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Keeping hope alive;
There's optimism behind the blunt words of Craig Wright, creator of dark plays and a new MTV show

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How many celebrated playwrights and TV bigshots have admitted to wetting themselves in public? The unresearched but likely answer: very few.

Craig Wright is among them.

During a panel discussion at the Printer's Row Lit Fest in June, the 47-year-old mastermind behind MTV's forthcoming Chicago-shot dramedy "Underemployed" launched into a urine-y yarn.

The nutshell version: A few years back at A Red Orchid Theatre in Old Town, where Wright has been an ensemble member since 2009, the actor Michael Shannon ("Boardwalk Empire") was performing Wright's critically acclaimed one-man play "Mistakes Were Made." At the time, Wright was dealing with a medical issue that necessitated sudden bathroom breaks.

Belatedly aware that the only way out was also the way in, Wright had positioned himself near an ostensible exit on the tiny theater's far side in case nature called. It did - with burgeoning urgency. However, since the exit wasn't actually an exit and the set was positioned in such a way as to preclude surreptitious egress, Wright sat tight to avoid disrupting the proceedings. Finally, his damming powers spent, he simply let the river flow.

This revelation, especially, made the small audience laugh - yes, because it involved pee-pee, but also because it was unexpected. And Wright revels in the unexpected, delighting in the process of discovery both onstage and off. In his mind, the unknown "is the only reason to live."

"But I don't want to sound like I'm some sort of hero," he said over Small's gin and Nova Scotia oysters at a West Loop hipster hangout. "I'm a mess. But I love life. I love being alive. I hate that I'm going to have to die. I hate it. I want to know what happens."

Coming off another day of "Underemployed" production - which has taken place around the city and at Cinespace on West 15th Place since May and is slated to wrap this weekend - he wore his usual outfit of slim dark-blue jeans, beat-up tan boots and a shabby-chic button-down shirt open to the upper sternum. As ever, its sleeves were rolled to reveal an array of simple blue-ink tattoos.

"The permanence of a tattoo is a rehearsal for death," Wright says his grown son and only child told him, "and no one is more freaked out by death than you, Dad, so you should get a tattoo."

Naturally, then, a death image came first: the Black Rabbit of Inle from Richard Adams' novel Watership Down. Then a 7 - for patience ("count to seven before doing anything big"). Next he acquired a moon "for mystery and uncertainty," a sycamore leaf representing the tree he son would be if he could be any tree, and a dogfish-entwined anchor (the ancient symbol for "Festina Lente" - "hurry slowly"). The most recent union of needle and skin, which took place in Chicago, yielded an "S." Wright is zip-lipped about its symbolism.

The epidermal etchings aren't his only indelible marks, merely the most obvious.

After his birth in Puerto Rico, where Wright's town-hopping and frequently road-bound father, Tom, was stationed at the time for work at the manufacturing conglomerate Standex, Wright and his parents - Mom, Ruth, was Dad's third of six wives - moved to Holyoke, Mass., and then to Maryland, where he'd soon find himself in a "vacuous" development of suburban Gaithersburg.

"No one ever told me the world is beautiful," Wright says of his childhood, though not glumly.

Tom Wright already had skipped out on them when Wright's mother suffered a stroke and, he says, died in front of him. He was 7. Although he retrieved her pills - "Which ones do you need?" - it was too late. So he called the fire department. Because he was 7. Thereafter, father and son were reunited. Their eventual estrangement would last for years.

As Wright tells it, he was out of the house and on his own by age 14. With a few hundred bucks from Mom's Social Security payouts, he trekked to Detroit Lakes, Minn. (where he had previously lived with his father), and enrolled in high school. Post-graduation, he bummed around the country for a spell before entering St. John's University in Minnesota. He lasted one semester.

Spurred by a fifth-grade reading of Kurt Vonnegut's book Slapstick and fueled by enthusiasm for what he once described as the "glitteringly theatrical cynicism" of choreographer-director Bob Fosse, writing had salved Wright from an early age. A dark tone always pervaded.

"Armed with nothing but anger and an admiration for a certain kind of coy and clever despair, I began to write to let everyone know how unhappy I was," he recalled in a 2005 essay. "I wrote to save myself. Predictably, the results were derivative and bad. My first play ended with my father being hung while a Pippin-esque chorus sardonically sang and tap-danced."

They got better. Much. First, though, came a marriage (in his early 20s) that would officially end two decades later and the son whose birth afforded Wright "a chance to sort of re-magicalize the world a little bit in a way that I never had."

At age 22 he won a prestigious local drama prize and continued to hone his playwriting chops. Besides "Mistakes Were Made," his sizable theatre canon has grown to include "Molly's Delicious," "Main Street," "The Pavilion," "Orange Flower Water" and "Recent Tragic Events."

A couple of weeks before "Underemployed" is scheduled to air, Wright's play "Grace" - a dark comedy about a young couple who move to Florida aiming to open a string of gospel hotels - begins Broadway previews. It premieres Oct. 4. Formerly produced at the Northlight Theatre in Skokie and other venues, "Grace" stars Shannon, Ed Asner, Paul Rudd and Kate Arrington. Under the direction of Chicago-based veteran director Dexter Bullard, it marks Wright's debut on the Great White Way.

"Craig's plays are about humanity in the deepest sense," says Bullard, who calls Wright one of today's "most important playwrights."

