The Waa-Mu Show is vying for global design domination. The set design for the 88th annual production, *For the Record*, called for a massive 11-foot-diameter rotating globe suspended above the stage and wrapped in the masthead of the show’s fictional newspaper, the *Chicago Offering*. Northwestern’s set, scenery, and paint shops are located in the Virginia Wadsworth Wirtz Center for the Performing Arts, but Waa-Mu is performed in Cahn Auditorium. How to pull off such a planetary transplant? By deflating Earth. The globe began as a plain white (albeit custom-built) inflatable balloon, but after its initial multisection muslin wrap was created (to determine shrinkage), it was deflated, rigged, reinflated, motorized, map-designed, taped for a paint mask, primed, painted, and unpeeled to reveal computer-generated, to-scale continents. The team then built a masthead (with interior lighting, no less) and painstakingly let all the air out of the balloon until it was small enough to fit into a box truck. The flattened Earth was then carefully moved across campus and reinflated, rigged, and motorized to dazzle this year’s Waa-Mu audiences. “This project in our studio had a good number of hours put into it by Northwestern staff, our graduate students, and our undergraduates,” says Wirtz Center technical adviser Matt Buettner. “We are proud of the work we do here, and our staff members often have the opportunity to create really stunning works of art through practiced trades in a close relationship with our MFA design students.”
The School of Communication places a high priority on two objectives: being responsive to student needs and goals, and engaging as fully as possible with our industries and alumni. We listen when alumni tell us what their industries and professions look for in graduates. And we now conduct an annual student survey to learn how our students’ interests and objectives are changing so that we can tune our programs to better serve them.

Music theatre provides a good example of one area that has seen a dramatic expansion of faculty, curriculum, and programming. Our friends and alumni advised us that music theatre was a key area of strength we should build on, especially with its growing importance in the creative industries. And our students begged for an expanded program that would better guide their development.

We responded with a major new investment in this area, which since 2000 has grown from one professor to four plus several lecturers. New faculty allowed us to expand instruction in voice and dance, and the curriculum now includes modules in creating the musical (with courses in writing, composing, and orchestration) and music theatre choreography. The American Music Theatre Project has brought a whole new set of opportunities to our students, who participate in evaluating projects, conducting readings and workshops, developing new musicals, and presenting new works. For the third year in a row, AMTP is supporting a partnership between Northwestern and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland to develop and present a new alumni-written, student-performed musical at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. As a result of this growth in opportunities, our students are enjoying even greater success as they pursue their dreams after graduation.

And that brings me to the subject of this issue of Dialogue. I admit it was great fun to pull together a whole issue on comedy arts. Our school has emerged as an incubator for talent and new content in this area, and this issue gives us a wonderful opportunity to showcase not only our comedic dominance in late-night television, sitcoms, stage, and cinema, but also the wonderful young alumni of our writing, acting, and media arts programs who are adding their distinctive voices to the mix.

Of course, like music theatre, this area is more and more important in the industry and a magnet for students. So, as we did with music theatre, we are investing in new faculty, new curriculums (including a new module in comedy arts), and new opportunities for students. We hope that the investments we are making will help us recruit students and faculty and will help them be even more successful as they pursue their goals.

As always, we welcome your feedback (and seek your support!) in making our school the most creative, responsive, and inclusive community in higher education.

Barbara J. O’Keefe
Dean, School of Communication
Start a dialogue: dialogue@northwestern.edu
THE NEXT BIG THINGS

by Kerry Trotter

From the record books to bookstores, from late night to stand-up, Northwestern School of Communication alumni dominate comedy—and for good reason. In the last decade, the school has prepared ever greater numbers of writers, producers, and performers for the funny business, thanks to the school’s robust comedy curriculum and the University’s liberal arts backbone. It’s a winning combination for producing smart, clever comedic artists marked by intellectual curiosity, an ability to adapt and innovate, a sense of responsibility, and the desire to help other ‘Cats succeed. The following young alumni are rewriting comedy’s rules.
northwestern has long been a pipeline for aspiring comedic writers. But recent graduates are forging an even smarter path in an increasingly competitive field. “I think there’s something special about going to a school that has produced people to look up to,” says Nicole Silverberg (C13). “Julia Louis-Dreyfus was there and was in some of the same clubs that you can be in—you too can be given the tools that she had.”

Silverberg graduated from Northwestern as an aspiring performer but fell into writing through University connections and her obvious talents. “It’s one thing to be younger than me, it’s one thing to be more successful????” Very disrespectful. Ultimately I’m not thrilled about this.”

—Nicole Silverberg via Twitter

Ashley Nicole Black (GC08) began taking improv classes at Chicago’s Second City while she was at Northwestern earning her master’s degree in performance studies. The comedy training upended her plans to become a professor but provided an unexpected complement to her interests. “The second I got started doing sketch comedy, I realized that was what I was meant to do all along,” Black says. “I realized that I was funny and that with the ability to write my own material, I could be in charge of how I was representing myself.”

Her performance studies background fostered an informed, more activist approach in sketch that took her from the bustling Chicago improv scene all the way to the writers room at Full Frontal with Samantha Bee and recently NBC’s The Tonight Show as well as to the writing team and cast of HBO’s forthcoming A Black Lady Sketch Show, created by Robin Thede (Medi01).

“I’m very happy to have a cultural, theoretical, and historical background for what I’m doing,” says Black. “It’s so important to have this context for what you are making; otherwise you aren’t fully aware of the message you created.”

As a woman of color, Black considers this especially important in approaching and debunking stereotypes. And it’s very much the essence of performance studies. Northwestern combines “going to a good school with being in the perfect city to learn comedy,” she says. “You really need both.”

Caitlin Kunkel (GC09) also pursued improv training at Second City in conjunction with earning a graduate degree, in her case an MFA in writing for screen and stage. She produced New York City’s first-ever Satire and Humor Festival, cowrote the satirical book New Erotica for Feminists (published last fall), writes for Public Radio International’s Live Wire, cofounded the Belladonna comedy website, does podcasts, and teaches satire writing classes through her improv alma mater.

“Northwestern helped me understand how to structure stories, and it created really great work habits in me that I still have to this day,” she says. As a graduate student she wanted to learn “a hard skill like production, and what I learned is still really applicable to the kind of work I do.”

Kunkel found her niche in online satire, an attainable format for fledging comedians. It can be done from home without childcare, with no need for live performance. “But satire is the kind of writing that requires a strong point of view,” she adds, “so if you just give students the scaffolding, most people can write a pretty great piece that says what they want to say.”

Comedy rewards intelligence, but Kunkel is quick to point out that it’s less about book smarts and more about being curious, making observations, and recognizing patterns with a decidedly Northwestern spin. “I tell my students, ‘You should spend as much time reading every week as you do writing,’” she says. “Learn how to come up with a smart take on something and be able to back it up with data.”

LAUGH LINE

School of Communication alumni have been splitting sides for the better part of a century. This timeline highlights just some of the school’s many contributions to comedy, both on campus and far beyond.

1927
Edgar Bergen (C27) leaves Northwestern to begin a legendary career. Best known for ventriloquist acts with his dummy Charlie McCarthy and Mortimer Snerd, Bergen (center) received an honorary Academy Award, a Screen Actors Guild Lifetime Achievement Award, and a Peabody Award. In 1960 he was inducted into the Hollywood Walk of Fame with three stars—one each for television, motion pictures, and radio. He died in 1978. In 1939 Northwestern awarded Charlie McCarthy an honorary degree.

1929
Northwestern students Joe Miller (25) (right) and Darrell Ware (25) write the music and lyrics for a musical comedy revue and enlist the help of the University’s music department.

1930
Clara, Lu ‘n’ Em, one of the first radio soap operas, debuts on Chicago’s WGN AM. It stars Louise Stankey Meade (C27), Isabel Carothers Benzlemizer (C26), and Hyton King Mitchell (C26) as small-town housewives exchanging gossip.

