



RENEGHUE

# No Safety Net

PROVOCATIVE  
THEATER.  
COURAGEOUS  
CONVERSATIONS.  
SAFE SPACES.

PROGRAM BOOK  
JAN 17 — FEB 3, 2018  
ANN ARBOR, MI



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“No Safety Net is an idea, an initiative, and ultimately a new chapter in the way that UMS thinks about presenting theater. We’ve selected four works by very different theater artists with a goal of sparking debate and bringing our audiences on a journey around some very interesting — and sometimes troubling — areas that are socially relevant. This festival is for those who like to dig in to the deeper and thorny issues of our time — but it’s also for those who are hesitant about doing so. We want to bring people together to think about how we’re moving ourselves forward as a community, as a country, and as a global society.”



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Matthew VanBesien". The signature is fluid and cursive.

**MATTHEW VANBESIEN —**  
*President, UMS*

“The arts provide a powerful opportunity for exploration and dialogue around some of the most challenging issues that our society is confronting. I am thrilled that UMS is taking this bold move to present a collection of socially relevant stage works, along with surrounding activities that bring important context and opportunities for reflection and action around those productions. No Safety Net provides a place and a context for members of our community to have difficult but necessary conversations and come to a deeper understanding about the world.”



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark Schlissel". The signature is cursive and elegant.

**MARK SCHLISSSEL —**  
*President, University of Michigan*

# Taking the Leap: A Conversation

by Allison Taylor

Presented between January 17–February 3, No Safety Net includes four performance titles and more than 35 community engagement activities, including Q&A sessions with the artists, a keynote conversation between P. Carl (founder of HowlRound) and Claudia Rankine (author of *Citizen: An American Lyric*), an MLK Day workshop on speculative histories with African-American playwright Jillian Walker, a workshop on systemic racism led by Kalamazoo’s ERACCE (Eliminating Racism & Creating/Celebrating Equity), and a panel on the lived experiences of transgender people in our community.

For a behind-the-scenes look into how No Safety Net came together, I sat down with UMS director of programming Michael Kondziolka, director of education and community engagement Jim Leija, and programming manager Mary Roeder.

**Allison Taylor:** How do you expect the events and performances included in No Safety Net to spark and facilitate conversation that may be different from the conversation around past UMS events and initiatives?

**Jim Leija:** When we were putting the season together and talking about the idea of No Safety Net, we were in the middle of one the most divisive election cycles in the history of our country. Both personally and professionally, we were starting to reflect on what it means to be divided. What does it mean to find yourself in a context where people are wildly polarized and have completely different points of view on the same issue?

Then, we thought about what the function of an arts organization is in furthering conversations on divisive issues, and how to potentially heal a community through an explicit set of issues-driven theater experiences. And ask, “What does it mean to emphasize points of view that we usually don’t get to hear?”

**Michael Kondziolka:** A capital “W.”

JL: Yes, a capital ‘W,’ “We.” This series looks at who the “We” is: how might “We” be thought of in a lot of different ways, and who is included in the “We” and who isn’t?

MK: On the most basic level, “We” as a performing arts organization are committed not only to work that exists in the past as part of a tradition of art-making, but also work that exists in the moment, our cultural moment — artistic voices that are engaged in a direct way with our moment. We are creating a platform for the contemporary artist to help us make sense of the world we live in; our human, social, and political condition. Just like the Greeks! It’s natural for us to create this space because we’re committed to contemporary art-makers. Then, the curatorial question becomes: How do we organize it? How do we plan it to ensure the biggest impact when we connect artists and audiences?

This point that Jim brings up about divisiveness, and the inability to connect and engage in constructive and meaningful ways, is one of the hallmarks of the moment that we live in, and it seems, sadly, to only become a more and more pressing phenomenon each day. But no one really seems to know what to do about it. One thing to try is to say, “Guess what, we’re going to use the special qualities of the art-maker as a way to convene around difficult topics and see if we, as performing arts presenters, can play a role in learning what it means to bring people together to have difficult conversations.”

JL: I think that’s a really good point, too. There are a lot of people within the context of our culture that are trying to puzzle through these questions of how to find common ground or how to actually solve this problem of being divided. We’re not going to solve that problem through this festival, but what we’re trying to do is access our toolbox as people in the performing arts and to really think about some of the unique ways in which the arts can bring people together.

Art is not public policy. We’re not making any laws. But the arts can help inform the ways in which we think about laws and public policy. To experiment with different ways of thinking and acting — practices that are embedded in theater — that might allow us to move the needle on how we think and talk about these issues, and even more so, how we behave around them.



MK: We exist within a very specific kind of community at the University of Michigan. U-M — and university campuses in general — is under fire and scrutiny for the ways in which they allow for or control speech, especially speech that is potentially controversial, painful, or even hurtful.

Artists play a special role in creating speech through their work, which can help us untangle this knot of how we feel about what is “correct” speech versus what is “incorrect” speech, what we are allowed to listen to, what we are allowed to consider. We’ve decided to “festivalize” these plays in a very concentrated way and join performance to contextual conversation.

AT: Can you contextualize the works a little bit? What supplementary events are you planning for the community to offer support for intense and potentially uncomfortable theater experiences?

MK: There is an intentional construction to the way we have placed these plays on the calendar — in terms of timing, design, and how we are creating connective tissue around these offerings.

JL: I think about the frame for the educational component of this experience being in three parts: First, there’s context building: get the information that you need or want to have, in order to really understand what you’re experiencing. Then there’s dialogue: a chance for audiences and artists to talk with each other about their shared experience. And then action: what within these pieces is actually calling out to you and saying you need to do something.

There are activities that align with this model of context, dialogue, and action. With the contextual portion, you can expect lectures and panels. In terms of dialogue, we’re inviting the audience and community discussants to reflect upon and respond to the performance.

Then, on the action side, we’re working with community partners to tease out what the practical aspects of each of these pieces are calling out. In particular, with *Underground Railroad Game*, UMS is partnering with Kalamazoo-based ERACCE (Eliminating Racism & Creating/Celebrating Equity) to offer a daylong anti-racism training. I think some people might wonder: “UMS is an arts organization, why would they do that?” And I would respond, “Well, why wouldn’t we do that? And why shouldn’t we do that?” If we’re going to summon the specter of racism on the stage, why not give people who want the opportunity a chance to confront their own racism in a structured and supportive space?

Surrounding Becca Blackwell’s performance *They, Themselves and Schmer*, we are working with networks and organizations of transgender people to build an audience for the show that Becca will recognize when Becca steps onto the stage, and to demonstrate that issues surrounding gender nonconformity are present in our local community.

MK: At UMS, we have the privilege of seeing lots and lots of artistic work, and it takes a lot to be like, “Oh wow, I’ve not experienced something like this in the theater before.” I don’t think I have been pushed to this point very often. But the works included in No Safety Net brought me there. Does that resonate with you guys?

JL: Definitely.

MK: We saw the works, and we just immediately knew there was something that was undeniably powerful that really needed to be considered.

**Mary Roeder:** I can speak to FK Alexander’s piece, *(I Could Go On Singing) Over the Rainbow*. It was the last addition to the No Safety Net festival. I saw it a couple years ago in Edinburgh and was just completely undone and moved by the experience in a way that’s really hard to describe. The reason that I like it as an inclusion in the festival is that it feels the most directly like an immersive, empathy-building experience. You’re sonically immersed, spatially immersed; you’re very close with other audience members. FK is an artist for whom her artistic practice is really a therapeutic practice. She identifies as living in recovery from addiction and mental collapse and a lot of the durational and repetitive elements of her work are ways of grappling with those lived experiences. She’s inviting audience members into what is a very personal experience for her.

MK: The reason I love the inclusion of *(I Could Go On Singing) Over the Rainbow* so much, is that this piece feels very poetic, and feels like a metaphor for potentially entering into a space of discomfort and danger. Understanding that something very nurturing, beautiful, and comforting can grow out of entering a space like that is a beautiful metaphor for all that is happening for audience members when they engage with this kind of work and all the works included in No Safety Net. The old risk/reward formula.

JL: In a very literal sense, FK is using the action of performance as a sort of coping mechanism, and I think that there’s something about the series that

asks the questions, “How do we cope in a world that seems to be rapidly changing? Where are all of the norms that we thought existed?”

To me, in a lot of ways, the invocation of No Safety Net is that the old rules don’t seem to apply any more. What are the new rules? What are the ways that we cope with making a new or different world?

AT: You refer to this festival as a little bit dangerous. Do you anticipate pushback? And if so, how do you plan to deal with that pushback?

MK: It’s easy to imagine that there’ll be pushback, but in reality, I don’t know if that’s going to happen.

JL: In certain cases, people have wondered whether we are preaching to the choir. I actually think that people are going to have to confront whether or not they are actually members of the choir....

MK: There is this wonderful moment in *Underground Railroad Game* — it’s the part that I remember the most. It’s the use of the words “moving forward” versus “progress,” and the way in which the two characters think very differently about what they mean. *Underground Railroad Game* is going to make a lot of people feel very uncomfortable for some very basic reasons: nudity makes people feel uncomfortable; sexual situations on stage can often times make people feel uncomfortable; language — especially incorrect language — can make people feel very uncomfortable. It’s going to be fascinating to see what happens.

AT: Can you reflect on the title “No Safety Net?” What does it mean?

MK: For me, because of who I am, the thing that’s most meaningful to me about the title is the way in which it’s actually tweaking ideas of the obsessively correct context within which we live. I love the fact that we’re using a word like “safety,” which is such a loaded, coded word, especially within the University context. I love the way that the use of this word is sort of referencing that. The original title for the festival was “No Safety Net: Theater for Unsafe Conversations in Safe Spaces.” That really played with this notion of the word “safe.”

MR: We are engaging with language politics. It’s worth noting that there was some pushback around the title. There’s privilege in engaging with “safety” through the context of a performance festival, when for many, very real concerns about “safety” are

literally a matter of day-to-day survival.

JL: It’s like what U-M professor of theatre & drama Anita Gonzalez said, “One person’s safety is another person’s reality.”

MK: I also think it would be disingenuous to not call out the fact that the title says more about our organization — UMS — and where the organization is at this moment, and what the organization aspires to do, than it does about the reality of a diverse community in southeastern Michigan. We have been trying, over the last seven years specifically, to create more and more value for audience members around a wider bandwidth of emotional experience when they go to a performance.

JL: We want to encourage dilating the potential range of responses from audience members. You hope that people will start to value something different than “that made me feel good,” or “that didn’t make me feel good.” Someone actually might say, “That didn’t make me feel good, but I learned something.” Or “That made me feel fantastic, but it doesn’t change my mind about anything.”

There are lots of potential ways in which we can react to work. There is a way in which the series asks for a kind of response that I think is pretty complex. I think No Safety Net is also a kind of...

MR: ...provocation.

JL: Yes, a provocation. It’s putting a flag in the ground. It’s saying that we want to be a part of the conversation that’s happening right now about many social issues and that the arts have something to bring to the conversation.

MR: In some ways it’s maybe harder to understand the rationale for including *Us/Them* in this series. The piece takes its creative inspiration from a particular terrorist incident in a school in the Caucasus. I think the reason that I find the inclusion of *Us/Them* so interesting is that the piece asks questions about how young people process trauma and how that processing might be different from the processing of adults.

Bronks, the theater company that created the piece, is a company that makes theater for young people. When this piece was premiered, they listed it as suitable for pretty young audiences, and as you move further and further west (it’s been performed in the UK, and we’re presenting the US premiere), the age appropriateness level continues to rise. I think they listed it as “12+” in the UK, and now we’re listing it at

“14+” here, and it’s interesting to ask the question of what is appropriate for young audiences.

MK: Mary, I think it’s just brilliant that *Us/Them* is included in this context, because again, it’s asking this question, “What does it mean to keep the kids safe in a world where they have access to everything?” Kids are never going to be shielded from the realities of all this and yet the impulse is to keep the children safe. It’s perfect. Its inclusion is as much about what’s appropriate for a specific audience as it is about anything else. Or, how we place restrictions in the name of audience “age appropriateness” that are ultimately grand illusions made in the name of “safety” and control.

I think these No Safety Net pieces also have aesthetic ideas and performative ideas embedded in them that for some people will feel new and provocative.

MR: Provocation through content, but also through...

MK: ...aesthetics.

MR: Aesthetics.

*Allison Taylor is a junior dual degree undergraduate student at the University of Michigan studying violin performance and communication studies. She is a UMS education and community engagement departmental student and a daily arts writer for The Michigan Daily.*

# Continue the Conversation

Please join UMS and our University and community partners for a series of events that highlight important historical, political, and artistic contexts for the works in No Safety Net and create space for gathering, dialogue, and celebration!

