EAU CLAIRE – Playwright Richard Kalinoski has written plays that have been translated into multiple languages and performed around the globe.

Yet, the Wisconsin native admitted that writing for theater wasn't initially on his radar.

"When I was an undergraduate at UW-Whitewater, my goal was to try to make the basketball team," said Kalinoski in a recent interview. "I made the final cut but then I was cut."

At UW-Whitewater, he was an English major, having a focus on poetry. However, one of Kalonoski's big loves was theater, saying that he used to go to Milwaukee to see plays. Soon, his interest in theater superseded his interest in poetry.

"I never imagined I would be a theater major," he said, but soon an opportunity arose to study at Oxford University in England his junior year. It pertained to studies of Shakespeare's "King Lear," including doing readings of the material, and he said the experience inspired him to make his own creations.

"Shakespeare wrote a play, so I can too," he said.

From there, he wrote a play called "Naked on the Subway," which he described as "amateurish," having it performed in the basement of a dormitory.

"We opened the play and, for whatever reason, people came to it, and by the end of the run, we were selling out, and it got me really interested, but I thought: Why do they like this?" said Kalinoski.

This pushed Kalinoski into getting an MFA in theater – something that was unthinkable just a few years prior – and eventually also led to him teaching the subject at UW-Oshkosh and elsewhere.

Kalinoski has since written a number of award-winning plays including "A Crooked Man," where an aspiring journalist hopes to win a writer's fellowship by telling his grandfather's story and instead gets told an awful secret; "Between Men and Cattle," which explores racial relations and overcoming expectations; and "My Soldiers," about a soldier returning home trying to cope with civilian life after serving overseas.

"Beast on the Moon," Kalinoski's most renowned play, premiered at the Humana Festival in 1995. Its visibility at the festival led to an ambitious director arranging a London production shortly thereafter. From London, the play gained international traction, spreading across Europe and beyond. It has since been translated into nearly twenty languages and performed throughout the nation and throughout the world, including in Estonia, Russia, Turkey, Czechia, Greece, France, and Argentina.

“I learned that the play was significantly well-structured,” he recalled of the praise he received from his play. “The focus is on this young wife – a woman who's an orphan – and her husband who's also an orphan – orphaned by the Turks, effectively.”

This makes reference to the Armenian Genocide, which took place in 1916, and is a focus in the play, which takes place in 1920s Milwaukee.

Kalinosky continued to say that the play focused “on their particular kind of microcosm of a world, and a sense of their own trying to adapt as immigrants, but also because she was more or less taken out of an orphanage and married in an arranged marriage to this youngish man.”

While the play has had success abroad, there have also been issues with certain countries putting on productions of “Beast.” Kalonoski recalled getting royalties upfront in Russia – including a bottle of vodka – for the play, but then received nothing further, despite the play running for another thirteen years in the country.

“It was interesting because [the Russians] actually agreed that I was owed money – in English, in writing – but they simply didn’t ever pay,” he said while shaking his head.

AN ENGLISH-LANGUAGE DEBUT

One of Kalinoski’s most recent plays is entitled “Front Room.”

“The play is about a theater professor who’s had her marriage fall apart, and how she struggles to reset her personal life,” explained Kalinoski. “But her mother – what I call a desperate hoarder – is very cantankerous and difficult to deal with, and is living in a house that is, quite frankly, potentially lethal.

“It sounds bleak, but it actually has a lot of humor in it.”

In late 2022, the play got its premiere in an unexpected place: Kosovo, a nation once part of Yugoslavia before its dissolution.

“It’s not that I didn’t think it was deserving of a production there, but I was surprised that the people in Kosovo decided on the play,” he said. “It’s a very, very American play, so the sensibility is very American.”

He noted that the success of “Beast” had, in turn, pointed eyes at the National Theater in Kosovo towards “Front Room” as well, leading to the Kosovar production of the play with an Albanian-language translation penned from Kalonoski’s script.

“I was amazed by the originality of the work…the combination of Abby’s [the elderly mother of the main character in the play] condition — a biting sense of humor stemming from underlying despair,” wrote director of the Kosovar production, Butrint Pasha, in a letter that was published

on Kalinoski's site that praised the material. "As a master of the 'show, don't tell' rule, Mr. Kalinoski skillfully paved the way for the dramatic story line where Abby's character was running out of time in the world."

The part of Abby was played in the Kosovar production by a nationally-renowned actress but soon the production came to a halt.

"She got ill, so they ended up just ending the production. They tried to find a way to recast it but were never able to do that," he recalled.

With its premiere abroad cut prematurely, Kalinoski wants "Front Room" to have the premiere it deserves, and he hopes to have that premiere here in the Chippewa Valley.

"I'm very fond of 'Front Room' and I'm trying to gather interest in it here in Eau Claire," said Kalinoski, who already had actors in mind for the production.

"I have some former students of mine who are both professional actors now," said Kalinoski. "I really want to bring them here because they're, quite frankly, brilliant. These two are phenomenal. I worked with them 20 years ago, when they were on stage in an academic setting, but they grew into adults, and you can see that growth in them."

He cited concerns of there being not many spaces in the area, and those that are available may not be able to support that lengthy of a run of "Front Room," but Kalinoski has said that he remains hopeful that something can be worked out with a local performance space – for example, at the Pablo Center at the Confluence.

"I'm anxious to find a pathway to do this," he said. "[The Pablo Center] has three rather spacious rehearsal spaces that can be used as theater spaces, especially in a chamber theater environment, so we may be able to garner one of those and produce the play."

More information on the playwright and news involving future productions can be found at richardkalinoski.com.