1933
Ann-Margret (C53) receives her second Golden Globe Award nomination, this time for her role as Kim McAlley in the film version of the musical comedy Bye Bye Birdie.

1937
Silverberg graduated from Northwestern as an aspiring performer but fell into writing through University connections and her obvious talents. “It’s one thing to be younger than me, it’s one thing to be more successful????” Very disrespectful. Ultimately I’m not thrilled about this.”

—Nicole Silverberg via Twitter

1969
The Brady Bunch, containing Robert Reed (C54) as the patriarch of a large blended family, premieres on ABC. After its five-season run, its syndication in 1975 made the show iconic for generations to follow.

Women’s Athletic Association (WAA) and Men’s Union (MU). Good Morning Glory is a smash hit, and the Daily Northwestern writes that campus interest is the “highest yet” for any dramatic activity in University history. The annual Wea Mc Thon has endured as Northwestern’s premier student-written musical theatre event. After eight decades in a revue format, Wea Mc Thon now serves as a starting point for new musicals.

Previous pages, from left: Late Night writers Amber Ruffin and Ally Hood (C08) in a segment with Seth Meyers (C96, H18).

Bye Birdie premiers on ABC.

Ann-Margaret (C53) receives her second Golden Globe Award nomination, this time for her role as Kim McAlley in the film version of the musical comedy Bye Bye Birdie.

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A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A LATE-NIGHT WRITER

Ally Hord jokes that working in late night is like the government job of comedy writing.

“It’s a year-round position, we get pay raises through WGA scale, and we don’t tape on Fridays,” she says. “It’s very stable, and people are actually able to settle down and have families. Compared with other writing room situations, we have a great schedule.”

But when she’s on the job as a member of the Late Night with Seth Meyers monologue writing team, she’s working nonstop. Hord describes a typical day: “Monologue writers tend to get in a little earlier, usually between 8:30 and 9 a.m. We have three monologue deadlines throughout the day—1:30, 3:15, and 5:30 p.m.—and that is further broken up with meetings, reads, and audience rehearsals. ‘We’ll write through the morning, and at 2 p.m. we go into Seth’s office and he reads through every joke that’s been selected by our head writer, Alex Baze. Seth’ll highlight the ones he likes, and those will be put in a packet that will be read at 4:15 in front of a test audience assembled from tourists in the 30 Rock lobby—for better or worse, because we’re a pretty political show. We’ll have a joke about the deputy attorney general and it can go right over the heads of a crowd from Norway. ‘Then we pick what worked, Seth will run through ‘A Closer Look,’ we’ll run through any sketch bits and test as much as we can. We’re supposed to be done with joke writing at 5:30, but since Trump loves to drop news at 6 p.m., we try to get as much as we can in before the news, and if we have any leftover from WandaVision, we’re going to throw it in. Seth will usually settle on the read Saturdays that are coming up, and then we are set on the content on the main show for the following week.’”

Artist-in-Residence Ally Hord at work (right). They say your wedding will be the best day of your life, but they haven’t seen this junk-food crawl map I made for the day after my wedding, ending at the ER.

—Ally Hord via Twitter

trying to figure out not just how you fit into the bigger picture but also what’s unique about you, you start honing that individuality, and it makes you pop when you get out into the real world.”

Such individuality allowed Ziwe Fumudoh (C14) to pursue academic interests in math, African American studies, and poetry as well as radio/television/film. “I just wanted to write more,” she says, “and with RTVF I was able to do screenwriting.” Fumudoh found that comedy requires “the same economy of words as poetry.”

Now a stand-up comedian, podcaster, web series creator, musician, and television-writer—most recently for Showtime’s Kidding, she credits RTVF senior lecturer Brett Neveu for encouraging her to “say yes to everything” (advice Acredit to Stephen Colbert). All those yeses have yielded an innovative career characterized by its lack of limits.

“I have multitudes, just like Walt Whitman,” she laughs, referencing his seminal poem Song of Myself “I’m working all the time and always trying to refine my craft.”

Adapting to a changing landscape

Dave Holstein (C08) is writing and producing the second season of Showtime’s Kidding, a dark comedy about a Fred Rogers-esque children’s TV host. Holstein cut his professional teeth writing for Showtime’s Weeds and HBO’s The Brink, shows centered respectively on a soccer mom drug kingpin and nuclear war.
Los Angeles—based Dave Holstein says he spends about two hours a day in his car, which has led him to devise a fun game to help pass the time. “I see a lot of Northwestern alumni vanity license plates, and I always try to pull up and see if I know the person in the driver’s seat,” he says. “It’s the equivalent of walking up to north campus and hoping you recognize someone on the way.” Farhan Ashbad contends that “you couldn’t escape Northwestern even if you tried.” One of four alumni writing for Man with a Plan—where Greg Mottler (C94) is an executive producer—he recently participated in a joke-writing “punch up” for a pilot where “the entire room was basically Northwestern people.”

Ally Hord is accustomed to being in rooms dominated by Cats. After all, she and writer Jenny Hagel (GC09) work for Seth Meyers (C96, H16). “I feel like Northwestern graduates in the industry are very down to earth and accessible,” she says. “I don’t see anyone I’ve encountered as an ego-first celebrity.”

But alumni do enjoy bragging about Northwestern. Hord says they come out of the Twitter woodwork when Northwestern athletics are in the news. When Kathryn Hahn starred in Sarah Gubbins’s Amazon series I Love Dick, did their alma mater connection come up on the set? “Oh, all the time,” says Gubbins. “We compared professors, we talked about going up and seeing all the changes. And we’d give each other the ‘Go Cats’ claws.”

Ziwe Fumudoh, whose work extends from late-night writing to live performance, sums it up: “Northwestern dominates entertainment, that’s very apparent. I’m literally surrounded by Northwestern graduates all the time, because they’re the ones hustling, putting pedal to the metal, and taking the super-focused energy they used in their studies and applying it to their lives.”

“When these topics were taking a traditional comedic approach in terms of rhythms and plots, but we also had to thread through stories that were political and important,” he says. “There’s comedy and then there’s comedy with something to say. I want to be involved in comedy with something to say.”

Holstein participated in Northwestern’s program in creative writing for the media, a precursor to the undergraduate module of the same name. He notes that his on-campus playwriting was filtered through the broader spectrum of his Northwestern academic pursuits, which helped him take a bigger picture approach to writing than he might have received in a conservatory program. Case in point: Holstein nearly responded to political tumult and an increase in divisive rhetoric by trying to fill the “empty chair that was Mister Rogers, and how we don’t have that voice on television anymore.” He thus successfully pitched Showtime’s idea for Kiddng, directed by Michel Gondry and starring Jim Carrey as kids show host Mr. Pickles—who, true to Holstein form, has an edge.

Kidding’s first season won critical acclaim, and Holstein is confident that in today’s changing media landscape, audience appetites can support such an outside-the-box show. “It’s a really democratic time to make television—the rules have been thrown out the window,” he says. “It used to be that there was one track to making a television show, and now there are a dozen. It’s exciting, you feel like you’re really riding the crest of a sort of revolution—how we digest content and define what television is and what constitutes a hit.”
have an idea that doesn’t necessarily resemble any other show that you’ve seen, and yet there’s a platform for it,” she says. “We’re looking at television, at least seasons, in a structure that you would think of like a feature film. It spans four or five hours, but you have an expectation, an engagement with your audience. It’s not just about crafting one episode that will keep them coming back; you can build plotlines and make them play over three episodes.”

Jen Spyra (GC’12) works in late-night comedy—not a new format, but one confronting new demands. As a staff writer for The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, she pens jokes and sketches for her fellow “Cat but with a hurdle indicative of our social media saturation—getting her takes out there before another comedian beats her to the punch on Twitter or elsewhere.

“It’s challenging,” she says. “The general rule is that if something has already been played with, we don’t want to do anything that feels familiar.”

A senior writer for The Onion before joining The Late Show, Spyra recalls a writers room rule that if two people come up with a similar headline or idea, they scrap it. And now, with the proliferation of quick-take tweets, Spyra and her colleagues need to be sharper still.

