Patrick Baliani was at a poetry reading when he found himself mesmerized by the sign language interpreter at the front of the room.

As he watched the intricate dance of hands and fingers, he soon realized he'd stopped listening to the spoken words altogether.

The experience sparked in Baliani a fascination with deaf culture and the theatrical quality of sign language. He began researching deafness, and for months kept a journal of all the sounds he heard and had so often taken for granted.

As he thought about what it would be like to lose the ability to hear, Baliani put pen to paper to explore the idea further. The result was "Monologue of a Muted Man," a play that will be performed on the UA campus on May 11 and 12.

Narrated by a single actor, the play is about a man who falls in love with a deaf woman in Venice, Italy, while he's simultaneously losing his own hearing.

"It's about the need and desire to communicate and get close to someone, at the same time that you're feeling insecure and not sure of your identity," says Baliani, an associate professor in the UA Honors College.

The production will incorporate live piano music and choreography, with a single dancer ? UA School of Dance alumna and Tucson Artifact Dance Project co-founder Ashley Bowman ? portraying the different characters as the narrator tells the story. The show was choreographed by Bowman and Claire Hancock, also a UA dance alumna and co-founder of the Artifact Dance Project.

"Monologue of a Muted Man" is one of several plays written by Baliani, whose original dramatic works have been staged in New York, Los Angeles, Seattle, Tucson, Phoenix, Prescott and Canada. This is the first time one of his shows will be performed at the UA.

Longing for home

Baliani wrote his first play, "Figs and Red Wine," after earning a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing from the UA in 1991. The semiautobiographical piece tells the story of three brothers who immigrate to the U.S. from Italy ? just as Baliani and his own three brothers did. The play was performed by Arizona Theatre Company in Tucson and was awarded the theater's Genesis New Play Award.

Around that same time, Baliani accepted his first position at the UA, teaching cross-cultural
literature to Native American high school students as part of a summer college preparation program. He did that for five years before going on to teach undergraduate and graduate students in the Department of English and later as an interdisciplinary faculty member in the Honors College.

Throughout his teaching career, Baliani has continued writing plays - some of them original and some of them translated adaptations of Italian classics, including Luigi Pirandello's "Six Characters in Search of an Author," Giovanni Boccaccio's "The Decameron" and Dante's "Purgatorio." In 1999, he was awarded the National Repertory Theatre Foundation National Play Award for his original play "A Namib Spring."

Baliani says he's drawn to playwriting because of an appreciation for dialogue and working with people.

"There's a collaborative element; it's very cool to work with live bodies," he says. "Writing is very solitary. You spend a lot of time by yourself, and that's true of a playwright too. But it's nice then to emerge and to see your work transformed on stage. It's invigorating."

Baliani's plays often explore themes of "longing for home," or a place that feels like home - something he experienced when he moved to the United States from Rome at age 17.

Coming to the U.S. was always his family's dream, Baliani says. Yet, when he arrived in Boston in 1975, the culture shock was jarring. Racial tensions in the city were high at the time, and he thought daily about returning to Rome. However, he stayed to focus on his education, earning a degree in comparative English and Italian literature from Boston College in 1979.

After graduating, Baliani worked for four years as a foreign exchange trader in Washington, D.C. - "a fish out of water," he says - before deciding to go back to school. That's when he applied to the creative writing program at the UA.

It wasn't until he arrived in Arizona that Baliani felt like he'd found home again.

"Coming to the Southwest, I felt closer to Rome," he says. "The quality of light here is quite similar to afternoons in Rome. I felt this affinity and familiarity with the desert, so I stayed."

Baliani and his wife, Dian - who first met as teenagers at a café in Rome - raised their two sons, Adrian and Julian, in Tucson. Adrian is a now a UA senior studying sociology and Julian is a sophomore studying sports management at Arizona State University.

Baliani and Dian visit their home country as often as possible. Every other summer, they teach Honors College students studying abroad in Italy. They've done so in Venice, Florence and Orvieto, and next summer hope to take students to Rome.

Campus as classroom

Since starting at the UA in 1991, Baliani has earned several teaching awards, including the UA Foundation Leicester and Kathryn Sherrill Creative Teaching Award, the Honors College Five Star Faculty Award, the Dean's Award for Excellence in Teaching and the Academic Preparation for Excellence in Teaching Award.
His passion for teaching is driven by a desire to give back. Words spoken to him by a high school student many years ago stay with him to this day: "Never stop helping people."

"I've always been inclined to teach, so that's my way of helping people," Baliani says. "On a bad day, I tell myself, 'Even on a bad day I can help someone in that room.'"

Baliani currently teaches Advanced Analytical Thinking and Writing, as well as Contemporary Experiences in the Humanities — a general education course.

In the humanities class, he uses the arts on campus to shape lessons — encouraging students to use campus sculptures, exhibits, architecture and theatrical performances in their literary comparisons.

"We basically make the campus our classroom, and the syllabus changes each semester according to what's happening here," he says.

Baliani also has served as a longtime instructor for the UA Humanities Seminars Program, an educational series offered to Tucson community members through the College of Humanities [3]. He has twice received the Humanities Seminars Superior Teaching Award.

In his nearly 30 years in the classroom, Baliani has never taught the same text twice.

"It keeps me fresh. I don't like to look back and redo. There's enough repetitiveness in our lives without that," he says. "Plus, it allows me to get to those things I want to read."

Outside of the classroom, Baliani always has his own writing in the works. His next play, which is just beginning to take shape, will be set in Haiti, a place he has visited with his wife on four occasions.

Baliani says he uses writing to explore and process a variety of interests and experiences — and often as a way of letting things go.

"The nice thing about playwriting is you can divest," he says. "You can take that part of yourself that you really wouldn't want to present in public and present it in public."

"Monologue of a Muted Man" will be performed May 11 at 1 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. and May 12 at 2 p.m. and 5 p.m. in Studio 124 of the Gittings building. Pre-show talks will take place in the studio at 12:30 p.m. and 7 p.m. on May 11 and 1:30 p.m. and 4:30 p.m. on May 12. Tickets are $32, available for purchase on the Artifact Dance Project website [4].

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