OUR COMMUNITY OF CREATORS
2019 Annual Report/2020 Calendar
The last two decades in the School of Communication have witnessed dizzying growth, from innovative curricular development to state-of-the-art facilities expansion. The source of all breakthroughs—artistic, scientific, and academic—is our community of creators.

This year’s MFA stage design graduates included the visionary team that codesigned set and lights for CommFest 2018’s “A Starry Night” alumni show—Scott Penner (GC19) and Anthony Forchielli (GC19), pictured here (from left) with Penner’s project for associate professor Jessica Thebus’s Toy Theatre class. CommFest demonstrated that when artists and scholars work together as a community, the results can be electrifying. “Northwestern allows us to open up to other artists in an engaging manner that promotes a true collaborative energy,” says Penner. “As storytellers, it is so important for us to be able to listen to each other and be open to each other’s experiences.”

Our community of creators is growing. The first cohort of MFA acting students began coursework in September and will soon be working in our new media and performing arts center in Abbott Hall on the Chicago campus. They are collaborating with MFA candidates in stage design, directing, writing, and documentary media, working under esteemed new W. Rockwell Wirtz Professor Stan Brown. The creative potential of this group is thrilling.

We thank you, our supporters, for believing in our mission and for nurturing a community that constantly inspires us. The creative work continues.

Give every year, make a difference every day.
CREATIVE RELEASE

Fusing rhythmic modernist and contemporary movement with meditative music to evoke African American spiritual themes of flight and escape, “Ascension” was a centerpiece of winter 2019’s Danceworks show. Guest choreographer Paige Fraser arrived at Northwestern with a score, a movement vocabulary, and a story that had to be told. Students, including Michelle Skiba and Max Han (above), helped her tell it. “Paige wanted to share her anxieties and also her aspirations for those who are struggling,” says Joel Valentin-Martínez, director of Northwestern’s dance program and the annual Danceworks showcase. “She wanted to use dance as a moment of reflection but also to look beyond that state of mind.”

Assembling diverse creative minds is key to helping students see the realities—and potential—of their dance careers. Fraser is an accomplished dancer and Princess Grace Award winner who is currently appearing in the North American tour of The Lion King. Although “Ascension” was her first work in a university setting, she turned out to be an excellent role model. “The students can see an example of a performer in action,” says Valentin-Martínez. “They can see what’s out there and how they maneuver a very challenging career.”

Each year Valentin-Martínez brings even more visiting artists into the Northwestern fold, and our students’ creative output soars. “We have a rigorous and very demanding way of creating dance,” he says. “We want our students to be prepared but also inspired.”

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The Blackout is in the limelight. Last spring the School of Communication’s student-run late-night-format comedy group won a College Television Award, presented by the charitable arm of the organization responsible for the Emmy Awards. The Blackout’s win recognized its “2018 Spring Quarter Update”—think Saturday Night Live’s “Weekend Update” but covering a quarter. It was one of three nominees in the variety category and one of 25 total nominees out of more than 600 submissions from 170 US schools. This was the Blackout’s first nomination and win.

“It’s pretty bold stuff, and they keep pushing themselves to get bigger and more connected,” says Brett Neveu, a senior lecturer in the Department of Radio/Television/Film and the Blackout’s faculty adviser. “It’s only been around a short time, but it’s exploded. They’ve got something really special.”

Launched in 2015 by RTVF majors interested in the late-night style of televised comedy, the Blackout uses a team of writers, producers, and directors plus carefully selected on-air talent to produce live shows, taped segments, promos, sketches, and more. “We are hoping to get as many voices as possible and get as many people in as we can,” says Max Kliman (C19), one of the “Quarter Update” producers. “When you have a lot of people pitching ideas and a lot of people working together, you are always going to get a better product than if you had one person in charge.”
CREATIVE COLLABORATION

Few campus endeavors more closely replicate the collaborative, deadline-driven, community-oriented intensity of professional theatre than the annual Waa-Mu Show—our very own incubator for student-written musicals. The 88th edition, For the Record, was inspired by New York Times journalist Amisha Padnani and her series “Overlooked,” which retroactively published obituaries for significant but previously neglected history makers.