“It’s actually a good thing,” she says. “It challenges us to come up with a fresher, more alternative angle.”

Spyra’s writing original and her head on a swivel has led to opportunities for Spyra to appear in Late Show sketches and for her byline to appear in the New Yorker, The New York Times, McSweeney’s, and more. “This is good for me, someone who’s also interested in doing her own thing,” she says. “It’s nice to run with an idea and have it be about your imagination. The autonomy of that is really fun.”

Embracing new faces and stories

In 2011, fresh from internships at Comedy Central and MTV, Farhan Arshad (GC’10) was heavily courted by a reality television producer to take part in an unscripted series about arranged marriages. While he had no interest in participating, the process inspired him to follow through with an idea of his own: a mockumentary about parent-driven matchmaking. The resulting web series, Brownies, depicted 10 families trying to find spouses for their children—but only nine are successful, putting the focus on a lonely outcast played by Arshad. The first two episodes were produced using a bunch of his Northwestern friends and on a budget of $50—the cost of their pizza dinner.

“We were just messing around and had no idea if it was going to be good,” he says. But those first two episodes garnered about 200,000 views, earned a sponsorship from the dating site OK Cupid, and landed Arshad an agent and manager. This and his Northwestern connections led to more meetings, writers-assistant gigs on CBS’s The McCarthy and ABC’s Dr. Ken, an entrance into the Disney Channel Storytellers program, and a staff writing position at CBS’s Mike and Molly.

He’s concurrently pitching projects featuring characters who resemble him and reflect his experience as a Pakistani American who grew up in Davenport, Iowa.

“We’re in such a unique situation, where millions of people tune into our work and you really do have a chance, if you exercise it correctly, to get your message out there,” he says. “If you don’t know different types of people in real life, the way you can get to know them is through TV. Telling inclusive stories is so important.”

April Quioh (C18) finds that her own story has struck a chord with an underserved audience. The cocreator and host of the popular podcast She’s All Fat started her career writing for the Netflix show Haters Back Off and then moved to Jake’s Wild; the TBS game show hosted by Snoop Dogg. She’s also now writing for NBC’s Scream Queens. While those experiences allowed her to flex her comedic muscles in unexpected ways, the podcast brought her writing in a decidedly more personal direction.

Conversations with friend and cohort Sophia Carter Kahn delved into “body positivity and what bothers us about the public’s take,” says Quioh. “The subject matter is not always funny—it might be ‘let’s talk about the time we were discriminated against at the doctor’s office’—so how can I find the humorous take on this while also providing my personal experience in a way the audience is able to relate to?”

The alchemy works. She’s All Fat is in its fourth season and averages about 18,000 listeners per episode. Quioh gives a lot of credit to her RTVF major and sociology minor for helping her craft her message.
One of those opportunities was The Social Ones, a mockumentary about social media influencers and the trap of online celebrity; the film won the audience award for comedy feature at last spring’s Cinequest Film Festival. Also the film’s co-executive producer with Laura and Danielle Kosann, March costars as a therapist who counsels, “I’ve worked with Rich a couple of times,” she says of Law & Order and The Social Ones, in which he also costars. “I ambushed him, and he said, ‘Kid, how did we not know this?’ Finding themselves together “was such a fun discovery.”

In addition to acting and producing, March is a philanthropist and entrepreneur who cofounded the custom makeup company Shespoke. Her advice to students entering the business, show and otherwise, has an interdisciplinary ring: “Don’t wait for somebody to give you a job—make your own job. You never know what kinds of opportunities are going to come from all of these collaborative efforts you have over your lifetime. Some of them are entrepreneurial, some of them are producing, some of them are acting, but they all add up to something.”

“I was talking on my show about how at Northwestern I discovered the political feminism movement, and less the glossy ‘you go, girl!’ version I had experienced as a kid in Seventeen magazine,” Quioh laughs. It wasn’t until getting to campus that “I was like, ‘yeah, I aggree! I go, girl!’ Because once I got into it in a more academic space, it stayed with me and informed what I make.”

Helping ‘Cats on the way

Budding television producer Ally Hord (CO8) moved to Los Angeles at an unfortunate time—during the 2008 writers strike. Productions on scripted television shows ground to a halt. She needed an in.

“I reached out to an old Northwestern RTVF friend of mine, Jake Szymanski (CO4), who had just started working at Funny or Die,” she says. “He described what he did day to day, and it sounded a lot like what we did at NSTV together.”

She sent him a resume outlining her work with Upright Citizens Brigade and in television production and was hired immediately. Hord then has been on a professional ascent. “I would say I’ve gotten most of my jobs through a Northwestern grad,” she says, modest about her sizable talents, production background, and drive. “If we had an opportunity to help out or recommend an interview or write a recommen- dation, we were there for each other along the way.”

“Stop asking for my skin care routine. There is none. I’m just mean to men and it keeps me young and beautiful.”
—April Quioh via Twitter

Now a staff writer for Late Night with Seth Meyers, Hord remembers a campus visit by comedy legend Garry Marshall (Medill56). Speaking to students, he was free of ego and full of appreciation for his alma mater—sentiments similar to what she sees emerging among her fellow graduates.

“We came up together in the industry, and we’re still close,” she says. “It has ended up being a really great, supportive community.”
What makes Northwestern students such great comedians? Creative energy, prime location, and lots of options for practicing their craft. The abundance of respected student-run comedy groups—on paper, on camera, and on stage—has given the University a reputation as a comedy powerhouse where all are welcome.
Northwestern students have been in on the joke for generations, and with the campus located on the doorstep of improv’s birthplace, it’s the perfect place to pursue humor.

“It might be Chicago—and the weather—that makes us funny,” says RTVF senior lecturer Brett Neveu, who cochairs the comedy arts module, a curricular path focused on the history and mechanics of humor and the practical demands of the industry. He’s also the faculty adviser for The Blackout.

“Chicago is different from New York or L.A. It’s a blue-collar city for the most part, and people are living their lives. You can really disappear into your own world and sense of humor. People here are looking for camaraderie, and comedy can provide that, too. Cracking each other up is a survival tool for January or February.”

Comedy at NU is not new. The first Waa-Mu Show, staged in 1929, was a comedic musical revue, a tradition that continued for eight decades. Even now, with the new original-book-musical format, the funny stuff still works its way in.

“One of my favorite things about Waa Mu is its capacity to combine serious subject matter with moments of joy and humor,” says Olivia Worsley, the public relations director for 2019’s show, For the Record—which scored big laughs amid heavier plot lines.

“The Waa Mu continues to tackle important issues, the show itself is never overly somber. Through humor, Waa Mu invites the audience to positively engage with and relate to the stories and themes of each show, even the more serious ones.”

And there are more and more humor outlets to engage audiences. Two decades ago, the campus boasted only a handful of comedy options, but new student groups are born every year, many emphasizing inclusiveness.

“In the time I’ve been at Northwestern, the number of comedy groups has really multiplied, and it’s been amazing,” says recent RTVF graduate Maya Armstrong, who acted for NSTV, improvised with Titanic Players, and codirected for Mee-Ow.

“Here, people want to express themselves and they want to laugh.
They see all these amazing comedy groups and awesome shows, and it gets people excited about joining groups or making their own mark on Northwestern's comedy scene."

Max Kliman, also a June RTVF graduate, worked on the satirical newspaper The Flipside, produced for The Blackout, and coached for No Fun Mud Piranhas, an improv company that welcomes any student interested in joining. The troupe famously included Stephen Colbert (C86, H11) and David Schwimmer (C88) after both were rejected by Mee-Ow. No Fun Mud Piranhas currently boasts more than 60 members.

A recent intern at The Late Show, Kliman says that Northwestern students are uniquely creative and open to new projects. “Whether it’s The Blackout, Waa Mu, The Flipside, or improv teams or comedy newspapers, the students here have such an interesting and unique sense of humor,” he says. “Working with them improves your ability to create funny things. There are other schools that have a lot of comedy, but I’ve never been in another environment where everyone wants to make things together.”