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## **Keynote Event with the Penny Stamps Speaker Series: A Conversation with Claudia Rankine and P. Carl Theater Matters: Activism, Imagination, Citizenship**

Thursday, January 18 // 5:10 pm  
Michigan Theater, 603 E. Liberty Street

Can theater promote social justice? Can a play help its audience imagine — and then manifest — a more equitable America? How is art-making an act of engaged citizenship? Acclaimed poet, playwright, and MacArthur “Genius” Fellow Claudia Rankine (*Citizen*) sits down with dramaturg P. Carl, the founder of the online theater commons *Howlround* and Distinguished Artist in Residence at Emerson College, to discuss the ways contemporary theater and performance can help catalyze and promote social justice issues. This event will also be live-streamed at [www.ums.org](http://www.ums.org). *Presented in collaboration with the Penny Stamps Distinguished Speakers Series.*

## **Workshop: Introduction to Systemic Racism with ERACCE**

Saturday, January 20 // 10:00 am  
Michigan Union, Kuenzel Room, First Floor, 530 S. State Street  
Registration fee: \$15/students, \$50/general public

What can you do to eliminate racism? How does your own racial identity factor into larger systems of power and oppression? Ask questions, challenge your own perceptions, and extend your knowledge surrounding race and racism in this workshop led by Kalamazoo-based ERACCE (Eliminating Racism & Creating/Celebrating Equity).

## **FRAME: A Salon Series on Visual Art, Performance, and Identity**

Mondays, January 22, February 19, and March 19 // 7:00 pm  
202 S. Thayer Building, Atrium

A series of open dialogues around contemporary visual art, performance, and identity will be hosted by Detroit-based performance artist and U-M alumna Jennifer Harge and by art critic, DIA curator, and co-founder of ARTS. BLACK Taylor Renee Aldridge. *Presented in collaboration with Harge Dance Stories, ARTS. BLACK, U-M Institute for the Humanities, the U-M Office of Academic Multicultural Initiatives, and the Office of Multi-Ethnic Student Affairs.*

## **Panel: Russia's Complex Relationship with the North Caucasus: Past and Present**

Tuesday, January 23 // 6:00 pm  
1010 Weiser Hall, 500 Church Street

Panelists will present a brief history of Chechen-Russian relations, discuss the origins of radical movements in the North Caucasus that led to the Beslan School Siege of 2004, as well as ongoing attempts for justice by the victims' families. Speakers include Tanya Lokshina, Russia program director for Human Rights Watch; Alexander Knysh, U-M professor of Islamic Studies; and Pauline Jones, U-M professor of political science and director of the International Institute and the Digital Islamic Studies Curriculum (DISC). *Presented by the U-M Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies.*

## **Lecture: Crackdown in Chechnya: Ramzan Kadyrov's Brutal Rule and International Human Rights**

Wednesday, January 24 // 12:00 noon  
110 Weiser Hall, 500 Church Street

For more than a decade, Ramzan Kadyrov has led Chechnya through brutal repression with the tacit blessing of the Kremlin, gradually becoming a tyrant by ruthlessly eradicating even the mildest forms of dissent. Tanya Lokshina, Russia Program Director for Human Rights Watch, addresses the horrific human rights abuses in Chechnya. *Presented by the U-M Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies.*

## **Lecture and Panel: Gender Identity 101 and Being Transgender in Our Community**

Saturday, February 3 // 6:00 pm  
Pierpont Commons, East Room, 2101 Bonisteel Boulevard

This combined lecture and panel will provide a basic primer on preferred language around gender identity, and explore the lived experiences of transgender people in our community. *In collaboration with the U-M Spectrum Center's "My Voice" program which provides panels of trained LGBTQ+ speakers to share their personal stories with audiences.*

## **Decompress: A Closing Night Celebration of No Safety Net**

Saturday, February 3 // 9:30 pm  
Blind Pig, 208 S. First Street

After three weeks of No Safety Net, we all deserve a little self-care. Join us for a relaxed closing-night celebration featuring DJs and musicians from Detroit's Seraphine Collective, including Mother Cyborg and Anya Simone, appearances by No Safety Net artists, mixing and mingling, snacks, and a cash bar. Free entry with a No Safety Net ticket stub, or \$5 cover.

*Unless otherwise indicated, all events are free and open to the public. Please note that some locations have limited seating and visitors will be seated on a first-come, first-served basis.*

*For a complete listing of public residency activities and more information, please visit [ums.org/nosafetynet](https://ums.org/nosafetynet).*





Wednesday Evening, January 17, 2018 at 7:30  
Thursday Evening, January 18, 2018 at 7:30  
Friday Evening, January 19, 2018 at 8:00  
Saturday Afternoon, January 20, 2018 at 2:00  
Saturday Evening, January 20, 2018 at 8:00  
Sunday Afternoon, January 21, 2018 at 2:00  
Arthur Miller Theatre, Ann Arbor

# UNDERGROUND RAILROAD GAME

*A production of*  
**Ars Nova**

**Jennifer Kidwell and Scott R. Sheppard**  
**with Lightning Rod Special**  
*Writers*

**Taibi Magar**  
*Director*

## RENEGHUE

31st, 32nd, 33rd, 34th, 35th, and 36th Performances of the 139th Annual Season

These performances are funded in part by the Building Audiences for Sustainability initiative of The Wallace Foundation and by the National Endowment for the Arts.

Media partnership provided by Ann Arbor's 107one, *Between the Lines*, and *Metro Times*.

Special thanks to Taylor Renee Aldridge; Mother Cyborg; Anita Gonzalez; Cara Graninger; Martine Kei Green-Rogers; Tim Grimes; Chrisstina Hamilton; DJ Haintso; Jennifer Harge; DJ Haylo; Pauline Jones; Saba Keramati; Jennifer Knapp; Alexander Knysh; Amanda Krugliak; Aliisa Lahti; Shaunie Lewis; Tanya Lokshina; Liz Malinkin; Peggy McCracken; Augusta Morrison; Andrew Morton; Diana Nucera; Fernando Ospina; Marysia Ostafin; Jenyce Poindexter; Will Sherry; Ahya Simone; Mary Taylor; Jillian Walker; the Ann Arbor District Library; ARTS.BLACK; the Blind Pig; Equality Michigan; ERACCE; Harge Dance Stories; the Seraphine Collective; the U-M Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies; the U-M Institute for the Humanities; the U-M International Institute; U-M Multi-Ethnic Student Affairs; the U-M Office of Academic Multicultural Initiatives; the U-M Spectrum Center; and the U-M Stamps Gallery for their participation in events surrounding No Safety Net.

Special thanks to Tiffany Ng, assistant professor of carillon and university carillonist, for coordinating the pre-performance music on the Lurie Carillon prior to Saturday evening's performance.

*Underground Railroad Game* appears by arrangement with ArKtype.

In consideration of the artists and the audience, please refrain from the use of electronic devices during the performance.

The photography, sound recording, or videotaping of this performance is prohibited.

**A gender-inclusive restroom is located in Room 1236 of the Walgreen Drama Center, on the first floor near the north entrance of the building.**



## PERFORMERS

Jennifer Kidwell  
Scott R. Sheppard

## CREATIVE TEAM

*Writers* / Jennifer Kidwell & Scott R. Sheppard, with Lightning Rod Special  
*Director* / Taibi Magar  
*Production Design* / Tilly Grimes  
*Scenic Design* / Steven Dufala  
*Lighting Design* / Oona Curley  
*Sound Design* / Mikael Sulaiman  
*Fight Choreographer* / Ryan Bourque  
*Movement Consultant* / David Neumann  
*Production Stage Manager* / Lisa McGinn  
*Assistant Stage Manager* / Natalie Hratko  
*Production Manager/Technical Director* / Brandon Wheat  
*Lighting and Sound Supervisor* / Sam Juhnke

*Underground Railroad Game runs approximately 75 minutes in duration and is performed without intermission.*

The Ars Nova production of *Underground Railroad Game* premiered Off-Broadway in New York City on September 24, 2016.

*Underground Railroad Game* premiered in the 2015 Fringe Festival presented by FringeArts in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.



After Wednesday evening's performance, please feel free to remain in your seat for an artist Q&A to get a glimpse into the lives and minds of the artists who bring their creativity to the stage.

### Community Dialogue

After Saturday evening's performance, join us for a community dialogue hosted by Jim Leija, UMS director of education & community engagement, and Martine Kei Green-Rogers, dramaturg and assistant professor of theater, SUNY New Paltz. They will be joined by several community leaders to engage audience members in discussion around the themes of each performance. The floor will be open to reflect, discuss, analyze, and respond to the performance. If you're attending the performance on a different date, you are welcome to join the post-performance discussion on Saturday evening — just bring your ticket stub.

## THE STORIES OF OUR PRESENT

by Shaunie Lewis



When I first saw *Underground Railroad Game* I was utterly shook! I'd never seen a play about race quite like this. *Underground Railroad Game* is on a new wave of social justice theater that focuses on bridging the past and present when

it comes to race. To me, this is a brilliant concept because when it comes to race relations, we are a country that desperately needs healing. But in order to heal, we have to examine the foundation upon which this hatred and sickness is built.

Up until fairly recently, we haven't been making this examination in the theater. With the exception of a select few plays (all written and produced within the last 20 years), in Black American theater we mostly see vignettes of the past: musicals about slavery, plays about hard life in the fifties, etc. The stories of our past. And we also see plays that paint portraits about certain Black experiences. The stories of our present. But it's rare that we see plays that combine them all. *Underground Railroad Game* provides us with that combination — one that's incredibly necessary because it is a representation of the way we are now. It's important to realize that the anger and/or guilt we feel today comes directly from our past. A past we never discuss or address. *Underground Railroad Game* directly exposes the elephant in the room and leaves the audience with no choice but to address it. Revolutionary!

*Underground Railroad Game* also stands out to me because it is the first play that I've seen that actually tackles the subtle racism people of color have to endure on a regular basis: micro-aggression. As defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, micro-aggressions are statements, actions, or incidents regarded as an instance of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group such as a racial or ethnic minority. In other words, micro-aggressions are subtle actions that keep people of different races at arm's length. They remind people of color that we are not seen as equals but rather as tokens; something exotic, entertaining, or, worst of all, a fetish. It's obvious that micro-aggressive racism is not "burn-a-cross-on-your-lawn" racism, however one does support the other regardless of the intention. It is important to educate people about micro-aggressions and the

ways in which they reinforce racist ideas. As a person of color, one of the hardest things I have to deal with is the constant battle against micro-aggressions. In our Ann Arbor community, we make a lot of assumptions about what people stand for, and most people believe that they are progressive. In certain ways, because Ann Arbor is such a progressive place, it's easier for micro-aggressions to go unchecked; they happen so frequently that they often go ignored. Calling people out for micro-aggressions is exhausting, and, frankly, no liberal likes to be called out as a racist. In *Underground Railroad Game*, micro-aggressions come to life in a scene where the two characters are walking down the street during a date. Stuart (a white man) says to Caroline (a black woman), "You're the first black woman I've dated." Right away, I recognized this moment, because it's happened to me in real life — maybe 85% of the time I've dated outside of my race. As an audience member, it's hard to know how to react to the moment: should we be offended? Should we laugh? It's very uncomfortable — most of this show is — but in discomfort, we learn the most. Open your mind. Be prepared to be educated. I wish I could tell you get comfortable, but it will be no use.

*Shaunie Lewis is a sophomore student at the University of Michigan majoring in acting and is from Detroit, Michigan. She can be seen in the upcoming U-M Department of Theatre & Drama studio production of Wild Honey at the Walgreen Drama Center in February.*

## THE MESSINESS OF RACE

by Anita Gonzalez



Race in America has always been fraught. Claudia Rankine writes in her book *Citizen*:

*A friend argues that Americans battle between the "historical self" and the "self self." By this she means, you mostly interact as friends*

*with mutual interest and, for the most part, compatible personalities; however, sometimes your historical selves, her white self and your black self or your white self and her black self, arrive with full force of your American positioning (14).*

What happens when historical selves explode within an imagined everyday context of the high-school classroom? How does the violence of the past connect to current evocations of racial anger? On the U-M campus, racist events have activated students to respond to perceived injustices through Black Lives Matter protests, anti-Spencer rallies, and other public demonstrations. Collectively, students of color have been advocating for their presence and humanity. And these contemporary racial politics have deep roots in American histories on- and off-campus.

Slavery was more than a system of chattel labor in which one person owned another. It was an embedded system of assumed racial superiority, coupled with the visceral reality of racialized bodies inhabiting the same space. The plantation owner and his wife ate meals next to their slaves, went to bed in close proximity to breathing, but dehumanized Black bodies they might later rape or assault. The trauma of this encounter, for both master and the enslaved, persists in the American psyche as a kind of post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD).

*Underground Railroad Game*, developed with Ars Nova and written and performed by Jennifer Kidwell and Scott Sheppard, unearths these troubled relationships. The evening begins with light-hearted exchange between audience and performers; we laugh, we chat, we feel welcomed. However, over the course of the evening, the friendly relationship between actors Jennifer and Scott disintegrates as they become overwhelmed by subconscious assumptions about how interracial relationships should work. Audience members, first engaged by the charismatic performers, gradually become more and more uncomfortable.