The Waa-Mu undergraduate writing team’s narrative centered on a reporter, frustrated with her assignments, who is moved to correct her paper’s institutional ignorance. With the help of colleagues, she defies her editor and writes dozens of obituaries for trailblazing women. The tale encompassed family upheaval, a job on the line, and a cast of inspiring characters—including early civil rights leader Ida B. Wells, World War II-era codebreaker Gene Grabee, and swashbuckling opera singer Julie D’Aubigny. Padnani herself attended a May performance and participated in a Q&A.

The show was a convergence of truth and make-believe, drama and comedy, the historical and the contemporary, and—in a very Northwestern twist—communication and journalism. Waa-Mu thrives on bringing creative voices together, and the more minds that meld, the better the outcome. “Both creating and performing something new is the ultimate creative risk,” says lecturer and Wirtz Center music director Ryan T. Nelson. “But when we all buy into that risk, we create a truly collaborative artistic community.”

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CREATIVE TEAMS

NASA's Journey to Mars, the plan to send a manned spacecraft to the Red Planet in the 2030s, is rife with challenges. Beyond the scientific complexities of deep-space travel, NASA is also navigating a social quandary: what sort of team can handle this mission?

With her ATLAS lab, communication studies professor and department chair Leslie DeChurch (third from left) is collaborating with Noshir Contractor, the Jane S. and William J. White Professor of Behavioral Sciences, and his SONIC lab on five NASA-funded grants tackling the dynamics of teams working in extreme conditions. Drawing data from astronauts and researchers in Johnson Space Center’s Human Exploration Research Analog, the International Space Station, Antarctica, and elsewhere, DeChurch and colleagues are using computational models to help identify crew compatibility factors. It’s not enough that potential voyagers be physically fit, preternaturally intelligent, and romantically unattached (the round trip would take three years); they’ll also need to be good interpersonal communicators.

“We’re taking an already state-of-the-art crew-selection system and making it even better by finding the values, traits, and other characteristics that will allow NASA to compose crews that will get along,” says DeChurch. She adds that discovering how to surmount barriers through the right group alchemy “helps us understand a lot of the teamwork problems we face on Earth.”
CREATING YOUR STORY

Family, friends, a calling, love. School of Communication convocation speaker Greg Berlanti (C94) expressed these time-tested wishes to rapt 2019 graduates in Welsh-Ryan Arena last June. “If you have those things, you have everything,” he said from the lectern. “And you will have a great story.”

Berlanti knows great stories. As television’s most prolific producer, he broke his own record last May with an astonishing 18 series ordered for the 2019 calendar year. His TV work includes The Flash, Riverdale, Brothers & Sisters, and Dawson’s Creek; his abundant film credits include directing the critically lauded Love, Simon, the first gay teenage romance distributed by a major Hollywood studio. Yet his own story eclipsed them all.

With humor, heart, and grace, Berlanti detailed his geeky start as a teenage puppeteer, his Northwestern student years with an unconventional major, his crossroads as a closeted gay man struggling to accept and articulate his identity, and his career successes and failures. His story starred patient parents, supportive friends and faculty, the chance discovery of writing, and marriage and children of his own—a future the young Greg had never imagined.

This convocation was additionally special in that it was the first time in recent memory that all the school’s graduates attended one ceremony, rather than being divided into two groups. The sense of community this generated was profound. “Northwestern was the first period in my life I would repeat,” Berlanti told the like-minded group. “I would do it all over again.”

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C R E A T I V E    P A R T N E R S

Seventy-six alums led The Music Man, with 110 faculty close at hand. Those numbers may be an exaggeration, but the summer 2019 production of the classic Meredith Willson musical at Chicago's Goodman Theatre was packed with members of our Northwestern community. The result was a rich, funny, visually stunning production on a major downtown stage.