-—Max Kliman

Having a sense of humor is a plus for any group, especially one that focuses on putting underrepresented voices on stage. "We're the only comedy group on campus with a mission statement that prioritizes multicultural representation,” says senior RTVF major Avery Powell, who served as the group’s 2018–19 president. "Diversity is not just a plus or a benefit—it's our priority. And that affects a lot of our decisions, from show themes to the audition process. It really makes us who we are." He believes that it also makes for better comedy, noting that audiences find a new perspective funnier and “honestly refreshing.”

Dolores Diaz, a June MFA graduate in directing, says that the school’s abundance of voices as a window into what’s to come. “I think the diversity of my cohort is a great litmus test for what’s funny to whom and why,” she says. "About half my cohort are international students, more than half are people of color, and we have a diversity of physical expressions, gender expressions, and sexual orientations. If you can make that room laugh, you’re doing something right.”

R&B artist Daniel Caesar has been announced as one of the mainstage performers at this year’s Dillo Day. However, if he’s anything like Northwestern’s CAESAR, he’ll take forever to show up and then quit when you ask him to do anything. —The Blackout

This year the University’s acceptance rate dropped to a record low of 8.4 percent—almost as low as the campus’s self-acceptance rate of 0 percent. —The Blackout

ABOUT THAT (COLLEGE) EMMY

The Blackout's College Television Award win recognizes its "2018 Spring Quarter Update" (think Saturday Night Live's "Weekend Update" but covering the whole quarter), one of three collegiate nominees in the variety category. Other College Television Award nominees included student-produced comedy and drama series, commercials, and animation. According to the Television Academy Foundation, 25 videos were nominated out of more than 600 submissions from 170 US schools. This was The Blackout's first nomination and win.

Launched in 2015 by RTVF majors interested in the late-night style of televised comedy, The Blackout produces live shows, taped segments, promos, sketches, and more. Like The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, it involves teams of writers, a handful of producers and directors, and carefully selected on-air talent. The "Quarter Update" segment is filmed in the Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communication’s broadcast studios, and live shows and sketches are produced all over campus. The group takes an inclusive approach to membership; anyone who is interested can join the production team, though aspiring writers have to submit applications. "It's pretty bold stuff, and they keep pushing themselves to get bigger and more connected—and lots of people want to be part of the organization,” says radio/television/film senior lecturer Brett Neveu, The Blackout's faculty adviser. "It's only been around a short time, but it's exploded. They've got something really special.”

The 39th annual awards ceremony was part of an extended weekend of Television Academy programming March 14–16 in Los Angeles.
Comedy is woven into the fabric of our MFA in writing for the screen and stage curriculum, from the sitcom initiative, to topics classes like ‘Writing and Performing Stand-Up’ and ‘Writing Comedy,’ to the various improv courses we offer,” says David Tolchinsky, radio/television/film professor and the MFA program’s codirector. “We also host a constant stream of guests from the comedy world, many of whom are our grads. To us, learning comedy is as important as learning drama. I think the fact that we embrace comedy so seriously sets our program apart from other screenwriting and playwriting programs.”

Playwriting and screenwriting are close cousins, and incoming MFA candidates interested in one arena wind up becoming proficient in both. The same principle applies to those entering as dramatic writers and emerging as far more. In fact, recent MFA cohorts have been expressing an ever-greater interest in writing comedy—perhaps no coincidence at a time when satirists and comedians are emerging as arbiters of truth in a complicated political climate.

Undergraduate students, too, are yearning to leverage comedy into something more than an easy laugh. Those interested in a deeper, more focused track can pursue the comedy arts module, which includes classes in comedy history and practice, internships, cocurricular practice, and a capstone portfolio. It’s open to any Northwestern student, thus inviting different backgounds and perspectives and embracing comedic performance training as a highly transferable skill.

“We concentrate on what it means to be funny in whatever realm you might find yourself.”

The School of Communication takes comedy seriously. While student groups have long been part of the University experience, comedy in the curriculum is a newer, more strategic focus. The study of comedy—its history, social and cultural implications, roots in activism, and practical applications—has found a dynamic home in the school’s interdisciplinary ecosystem. The results are immersive opportunities at the graduate and undergraduate levels: the MFA program in writing for the screen and stage, the comedy arts module, and the sitcom sequence.
We concentrate on what it means to be funny in whatever realm you might be entering, whether that’s a stand-up stage or a law office.

—Brett Neveu

be entering, whether that’s a stand-up stage or a law office,” says RTVF senior lecturer Brett Neveu, the module’s cochair. “There’s this strategy in Second City and other improv groups called ‘yes, and—.’ It’s the idea that instead of shutting things down, you build on them. I think that strategy works in all sorts of situations: in music, in the boardroom, on stage, or even with yourself. If you’re developing a TED Talk or a stand-up routine or a corporate presentation, it’s about ’yes, and—ing’ your own material.”

In addition to classes on such topics as advanced performing and sitcom writing, the module includes genre studies delving into rom-coms and improv. Additionally, students are required to get involved in cocurricular activities such as NSTV, Mee-Ow, or Out Da Box. The year-long process coalesces in students creating an original 30-minute comedy script, a spec script for a comedy already on the air, a comedic play or screenplay, a comedic monologue, multiple sketches, and/or original script for a comedy already on the air, a comedic play or screenwriting. All told, students must write a lot and familiarize themselves with the trials of performance—two big features of most comedy professions.

“Northwestern students take a lot of risks,” says RTVF lecturer Zina Camblin, staff writer for the upcoming Wu Tang: An American Saga and the comedy arts module’s cochair. “And even when you’re developing a TED Talk or even with yourself. If you’re developing a TED Talk or a stand-up routine or a corporate presentation, it’s about ’yes, and—ing’ your own material.”

Also integral to the process is the near-annual trip the sitcom students take to Los Angeles: The group visits with industry professionals, tours studio backlots, and gets caught up on alumni projects. Past trips have included meetings with Jeff Jacobs (C86, Medill87), Gregg Mettler (C94), Laverne McKinnon (C87), and Farhan Arshad (GC10) as well as visits to the sets of Modern Family and—in addition to Julia Louis-Dreyfus (C83, H07) and Brad Hall (C80). This year, students met with Alex Barrow (WCAS95), executive producer of The Goldbergs. Says Germain, “It’s an incredible experience to get to watch these amazing comedies being shot and to learn from the people who make them happen.”

RTVF senior Mega Annabel Dafiaghor directed the latest sitcom sequence winner, Aliens in America, which follows the lives of two international students. She went on the spring trip and got to meet Kay Cannon, the director of BlackkKlansman and the producer and writer of the Pitch Perfect movies—the first of which was directed by Jason Moore (C93).

“I learned from her that it’s not just about telling these jokes, because what we’re doing isn’t stand-up comedy,” says Dafiaghor, who hopes to pursue a career as a director. “It’s all about the format and how you tell the jokes. You can have something ridiculous going on in the background of a scene and then play classical music over it. When I came back, I used that advice in my own work.”

Dafiaghor says comedy is a way for her to laugh at things that can otherwise be hard to handle. “Comedy has always been important to me,” she says. “I’m this really tall black girl, and people don’t expect me to have the personality that I do. But comedy is a way to break that barrier.”

Aalisha Sheth, a writing for the screen and stage MFA student and a co-writer, and co-executive producer of Aliens in America, agrees that comedy lets us open up about difficult topics. “Comedy encourages dissent,” she says. “It allows for the release of suppressed human emotions in the guise of a laugh. It makes space for a discussion on pressing issues—that often go unnoticed—about society and the world at large through a setup and punchline.”

Greg Porper (C12) worked on the first sitcom sequence winner in 2012 and says the experience helped him in his professional career as a writer, director, and producer on multiple productions, including a CW web series and projects featured on Funny or Die and College Humor. “I learned that you can’t win every battle and that every person on the show plays an important role,” he says. “When I sold a show to the CW, I had been running a similar crew about that same size, and I put those skills to work.”