The performers who created the work embrace the trope of "play" for their charged exploration of race and power; they use simplistic imagery to reveal disturbing histories. While the initial encounter in the school classroom seems far-removed from the slave plantation, each character embodies an archetype they can't seem to erase or obscure. What first presents as an uncomplicated classroom game quickly deconstructs into a symbolic, avant-garde exploration of deeply rooted racial fetishes and fears. The aesthetic form of *Underground Railroad Game* is challenging. Partial nudity reveals the actors' vulnerability, while boldly confronting and titillating the audience. Intimate moments, such as an encounter inside of a shadowy tent, provoke exchanges of things unsaid. And throughout the evening, comedy relieves the tension.

Ars Nova, the New York-based company which produced the work, is known for developing avant-garde theatrical presentations which challenge contemporary social issues through the imaginations of artists in early stages of their professional development. The company encourages out-of-the-box approaches to creating art for the theatrical stage. And the performers represent this aesthetic. Jennifer Kidwell, a graduate of the Pig Iron Theatre Company's School for Advanced Performance Training dedicates herself to work that addresses the complexities of race and notions of American history, while her creative partner, Scott Sheppard, also a graduate of Pig Iron, is a teacher, director, and deviser from Philadelphia. Their shared training in ensemble theater is evident in the improvisational ambience of *Underground Railroad Game*. Director Taibi Magar, an Egyptian-American graduate of the Brown/Trinity MFA program, is equally invested in avant-garde explorations of political questions.

Race relations, particularly on the U-M campus, are seldom explored through the avant-garde, so it is encouraging to see *Underground Railroad Game* embedded within the No Safety Net series. In these times of polarization, where "rants" proliferate, the avant-garde offers an opportunity for nuanced engagement in complex issues not easily resolved in sound bites. *Underground Railroad Game* complicates our expectations about what racial dialogue is, forcing us to consider how the body itself carries memories and associations which are merely masked by civic dialogue. At the same time, the avant-garde pushes us to realize that art and comprehension might just be messy.

U-M President Mark Schlissel writes in a statement about campus racial incidents issued on November 21, 2017: "Words and actions meant to hurt someone based on their identity have no place at the University of Michigan and we condemn them." Unfortunately, the public face of racial intolerance emerges from deep-seated, often unresolved histories. Art, at its best, offers an opportunity to deeply examine how social systems impact present realities. *Underground Railroad Game* intervenes in this process, offering us a messy, but important exploration of race in the US.

*Anita Gonzalez (PhD), U-M professor of theatre & drama, heads the Global Theatre and Ethnic Studies minor at U-M. Her most recent books are Black Performance Theory, co-edited with Thomas F. DeFrantz, and Afro Mexico: Dancing Between Myth and Reality. She is currently writing the libretto to Home of My Ancestors for Houston Grand Opera.*

#### **JANUARY 20, 2018: ART ACTION DAY**

Formed by Laurie Anderson, Laura Michalchyshyn, and Tanya Selvaratnam, The Federation is an unprecedented coalition of individuals and organizations that believe in the power of art and are committed to keeping cultural borders open. It is committed to combatting xenophobia and the threatened closing of physical borders.

On January 20, 2018 — **ART ACTION DAY** — The Federation will use its platforms and voices to represent that art is essential to democracy. That date was decided because this past January 20, 2017, arts institutions were encouraged to close their doors in protest of the inauguration — a terrible idea! Never tell artists to be silent. On January 20, The Federation wants artists to be more loud and visible than ever.

For more information, please visit [wearethefederation.org](http://wearethefederation.org).

## TEACHING THE N-WORD

*A black professor, an all-white class, and the thing nobody will say*

by Emily Bernard

*Once riding in old Baltimore,  
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,  
I saw a Baltimorean  
Keep looking straight at me.*

*Now I was eight and very small,  
And he was no whit bigger,  
And so I smiled, but he poked out  
His tongue, and called me, "Nigger."*

*I saw the whole of Baltimore  
From May until December;  
Of all the things that happened there  
That's all that I remember.*

— Countee Cullen, "Incident" (1925)



### October 2004

Eric is crazy about queer theory. I think it is safe to say that Eve Sedgwick, Judith Butler, and Lee Edelman have changed his life. Every week, he comes to my office to report on the connections he is making between the

works of these writers and the books he is reading for the class he is taking with me, African-American Autobiography.

I like Eric. So tonight, even though it is well after six and I am eager to go home, I keep our conversation going. I ask him what he thinks about the word "queer," whether or not he believes, independent of the theorists he admires, that epithets can ever really be reclaimed and reinvented.

"'Queer' has important connotations for me," he says. "It's daring, political. I embrace it." He folds his arms across his chest, and then unfolds them.

I am suspicious.

"What about 'nigger'?" I ask. "If we're talking about the importance of transforming hateful language, what about that word?" From my bookshelf I pull down Randall Kennedy's book *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*, and turn it so its cover

faces Eric. "Nigger," in stark white type against a black background, is staring at him, staring at anyone who happens to be walking past the open door behind him.

Over the next 30 minutes or so, Eric and I talk about "nigger." He is uncomfortable; every time he says "nigger," he drops his voice and does not meet my eyes. I know that he does not want to say the word; he is following my lead. He does not want to say it because he is white; he does not want to say it because I am black. I feel my power as his professor, the mentor he has so ardently adopted. I feel the power of Randall Kennedy's book in my hands, its title crude and unambiguous. *Say it*, we both instruct this white student. And he does.

It is late. No one moves through the hallway. I think about my colleagues, some of whom still sit at their own desks. At any minute, they might pass my office on their way out of the building. What would they make of this scene? Most of my colleagues are white. What would I think if I walked by an office and saw one of them holding up *Nigger* to a white student's face? A black student's face?

"I think I am going to add 'Who Can Say Nigger?' to our reading for next week," I say to Eric. "It's an article by Kennedy that covers some of the ideas in this book." I tap *Nigger* with my finger, and then put it down on my desk.

"I really wish there was a black student in our class," Eric says as he gathers his books to leave.

—

"It's not that I can't say it, it's that I don't want to. I will not say it," Sarah says. She wears her copper red hair in a short, smart style that makes her look older than her years. When she smiles I remember how young she is. She is not smiling now. She looks indignant. She is indignant because I am insinuating that there is a problem with the fact that no one in the class will say "nigger." Her indignation pleases me.

Good.

"I'd just like to remind you all that just because a person refuses to say 'nigger,' that doesn't mean that person is not a racist," I say. They seem to consider this.

"And another thing," Sarah continues. "About dressing for class? I dislike it when my professors come to class in shorts, for instance. This is a











profession. They should dress professionally.”

Later, I tell my husband, John, about our class discussion. When I get to Sarah’s comment about professors in shorts, he says, “Good for her.”

—

I hold up *Nigger* and show its cover to the class. I hand it to the person on my left, gesture for him to pass the book around the room.

“Isn’t it strange that when we refer to this book, we keep calling it ‘the n-word’?”

Lauren comments on the affect of one student who actually said it. “Colin looked like he was being strangled.” Of the effect on the other students, she says, “I saw us all collectively cringing.”

“Would you be able to say it if I weren’t here?” I blurt.

A few students shake their heads. Tyler’s hand shoots up. He always sits directly to my right.

“That’s just bullshit,” he says to the class, and I force myself not to raise an eyebrow at *bullshit*. “If Emily weren’t here, you all would be able to say that word.”

I note that he, himself, has not said it, but do not make this observation out loud.

“No.” Sarah is firm. “I just don’t want to be the kind of person who says that word, period.”

“Even in this context?” I ask.

“Regardless of context,” Sarah says.

“Even when it’s the title of a book?”

I tell the students that I often work with a book called *Nigger Heaven*, written in 1926 by a white man, Carl Van Vechten.

“Look, I don’t want to give you the impression that I am somehow longing for you guys to say ‘nigger,’” I tell them, “but I do think that something is lost when you don’t articulate it, especially if the context almost demands its articulation.”

“What do you mean? What exactly is lost?” Sarah insists.

“I don’t know,” I say. I do know. But right here, in this moment, the last thing I want is to win an argument that winds up with Sarah saying “nigger” out loud.

#### September 2004

On the way to school in the morning, I park my car in the Allen House lot. Todd was the one who told me about the lot. He said, “Everyone thinks the lot at the library is closer, but the lot behind Allen House is so much better. Plus, there are always spaces, in part because everyone rushes for the library.”

It is true that the library lot is nearly always full in the morning. It’s also true that the Allen House lot is relatively empty, and much closer to my office. But if it

were even just slightly possible for me to find a space in the library lot, I would probably try to park there, for one reason. To get to my office from Allen House, I have to cross a busy street. To get to my office from the library, I do not.

#### November 2004

*Some of My Best Friends*, my anthology of essays about interracial friendship, came out in August, and the publicity department has arranged for various interviews and other promotional events. When I did an on-air interview with a New York radio show, one of the hosts, Janice, a black woman, told me that the reason she could not marry a white man was because she believed if things ever got heated between them, the white man would call her a nigger. I nodded my head. I had heard this argument before. But strangely I had all but forgotten it. The fact that I had forgotten to fear “nigger” coming from the mouth of my white husband was more interesting to me than her fear, alive and ever-present.

—

“Are you bi-racial?”

“No.”

“Are you married to a white man?”

“Yes.”

These were among the first words exchanged between Janice, the radio host, and me. I could tell — by the way she looked at me, and didn’t look at me; by the way she kept her body turned away from me; by her tone — that she had made up her mind about me before I entered the room. I could tell that she didn’t like what she had decided about me, and that she had decided I was the wrong kind of black person. Maybe it was what I had written in *Some of My Best Friends*. Maybe it was the fact that I had decided to edit a collection about interracial friendships at all. When we met, she said, “I don’t trust white people,” as decisively and exactly as if she were handing me her business card. I knew she was telling me that I was foolish to trust them, to marry one. I was relieved to look inside myself and see that I was okay, I was still standing. A few years ago, her silent judgment — this silent judgment from any black person — would have crushed me.

When she said she could “tell” I was married to a white man, I asked her how. She said, “Because you are so friendly,” and did a little dance with her shoulders. I laughed.

But Janice couldn’t help it; she liked me in spite of herself. As the interview progressed, she let the corners of her mouth turn up in a smile. She admitted



that she had a few white friends, even if they sometimes drove her crazy. At a commercial break, she said, "Maybe I ought to try a white man." She was teasing me, of course. She hadn't changed her mind about white people, or dating a white man, but she had changed her mind about me. It mattered to me. I took what she was offering. But when the interview was over, I left it behind.

—

My husband thought my story about the interview was hilarious. When I got home, he listened to the tape they gave me at the station. He said he wanted to use the interview in one of his classes.

A few days later, I told him what Janice said about dating a white man, that she won't because she is afraid he will call her a nigger. As I told him, I felt an unfamiliar shyness creep up on me.

"That's just so far out of...it's not in my head at all." He was having difficulty coming up with the words he wanted, I could tell. But that was okay. I knew what he meant. I looked at him sitting in his chair, the chair his mother gave us. I can usually find him in that chair when I come home. He is John, I told myself. And he is white. No more or less John and no more or less white than he was before the interview, and Janice's reminder of the fear that I had forgotten to feel.

—

Todd is married to Hilary, another of my close friends in the department. She is white. Like John, Todd is out of town this weekend. Since their two boys were born, our godsons, John and I see them less frequently than we used to. But Hilary and I are determined to spend some time together on this weekend with our husbands away.

Burlington traffic keeps me away from her and the boys for an hour, even though she lives only blocks away from me. When I get there, the boys are ready for their baths, one more feeding, and then bed. Finally, they are down, and we settle into grown-up conversation. I tell her about my class and our discussions about "nigger."

I tell her about the fear I have every day in Burlington, crossing that street to get back and forth from my office, what I do to guard myself against the fear.

"Did you grow up hearing that?" She asks. Even though we are close, and alone, she does not say the word.

I start to tell her a story I have never told anyone. It is a story about the only time I remember being called a nigger to my face.

"I was a teenager, maybe 16. I was standing on a sidewalk, trying to cross a busy street after school, to get to the mall and meet my friends. I happened to make eye contact with a white man in a car that was sort of stopped — traffic was heavy. Anyway, he just said it, kind of spit it up at me."

"Oh, that's why," I say, stunned, remembering the daily ritual I have just confessed to her. She looks at me, just as surprised.

#### December 2004

In lieu of a final class, my students come over for dinner. One by one, they file in. John takes coats while I pretend to look for things in the refrigerator. I can't stop smiling.

"The books of your life" is the topic for tonight. I have asked them to bring a book, a poem, a passage, some art that has affected them. Hazel has brought a children's book. Tyler talks about *Saved by the Bell*. Nate talks about Freud.

Dave has a photograph. Eric reads "The Seacoast of Despair" from *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*.

I read from *Annie John* by Jamaica Kincaid. Later I will wonder why I did not read "Incident" by Countee Cullen, the poem that has been circulating in my head ever since we began our discussion about "nigger." *What held me back from bringing "Incident" to class?* The question will stay with me for months.