The Music Man was directed by 2002 Tony Award winner Mary Zimmerman (C82, GC85, GC94), the Jaharis Family Foundation Chair in Performance Studies, and featured costume design by associate professor Ana Kuzmanic (GC04), set design by Daniel Ostling (GC96), and performances by Jeremy Johnson (C94), Christopher K. Jones (C99), and Heidi Kettenring (C95).

Taking on a much-loved, oft-produced musical is no enviable task. But when a show merits reimagining, Zimmerman and frequent collaborator Kuzmanic are the go-to creators for the job. “Ana and I are thick as thieves,” says Zimmerman. “Our professional work and our educational work constantly overlap.” Kuzmanic notes that Zimmerman's direction centers on character relationships, not typically the focus of musicals. For this duo, professional relationships matter even more.

“In work with Mary, we create the visual world together,” says Kuzmanic. “She always wants to hear our strongest thoughts and why we feel that way.” Zimmerman and Kuzmanic partnered again for the Los Angeles Opera’s February 2020 world premiere of Eurydice.
## A N O D T O C R E A T O R S

Last summer, Northwestern theatre students found unexpected communion with a Danish literary giant. Author Hans Christian Andersen penned such internationally beloved children’s tales as “The Little Mermaid,” “The Ugly Duckling,” and “The Emperor’s New Clothes”—stories perhaps inspired by the challenges and ideas the 13-year-old Andersen encountered as the youngest commoner ever chosen by the Danish king to study at the Royal Academy in Copenhagen. While few students can identify with those circumstances, many can relate to the thrill of new beginnings and artistic growth.

ImagineU’s production of *Hans Christian Andersen*, a vivid musical reimagining of the author’s formative years, gave students and young audiences a taste of the Dane’s creative impact. The Virginia Wadsworth Wirtz Center for the Performing Arts often mounts shows for family audiences, prompting even the youngest patrons to think more deeply, believe more strongly, and try harder. Students, too, thrive when working in the family-friendly format.

“The Northwestern theatre community is overflowing with people who are intensely passionate about what they do and additionally have the skills to execute high-quality projects consistently,” says senior Holly Hinchliffe (right, with, from left, seniors Elijah Warfield and Pablo Lauercica), who played Andersen’s mother. “I am always in awe of the dedication of those around me and have never before been exposed to talent and commitment to theatre art on such a large scale.”

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Give every year, make a difference every day.
In Voyeurs de Venus by award-winning playwright Lydia Diamond (C92), Western society’s ugly racist past and its slow-moving reckoning get a closer examination. Diamond (center, in red) returned to Evanston in May for a discussion following the play’s final performance in the Josephine Louis Theater. She was joined by director Tasia Jones and the student cast.

Voyeurs de Venus centers on a modern woman researching a historical figure, Saartjie Baartman—who was brought from South Africa to London in 1810 to be exhibited on the freak-show circuit as the “Hottentot Venus.” After Baartman’s death, her body was dissected, and parts of it were displayed in Paris until 1974. The subject matter is so difficult that the play has only been staged three times since its premiere in 2008. “People don’t want to touch it,” said Diamond, an associate professor of theatre at the University of Illinois at Chicago and winner of the African American Arts Alliance of Chicago’s Black Excellence Award, an American Alliance for Theatre and Education Award, and many other honors. “But I’m very grateful to Northwestern for putting this on. It was brave and wonderful to do so.”

The author of the plays Stick Fly, Smart People, and The Bluest Eye, Diamond said her works are reflections of being a black woman in a stubbornly evolving world. Their continued relevance is an upsetting reminder of the work society has left to do. “We refuse to figure it out,” she said. “So I’ll continue to explore those issues.”
OUR CREATIVE FUTURE

The American Music Theatre Project, which brings together professional playwrights and Northwestern talent to workshop new musicals, always goes for broke—whether through big productions featuring Equity actors or simpler staged readings. Directed by assistant professor Roger Ellis, last May’s production of Get Out Alive by Chicago-based artist-musician Nikki Lynette took an even edgier tack—one Ellis sees as the future of musicals. “We’ve been historically locked into some rules about how musical theatre is meant to be appreciated and constructed. AMTP creates a space where we can experiment and explore,” he says. “It’s nurturing artists who are going to push the art form forward.”