Tolchinsky sees Northwestern’s culture of comedy evolving even further, both in the curriculum and beyond. More than just an outlet, comedy can be a vehicle for political commentary and social change. As he points out, late-night monologues and sketches are now regularly quoted and discussed by network news reporters and have become an intriguing and evolving dynamic in a variety of aesthetic and social interactions.

“The School of Communication and Northwestern make for an amazing environment to write and study comedy,” he says. Citing discussions with colleagues in art history and art theory and practice, he says that “humor, ironic, and humorous juxtapositions are often at play, not just in media writing but across art making.”

He adds that “our faculty colleagues in the screen cultures doctoral program, including Mimi White, Jeff Sconce, Miriam Petty, and Lynn Spigel, are often investigating the nature of the humor in a lot of the works we admire. Most recently, Miriam has been writing about Tyler Perry. And more broadly, our scientists have been investigating the role that humor plays in communication and healing. That’s why it’s so exciting to be at a place like Northwestern—we can look at the same subject from a lot of angles.”
Professor's newest work receives triple honors

School of Communication professor E. Patrick Johnson’s latest scholarly book, Black, Queer, Southern, Women. (An Oral History), has garnered three prestigious honors from leading LGBTQ literary advocacy organizations.

In January, Black, Queer, Southern, Women. was recognized as a 2019 Stonewall Book Award—Israel Fishman Nonfiction Award Honor Book. In March, alone, it was named a finalist for both a Lambda Literary Award for LGBTQ studies and a Judy Grahn Award for Lesbian non-fiction. Each organization is renowned for recognizing LGBTQ authors of scholarly works as well as other non-fiction and fiction.

“We might say that 2018 was a watershed moment for women coming into voice in a profound way, whether through speaking out against gender violence with #MeToo or a record number of women being elected to public office,” says Johnson, the University’s Carlos Montemurro Professor of Performance Studies and African American Studies.

“Black, queer Southern women are also a part of that movement, yet their voices are not always the ones being elevated—due to racism, homophobia, and even a conceit that the community is so cohesive,” Johnson continued. “This grant from the NSF is a key validation of my research agenda in computational journalism,” says Diakopoulos. “It underscores the importance of scientifically understanding how computing can enhance and advance and will change the practice of journalism in the future.”

Distributed over five years, the grant is given to non-tenured professors in recognition of distinguished research and exemplary classroom leadership. As one of the few significant grants available to nontenured faculty, it supports ambitious, long-term research planning that can eventually lead to a tenured position—and major scientific breakthroughs.

“The grant will allow me to pursue several projects in my Computational Journalism Lab to better understand the efficiency and effectiveness of computational story-discovery tools in domains ranging from investigative and social journalism to computational fact-checking,” Diakopoulos explains. “I’m excited that the grant will also support my efforts to increase the data and computational literacy of journalists so that practitioners will be better equipped to operate in a data- and algorithm-driven media landscape.”

In February, assistant professor of communication studies Nick Diakopoulos was awarded a prestigious National Science Foundation Faculty Early Career Development (CAREER) Award, making him the department’s seventh faculty member to receive this honor. Diakopoulos is a leading researcher of computational and data journalism, with a focus on the human-centered use of algorithms, automation, and artificial intelligence in news production and consumption.

Documentary media MFA alumni screen short films at Block Cinema

Two films by MFA in documentary media alumni demonstrated the medium’s power at a special April 13 screening at the Block Museum of Art.

As part of the Northwestern Alumni Association’s “A Day at Northwestern,” Iyabo Kwayana (GC17) screened, Practice, a short-film nominee at the 2019 London Short Film Festival. The film shows young men practicing martial arts exercises outside China’s Shaolin Temple.

Shuhan Fan (GC16) and Luther Clement (GC17) showed Stay Close, which premiered at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival. Coproduced by Nevo Shinaar (GC17) and Ashley Brandon (GC17), the film tells the story of Brooklyn Inner Earth’s against-the-odds journey to a silver medal at the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing.

The films were shining examples of the work that documentary media MFA graduates are doing, says Debra Tolchinsky, the program’s founding director.

“I dug up the original PowerPoint presentation outlining our dream outcomes for the MFA program in documentary media, which was implemented in 2013,” says Tolchinsky. “And those included projects being accepted into respected film festivals, films achieving theatrical or broadcast release, graduates receiving nationally recognized fellowships, graduates taking on key roles for documentary projects, graduates obtaining employment in the documentary or gaming industry, and graduates obtaining teaching positions at universities. I am beyond thrilled to say that in five years, we’ve achieved all of these outcomes plus much more. We’ve been especially fortunate to have the support of the Jane and Michael Hoffman Foundation, which enabled us to get the program off the ground, offering scholarships and having Oscar-nominated guest filmmakers visit classes and give master classes.”
Clinical Collaborative tackling autism research and clinical advancements shared its findings—and the work of peers—on April 26 at the 2019 Lambert Family Communication Conference, “Understanding the Autism Spectrum: Clinical, Biological, and Cultural Perspectives.” Discussions ranged from how families cope with autism to the latest research about the autistic brain. Norris University Center was packed with clinicians, researchers, and autism-affected families eager to learn about autism research and clinical advancements shared its findings—"to help us generate ideas and create momentum to advance change in the research, treatment, and policy aspects that affect individuals with autism, their families, and their broader communities."

With two colleagues—assistant professor Elizabeth Norton and Megan Roberts, the Jane Steiner Hoffman and Michael Hoffman Assistant Professor of Communication Sciences and Disorders—Losh recently launched the Northwestern University Autism Research and Clinical Collaborative, which marries clinical work with research and education to improve outcomes for children and families affected by autism. “Understanding the Autism Spectrum,” which also served as this year’s CSD Connect alumni professional gathering, provided a prime opportunity to broadcast the collaborative’s mission and invite leading voices to help guide the conversation.

Those voices included featured speakers Alison Singer, cofounder and president of the Autism Science Foundation; Sandy Magalía, autism and neurodevelopmental disabilities professor at the Steve Hicks School of Social Work of the University of Texas at Austin; Kevin Pelphrey, the Harrison-Wood Jefferson Scholars Foundation Professor at the University of Virginia School of Medicine; and Richard Pepper Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders. The conference brought together experts in clinical, cultural, and biological areas of autism study “to help us generate ideas and create momentum to advance change in the research, treatment, and policy aspects that affect individuals with autism, their families, and their broader communities.”

“W e realized there was a strong need for an integrative discussion forum to bring together some of the more important issues facing individuals with autism,” says conference co-organizer Molly Losh, the John and Peter Dole Chair in Learning Disabilities in the Roxlyn and Richard Pepper Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders. The conference brought together experts in clinical, cultural, and biological areas of autism study “to help us generate ideas and create momentum to advance change in the research, treatment, and policy aspects that affect individuals with autism, their families, and their broader communities.”

"Like any我也 see they have.

"During the meeting, participants discussed the scope of the "fluency umbrella"—the complex and multifaceted nature of fluency disorders. They focused on topics they’d like to explore in more depth, including how to better involve families in the therapeutic process, how treating multilingual patients presents complex challenges, how a stutter might affect a patient’s emotional well-being, and how clinicians might help fluency-issue patients navigate the modern world—including Siri, Alexa, and other artificial intelligence programs that often don’t allow users to pause during speech.

"When I was in school and early intervention, it was a little isolating, because no one knew how to work with fluency clients, so groups like these are extremely important," says Megan Moriarty, a CSD lecturer. "Here, we can troubleshoot together."

Northwestern University in Qatar’s communication exchange and ambassador programs underscore NU-Q’s commitment to providing its students with a global education.

“I was in Evanston to welcome our ambassadors to campus and meet with the exchange students,” says Everett E. Dennis, NU-Q dean and CEO. “These programs allow our students to enjoy the benefits of attending a global university and also strengthen the ties between the Evanston and Doha campuses.”