The night of our dinner is an emotional one. I tell my students that they are the kind of class a professor dreams about. They give me a gift certificate to the restaurant that David and I frequent. I give them copies of *Some of My Best Friends* and inscribe each one. Eric demands a hug, and then they all do; I happily comply. We talk about meeting again as a class, maybe once or twice in the spring. The two students who will be abroad promise to keep in touch through our listserv, which we all agree to keep going until the end of the school year, at least. After they leave, the house is quiet and empty.

Weeks later, I post "Incident" on our listserv and ask them to respond with their reactions. Days go by, then weeks. Silence. After more prodding, finally Lauren posts an analysis of the poem, and then her personal reactions to it. I thank her online, and ask for more responses. Silence.

I get emails and visits from these students about other matters, some of them race-related. Eric still comes by my office regularly. Once he brings his mother to meet me, a kind and engaging woman who gives me a redolent candle she purchased in France, and tells me her son enjoyed "African-American Autobiography." Eric and I smile at each other.

A few days later, I see Eric outside the campus bookstore.

“What did you think about ‘Incident’?”

“I’ve been meaning to write you about it. I promise I will.”

In the meantime, *Nigger* is back in its special place on my bookshelf. It is tucked away so that only I can see the title on its spine, and then only with some effort.

*“Teaching the N-Word” was published in The American Scholar in September 2005. This excerpt was printed with permission from the author; the complete essay can be read at [www.ums.org/teachingnword](http://www.ums.org/teachingnword).*

*Emily Bernard is a professor of English and critical race and ethnic studies at the University of Vermont. Her first book, Remember Me to Harlem: The Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten (2001), was a New York Times “Notable Book of the Year.” Some of My Best Friends: Writers on Interracial Friendship (2004) was chosen by the New York Public Library as a “Book for the Teen Age, 2006.” Her essays have been published in several journals and anthologies, such as The American Scholar, Best American Essays, Best African American Essays, and Best of Creative Non-Fiction. Dr. Bernard has received fellowships from the Alphonse A. Fletcher Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the W.E.B. DuBois Institute at Harvard University. In 2008–09, Dr. Bernard was the James Weldon Johnson Senior Research Fellow in African American Studies at the Beinecke Library at Yale University. Michelle Obama: The First Lady in Photographs, a book she co-authored with Deborah Willis, was published by W.W. Norton in the fall of 2009. Another book, White Shadows: Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance, was published by Yale University Press in 2010.*

## ARTISTS

**Jennifer Kidwell** (*creator/performer*) is a performing artist. Recent projects include *Demolishing Everything with Amazing Speed* (Dan Hurlin), *I Understand Everything Better* (David Neumann/advanced beginner group), *Sans Everything* (AS 220), *Antigone* (The Wilma Theater), *I Promised Myself to Live Faster* and *99 Break-Ups* (Pig Iron Theatre Company), *Dick's Last Stand* (Whitney Biennial 2014, as Donelle Woolford), and *Zinnias: the Life of Clementine Hunter* (Robert Wilson/Toshi Reagon/Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon). She is currently working with Geoff Sobelle and Nichole Canuso and is a Pig Iron Theatre Company member, a Wilma Theater Associated Artist, a co-founder of the theater company Lightning Rod Special, and a co-founder of JACK. Her writing has been published in *Movement Research Performance Journal* #45 and *hyperallergic.com*. In 2013, she was awarded the TCG/Fox Resident Actor Fellowship (with PITC), naming *Underground Railroad Game* as her primary project. She is a 2016 Pew Fellow.

**Scott R. Sheppard** is an Obie Award-winning theater artist living in Philadelphia and New York City. He is a co-director of the Philadelphia-based theater company Lightning Rod Special. Select credits include *Underground Railroad Game* (co-creator/performer), which was named by the *New York Times* as one of the "Top 10 Shows of 2016" and is currently touring nationally and internationally; Pig Iron Theatre Company's (PITC) *99 Breakups* and *Period of Animate Existence* (co-creator/performer); PITC's *Gentlemen Volunteers* (performer); George & Co.'s *Holden* (co-creator/performer); Lightning Rod Special's *Sans Everything* (co-creator/performer); and Arden Theatre Company's *The Stinky Cheeseman* (performer, Barrymore nomination). Mr. Sheppard is a recipient of the Independence Foundation Fellowship in the Performing Arts, a 2018 artist-in-residence at Guild House, and an Obie Award-winner for "Best New American Theater Work" (*Underground Railroad Game*). He is a proud graduate of the inaugural class at Pig Iron's School for Advanced Performance Training.

**Taibi Magar** (*director*) is an Egyptian-American director based in New York, and a graduate of the Brown/Trinity MFA program. In New York, she has directed and developed work with TFANA, the WP Theater, Rising Phoenix Rep, and INTAR Theatre. Regionally, she has directed and developed work with Trinity Repertory Company, Pennsylvania Shakespeare Festival, Shakespeare & Company, and Oregon Shakespeare Festival. She is the recipient of a Stephen Sondheim Fellowship, an Oregon Shakespeare Festival Fellowship, a Public Theater Shakespeare Fellowship, the TFANA Actors and Directors Project Fellowship, and is an alumna of the Lincoln Center Directors Lab. She is a member of the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society and is represented by Ross Weiner at ICM Partners.

**Tilly Grimes** (*production design*) received her MFA from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. Select credits include *The Wildness*, *Small Mouth Sounds* (Ars Nova); *Kings* (WP Theater); *An Octoroon* (Wilma); *Don Giovanni* (Boston Lyric Opera); *Family Album* (Oregon Shakespeare Festival); *41-Derful*, *Motel Cherry* (Clubbed Thumb); and *Romance Novels for Dummies* (Williamstown). Upcoming projects include *Kingdom Come* (Roundabout) and *The Hunger* (BAM).

**Steven Dufala** (*scenic design*) is a multidisciplinary artist and musician based in Philadelphia. He works primarily in collaboration with his brother Billy as The Dufala Brothers, and has been working intermittently with dance and theater as a designer for about 15 years. He has worked with Pig Iron Theatre Company, BalletX, Kate Watson Wallace/anonymous bodies, Geoff Sobelle, and others. With Billy, he co-teaches sculpture at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and is represented by the Fleisher/Ollman gallery in Philadelphia. The Dufala Brothers' work is in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the West Collection, Pafa, and many private collections.

**Oona Curley** (*lighting design*) is a lighting and scenic designer. Recent credits in New York include projects at The New Ohio, La MaMa, JACK, The Cherry Lane, NYU/Tisch, and Columbia University. Recent regional credits include projects with FringeArts, Opera Philadelphia, and Chester Theatre Company. Frequent collaborators include Knud Adams, Piehole Theater Company, and Bearded Ladies Cabaret. She is a Princess Grace Award nominee, and recipient of the J.S. Seidman Award for Design Excellence, the Weston Award for Design, and the Zonta Award for Theatre Arts. She received her MFA from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. For more information, please visit [oonacurley.com](http://oonacurley.com).

**Mikaal Sulaiman** (*sound design*) is a Los Angeles-based sound designer. He attended the University of the Arts and later studied the Jacques Lecoq approach to physical theater at LISPA. Currently, he sound designs for film, theater, and dance. He has worked in the UK, Sweden, and Saudi Arabia. His most recent collaboration was on *Holoscenes* with Lars Jan of Early Morning Opera at the London's Burning event in conjunction with the Artichoke Trust.

**Lisa McGinn's** (*production stage manager*) Ars Nova credits include The Debate Society's *JACUZZI*, *Eager to Lose*, and *Game Play*. Recent credits include Geoff Sobelle's *The Object Lesson*, *Chimera* and *The Wholehearted* (Stein | Holum Projects), *The Light Years* (The Debate Society), *How to Build a Forest* (PearlDamour + Shawn Hall), and *Revolt. She Said. Revolt again*, and *Winners and Losers* (Soho Rep). Additional credits include Banana Bag and Bodice, Prelude Festival, Miller

Rothlein Dance, Clubbed Thumb, Theatre of a Two-Headed Calf, Mint Theatre, Talking Band, Fight or Flight Theatre, Trinity Theatre Company, and Two River Theatre Company.

**Natalie Hratko's** (*assistant stage manager*) Ars Nova credits include *KPOP*, *The Wildness*, *Sky Pony's Rock Fairy Tale*, *The Rise & Fall of Marcus Monroe*, *By the Water* (with Manhattan Theatre Club), and many Ars Nova ANT Fests, Showgasms, and galas. She was recently on international and national tours with Complexions Contemporary Ballet. Other credits include *Oh, Hello!* (Cherry Lane Theatre), *Scenes From A Marriage* (New York Theatre Workshop), *In Your Arms* (New York Stage and Film), Broadway Dance Lab, The Alvin Ailey School, and Martha Graham Dance Company.

**Ars Nova** is committed to developing and producing theater, comedy, and music artists in the early stages of their professional careers. Its unique development programs are designed to support outside-the-box thinking and encourage innovative, genre-bending work. Dubbed by *The New York Times* as a "fertile incubator of offbeat theater," Ars Nova blurs genres and subverts the status quo. With its feverish bounty of programming, Ars Nova is the stomping ground and launching pad for visionary, adventurous artists of all stripes. By providing a safe environment where risk-taking and collaboration are paramount, Ars Nova gives voice to a new generation of artists and audiences, pushing the boundaries of live entertainment by nurturing creative ideas into smart, surprising new work.

Ars Nova has been honored with an OBIE Award and a Special Citation from the New York Drama Critics' Circle for sustained quality and commitment to the development and production of new work. Notable past productions include *Time Out NY Critics' Pick KPOP*, created by Jason Kim, Helen Park, Max Vernon, and Woodshed Collective, directed by Teddy Bergman; "Best New American Theatre Work" Obie Award-winner and *The New York Times'* "Best of 2016" *Underground Railroad Game* by Jennifer Kidwell and Scott R. Sheppard with Lightning Rod Special, directed by Taibi Magar (now on international tour); "Outstanding Musical" Lortel Award-winner *FUTURITY*, by César Alvarez with The Lisps, directed by Sarah Benson; *The New York Times'* and *New York Post's* "Best of 2015" *Small Mouth Sounds* by Bess Wohl, directed by Rachel Chavkin (now touring the US after a return engagement Off-Broadway); *Time Out New York's* "Best of 2014" *JACUZZI* by The Debate Society, directed by Oliver Butler; the Tony Award-winning smash-hit *Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812* by Dave Malloy, directed by Rachel Chavkin; *Jollyship the Whiz-Bang* by Nick Jones and Raja Azar, directed by Sam Gold; the world premiere of the 2009 season's most-produced play *boom* by Peter Sinn Nachtrieb, directed by Alex Timbers; the show that put Bridget Everett on the map, *At Least It's Pink* by Everett, Michael Patrick King, and Kenny Mellman, directed by King;

and Lin-Manuel Miranda and Thomas Kail's first New York production, *Freestyle Love Supreme* by Anthony Veneziale and Miranda, directed by Kail. For more information, please visit [arsnovanyc.com](http://arsnovanyc.com).

**Lightning Rod Special** is a Philadelphia-based devised theater company, co-directed by Katie Gould, Mason Rosenthal, Scott R. Sheppard, and Alice Yorke. Exploding complex questions with precision and play, Lightning Rod Special makes live performance from the ground up. For more information, please visit [lightningrodspecial.com](http://lightningrodspecial.com).

*UMS welcomes the company members of Underground Railroad Game as they make their UMS debuts this week.*







Wednesday Evening, January 24, 2018 at 7:30  
Thursday Evening, January 25, 2018 at 7:30  
Friday Evening, January 26, 2018 at 8:00  
Saturday Evening, January 27, 2018 at 8:00  
Sunday Afternoon, January 28, 2018 at 2:00  
Arthur Miller Theatre, Ann Arbor

# US/THEM

*A production of*  
**BRONKS and Richard Jordan Productions**  
with Theatre Royal Plymouth and Big in Belgium  
in association with Summerhall

**Carly Wijs**  
*Writer and Director*

## RENEGHUT

37th, 38th, 39th, 42nd, and 44th Performances of the 139th Annual Season

These performances are funded in part by the Building Audiences for Sustainability initiative of The Wallace Foundation.

Media partnership provided by *Between the Lines* and *Metro Times*.

Special thanks to Taylor Renee Aldridge; Mother Cyborg; Anita Gonzalez; Cara Graninger; Martine Kei Green-Rogers; Tim Grimes; Chrisstina Hamilton; DJ Haintso; Jennifer Harge; DJ Haylo; Pauline Jones; Saba Keramati; Jennifer Knapp; Alexander Knysh; Amanda Krugliak; Aliisa Lahti; Shaunie Lewis; Tanya Lokshina; Liz Malinkin; Peggy McCracken; Augusta Morrison; Andrew Morton; Diana Nucera; Fernando Ospina; Marysia Ostafin; Jenyce Poindexter; Will Sherry; Ahya Simone; Mary Taylor; Jillian Walker; the Ann Arbor District Library; ARTS.BLACK; the Blind Pig; Equality Michigan; ERACCE; Harge Dance Stories; the Seraphine Collective; the U-M Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies; the U-M Institute for the Humanities; the U-M International Institute; U-M Multi-Ethnic Student Affairs; the U-M Office of Academic Multicultural Initiatives; the U-M Spectrum Center; and the U-M Stamps Gallery for their participation in events surrounding No Safety Net.