But for all his serious themes, Bullard notes, there is always a "drumbeat of humor" - whether of the laugh-out-loud or melancholy variety.

"His sense of humor is right next door to his sense of righteousness and his sense of power and control."

Wright himself derives considerable comedic pleasure from, among other things, "stories of people who have constructively insulted me in good ways."

Here's one example, courtesy of "Underemployed" writer Christian Lander, who traveled with Wright and Wright's dog by car from L.A. to Chicago last spring: At some point along the way they narrowly avoided a crash, which caused Wright to muse about how such a tragedy would play in the Chicago papers. Lander knew immediately: "Bulls lose!"

"He just thought that was hilarious," Lander says. "And so any time over the summer when he felt he was getting a little big for his britches, he'd just say, 'Bulls lose!' "

Well before Broadway and high-profile television gigs came his way, a friendship with the Pulitzer-winning poet James Merrill helped Wright to find his voice.

"He didn't say it in so many words," Wright remembered, "but the net takeaway of my relationship with him was that I would stop writing about what I thought I was right about and instead write about what I loved."

Armed with this clarity of purpose and on the cusp of 30, he took the next logical step: seminary studies. With thoughts of joining the ministry, Wright signed up for courses at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities in New Brighton, Minn.

"Craig wasn't given to any kind of easy answers to difficult questions," says Paul Capetz, one of Wright's instructors. "So if he sensed that other students in a class were kind of being complacent, he wouldn't hesitate to say something that shook them up."

Colleagues say he is that way still, sometimes to intimidating effect. Wright smilingly chalks it up to "youthful enthusiasm."

"He does not waste a syllable," says Steven Wilson, who directed a cast of young girls in Wright's imaginative revamp of Homer's The Iliad at A Red Orchid. "When he speaks to you as well. I've never heard any extra words come out of his mouth. And it could come off at first as a little off-putting, but then you realize that's just who he is."

Others call him "straightforward and blunt," "no-nonsense," a guy who "pulls no punches" and will "call you on your bull----."

Conversely, they say, he is pleased when those whose talents and opinions he respects call him on his. At a point in his career when ego could easily eclipse artistry, Wright remains deeply dependent on collaboration and dissension to flesh out storylines, create characters and conjure dialogue that rings true.

As Bullard puts it, he is "the least defensive writer I have ever met in terms of saying, 'It's gotta be my way.' "

To varying degrees, it is a quality that has served Wright well in TV land. After Alan Ball plucked Wright to work on his hit HBO drama "Six Feet Under," in 2001, an Emmy nomination was earned (for Wright's episode "Twilight") and proverbial doors opened. A truncated stint on ABC's megahit "Lost" followed. Then it was on to "Brothers and Sisters, also at ABC, and the network's "Dirty Sexy Money," which Wright created and executive produced. When it was nixed after only two seasons, he migrated to Showtime's "United States of Tara."

His biggest showbiz coup to date, the pricey "Dirty Sexy Money," hit airwaves only two months before a protracted Writers Guild of America strike commenced, in September 2007, and was no ratings blockbuster. And because he "was always trying to please everyone back then, the show was very hard work for me," Wright admits. "I learned a lot from it, loved working with the cast, but I'm glad it ended."

At least one of his former charges, thespian Donald Sutherland, looks back fondly on the experience.

"His wit delighted me," Sutherland says in an email. "And by wit and I mean the 'true wit' that Alexander Pope described in 'An Essay on Criticism': 'True wit is nature to advantage dress'd. What oft was thought but ne'er so well express'd.' That's Craig."

And while the process of achieving precisely the right kind of expression can augment Wright's innate intensity, his sometimes-hard shell shields a gooey center. He'll readily apologize for ill-received curtness and isn't above clarifying criticisms, those who've worked with him say. When overcome with joy, which happens with increasing regularity, he is a veritable human sprinkler.

"Craig cries a lot," Lander says. "Not because anything bad happens, but because Craig is someone who tears up joyfully when he's around people he cares about."

The condition, it seems, is contagious.

Whether he is shedding happytears or shredding a problematic scene, such emotional sensitivity and creative zeal are integral to Wright's work. And his work, he explains, is largely about conveying "the beauty of a certain tension between opposites."

Amid ample ugliness and often well beneath the surface, there is always beauty to be found in worlds Wright invents - in the comic desperation of "Mistakes Were Made" and the marital discord of "Orange Flower Water;" in the familial dysfunction of "Dirty Sexy Money" and the angst of "Underemployed."

There is abundant beauty, too, in the world he has long inhabited, where an angry boy who sought solace in words became a life-loving man who soiled himself for art. Who could be cynical but instead is hopeful.

"Sometimes I've imagined God - let's call it a her for the sake of advancing the world - as someone with her finger one inch above a button, and she sits there all day looking at the world on a billion television screens," Wright said. "And on every television screen she can see everything that's happening. She can see every moment of grace. She can see every moment of positive development, every moment of learning, every moment of love. She can also see every moment of horror, every moment of cruelty, every moment of impossible despair. And the fact is that the despair outweighs the beauty. Therefore, she is tempted to hit the button and stop the process.

"Only God can watch this process unroll and not press the button," he went on above the hipster din. "Only God can watch it and keep on hoping. We would grow hopeless, but God - if there is one - is the one in all of us who doesn't press the button and who keeps on living and hoping, saying, 'Maybe it works out. Hold on, hold on, maybe it works out.' "