ENCOUNTERING OURSELVES

Each year the Dance Program presents a student showcase, Danceworks. To enhance the project, professional choreographers are invited to campus to work with student performers. In 2017 Danceworks welcomed Ballet Hispanico artistic director Eduardo Vilaro to guide our dancers through his piece “With My Face to the Wall” (above). “This concert opened up new avenues of discovery,” says Vilaro, “because you were seeing work by artists who tempted you to think differently.”

This spirit of discovery, different thinking, and openness is precisely what has positioned the School of Communication to spark innovation and creativity in our community, encouraging faculty and students to seek new experiences and take creative risks. Our students are increasingly global citizens, our faculty’s research knows no borders, and our alumni’s achievements are boundless.

As collaborative, multidisciplinary thinkers and doers, we find that the further we roam, the more clarity we have in what we can do and who we can be. And thanks to our generous donors, our quest for excellence is succeeding.

This calendar represents people, projects, and partnerships made possible by this culture of adventure that you, our friends, support. It is by moving across and beyond boundaries that we expand our understanding. Most important of all, in these journeys we encounter ourselves.

Give every year, make a difference every day.
Playing Miguel de Cervantes’s character Don Quixote is a blessing and a
curse for an actor: while it’s universally accessible, it has also seen 400
years of interpretations. How can something so well known be made fresh?

For starters, cast School of Communication theatre professor and noted actor
Henry Godinez. Then add the bold faculty and alumni artists who mounted the
adaptation Quixote: On the Conquest of Self at Chicago-area Writers Theatre
last fall. “This is a character I’ve lived with for a long time,” Godinez says, “but
this version gives me license to play with a different angle.”

This time-hopping Quixote starts in Mexico City, where the adaptation’s play-
wright and director both hail from. A 21st-century woman replaces sidekick
Sancho Panza. The updates demand extreme physical and lingual dexterity
from the lead actor; Godinez prepared for his critically acclaimed perfor-
mance through arduous training with Evanston-based Actors Gymnasium.

But despite the reimagining of Cervantes’s classic, Godinez remains true to
Quixote’s essence: fighting for the common good despite the perceptions
of others. The story the character tells is extraordinarily timely. Also extra-
ordinary is the sheer number of other Northwestern artists affiliated with
the production: costume designer Sanja Manakoski (GC17), lighting designer
Alex Ridgers (GC17), choreographer Billy Siegenfeld (professor of dance),
and the company’s managing director, Jon Faris (C03).

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ENCOUNTERING LEGENDS

Legends are reputed to be unreachable. But Julia Louis-Dreyfus (C83, H07), who has smashed Emmy Award records, still gives generously of her time to help Northwestern students. With her husband, Brad Hall (C80), she sponsors the School of Communication’s sitcom sequence.

Each fall about a dozen radio/television/film students are selected to write original sitcoms. A faculty jury reviews the draft pilots and chooses one for a production grant, funded by Louis-Dreyfus and Hall. The selected script is produced in the winter and spring, and its student creators are invited to Los Angeles to visit the set of Louis-Dreyfus’s HBO comedy Veep. The students pictured with her (center) above—Hope Rehak, Georgia Bernstein, Tyler Zencka, and Troy Lewis—found the encounter transformative.

“It was an amazing experience, as the students had a lot of one-on-one time with Julia Louis-Dreyfus and Brad Hall to talk shop and watch them work,” says RTVF senior lecturer Erik Gernand, who teaches the sitcom production course and accompanied the students to LA. “They absolutely took what they learned on set and used it in their own practice.”

No one could be better to learn from. In 2017 Louis-Dreyfus bested her own Emmy records by winning her sixth consecutive award as outstanding lead actress in a comedy series for Veep and her eighth overall performance award, the latter tying the record set by alumna Cloris Leachman (C48, H14).
ENCOUNTERING EACH OTHER

We’re staging our biggest show yet, and we want you there. On Saturday, April 21, the School of Communication presents “A Starry Night,” a star-studded live performance featuring prominent alumni in the entertainment industry and hosted by Stephen Colbert (C86, H11). This celebration of our community’s achievements also serves as the launch party for our new MFA programs and the downtown space that will house them.

The show is the closing event of CommFest 2018, a two-day campus festival of reunions, tours, master classes, lectures, exhibitions, student performances, and more, designed to showcase every facet of the school and our constituent communities. The event’s scope is unlike anything we’ve ever done, but big news demands a big celebration. “We want alumni to have an opportunity to see how the school is evolving to meet the challenges of this new century,” says Dean Barbara O’Keefe. “They will be able to explore our expanded and upgraded facilities, get to know the current generation of faculty and students, and experience the best work our community has to offer.”

“A Starry Night” (artists’ rendering above) will be mounted in Ryan Fieldhouse, a new athletics facility that our faculty and students will transform into a dazzling theater. Its massive size will accommodate thousands of attendees, a large set and stage, and a postshow celebration—the curtain call for a memorable weekend. To purchase tickets, view a schedule of events, and stay up to date on our celebrity performers, go to commfest.northwestern.edu.