Special thanks to Tiffany Ng, assistant professor of carillon and university carillonist, for coordinating the pre-performance music on the Lurie Carillon prior to Saturday evening's performance.

*Us/Them* appears by arrangement with Richard Jordan Productions.

In consideration of the artists and the audience, please refrain from the use of electronic devices during the performance.

The photography, sound recording, or videotaping of this performance is prohibited.

**A gender-inclusive restroom is located in Room 1236 of the Walgreen Drama Center, on the first floor near the north entrance of the building.**



## PERFORMERS

Gytha Parmentier  
Roman Van Houtven

## CREATIVE TEAM

*Producers* / BRONKS and Richard Jordan Productions  
*Co-Producers* / Theatre Royal Plymouth and Big in Belgium, in association with Summerhall  
*Writer and Director* / Carly Wijs  
*Created with* / Thomas Vantuycom  
*Designer* / Stef Stessel  
*Lighting Design* / Thomas Clause  
*Sound Design* / Peter Brughmans  
*Dramaturg* / Mieke Versyp

*Us/Them runs approximately one hour in duration and is performed without intermission.*



After Wednesday evening's performance, please feel free to remain in your seat for an artist Q&A to get a glimpse into the lives and minds of the artists who bring their creativity to the stage.

### **Community Dialogue**

After Saturday evening's performance, join us for a community dialogue hosted by Jim Leija, UMS director of education & community engagement, and Martine Kei Green-Rogers, dramaturg and assistant professor of theater, SUNY New Paltz. They will be joined by several community leaders to engage audience members in discussion around the themes of each performance. The floor will be open to reflect, discuss, analyze, and respond to the performance. If you're attending the performance on a different date, you are welcome to join the post-performance discussion on Saturday evening — just bring your ticket stub.

# Timeline: The Beslan School Siege

## SEPTEMBER 1, 2004

9:30 am: 32 heavily armed men and two women wearing suicide bomb belts storm School Number One (SNO) in Beslan, North Ossetia and take 1,200 people hostage in the school gym during the school's "Day of Knowledge" celebration marking the first day of school.

Attackers tell *The New York Times* that they belong to militant organization called Riyadh al-Salihin, led by Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev and demand that Russian forces withdraw from Chechnya, refusing to comply with negotiation attempts as Russian commandos called "Spetsnaz" unite with Beslan police to set up a perimeter around the school.

## SEPTEMBER 2, 2004

An emergency meeting of the UN Security Council condemns the hostage-taking while President Putin tells the world that his main concern is the lives and health of the hostages, including the children, who have at this point been denied food, water, and medical attention while being forced to act as human shields.

## SEPTEMBER 3, 2004

Two explosives detonate around the school, causing the gym's roof to collapse, killing many hostages and spurring Russian special forces to surge into the school. Over the next several hours, fighting between Russian forces and the Chechen terrorists leads to over 200 deaths, 28 of them hostages.

## SEPTEMBER 4, 2004

Putin readdresses the nation for the first time and admits to deficiencies in handling of the hostage crisis, saying "Weak people are beaten" as the death toll rises to over 322 people, including 155 children.

## SEPTEMBER 5, 2004

The death toll rises to 355 dead, 700 injured, and 386 people hospitalized as the only hospital in Beslan is overwhelmed by the demands of the crisis. President Putin declares September 6–7, 2004 national days of mourning and agrees to the idea of a parliamentary investigation of the crisis after rejecting the idea of an open public inquiry.

## SEPTEMBER 16, 2004

A Levada-Center opinion poll finds that 58% of Russians support stricter counter-terrorism laws and the death penalty for terrorism, while 33% would support banning all Chechens from entering Russian cities.

**NOVEMBER 29, 2005**

A public inquiry by the North Ossetian parliament concludes that both local and federal law enforcement mishandled the situation, citing the lack of prepared emergency services during the 52 hours of the crisis, failure to keep the scene secure from civilians, and excessive force used by Russian agents flooding the school, such as tanks and flamethrowers, which may have contributed to more death and trauma among victims.

**DECEMBER 26, 2005**

After family members of the victims of the attacks accused the Russian security forces of incompetence, they demand that authorities be held accountable, leading Putin to personally promise to the Mothers of Beslan group to hold an “objective investigation.” Russian prosecutors investigating the siege on the school declare that authorities had made no mistakes whatsoever.

**MAY 26, 2006**

The only member of the terrorists taken alive, Nurbashi Kulayev, is sentenced to life in prison by Tamerlan Agazarov, chief justice of the North Ossetian Supreme Court in Vladikavkaz, after admitting to being involved with the raid, though denying killing anybody.

**AUGUST 29, 2006**

A private report by Yuri Savelyev, a dissenting parliamentary investigator and one of Russia’s leading rocket scientists, concludes that Russian forces were responsible for the initial explosions on September 3, 2004 and that the government had prior knowledge of the attacks and did not act, therefore placing responsibility for the final massacre on actions of the Russian forces and the highest-placed officials in the federal government.

**DECEMBER 22, 2006**

The Russian Parliamentary committee ends their investigation into the incident and finds that much of the blame is to be placed on the North Ossetian police, and that Russian federal forces acted appropriately in their use of weaponry and did not insight the majority of the violence in the final massacre.

**JUNE 26, 2007**

89 relatives of victims lodged a joint complaint against Russia with the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). The applicants say their rights were violated both during the hostage-taking and the trials that followed.

**APRIL 14, 2017**

The European Court of Human Rights rules in favor of the prosecutors, stating that Russia had sufficient information detailing that an attack was being planned in the area of Beslan, but failed to act and that the use of heavy weaponry in the operation to release the hostages contributed to the high number of casualties. It ruled that Russia should pay 2.9 million euros (\$3.1 million) in compensation to the victims, though the government has refused to comply with the ruling.

## THINK ABOUT THE CHILDREN: WHEN THEATERS CROSS THE LINE

*Shows for young audiences can sometimes be controversial for reasons that surprise even the most thoughtful theater-makers.*

by Emma Halpern



The Public Theater's production of *Julius Caesar* was by no means the only controversial play this year. In April, Boston Children's Theatre produced *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* with a cast of teens and young adults as a part of its young actors'

training program. According to the *Boston Globe*, the production made waves when a 21-year-old actor briefly appeared nude onstage. Several board members resigned, and executive artistic director Burgess Clark, who directed the play, agreed to a layoff while the remaining staff and board worked to find consensus.

Various details suggest that the falling-out was as much about miscommunication as it was about the nudity itself. But the incident is a reminder of how theaters for young audiences (TYA) often have to tread carefully when it comes to what's considered appropriate (and what's not). As Larry Coen, artistic director of Boston's City Stage Company, observed, "If the company did not have the word 'children' in its name, the entire event might have gone unnoticed."

What does it mean for a show to be "appropriate" for young audiences, and how do TYA artists reconcile the pressure to stay within the bounds of propriety and taste with their artistic impulses, not to mention their desire to speak honestly to kids about the world? Most often TYA encounter this kind of question with content that's simply sad, not shocking. Australia-based playwright Finegan Kruckemeyer, who advocates for this kind of work, addresses this issue in his essay "The Taboo of Sadness," in which he explains how plays with young protagonists who face tragedy can offer children models of resiliency. Kruckemeyer often writes about kids dealing with loss in fantastical settings, such as a girl who wakes up to find that she's the only person left on the planet. He's had 85 plays produced in 18 countries, a testament to what "appropriate" means internationally.

"My governing philosophy is that no material is off-limits, but that a considered and tactful hand must steer this material into being," Kruckemeyer says. "To shock a young (or indeed any) audience without regard is poor form. And to deny complex truths for viewers who may

live them (not in a perfect world, but simply in a world) is as well."

At 24th Street Theatre in Los Angeles, they've felt the pushback against putting sadness onstage. The company recently completed a tour of *Walking the Tightrope*, a play by British writer Mike Kenny that executive director Jay McAdams calls a "sweet tone poem" about a girl helping her grandfather deal with his wife's death. The production won several LA theater awards, and was showcased at the 2014 International Performing Arts for Youth booking conference. Many presenters there told McAdams they loved the show but felt it was too risky to bring to their theaters.

"All week people said, 'That was one of the best pieces of theater I've ever seen in my entire life, but it made me cry, and if people cry in my theater, I'll be fired,'" says McAdams. "We've always thought that children's theater should be provocative, but there's a downside. Presenters want to book us on a nine- or 10-city tour. If you're doing *Pinkalicious*, you'll get a 60-city tour."

Downbeat material isn't the only third rail in TYA. In 2014 a group of Northwestern University students toured *The Transition of Doodle Pequeno* by Gabriel Jason Dean to elementary schools. Geared toward fourth and fifth graders, the play features a boy who wears a tutu and a group of boys who use the word "gay" as a slur. A teacher at one of the schools complained about the content to the principal, and another school cancelled the presentation.

Rives Collins, a prolific TYA director and theater professor at Northwestern, emphasizes the importance of transparency and disclosure when bringing edgy work to schools, and notes how better communication could have prevented the school cancellation. "My initial thought was to jump on board on the side of these student producers," Collins says. "I'd seen the show done on campus and it was beautiful. But the school drama specialist and the principal didn't know what the play was, and so couldn't prepare their community. I think the students sent out the right materials, but there was a sense of a school being taken by surprise."

In some cases, the content that parents and teachers find provocative is not what artists anticipate. This past season, 24th Street Theatre produced *Hansel and Gretel Bluegrass* by Bryan Davidson. McAdams and the creative team struggled over how to portray Gretel's killing of the

Photo: Emma Halpern; photographer: Jody Christopherson.

witch, but that scene isn't what troubled one audience member. Namely, the show's booking agent was concerned that a narrator character — a grizzled radio host in 1930s Appalachia, played on video segments by Bradley Whitford — sips from a flask, believing this small detail would keep the show from getting any bookings.

"It had integrity in terms of the character, but we had to cut it," says McAdams. "Killing the witch was fine with people because it's part of the plot, but for us it's the opposite. You can go into any restaurant in America and order a glass of wine. Drinking is not a moral issue for us, but killing and violence are. That's what I want to protect our kids from, and that's the epidemic we face in our country — not talking about when your grandparent dies or showing an old man with a flask."

Collins and Kruckemeyer have been similarly surprised about what shocks parents and teachers. Collins has directed readings of *Ever in the Glades*, a play by Laura Schellhardt aimed at ages 12 and up, which the Kennedy Center of the Performing Arts will present next year. "The most pushback we've received so far is to the phrase 'goddamn,'" Collins says. "There are other swear words in the play, and nobody so far has said anything about the alcoholism, or the potential abuse of a young girl by adult men. All of those things sort of pass under the radar, but the concern so far is with the religious overtones of that one phrase."

Says Kruckemeyer, "I've discovered my (unwitting) propensity for blasphemy since working in the US, and have always been happy to remove individual words where they don't affect the tone of a line. A peppering of societal taboos and sociopolitical themes has raised eyebrows — some expectedly, like refugee advocacy and indigenous rights, others surprisingly, like referencing evolution."

There is a consensus that TYA companies are doing much more provocative work outside the US. Collins points to the ASSITEJ conference, an international gathering of TYA artists, which took place in Cape Town, South Africa this past May. "There was a piece done by a Belgian company called *Us/Them*," Collins says. "It was essentially about a Chechen school that was taken over by terrorists who held a school community hostage. This was advertised for students ages 14 and up. There was a group of girls in the audience who said, 'I would see that play 10 times in a row, I loved it so much,' and there was zero pushback about how this was inappropriate for young people."

Says McAdams, "There's work at ASSITEJ that you won't even really recognize as children's theater because it's just good theater. But you might see someone light a cigarette in a play. Can you imagine the sound of seats slamming in a children's theater if you had a cigarette onstage in this country? I'm not saying you should have a cigarette in a children's show,

but I can think of some reasons why a character in a children's show might smoke. I think we need to be realistic about the world we live in and have a real dialogue about what we think is appropriate for our children."

There does seem to be a desire among American TYA artists to engage in that dialogue. At the Write Now conference in Tempe, Arizona, this past March, Collins conducted a survey of approximately 40 TYA writers, directors, artistic directors, and other TYA professionals. 77 percent of responders agreed or strongly agreed with the phrase, "As artists, we have a responsibility to ensure that our season programming is in direct response to what is happening in the world." 70 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed that "Childhood is fleeting and precious. We should allow children to be children to be children for as long as possible; they will have plenty of time to grapple with the problems of the world when they grow up."

