brainstorming session, wherein Drummond and the students tried to develop and write — or, at least, conceptualize — the narrative of a play. It was a therapeutic exercise for many of the participants. It was also an opportunity for Drummond to tap into the creativity of medical professionals. For Robert Cesaro, a 2019 M.D. candidate, just having the chance to talk about these lofty topics was invigorating. “Rob provided me a safe environment to explore my raw and honest perspectives about healing, death and medicine.”

Much of what Drummond was focusing on during his residency was how medical students approach difficult, complex situations — in particular, how to break “bad news” to patients. He wanted to understand the processes students employ to keep improving and learning despite the difficulties they face every day, and how those processes play out in their personal lives.

Anjan Kumar Saha, an M.D./Ph.D. student, was grateful to attend Drummond's workshop. “Rob's questions regarding making difficult decisions and breaking bad news ... forced me to think critically about questions central to my own career trajectory ... what I call the 'manifest destiny' of my lifetime: a devotion to biomedical discovery and big-picture therapeutic potential, armed by an understanding of the scientific method and medical decision-making.”

In a few years, the interviews Drummond conducted with students, residents and medical professionals will surface — verbatim, he believes — in a play that will likely be performed at the Royal Court Theatre in London. It will be a profound conclusion that reflects the creativity and insight of U-M Medical School students and faculty alike. Drummond, for one, has gained immense respect for those who dedicate their lives to helping and healing others.

“As an artist, I’m lucky,” Drummond says. “I get to sit and pontificate about all these things. A doctor has to live with it, see it every day, deal directly with the people — with the fear, with the rawness of it all. But the end goal, I feel, is the same. The end goal is a better understanding ... The quest to understand mortality.”

To learn more about the Medical Arts Program at the University of Michigan Medical School, please refer to [our feature story, published in summer 2015](#).