Editor's note: The following story, about 2010 Gothenburg High School graduate Zac Franzen, was published in the Nov. 19, 2012, edition of the Daily Nebraska. The DN is a newspaper published for University of Nebraska-Lincoln students.

Zac Franzen will tell you that everything he does is entirely for his audience.

A junior international relations major and artistic and managing director of the Red Theater in Lincoln, Franzen began acting when he was 8 years old and doesn't plan on stopping any time soon.

Franzen first came to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln as a theater performance major.

"I stuck with that for two semesters, then I began to hate the department here at UNL," Franzen said. "So I went and auditioned for Juilliard in Chicago and got accepted into their school for performing arts."

Although the timing wasn't perfect for a move to Chicago, Franzen said he continued to follow his passion when he was asked to join the Red Theater by its original founder, Aaron Sawyer.

"I had never heard of it before, so after doing some research, I went to the group's first meeting," Franzen said. "Three years later, I'm suddenly both the artistic and managing director."

The Red Theater is a collective theater company with groups in Chicago, Omaha and Lincoln. Its overall mission is to empower its audience through its performances.

By writing and performing original pieces anywhere from two seconds to two minutes long, the local group performs hour-long shows for the Lincoln community.

"The topics and ideas are about things that are personal to us," Franzen said. "Politics, religion, family life, sex, drugs – just about anything that we have experienced in our life and are passionate about."

Franzen first started writing his own poetry and short productions when he was involved with speech in high school.

OFF TO RUSSIA

Zac Franzen will leave for a University of Nebraska-Lincoln Study Abroad program next Monday where he will spend four months in St. Petersburg, Russia.

Franzen will study international relations with an emphasis in foreign policy.

During his trip, he will also travel to Tallinn, Estonia; Helsinki, Finland; and Moscow.

"I really enjoy writing," he said. "So Red Theater was a creative outlet that allowed me to both write and perform my own work."

In the three years he has been involved with Red Theater, Franzen has written 45 pieces. He said all his work has been inspired by his own views, opinions, beliefs and experiences.

"These are about anything from dramatic pieces about my grandfather's passing to comedic pieces making fun of the bed bug situation here at UNL," Franzen said. "We all have our opinions on matters, but it's not often you see them being expressed through performance."

There are 11 members involved in the Red Theater and each author is usually the center of his or her own piece.

Franzen said one of the most rewarding parts of writing and performing with the group is working with the cast.

"I love being able to watch them grow artistically," he said, "but above all, I do what I do because it's about watching the excitement and enjoyment that our audience gets from our performances.

"Being able to watch what I write grow and transform into exactly what I imagined it to be is astonishing," Franzen added. "However, it's not until we are performing and I see the audience's reaction to the piece that I truly have a feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction."

Franzen said if it weren't for the audience, he would have no desire to live his life on stage.

"No words can explain how I feel when someone on the street walks up and says, 'You're in Red Theater. Your show was amazing.'" he said.

Leah Keller, a junior advertising and public relations major, recently co-directed her fourth show with Franzen through the Red Theater.

"I've known Zac since high school, and it's a little hard to keep up with him sometimes," Keller said. "He's very energetic and passionate about what he does and is always looking for new directions to push the group."

Keller said she thinks Franzen's excitement is infectious, but it also helps that the two know each other so well.

"We can honestly tell each other when an idea just isn't working and come up with ways to fix it together," Keller said. "I feel like that influences our directing styles in that we feed off of each other's ideas to try to make the best show possible."

Franzen said he can barely see where he'll be in two days, let alone 10 years.

"I know I don't plan on being here in Lincoln, and I don't plan on being a part of Red Theater at that point," he said. "But no matter where I am, I will always be involved in the arts in one way or another."