"The results to that question would have been very different in a different era," says Collins. "It would be interesting to check it against other kinds of data you could pull together. If respondents were surveying their audiences, how would they answer these questions?"

Still, there's clearly a long way to go in the US before such ideals become the norm. "I spoke to the managing director of a major children's theater, who said, 'I've got board members who are bank presidents. I could lose a million dollars if I say the wrong thing about politics or the world,'" says McAdams.

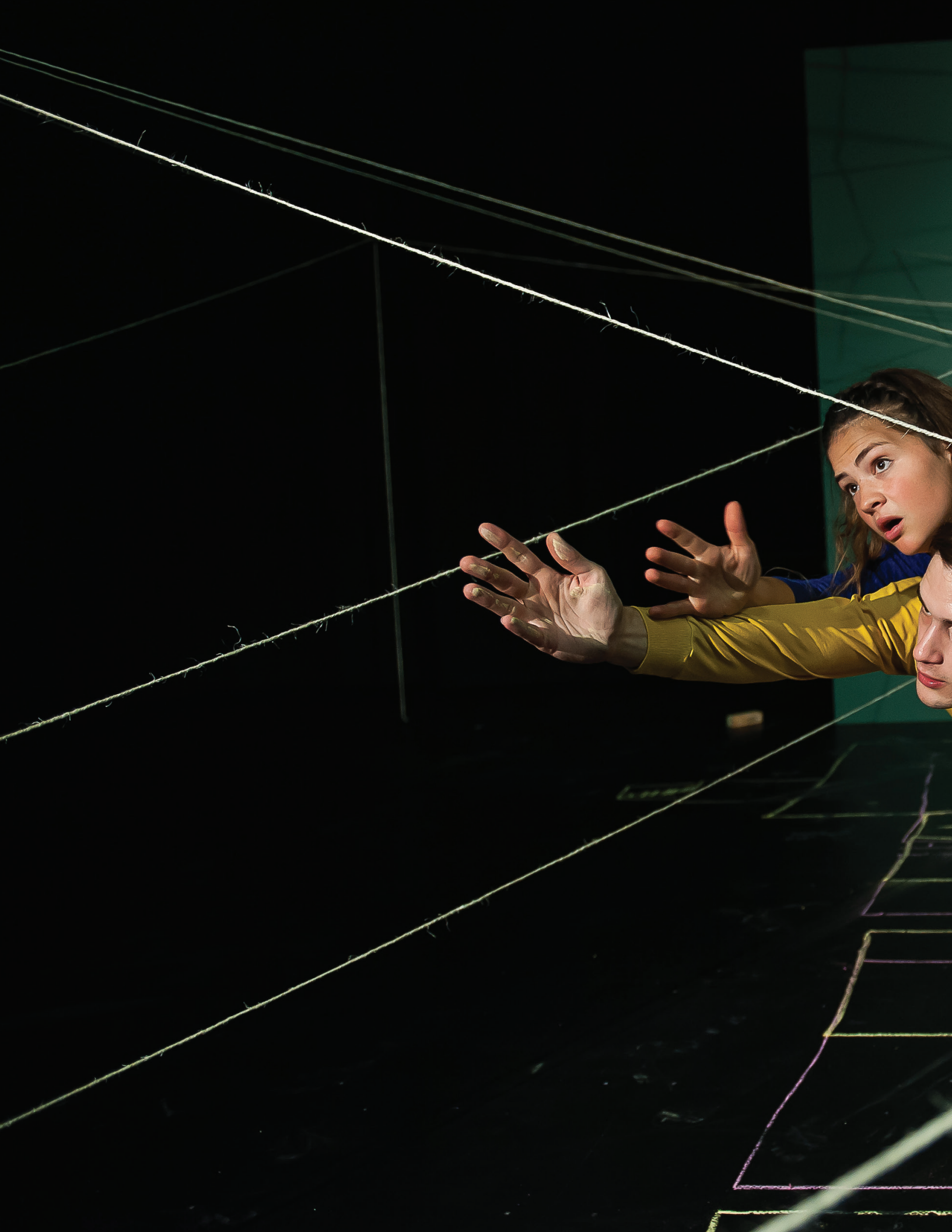
Collins emphasizes the importance of building partnerships with schools and communities to help more challenging work succeed. "There might be some groups where we say, 'We might not be partners on this particular production,' or 'our styles don't necessarily mesh,' so one form of partnership is to agree to disagree and walk away. But in a world where finding audiences is sometimes challenging, building bridges between audiences and producing organizations is so important. I think that kind of dialogue is really necessary."

Hopefully Boston Children's Theatre, and other TYA companies across the US, will take this attitude to heart.

*This article originally appeared in American Theatre online, 28 June 2017. Used with permission from Theatre Communications Group.*

*Emma Halpern has been a producer and dramaturg on over 20 New York City Children's Theater productions and workshops. She has given presentations at the Mid-America Theatre Conference, NYU Theatre for Young Audiences Forum, New Victory Theater/AATE Play-in-Progress Symposium, and TYA/USA One Theatre World, and has written for American Theatre, TYA Today, and Puppetry International.*











## ARTISTS

**Carly Wijs** (*writer and director*) has written and created plays, and has performed as a film and theater actress with Wim Vandekeybus/Ultima Vez, Guy Cassiers, Josse De Pauw, De Roovers, KOPERGIETERY, and Muziektheater Transparant. Her productions have toured internationally. She is regularly invited to be a guest lecturer at the RITS School of Arts and Performing Arts Research and Training Studios (PARTS) in Brussels. Her first novel, *The Doubtexperiment*, was published in May 2016 and nominated for the Flemish debut prize The Bronze Owl. *Us/Them* won her an Edinburgh Fringe First award at the 2016 festival.

**Gytha Parmentier** (*performer*) graduated from the KASK in Ghent and has previously worked as an actress with het KIP, Luxemburg vzw, and Alain Platel.

**Roman Van Houtven** (*performer*) graduated from the PARTS dance school. During and after his studies, he worked on projects with FABULEUS, Impuls Company, Dancingkids (Rosas Education), DE studio, Galacticamendum, and Daniel Linehan/Hiatus. In association with BRONKS, De Munt, and Q-O2, he choreographed the music theater production *Frankenstein*.

**Stef Stessel** (*scenery*) has worked as a designer on several theater productions by HETPALEIS, de Roovers, Toneelhuis, and other companies.

**Mieke Versyp** (*dramaturg*) has previously worked with Carly Wijs as a dramaturg on the production *De papa, de mama en de nazi* (KOPERGIETERY), as well as with Studio Orka and Ontroerend Goed. She has also written several children's books, including *Linus* and *Soepletters*.

**Theatre Royal Plymouth** is the largest and best-attended regional producing theater in the UK and the leading promoter of theater in the South West UK. Theatre Royal Plymouth produces and presents a broad range of theater in its three distinctive performance spaces — The Lyric, The Drum, and The Lab — including classic and contemporary drama, musicals, opera, ballet, and dance. It specializes in the production of new plays and has built a national reputation for the quality and innovation of its programs. The company's extensive creative learning work is pioneering and engages young people and communities in Plymouth and beyond. Its award-winning waterfront production and learning center, TR2, is a unique building with unrivalled set, costume, prop-making, and rehearsal facilities.

Recent Theatre Royal Plymouth productions include: *Monster Raving Loony* by James Graham, *The Man With The Hammer* by Phil Porter, *The Whipping Man* by Matthew Lopez, *After Electra* by April de Angelis, *Grand Guignol* and *Horse Piss*

*for Blood* by Carl Grose, *Merit* by Alexandra Wood, *Another Place* by DC Moore, *Chekhov in Hell* by Dan Rebellato, *The Astronaut's Chair* by Rona Munro, *Solid Air* by Doug Lucie, and *MAD MAN* by Chris Goode.

The Theatre Royal Plymouth also collaborates with some of the best artists and theater-makers in the UK and internationally, and regularly co-produces with Richard Jordan and Ontroerend Goed (*World Without Us*; *Are we not drawn onward to new erA*; *A History of Everything*; *Sirens*, and *Fight Night*); Paines Plough (*The Angry Brigade* by James Graham, *Love Love Love* by Mike Bartlett); Frantic Assembly (*Othello*, *The Believers* by Bryony Lavery, *Lovesong* by Abi Morgan); and Told By An Idiot (*My Perfect Mind*, *And The Horse You Rode In On*).

Theatre Royal Plymouth has also co-produced with Complicite (*The Master and Margarita*, *A Disappearing Number*), Hofesh Shechter (*Sun*, *Political Mother*), Graeae (*The Solid Life of Sugar Water*), and David Pugh, Dafydd Rogers, and Kneehigh Theatre (*Rebecca*). Alongside its own productions, the company presents a program of quality and popularity and regularly launches national touring productions including *Swan Lake* and *Edward Scissorhands* (Matthew Bourne), *War Horse* (National Theatre), and *Billy Elliot the Musical*.

Now in its sixth year, **Big in Belgium** provides a platform for Flemish theater during the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Every year a selection of Flemish plays are translated into English and presented, aiming to create a greater visibility for Flemish theater on the international scene.

**Summerhall** presents engaging, challenging, and exhilarating visual arts, theater, dance, music, literature, and education for people of all ages in the unique buildings of Edinburgh's former Royal (Dick) Veterinary College. It hosts diverse programs of visual and performance art throughout the year as well as events, parties, other festivals, workshops, and even weddings. Summerhall provides workspaces for artists, innovators, and community organizations as well as encouraging the creation and application of new technologies in its high-tech hub, the TechCube. Summerhall is for everyone. Whether you are engaging with its exhibitions, catching the best in avant-garde European theater, grabbing something to drink in the Royal Dick bar, or simply soaking up the atmosphere in the buzzy courtyard, there is something for you to explore, discover, and most of all, enjoy, all year round.



**BRONKS** is a Brussels-based art house with an accent on theater for a young audience. The artistic guidance is in the hands of Veerle Kerckhoven and Marij De Nys. BRONKS aims with its artistic and art education activities to stimulate children, youth, and their environment to discover and explore the possibilities in ourselves and in the world.

Each season, BRONKS invites several artists to make a production for children or youth. This results in three in-house productions per year, presented not only in the BRONKS theater, but also on tour. A new theater text is written for many BRONKS creations. By offering both starting theater makers and established names and artists from other disciplines the opportunity to create their first performance for children, BRONKS aims to generate enthusiasm for the performing arts for a young audience. In addition to its own work, BRONKS also presents guest productions from beginning and experienced companies and makers from Flanders, the Netherlands, and sometimes from other countries. Moreover, BRONKS focuses not only on theater, but also on music, dance, the visual arts, and film.

BRONKS has developed extensive educational activities for schools as well as for children and youth who wish to pursue the performing arts in their free time. Students and teachers can come to BRONKS for school performances, introductions, post-performance discussions, workshops, and long-term theater projects. Via STUDIO BRONKS, the company organizes workshops outside school hours in which children and youth can actively explore the theater medium.

**Richard Jordan Productions** is a Tony and Laurence Olivier Award-winning London-based production company under the leadership of British producer Richard Jordan. Described by *The Stage* newspaper as “one of the UK’s most prolific theater producers” and named seven times in their annual list of the “Top 100 UK Theatre Professionals,” Mr. Jordan was the first recipient of the Society of London Theatre Producers Award. A new writing specialist, he has been at the forefront of commissioning, developing, and producing works by a diverse range of established and emerging writers and artists often with a strong social and political agenda. He has also enjoyed a long association with Belgium, producing and developing the work of some of its country’s most exciting new and leading contemporary artists and companies. Since 1998, his company has produced, commissioned, and developed over 255 productions (29 New York City presentations) in the UK and 27 other countries including 84 world premieres and 90 US, UK, and Australian premieres, enjoying associations with many of the world’s leading theaters and arts organizations. These productions have been the recipients over 40 major awards including the

Tony Award for “Best Play”; Olivier Award for “Outstanding Achievement at an Affiliate Theatre”; Emmy Award for “Best Feature Section”; 15 Scotsman Fringe Firsts Awards; three Herald Angel Awards; nine Total Theatre Awards; Amnesty International Freedom of Expression Award; Spirit of the Fringe Award; Off-West End Award for “Best Musical”; three Helen Hayes Awards; Adelaide Festival Award; US Black Alliance Award; Stage Award; Obie Award; John Gassner Award for “Best New American Play”; Jeff Award; Lucille Lortel Award, and the Drama Desk, Drama League, New York Critics, and Outer Critic Circle “Best New Play” awards. In 2013 Mr. Jordan became the first British producer to have won every notable Broadway and Off-Broadway “Best New Play” award. He is the International Producing Partner at Chicago Shakespeare Theater and guest lectures on theater producing for New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts. He also writes a popular weekly column for *The Stage* online. In 2010, for his work in the UK and international theater industries, he was selected for lifetime inclusion in A & C Black’s annual publication *Who’s Who*.