This winter and spring, a dozen NU-Q communication exchange students spent two to four weeks on the homestay campus—taking courses, engaging in extra-curricular activities, building connections with Evanston students, and sampling American culture.

Junior Maha Essid, Wijdan Al-Khateeb, and Sahar Elkabash participated in events sponsored by Northwestern’s Muslim cultural Students Association. Essid and Al-Khateeb were also involved with the Students for Justice in Palestine, a student, faculty, and community group dedicated to Palestinian rights and self-determination.

Noting Evanstonians’ curiosity, Elkabash says, “We get to hear their opinions about our culture and countries.” Muhammad Humam, who took business classes to complement his studies in communication, played with Northwestern’s recently revived cricket club. “The club is improving,” he says, “and the attendance for our matches was great.”

For a week in early March, a separate delegation of NU-Q student ambassadors partnered with Evanston campus students, who took them to classes, popular eateries, and other social activities. NU-Q journalism student Saad Ejaz quickly discovered that he and radio/television/film major Miguel Aponte shared two key interests: filmmaking and HBO’s Game of Thrones.

“We’re increasingly a more global society,” Aponte says. “It’s one thing to think of other places as ‘that somewhere out there’, and it’s another to have personal relationships with someone from somewhere else. You still share this common experience.”

NU-Q student ambassador Altreem Alkhatere says of the program, “It really helps having someone with you 24/7.” Tagging along with an Evanston student helped her “feel more comfortable. It was a positive experience for me.”

In late March, the NU-Q ambassadors reciprocated, playing host to their Evanston partners when those students visited Education City.

—Larry Grenberg

Our community

Lambert Conference focuses on autism

A new School of Communication clinical collaborative tackling autism research and clinical advancements shared its findings—and the work of peers—on April 26 at the 2019 Lambert Family Communication Conference, “Understanding the Autism Spectrum: Clinical, Biological, and Cultural Perspectives.” Discussions ranged from how families cope with autism to the latest research about the autistic brain. Norris University Center was packed with clinicians, researchers, and autism-affected families eager to learn about autism research and clinical advancements shared its findings—"to help us generate ideas and create momentum to advance change in the research, treatment, and policy aspects that affect individuals with autism, their families, and their broader communities.”

"Like any...
**Faculty focus**

**Masi Asare (PhD, New York University)** contributed lyrics for the Broadway-bound musical adaptation of the hit indie film *Munson Wedding*. As part of the process, Asare joined director Mira Nair and other members of the creative team last winter for a workshop in New Delhi.

**Danielle Beverly (MFA, Columbia College)** participated in a panel at the International Documentary Association’s 2018 “Getting Real” industry conference in September. Moderated by radio-television-film professor Marco Williams, the panel “What Is the Value of a Film School Education?” examined the pros and cons of obtaining a film degree for entry and success in the documentary field.

**Aymar Jean-Cristian (PhD, University of Pennsylvania)** hosted an April event at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago to celebrate the premieres of pilots and web series distributed on his OTV Open Television digital platform. New series include *Damaged Goods* and *Good Enough*. As part of the festivities, Christian moderated Q&As with the show’s creators.

**Leslie DeChurch (PhD, Florida International University) and Noahsir Contractor (PhD, University of Southern California)** (top above) presented their research on crew compatibility and teamwork for NASA’s projected Mars mission at the American Association for the Advancement of Science conference in February in Washington, DC. Early findings identified one mission’s weak spots attracted major media coverage and landed the pair’s work in such publications as *The Economist* and *Science Daily*.

**Tracy Davis (PhD, University of Warwick)** enjoyed a six-week run at the Hox Theater in Los Angeles. Based on slave narratives, the 2008 play follows a dying plantation owner who wishes to free his slaves and whose wife’s rejection of his decision causes the plantation to erupt in chaos. The production’s cast consisted entirely of actors of color.

**Linda Gates (MA, New York University)** wrote *Spawning in Shakespeare’s Voice: A Guide for American Actors*, published this spring by Northwestern University Press. The book is intended for undergraduate and graduate acting students as well as professionals wishing to perform Shakespeare with the skill of classically trained actors. It is also valuable for European actors interested in performing Shakespeare in American English and British action who would like to explore Shakespeare from an American perspective. Focusing on breathing, resonance, diction, and other technical elements of voice and speech, the guide also provides an introduction to verse speaking and scanning and to Shakespearean rhetorical devices such as anaphore, alliteratio, onomatopoeia, irony, metaphor, and wordplay.

**Elizabeth Gerber (PhD, Stanford University)** cohosted a Stanford University workshop with practitioners and academics last December on scaling design thinking. She is now working on an article detailing the findings for the Sloan Management Review. For America, the initiative she spearheaded, held an event in San Francisco last winter on the role of trust in design. The heads of design at Airbnb (which hosted the event) and Walmart spoke with the CEO of Artefact, a leading Seattle-based interaction design organization.

**Kyle Henry (MFA, University of Texas, Austin)** was selected as a 2019 Kaplan Fellow. This prestigious residency—judged by eminent humanities professors from beyond Northwestern—allows recipients either a full year’s leave or a teaching reduction in order to develop their projects within an interdisciplinary setting. Henry’s project, the film *Mourning*, explores the sometimes fraught relationships between elderly workers and the families they care for.

**Dassia Posner (PhD, Tufts University)** was shortlisted for the Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space Award for her book *The Director’s Process: E. T. A. Hoffmann and the Russian Theatrical Avant-Garde*.

**On the Screen:**

- **Nina Kraus (PhD, Northwestern)** continues to be in demand nationwide for keynote addresses. Recent highlights include “Teaching Music for Brain Health” at the Music Institute of Chicago, “Moderating from Arts Research to R&D” at the National Endowment for the Arts, “Music and the Mind” with celebrated soprano Renée Fleming at Chicago’s Harris Washington Library Center, and a talk about Brain Awareness Week at the University of Chicago. She will continue to speak extensively through summer and fall.

- **Hamid Naficy (PhD, UCLA)—a** well-known scholar on Iranian, postcolonial, and diaspora cinema—was the subject of a documentary that screened in February at the Gene Siskel Film Center and the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art. Maryam Sepahpoo’s film *Month Have in a Minor Key: Hamid Naficy on L.A.* contextualizes Naficy’s many professional accomplishments within his personal experience as well as the political and social history of Iran and the United States. Additionally, *Iran Names*, a leading Canadian bilingual Persian-English journal, will publish a full special issue celebrating Naficy’s career, publications, films, and caricatures.

**Ariel Rogers (PhD, University of Chicago)** wrote *On the Screen: Displaying the Moving Image, 1926-1934*, published this month by Columbia University Press. Rogers explores the role screens played at the height of Hollywood cinema—how filmmakers, technicians, architects, and exhibitors used a variety of screens within diverse spaces, including studio soundstages, theaters, homes, stores, and train stations.

**Anna Shapiro (MFA, Yale School of Drama)** will direct the Broadway-bound Elton John musical *The Devil Wears Prada*. Shapiro is the artistic director of Chicago’s Steppenwolf Theatre and the director of the School of Communication’s new MFA program in acting.
Gail Shapiro (MFA, Yale School of Drama) plays the recurring role of Nurse Ratched on NBC’s Chicago Med. She appeared at Chicago’s Victory Gardens Theater June 1–July 3 in I Forgot, directed by Devon De Mayo and written by Steven Levinson (a Tony Award winner for Dear Evan Hansen).

Ines Sommer (MFA, School of the Art Institute of Chicago) organized the inaugural Doc Chicago conference, which brought together filmmakers from Chicago’s diverse documentary community. Featuring expert panels, a short docs program, community conversation, and networking, the free March event offered an opportunity for local documentary filmmakers to learn, exchange ideas, and connect.