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ENCOUNTERING SOUND

Nina Kraus, the Hugh Knowles Chair in Audiology and professor of neurobiology and otolaryngology, is a household name for those passionate about brain health. Quoted in news stories, sought after for speaking engagements, and tapped for panels, she examines the roles that music, bilingualism, aging, and injury play in auditory processing. Kraus’s more recent partnerships with Northwestern Athletics have enabled her to do innovative work in studying concussions and recovery.

In June, Kraus (above right) was featured in “Sound Health in Concert: Music and the Mind” with the National Symphony Orchestra at Washington’s Kennedy Center. Kraus spoke alongside celebrated soprano Renée Fleming (above left), National Institutes of Health director Francis Collins, and other notable figures in science and music. The presentation included Fleming’s rendition of Dvořák’s “Song to the Moon” and Kraus’s insights into sound, music, and emotion. The usually unflappable Kraus says, “I was so moved by Renée’s singing that it was a challenge to collect my thoughts and talk about the effects of the musical experience on the nervous system.” Kraus also appeared with four middle school musicians who performed and addressed music’s outsized role in their lives—a subject at the core of many of her groundbreaking encounters.

“As someone who lives across disciplines, I am encouraged by the intersection between NIH and the performing arts,” she says. “It will surely advance our understanding of music and the brain.”

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ENCOUNTERING FANTASIES

Leave it to David Catlin to upstage the Bard. Last summer at Northwestern, the theatre lecturer and alumnus staged A Midsummer Night’s Daydream, an adaptation of Shakespeare’s famous comedy. The mischief, fairies, and plotlines remained, but Catlin (C88) condensed and borrowed dialogue and sprinkled in new characters, songs, and a literal flip in look. Borrowing from the bold, acrobatic style of Chicago’s Lookingglass Theatre Company (which Catlin and his classmates cofounded), our undergraduate actors took to the skies and tumbled to the ground to tell the tale.

“We founded Lookingglass on many of the same core principles that we learned as students here—collaboration, theatrical innovation, and a story-centric creative process,” says Catlin. “Along with a profound love of language, we incorporate kinesthetic movement, visceral circus, and cinematic visual storytelling to more fully engage our audiences.”

Catlin’s vision was choreographed, rehearsed, and perfected in a new black box theater in the enhanced Virginia Wadsworth Wirtz Center for the Performing Arts. Designed with these performance styles in mind, the space boasts 24-foot ceilings, an aerial grid with structural supports for actors in harnesses, and sprung floors for soft landings. Fantastical, innovative storytelling needs facilities to support it; our donors recognized this and responded generously. Performing in these facilities prepares our students for professional work, where they adapt, evolve, and find inspiration in all directions.

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ENCOUNTERING BYGONE DAYS

Todd Rosenthal has a confession: he gets nervous about Chekhov. “It feels precious, like it’s behind glass,” he says, “like it’s not real.”

The Tony Award–winning set designer and professor of theatre experienced what can only be described as a breakthrough with his work last winter on Uncle Vanya at Chicago’s Goodman Theatre. Breathtaking in scale and detail, Rosenthal’s set paid painstaking attention to stylistic value and to the circumstances keeping the characters in just one room of the vast estate at the center of the story. “Not real” was not an issue.

Rosenthal was inspired by Havana, a book of photographs of the Cuban capital by Robert Polidori. “There’s this incredible sense of former splendor,” says Rosenthal, noting that one image in particular projected just the mood he desired for Vanya. The resulting set’s faded green walls and mismatched furniture (and even the odd piece of farming equipment) evoked a vanishing world.

With a career as vast and accomplished as his, Rosenthal now has a quick sense of what will and won’t work on stage; the concept behind Uncle Vanya came swiftly and organically. When artists and students approach him with abstract concepts or feelings they want to represent, Rosenthal’s advice is often to “just do that.” As he says, “When you have an idea, however ‘out there,’ sometimes putting that on stage is the right choice.”
ENCOUNTERING NEW STORIES

The collaboration was billed as Atlantic: Two New Musicals, One Epic Journey. And few of the students, alumni, and faculty involved would disagree.

Last summer, Northwestern’s American Music Theatre Project teamed up with the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland to create two new musicals that debuted at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Atlantic: A Scottish Story and Atlantic: America and the Great War were written by alumni and directed by faculty of the Conservatoire and Northwestern. It was an exciting international riff on the model developed by AMTP, which develops new musicals by emerging writers through workshops featuring Northwestern students and professional actors.

“Students from both institutions received music theatre technique training, participated in developmental workshops with the writers, and originated roles for two new musicals that premiered at the largest theatre festival in the world,” says AMTP producing director Brannon Bowers (C15). “Moreover, three recent alumni had the opportunity to write and premiere their work there, creating their own international profiles as music theatre writers and establishing Northwestern as a destination for music theatre writing education.”