*UMS welcomes the company members of Us/Them as they make their UMS debuts this week.*





Friday Evening, January 26, 2018 at 8:00  
Saturday Evening, January 27, 2018 at 8:00  
Tuesday Evening, January 30, 2018 at 7:30  
Wednesday Evening, January 31, 2018 at 7:30  
Thursday Evening, February 1, 2018 at 7:30  
Friday Evening, February 2, 2018 at 8:00  
Saturday Evening, February 3, 2018 at 8:00  
The Stamps Gallery, Ann Arbor

# **(I COULD GO ON SINGING) OVER THE RAINBOW**

**FK Alexander**  
*Performer and Singer*

**Okishima Island Tourist Association**  
*Lea Cummings / Noise*  
*Sarah Glass / Samples*

## **RENEGHUE**

40th, 43rd, 46th, 47th, 50th, 52nd, and 55th Performances of the 139th Annual Season

These performances are funded in part by the Building Audiences for Sustainability initiative of The Wallace Foundation.

Special thanks to Taylor Renee Aldridge; Mother Cyborg; Anita Gonzalez; Cara Graninger; Martine Kei Green-Rogers; Tim Grimes; Chrisstina Hamilton; DJ Haintso; Jennifer Harge; DJ Haylo; Pauline Jones; Saba Keramati; Jennifer Knapp; Alexander Knysh; Amanda Krugliak; Aliisa Lahti; Shaunie Lewis; Tanya Lokshina; Liz Malinkin; Peggy McCracken; Augusta Morrison; Andrew Morton; Diana Nucera; Fernando Ospina; Marysia Ostafin; Jenyce Poindexter; Will Sherry; Ahya Simone; Mary Taylor; Jillian Walker; the Ann Arbor District Library; ARTS.BLACK; the Blind Pig; Equality Michigan; ERACCE; Harge Dance Stories; the Seraphine Collective; the U-M Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies; the U-M Institute for the Humanities; the U-M International Institute; U-M Multi-Ethnic Student Affairs; the U-M Office of Academic Multicultural Initiatives, and the U-M Spectrum Center for their participation in events surrounding No Safety Net.

In consideration of the artists and the audience, please refrain from the use of electronic devices during the performance.

The photography, sound recording, or videotaping of this performance is prohibited.

Special thanks to Srimoyee Mitra and the Stamps Gallery for their collaboration on this presentation. **STAMPS GALLERY**  
201 S. DIVISION STREET

## PERFORMERS

FK Alexander / *Vocals*

Okishima Island Tourist Association / Lea Cummings, *noise*; Sarah Glass, *samples*

## CREATIVE TEAM

*Creator* / FK Alexander

*Music* / Okishima Island Tourist Association

*Amplifier* / Nick Anderson

*(I Could Go On Singing) Over the Rainbow runs approximately 65 minutes in duration and is performed without intermission. The Saturday 1/27 performance is a three-hour durational performance and is performed without intermission; audience members are welcome to come and go as they please.*

## ARTIST STATEMENT

*"Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."*  
— Audre Lorde

Caring for myself, and others, is, for me, part of a spiritual recovery — from capitalism, from murderous societal structures, from addictions, from trauma, from ideas about territories and boundaries and identities that divide us. This is a vital path.

It is my conviction that RECOVERY IS POSSIBLE. It is simple but it is NOT easy.

In my work, I have found a way to claw at these notions through sensory overload together with grueling repetition and ritual.

I am concerned with issues of recovery, wound, aggressive healing, medicalization, and capitalism.

My practice is spiritual, using meditation, prayer, blood, sweat, and noise to communicate my belief that we are more than just the narrative we tell ourselves — we are more than the stories, more than our pasts; that we are all able to recover from trauma.

But it takes work.

This comes, at its roots, from being in recovery, from working with others, and observing that people are capable of all kinds of transformation and rebirth.

This personal, street-level work is something I visit in my performances where a task is set and I must attempt to deal with that task, such as gathering coal on my hands and knees, burning my personal possessions, or singing "Over the Rainbow" hundreds of times.

Aesthetically I am driven by images of pop culture, of TV and Hollywood — at once aware of the poison of these oppressive fantasies yet compelled to roll around in the fantasy and danger of all its lies and dreams.

Personally, I have found deep emotional and narrative identification with Judy Garland — at times over identification, where the psychic boundaries between myself and the Myth of Judy have become so blurred to the point of entering an almost method-acting arena of a fractured reality.

FK ALEXANDER IS JUDY GARLAND — be careful what you wish for.

After all,

"We have been poisoned by fairy tales." (—Anais Nin)

I know I have.

-

I want the atmosphere of this work to be loud, visceral, physical — to make the mind stop for a moment and let the body think about its blood, its breath, or lack of. To let the heart be confronted by another heart, another pulse, to face its own life force, power, and vulnerability.

Noise music, for me, eradicates thinking. It flips the switch in me that's in the brain that contains words, opinions, my "story," my past, fears, place, and time. It forces my body into the Here and Now — through volume, overload, power, hypnotic pulses, and pressure. Stop thinking and become an organic machine. I feel free yet charged.

The band who plays in this piece, Okishima Island Tourist Association, are in my opinion, the purest example of the beautiful euphoric force that noise music can reach.

-

I choose the body as the site, the playground, the venue, the tool, the battleground, and the landscape to experience the paradox of living. I veer wildly through the days — at once impelled to live yet destined to die.

This constant flux is lived out in the body. I offer in my work my attempt to reconcile the extraordinary rhythm and violence of life.

I surrender my need to understand the earth I worship as I scuttle across. The sun continues to rise and so I do too.

Performance is the state of being where my conflict of living is, for an all-too-brief yet electrifying time united and soothed. It is my only way to remain alive in a sacred and profane universe.

Hyper colors, loud sounds, and flashing lights distort us from collective truths; so I use these tools in my work, to share a sense that even in the insanity of modern fantasy we can still find ways to connect with others and heal, both as a collective and individually.

I offer my work as a tribute to a world in chaos — we are powerless.

I offer my work as a prayer to a world on fire — we are powerful.

Personal and collective transformation can be our reality. Recovery is possible.

I use art as my gun and my white flag.

— FK Alexander











The recording to which you hear FK singing alongside is the last-known recording of Judy Garland singing “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” at her final concert in Copenhagen on March 25, 1969, shortly before her death on June 22, 1969 at the age of 47 by drug overdose.

*I Could Go On Singing* was the title of the last movie Judy Garland made, in 1963. She made 41 films in her career.

Judy made over 1,100 concert appearances, and countless more radio, television, and recording performances.

## NOISE

by Aaron Dilloway



I've always loved music, but as I got older I realized that what I really love is NOISE.

What is noise? Besides its general definition of "unwanted sound," "noise" is also an obscure genre of music. Readers of this publication may

have never heard or even heard of "noise" in this sense. The best way I can think of to introduce this type of "music" to a wider audience is to walk them through my own convoluted journey toward discovering noise, and its complicated overlaps and divergences from other genres.

When I was in fourth grade during hockey practice, a kid on my team, I think his name was Nels Rosan, played a tape in the locker room of a band called The Butthole Surfers. As fourth graders, we thought this name was hilarious. The song I heard, which I later realized was a track called "The Shah Sleeps In Lee Harvey's Grave," was absolute chaos. It made me laugh so hard, I loved it. Nels told us this was "punk rock." What I heard that day would stick with me for years, and that's what I thought I loved, punk rock.

As a very young kid in the 1980s however, it was hard to dig further into this interest. We got MTV the year it came out, 1981, when I was five years old. I remember my mind being blown when I realized that not only did this channel play music videos, that's ALL it played! But even having MTV didn't give me a chance to hear enough weird music to learn that what I loved was not exactly punk rock but something else.

It wasn't until a couple of years later in sixth grade that my friend Alyssa Faoro made me a mixed tape of punk rock. It had bands like The Sex Pistols, The Clash, and The Circle Jerks. It also included that same song by the Butthole Surfers that I had heard in the hockey locker room years earlier. It was great to hear that chaos again, but the rest of the tape, including the Sex Pistols, shocked me! I had had this idea in my head for years now that punk rock was noise and cacophony. But the Sex Pistols were so normal! It was plain old rock and roll!

That's when my quest to find what I would eventually learn was called "noise music" began. I kept searching for the wildest and weirdest music I could find. I loved the noise Jimi Hendrix and The Who made when they smashed their instruments; I loved the wild solo in Steve Miller's "Abracadabra"; the

spooky sounds that would pop up in Pink Floyd songs and sci-fi horror movies and especially in these old science filmstrips I would see at school. I remember asking a teacher after one of these films if there were records of this strange music available. She said "no" or "I don't know" and I was bummed. I kept searching.

It wasn't until 1992 that I got my first real taste of live "noise" music. My friends and I went to see a local punk band called the Laughing Hyenas at a house party in Ann Arbor. The opening band was a trio of goofy looking guys in suits and glasses called COUCH. They played guitars, a set of bongos, and a cheap keyboard. They went wild on their guitars — there was maybe an occasional guitar "riff," but most of the time it was them squeezing every sound they could possibly get out of these cheap electronic guitars, ear-shredding distortion, and walls of feedback. They were LOUD, and they were NOISY, and they were EVERYTHING I had been looking for.

A few months later while browsing the bins at Schoolkids Records I came across a 45rpm single by COUCH. How could they have a record out?! I immediately bought it and was surprised to even recognize, as noisy as they were, some bits they had performed at the show! These were SONGS! But an entirely different kind of song than the punk tunes that had disappointed me. The guy behind the counter, who turned out to be Geoff Walker of the "noise rock" band Gravatar, convinced me to also buy John Zorn's *Naked City* and a record in ratty homemade packaging by a band called Caroliner Rainbow Hernia Milk Queen. I liked them both, but the Zorn disc was a bit too "controlled" for me. In the Caroliner record I heard that same chaos I had first heard in the Butthole Surfers. It confused me: it brought images into my head and triggered my imagination. Another employee of Schoolkids turned out to be James Magas, a member of COUCH. He took me under his wing and introduced me to the strange music of Captain Beefheart, the New York "no wave" scene, the free jazz of Ornette Coleman, and the most extreme noisy music I heard to that point which were the artists of the Japanese noise scene such as Hijo Kaidan, Merzbow, and Masonna. Around this time I also found an LP set at a garage sale by a guy named Harry Partch who made all of his own instruments. I eventually came across copies of the RRRecords mail-order catalog and *Bananafish* magazine.

Through these finds I learned about the international tape trading community, a network of sound artists who would trade tapes of their strange

sounds though the mail. Further digging introduced me to early industrial music, the tape experiments of Brion Gysin and William S. Burroughs, German psychedelic and synthesizer music, to John Cage and early electronic music and *musique concrète*, and finally all the way back to the Futurist art movement of the early 1900s where these artists would put on concerts of homemade noise-making devices.

I'm sharing this personal trajectory because it highlights how noise music isn't just a discrete genre, but a quality that can appear and disappear in a lot of recognized types of music. Still there is also a growing canon of work that is specifically devoted to making this kind of chaotic sound, a "noise" genre that has its roots in all of these earlier musics, from academic music, to punk rock, and everything in between.

Many people have differing theories on where and when it all began, as its origins took place largely through informal underground networks, such as the tape trading networks in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Artists making this extreme form of music could connect with other artists with similar ideas. It was tough to get someone to invest the money to press up this wild music on vinyl record albums, so cassettes became the preferred format. Many of these connections were made in classified ads in the back of independent music magazines and also smaller-run homemade fanzines dedicated to this noisy music. I began trading tapes by sending copies of my tapes to these fanzines for review. In high school I found myself trading tapes with people in the UK and Japan. These artists had, like me, convoluted paths toward noise. This probably made our connections all the more solid and valued once we found what we were looking for in one another.

Ron Lessard, who started the record shop and label RRRRecords in 1984, has been following this music/non-music scene since the mid-1970s and probably has the largest collection of "noise" releases in America. I once asked him what he believed was the first true "noise" release. He told me he considered The New Blockaders' 1982 LP *Changez Les Blockeurs* as the first LP of the "noise" genre. As in, it's not an academic piece recorded in a university setting like many *musique concrète* and early electronic music releases, and it's not an "experiment" like Lou Reed's *Metal Machine Music*, but the first record by an underground artist of completely abstract and harsh noise sound. There were of course many recordings of noisy sounds released before this, but he considers those as something else...industrial, electronic, etcetera. This was a different approach. This was NOISE. The record was recorded by two brothers in their parents' shed. It is two sides of clanging and

scraping metal sounds: no rhythm, no composition, just two sides of creaking metal.

What followed this record were more and more artists who pushed this abstract water-like flow of sound into many different extremes. Over the years, after viewing hundreds and hundreds of live "noise" concerts, I have felt just about every emotion that can be felt triggered from the rich selection of sounds being manipulated, processed, and explored. After more than 30 years of searching and listening to sounds, through this genre, I am still hearing and literally feeling new and exciting things I have never heard before. One of my favorite noise experiences was experiencing a concert by long-running noise group The Haters, where their thick wall of static sound was played at such volume that my entire body was vibrating so strongly that I felt almost as if I were floating. It was a complete wall of sound. It was meditative, it was psychoactive, it was like being sucked into a Jackson Pollock painting. I look forward to more moments like these: joyful moments of TOTAL NOISE!