Mary Zimmerman (PhD, Northwestern University) directed The Music Man for Chicago’s Goodman Theatre this summer. Her ofuro performed theatrical adaption of Robert Louis Stevenson’s Treasure Island was published this summer by Northwestern University Press. The adaptation marries Zimmerman’s renowned energy and imagination with the larger-than-life tale of seafaring adventure.

Faculty focus

Jake Smith (PhD, Indiana University) released his book Esc this spring on iTunes. An academic book reimagined as a podcast or audiobook, Esc is a work of experimental audio-based scholarship combining sound studies, radio history, and environmental criticism. This fully open-access digital suite of audiographic essays is presented as a co-part podcast series combining spoken commentary, clips from classic radio dramas, excerpts from films and television shows, news reports, and the work of contemporary sound artists.

J.P. Sniadecki (PhD, Harvard) recently received an individual Graham Foundation Grant and was an invited visiting speaker at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston’s Core Program. This summer he will be an artist in residence at the MacDowell Colony.

AMTP focuses on mental health

Roger Ellis (MFA, San Diego State University) directed the American Music Theatre Project’s May workshop performance of Get Out Alive, an autobiographical multimedia musical by Chicago-based artist and musician Nikki Lynette. With Ellis’s guidance, what started out as a one-woman show was molded into a work that can experiment, but Lynette’s radical exploration of self and the show’s striking audiovisual elements point to the future of the medium. “This was an opportunity for AMTP to expand its view of what a new musical can look like and bring the mental health conversation to campus in a new way,” says AMTP producing director Brannon Bowen (C’15). “Nikki activates and energizes conversations around mental health, abuse, trauma, suicide, and sexual assault specifically in communities of color, giving a voice to those who don’t see themselves or their struggle represented in the media.”

The opening of the piece kicked off Mental Health Awareness Month. Lynette also held a mental health awareness workshop for students.
Alumni achievements

Class notes are selected from stories of alumni featured in the media as identified by the University’s Office of Alumni Relations and Development and updates to出售于Dialogue by mail or email at dialogue@northwestern.edu.

1940s

Peggy Holmerich (C48) was honored as Philanthropist of the Year by Oklahoma State University’s Women for OSU on April 25.

1950s

Madeline Miles (CC56) received the 2019 B.E.A.C.O.N. Award. Recognizing enthusiastic advocacy for community and organizational needs, the award was presented by Beacon Light, an affiliate of Pennsylvania’s Journey Health System.

1970s

Joanne Williams’ (C71) was honored at the 2017–18 Chicago/Midwest Regional Alumni achievements

1980s

Anbheet Eshbach (C89) is now the president of Kindbody, a women’s healthcare start-up company. She is the founder and former CEO of Exhale Spa, which was sold to Hyatt Hotels in 2013.

1990s

LeSLie Demos (C89) has joined Chicago’s Steppenwolf Theatre Company as its new associate artistic director. In this role he will oversee and facilitate artistic operations while assisting artistic director Anna Shapiro in administrative and production work. Focuser of Small A’s, a digital production company based in Venice, California, Demos produced the film Diver, an award winner at the Sundance and Berlinale Film Festivals, and coproduced the Ladymad Klang Mambau film On Tip Toe, nominated for an Academy Award and an Emmy Award. As an actor he has appeared on numerous Chicago stages as well as at the Kennedy Center, at London’s National Theatre, and on Broadway.

2000s

David Kraghaj (C81, C98) was recently elected to the American Law Institute, founded in 1933 by prominent judges, lawyers, and academics to improve law and its administration in the United States.

Amy Zadeik Anderson (C82) was named executive director of the National Endowment for the Arts, which is the federal agency that uses tax revenue to fund the arts in the United States.

Jennifer Hsiang (C91) is a member of the Policy and Community Engagement Liaison for the Portage Area Regional Transportation Authority in Portage County, Ohio.

2010s

Seana Kepford (C92) wrote, produced, and starred in 30 Miles from Nowhere, a thriller about old college friends gathering for a funeral and the spooky events that ensue during their stay at a nearby cabin. The film was coproduced by Kelly Demaret (C93), Rob Benedict (C95) co-starred, and his band, Louden Swain, performed a song for the film. Andrea Peterman (BSMaj) also contributed songs. The cast features the late Roshyn Alexander (C46).

Matthew Friedman (C93) edited Lulu Wang’s film The Farewell, which premiered to critical acclaim this year at the Sundance Film Festival and was immediately picked up for distribution by A24. In addition to editing feature films, Friedman teaches advanced screen editing at the American Film Institute in Los Angeles.

Kat Fallis (GC14), an adjunct screening lecturer in the Department of Radio/Television/Film, is the author of the young adult novel Undaunted, published last spring by Scholastic Press. It is the companion book to her dystopian romance Zealman, which received rave reviews from Publishers Weekly and School Library Journal and was added to the Tome Student Literary Society “1 List” for “clean” teen reads. Fallis also wrote the underwater Western adventure Dark Lip and Rip Tide, both also published by Scholastic Press.

Gabrielle Santinelli (C93) coached actors Danielle Macdonald and Ashley Thomas for Skin, the 2019 Oscar-winning live-action short. She went on to work with Macdonald on the upcoming feature film Skin, which also stars Jamie Bell and Vera Farmiga. Santinelli recently joined the theatre faculty at USC’s School of Dramatic Arts, teaching voice over acting, advanced voice direction, and acting in English.

NUEA news

On December 7 NUEA West held a casual holiday party, the Fun & Festive Mixer, in Hollywood. The group held a networking night on April 14 in collaboration with the Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles; NUEA provided discount tickets to members for all festival screenings as well as the closing night gala. On May 23 the group’s Storytellers series continued, centering on the theme of breaks.

NUEA East is reorganizing and will have updates soon.

From left: Seana Kepford, Kelly Demaret, Michael Ness, Andrea Peterman, Tom Mizer, Rob Benedict, Samantha Fuhrerbrink Stark, and Wendy Radokoski at the premiers of 30 Miles From Nowhere.
Ian Thompson (C98) was appointed communications director for the Los Angeles City Controller’s office. Thompson is also a part-time strategist with the watching group Corporate Accountability, where he spent the last year as a deputy director overseeing development and communications.

Jennifer Bender (C05) is creating and developing the web series for which she is also a creative developer consultant for Live Oak Entertainment. Previously she served three years as the Araca Group’s vice president of production and development.

Nick Guroff (C00) directs communications for International Rivers, a global river protection group. Guroff is also a part-time strategist with the watchdog group Corporate Accountability, where he spent the last year as a deputy director overseeing development and communications.

Nancy Specter (GC95) was appointed chair-elect of the board at WEDI, a nonprofit organization focused on using health information technology (HIT) to create efficiencies in healthcare information exchange. Specter is the coding and HIT advocacy director at the American Medical Association.

Wei Lin Wong (C16) is senior vice president of corporate strategy and development at Information Resources. He previously served on the corporate strategy team for the company’s North America business.

Miguel Jiron (C06) is a story-board artist for the film Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse.

Coza Piz Browning (GC02, GC10) and Chloe Johnston (GC04, GC11) cowrote Ensemble: Made Chicago A Guide to Directed Theater, published by Northwestern University Press. Spotlighting the work of many School of Communication alumni, the book profiles 43 Chicago theater companies that create devised performance—including Second City, Free Theater, Lookout Theater—and includes exercises from each. The book is aimed at artists, teachers, students, and Chicago theater enthusiasts.

Elizabeth Poliana (C06) was promoted to producer for a new comedy series. Angelev follows a newly retired husband and father who falls in love with an augmented reality companion that in 2017 featured in the film Cuties. An augmented reality companion and his filmmaking partners crowd-fund the film and later partner with Strangely Compelling Multimedia.

Tarrance Brown (GC11) was hired as a visiting professor for screening of the University of Notre Dame.

Ilana Peela (C13) wrote the script for Diary of a Female President, which was given a 10-episode, straight-to-series order by Disney, the Walt Disney Company’s forthcoming direct-to-consumer streaming service.