The critically acclaimed shows depict two sisters separated by the ocean at the start of World War I. Their family bonds bridge their two countries, and this was echoed in the community forged among the project’s students and faculty—who found that great artistic partnerships can bridge any divide.

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ENCOUNTERING NEW VOICES

Brown Girls was the little show that could—and did. The internet television series created by Chicago-based writer-directors Fatimah Ashgar and Sam Bailey centers on the friendship of two women of color navigating their mid-20s. Its 2017 premiere garnered critical raves, major media coverage, and a development deal with HBO. An Emmy nominee and a Streamy Award winner for best indie series, it was hailed as groundbreaking and as an honest, entertaining show that was a long time coming—a story whose main characters come from intersectional communities that are dramatically underrepresented in mainstream television.

Brown Girls was also a big win for Aymar Jean Christian, assistant professor of communication studies. In 2015 he created a web-TV platform to showcase marginalized voices: the LGBTQ community, women, and artists of color. Among the distributed shows was Brown Girls, and its acclaim validated his extensive research in—and advocacy for—greater racial and sexual-identity representation on television. “The success of Brown Girls shows that investing in underrepresented artists can create real value,” says Christian. “Now I have connections with development executives from a range of networks, all desperately searching for new voices. It will be fascinating to see how these series develop, and I hope funders realize the incredible potential for research and development in Chicago.” Christian’s platform was created as a research project that was funded primarily through School of Communication grants.
ENCOUNTERING MIND AND MATTER

Ozge Samanci's latest interactive art installation allows participants to control a digitally simulated ocean using only their brainwaves. Calm seas and storms alike are powered by the viewer's thoughts; the sheer act of concentration can conjure a squall or sunshine. It was an ambitious concept even for this multidisciplinary artist—but the resulting encounter is breathtaking.

"I am amazed at the way it works," she says. "That surprised me—you can intentionally control your thinking." What Samanci hopes participants will think about is humanity's relationship with the natural world—as she explains, a glass of water we drink was once in Lake Michigan, a cloud, or a plant. "Our waste in the world is our extension," she says, "and how we think is impacting our environment."

An assistant professor of radio/television/film, Samanci teamed up with undergraduate students for almost two years to build and perfect game engines on a powerful computer that could realistically control virtual oceans. With headsets she found online and projection screens for the seascapes, the installation can and will travel as an art piece.

"It's hard to sustain focus," she says of human nature. "But this demands ultimate concentration." Which is not hard when encountering Samanci's art.
ENCOUNTERING NEW AUDIENCES

The dogs were big, little, sleepy, and awake. They wore hats, drove cars, and climbed trees. They partied. And young audiences stopped everything to watch those dogs go. P.D. Eastman’s classic children’s book Go, Dog. Go! was adapted last summer by Imagine U, Northwestern’s theatre program for children and families. In addition to wildly whimsical productions, Imagine U designs complementary events around its shows to further engage kids and their caregivers: interactive theatre workshops, block parties, crafts, and games. The outreach benefits families and student actors alike.

“Imagine U has built community among families from the University, Evanston, and surrounding areas,” says Lynn Kelso (GC97), Imagine U’s founder and artistic mentor. “These children are the most honest audiences, with fertile imaginations and empathetic responses. The storytelling shared with them onstage is exciting and stimulating for both the audience and the actors.”

Northwestern has emerged as a leader in teaching and advocating for inclusive theatre, especially for younger audiences. Imagine U now offers “relaxed” performances of each production to better serve children with developmental differences. Light and sound cues are softened, fidget toys and communication devices are welcome, and dedicated spaces and trained teaching artists are available for kids needing a break. These initiatives are empowering theatre’s next generation of leaders—and audiences who figure prominently in the creative process.

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ENCONTEERING THE WORLD NEXT DOOR

Kyle Henry’s feature-length film Rogers Park premiered in fall 2017 at the Chicago International Film Festival. Henry’s past films have screened at Sundance and Cannes, but with Rogers Park the associate professor of radio/television/film ventured far from his comfort zone to spotlight a place close to his heart. The film centers on two couples in the eponymous Chicago neighborhood who are wading through the messiness of middle age—the “second great coming-of-age,” as Henry puts it. Crafting this story, though, was a “radical departure” from his usual individual work.

To start, there was an outline but no script. Instead, he and partner Carlos Trevino held race-, gender-, and sexual orientation-blind casting to fill the lead roles. In a series of group meetings, those actors (including Christine Horn, above) wound up crafting most of the lines themselves. The process was designed to maximize veracity in the performances and to reflect the energy and diversity of Henry’s home community. “I tell my students to create what is most authentic,” says Henry.

Many of those students, as well as recent alumni, worked alongside Henry on the film, which was funded in part by a School of Communication Innovations Grant. Fear of the unknown—including new collaborative encounters—can hinder a filmmaker. So Henry tells his students, in words and deeds: “You won’t be afraid of the destination if you’re journeying together.”
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