Lynette wrote Get Out Alive as a one-woman show—a radical, semiautobiographical exploration of trauma, abuse, and mental health told through audiovisual elements, a live DJ, and personal narrative. Ellis’s task as director was to help turn Lynette’s vision into something more recognizably theatrical, with a small cast (students Marisol Beaufrand and Olivia Pryor as the “echoes”), a suggestion of costumes, a simple set and lighting, and occasional dialogue.

Later featured in Steppenwolf Theatre Company’s LookOut series, Get Out Alive challenged audiences’ assumptions of what theatre is and can be. It also incorporated students’ questions and ideas. “Facilitating meaningful interactions between students and professionals has been one of the greatest parts of this process,” says Ellis. “It’s a two-way street—who’s learning from whom.”

Give every year, make a difference every day.
Chicagoan Dan Goffman was a history professor who loved teaching and writing. He suffered a stroke at age 51 that affected his speech and left him unable to write or use his left hand. He retired early but worried about boredom and isolation—until he picked up a pencil.

“In my youth, I was a lousy artist,” he says. “After the stroke, I was surprised to find that I could draw.”

Though the stroke left him with aphasia, it kindled a newfound creative spark. Goffman (above) took art classes at the Evanston Art Center, and in May 2019 his work was displayed in a show at the Northwestern University Center for Audiology, Speech, Language, and Learning, where he is a patient in its Aphasia Center. NUCASLL clinicians treat hearing, speech-language, and learning conditions but also regard patients as part of a larger community, providing a place where they come to feel supported.

Belma Hadziselimovic (at far right, with clinical faculty members Karen Kinderman, at far left, and Sarah Penzell), a senior lecturer in the Roxelyn and Richard Pepper Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders and one of NUCASLL’s lead clinicians, has worked with Goffman for more than a decade. “Dan’s discovery of art after his stroke is an excellent example of finding a new talent after neurological injury,” she says. “It became clear that a wider audience needed to see it.”

CREATING IN ADVERSITY
CREATING TO REMEMBER

Hassan Al Rawas spent childhood summers at his grandfather’s chocolate factory in Beirut, Lebanon. Al Rawas’s immediate family had left the country for Kuwait during the Lebanese Civil War in the 1970s, so his annual returns became a way to create memories and restore connections in spite of ongoing violence. As a third-year MFA candidate, Al Rawas directed the Wirtz Center’s February 2019 mainstage production of Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*. “A Russian play from the turn of the 20th century became this homage to my family in Lebanon,” he says.

The parallels are hard to ignore. Al Rawas’s grandfather made the agonizing but financially sound decision to sell his life’s work to one of his sons, who promptly dismantled the business and turned the factory into a warehouse. *The Cherry Orchard* follows a Russian aristocrat making a last, emotional return to her family’s estate before it is auctioned. She’s saying goodbye not only to her ancestral lands but to the very social order of her life.

Al Rawas shared his family’s story with his MFA stage design collaborators and the show’s undergraduate actors, who were moved to incorporate his memories into their creative approach. “It was a really special production for all of us,” he says.

Letting go of the past can be painful. But within a creative community, moving into the unknown—with wonderful memories of what that community has built—can be a productive, fulfilling adventure that will continue to sustain us.

*Give every year, make a difference every day.*
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On the cover
Lucette Panush as Bertha in the October 2018 production of Jane Eyre at the Virginia Wadsworth Wirtz Center for the Performing Arts. The play was adapted from Charlotte Brontë’s novel by Polly Teale and directed by Kathryn Walsh, with costume design by Raquel Adorno, scenic design by Scott Penner, and lighting design by Anthony Forchielli.

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