Betsy Stewart (C4) played the role of Annette in the touring musical adaptation of the film Cruel Intentions. The tour’s artistic team included director Kenneth Ferrer (C04) and music director and arranger Zach Spouda (C11). The original film was written and directed by Roger H朱mbie (C88).

Caitlin Kunke (GC96) is a costume designer for the film The Addams Family. Kunke was named to Time magazine’s List of “The Best Humorists Writing Today.”

Nayma Arawali (GC15) was selected as one of eight participants for the Disney ABC Television Writing Program. The one-year program helps emerging writers secure staffing assignments via Disney-ABC series. She recently became a staff writer for ABC’s new hour-long romantic comedy series The Baker and the Beauty.

Clarifications
In the summer 2018 issue, the article “The Black Student Theatre Experience” detailed a 1972 trip to Joliet Prison during which the student group Black Poets/Writers/Performers staged a production. As mentioned, the show was directed by Renae Ward; the group was cofounded by Eileen Cherry Chandler (C73). In the winter 2019 article “Bridging the Word Gap: Helping Children’s Language Development,” the founders of Language Empowers All People (LEAP) are credited with creating their Beginning with Babble app; it was developed by a team that also included John Lybolt (C94, GC70, GC77) and Josh Holton.

2000s

Billy Eichner (C00) announced last winter that he will star in and cowrite a gay romantic comedy for Universal Pictures, a major step for underrepresented men and a major studio development. Eichner’s story will focus on two men with committed issues who fall in love. Judd Apatow has signed on to produce the film, and Nick Stoller will direct. Eichner voices Timon in the remake of Disney’s The Lion King.

Coya Paz Browning (GC02, GC10) and Chloe Johnston (GC04, GC11) cowrote Ensemble: Made Chicago A Guide to Directed Theater, published by Northwestern University Press. Spotlighting the work of many School of Communication alumni, the book profiles 43 Chicago theater companies that create devised performance—including Second City, Free Theater, Lookout Theater—and includes exercises from each. The book is aimed at artists, teachers, students, and Chicago theater enthusiasts.

Marc Underhill (C09) cowrote, produced, and directed Aangie, starring Richard Kind (C78) (above). The film premiered at Cinequest Film Festival, where it was chosen as one of 15 non-fuss features. Angelev follows a newly retired husband and father who falls in love with an augmented reality companion that in 2017 featured in the film Cuties. An augmented reality companion and his filmmaking partners crowd-fund the film and later partner with Strangely Compelling Multimedia.

It started on stage
When Charlotte Booker (C74) was a student, she played the role of Irene Malloy in The Miracle Worker, along with Samantha Mark Nutter (center), a Loyola University student taking part in summer theatre courses at Northwestern, and James Goode (C78). Now a New York actress, Booker crossed paths with Nutter again 38 years later when the Los Angeles–based comedy writer and composer traveled east for work. After Facebook friending and a glass of wine, a new match was made. Booker and Nutter will be starring in New York’s First this fall, 45 years after last seeing the stage outside Annie May Swift Hall. Booker gives a lot of credit to Janet Olson of the Northwestern University Archives for providing a production photo she had requested. She says Nutter was visibly touched when she gave it to him, asking, “How do we get the other guy out of the picture?”—which sealed the deal.

Nikki Yebah (GC16) is a professor at San Jose State University. Her play about police brutality, The Mothers, was recently performed in Sarasota after productions in Los Angeles, Sacramento, and San Jose.

Ryan Martin (C17) wrote and composed The Invisible 6,000 Foot Ladder to Heaven, which premiered in February at the Chicago Music Theater Festival. Directed by Elliott Hartman (C17) and starring Rachel Guth (C18), the comedy-drama was first performed in 2018 on campus as a staged reading by the Purple Crayon Players.

Sebastian Pinzon Silva (GC17) and current MFA in documentary media candidate Milton Guillen have been selected as diverse Voices in Documentary Fellows. The mentorship and development program for documentary filmmakers of color is offered by Kartemquin Films and the Community Film Workshop of Chicago.
In memory

David Charles Whitney, professor emeritus of communication studies and the School of Communication's former associate dean for faculty and graduate affairs, died February 9 at age 72 in Evanston. Whitney enjoyed a long and prestigious career in academia, researching and publishing works about the sociology and social history of mass communicators as well as taking on leadership roles and a key Northwestern international initiative.

David Charles Whitney was born in 1946, in Asheville, North Carolina, and grew up in Clemson, South Carolina, where he earned a bachelor's degree in English at Clemson University. He earned a doctorate in mass communication at the University of Minnesota, where he met Ellen Wartella. They married in 1976.

The two embarked on joint academic careers extending more than four decades; at Ohio State University (Whitney in journalism, Wartella in communication); for more than a decade at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's Institute of Communication Research; for 11 years at the University of Texas at Austin (Whitney in journalism, Wartella as dean of the College of Communication); and at the University of California, Riverside (Whitney as chair of the creative writing department, Wartella as provost). They came to Northwestern in 2010.

In 2015 Whitney moved to Doha, Qatar, to serve as associate dean of academic affairs for Northwestern's Middle East campus. He retired and returned to the United States in 2017. Whitney is survived by his wife, Pat, whom he married in 1967; dedicated activist and professor and debate coach, and they had a son, David. But after Isobel Berolzheimer died unexpectedly of pneumonia in 1937, the show went off the air. The surviving women attempted a reboot years later, but it didn’t last.

David Berolzheimer, in memory of Isobel Carothers Berolzheimer, gifted the School of Communication with a remembrance of his mother and her friends’ extraordinary legacy. The new second-floor black box space in the Virginia Wadsworth Wirtz Center for the Performing Arts is now the Clara, Lu ‘n’ Em Theater.

The flexible space, which was part of a Wirtz Center addition completed in 2016, seats up to 100 and features a 24-foot ceiling and a structural grid for dance activities and aerial work. The black box theater provides a space where students can strive for the same level of innovation, collaborative work that was the hallmark of Isobel Berolzheimer and her fellow alumnae.

Sadly, David Berolzheimer passed away May 17, before he could see the space with its new name. The school is honored to be the recipient of Berolzheimer’s generosity and deeply touched to memorialize the wonderful contributions of both mother and son.

Photos and history courtesy of Northwestern University Archives

Communicating gratitude

In 1930, three housewives with folksy Midwestern accents triggered a comedy movement. Clara, Lu ‘n’ Em, the first-ever radio soap opera, debuted on Chicago’s WGN and soon after moved to NBC and a national audience. Its three leads—Isobel Carothers as Lu, Helen King as Em, and Louise Starkey as Clara—would gossip in character about family, friends, and current events, all with funny malapropisms and mispronunciations that endeared them to an audience weary from the economic and social anguish of the Great Depression.

The irony, of course, is that these small-town housewives were entering new Northwestern School of (then) Speech graduates and Zeta Phi Beta sorority sisters who wrote their own scripts, negotiated their own contracts, and understood best of most of their contemporaries how to leverage humor in a new media frontier—a male-dominated frontier, at that.

The women—or ‘the girls’ as they were better known—wrote five shows per week and juggled in-person appearances with marriages and growing families. The show’s first sponsor was Super Suds dishwashing detergent, and in 1932 Colgate-Palmolive-Peet, the parent company, moved their show’s time slot from late night to midnight. This move tapped into their target ‘housewife’ audience via 42 stations and gave rise to the term ‘soap opera.’

Isobel Carothers (C26) married Howard Berolzheimer (C23, GC25), a Northwestern professor and debate coach, and they had a son, David. But after Isobel Berolzheimer died unexpectedly of pneumonia in 1937, the show went off the air. The surviving women attempted a reboot years later, but it didn’t last.

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Dialogue is published for the alumni of the School of Communication. Comments and suggestions may be mailed to Dialogue, Northwestern University School of Communication, Evanston, Illinois 60208, or emailed to dialogue@northwestern.edu. Please email all address changes to BioUpdate@northwestern.edu.

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