*Aaron Dilloway is an experimental musician. He is an improviser and composer originally from Brighton, Michigan who works with the manipulation of eight-track tape loops in combination with voice, tape delays, and various organic and electronic sound sources. A founding member of the industrial noise group Wolf Eyes (1998–2005), he resides in Oberlin, Ohio where he runs Hanson Records and Mailorder.*

## ARTISTS

**FK Alexander** is a Glasgow-based performance artist whose work is concerned with issues of wounds, recovery, aggressive healing, radical wellness, industrialization, and noise music. Her work predominantly puts her body at the center of ritualized, action-based, often durational work, in often-ridiculous attempts to communicate ideas around new language, new violence, and new love. FK collaborates often with a range of live artists and noise musicians. FK identifies as living in recovery from drug addiction and mental collapse and firmly believes we are all trying to recover from something or someone. As a former DJ, FK is interested in placing performance art in rock and roll settings and rock and roll in performance art. *(I Could Go On Singing) Over the Rainbow* is the winner of Edinburgh Fringe Festival's 2016 Total Theatre Award and the 2016 Arches/Summerhall Autopsy Award.

**Okishima Island Tourist Association** are transcendental noise duo Lea Cummings (Kylie Minoise, Opaque) and Sarah Glass (Grimalkin555, The Fnords). Their work aims to open higher states of consciousness through multi-frequency overload and explosive sonic maximalism.

*UMS welcomes FK Alexander and Okishima Island Tourist Association as they make their UMS debuts this week.*

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*(I Could Go On Singing) Over the Rainbow* is dedicated to Sheila Alexander (that world) and Roderick Alexander (this world).

With gratitude to Iain Findlay Walsh.

For more information on FK Alexander, please visit:

Instagram: [f.k.alexander](https://www.instagram.com/f.k.alexander)

Twitter: [@fkalexander](https://twitter.com/fkalexander)

Website: [www.fkalexander.com](http://www.fkalexander.com)





Wednesday Evening, January 31, 2018 at 7:30  
Thursday Evening, February 1, 2018 at 7:30  
Friday Evening, February 2, 2018 at 8:00  
Saturday Evening, February 3, 2018 at 8:00  
Arthur Miller Theatre, Ann Arbor

# THEY, THEMSELVES AND SCHMERM

**Becca Blackwell**  
*Writer and Performer*

**Ellie Heyman**  
*Director*

## RENEGHUT

48th, 51st, 53rd, and 56th Performances of the 139th Annual Season

These performances are funded in part by the Building Audiences for Sustainability initiative of The Wallace Foundation and by the National Endowment for the Arts.

Special thanks to Taylor Renee Aldridge; Mother Cyborg; Anita Gonzalez; Cara Graninger; Martine Kei Green-Rogers; Tim Grimes; Chrisstina Hamilton; DJ Haintso; Jennifer Harge; DJ Haylo; Pauline Jones; Saba Keramati; Jennifer Knapp; Alexander Knysh; Amanda Krugliak; Aliisa Lahti; Shaunie Lewis; Tanya Lokshina; Liz Malinkin; Peggy McCracken; Augusta Morrison; Andrew Morton; Diana Nucera; Fernando Ospina; Marysia Ostafin; Jenyce Poindexter; Will Sherry; Ahya Simone; Mary Taylor; Jillian Walker; the Ann Arbor District Library; ARTS.BLACK; the Blind Pig; Equality Michigan; ERACCE; Harge Dance Stories; the Seraphine Collective; the U-M Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies; the U-M Institute for the Humanities; the U-M International Institute; U-M Multi-Ethnic Student Affairs; the U-M Office of Academic Multicultural Initiatives; the U-M Spectrum Center; and the U-M Stamps Gallery for their participation in events surrounding No Safety Net.

In consideration of the artists and the audience, please refrain from the use of electronic devices during the performance.

The photography, sound recording, or videotaping of this performance is prohibited.

**A gender-inclusive restroom is located in Room 1236 of the Walgreen Drama Center, on the first floor near the north entrance of the building.**



## PERFORMER

Becca Blackwell

## CREATIVE TEAM

*Writer /* Becca Blackwell

*Director and Developed with /* Ellie Heyman

*Additional Collaboration /* Jess Barbagallo and Jill Pangallo

*Video /* Jill Pangallo and Nicholas Zeig-Owens

*They, Themselves and Schmerm runs approximately 70 minutes in duration and is performed without intermission.*



After Wednesday evening's performance, please feel free to remain in your seat for an artist Q&A to get a glimpse into the lives and minds of the artists who bring their creativity to the stage.

### **Community Dialogue**

After Saturday evening's performance, join us for a community dialogue hosted by Jim Leija, UMS director of education & community engagement, and Martine Kei Green-Rogers, dramaturg and assistant professor of theater, SUNY New Paltz. They will be joined by several community leaders to engage audience members in discussion around the themes of each performance. The floor will be open to reflect, discuss, analyze, and respond to the performance. If you're attending the performance on a different date, you are welcome to join the post-performance discussion on Saturday evening — just bring your ticket stub.

## ARTIST STATEMENT

*They, Themselves and Schmerm* came from an impetus to create something because I didn't feel like I ever saw myself represented on stage. My friend Michelle Matlock told me way back in 2004 that the only way I was going to see myself on stage was to write for myself. I struggled with what to say because I found solo shows very trite and sometimes self-indulgent. In 2014, my partner, Erin Markey, told me to just try and find something that I connected to and then follow my instincts. I went down a rabbit hole matrix of YouTube videos about Illuminati and child molestation and drug abuse. Just your usual afternoon movie time. And there I came across *Me, Myself and I*. A strange 36-minute PR video about Corey Haim. I sat and watched. Stunned. Curled into a small ball on my couch clutching my dog, Horsey, by the end. I saw a lot of myself in him in this video. And I realized it wasn't just representation of a trans, non-binary, butch, masculine person with a vagina I had never really seen on stage or film, but also sexual abuse and drug abuse out in the open. Especially sexual abuse. So I reached out to my friend Jill Pangallo, and we just started playing around. I made deadlines by booking myself at small spaces so I had to write. And then my director, Ellie Heyman, came on in September 2015 and with blood, sweat, and many, many tears helped shape this piece. It keeps changing, being molded, and is always in flux. And right when I don't want to do it ever again, I get the opportunity to do it again. Be careful what you wish for. Ellie said to me many times, "This isn't for you anymore. This is for someone who needs to see it." So...here you go.

— Becca Blackwell

## THEY, THEMSELF AND SCHMERM\*: A BECCA BLACKWELL-GUIDED TOUR OF THE TRANSITION FUNHOUSE

by Jess Barbagallo



\*Schmerm is not a technical term, but Becca's hilarious auditory observation of what happens when folks try and describe them upon first sight. Put "he," "she," and "them" in the verbal blender, turn the anxiety on high, and voilà: schmerm.

In late November of last year, I visited the Duplex, a cabaret on Christopher Street in New York City, to see my friend Becca Blackwell debut their latest theatrical experiment, *It's That Time of the Month — Snatch Adams' Variety Talk Show*. "Snatch," Becca's perverse riff on the titular jester played by Robin Williams in the 1998 biopic *Patch Adams*, is a walking vagina clown laid off by Planned Parenthood on exactly November 8, 2016. Their squeaky red nose just happens to be a clitoris planted smack dab in the middle of their face, and as claims of sexual harassment pile up across the nation, the silliness of Becca's gesture starts to feel less and less like a joke and more like the unleashing of a brilliant fury: if they can't keep it in their pants, why should we? I know Becca's been dreaming on this character for a while. As a frequent early sounding board for their endless imaginative powers — we've been performing together and for each other going on a decade now — I have an image of Snatch's early prototype: Becca undulating before me in a dressing room before we head onstage, loose limbs accompanied by a goofy-voiced narration of self-as-life-sized vagina, wetly making its way down a sidewalk in joyful, secreting motion.

In *They, Themselves and Schmerm*, a radical stand-up routine meets coming-of-age memoir, the simultaneously clueless and woke monster vagina makes several cameos. Becca describes the faux/real horrors of using a men's room at a sports bar in Boston and discovers that boys don't wash their hands after they go:

*Apparently the penis is a self-cleaning pristine element. I have this crazy vagina that collects debris.*

And later, Becca details a family trip to visit their father at a men's prison. Tasked with escorting their brother's

child to a ladies' restroom after some nickels and dimes go mysteriously missing, chaos ensues. As the fallen father "zones out" in the face of difficulty, Becca drolly observes:

*I can't wait to be a full man so I can completely check out of any uncomfortable experience. But not with this big vagina, though.*

And then abruptly they break the moment by imitating a queef — that's slang for "vaginal flatulence" if you've never read the word in a program note before — on cue. In *They, Themselves and Schmerm*, resolution is continually eschewed as contradictions of experience amass, revelations interrupted by the inherent vulnerability of being a breathing human bridge across a woefully constructed gender binary, in a show which celebrates the unique multitude of identities a queer person can lay claim to over the course of a life.

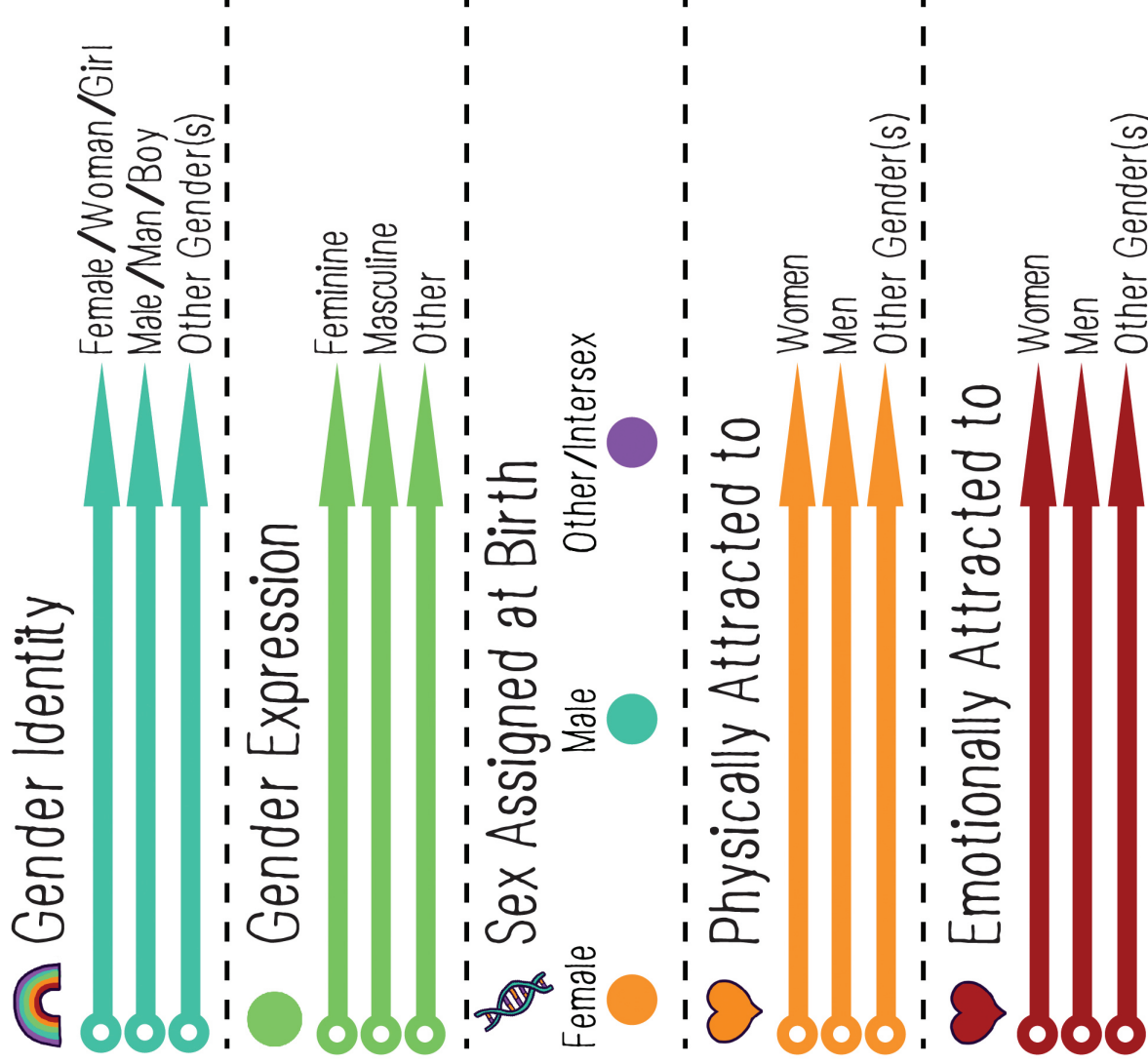
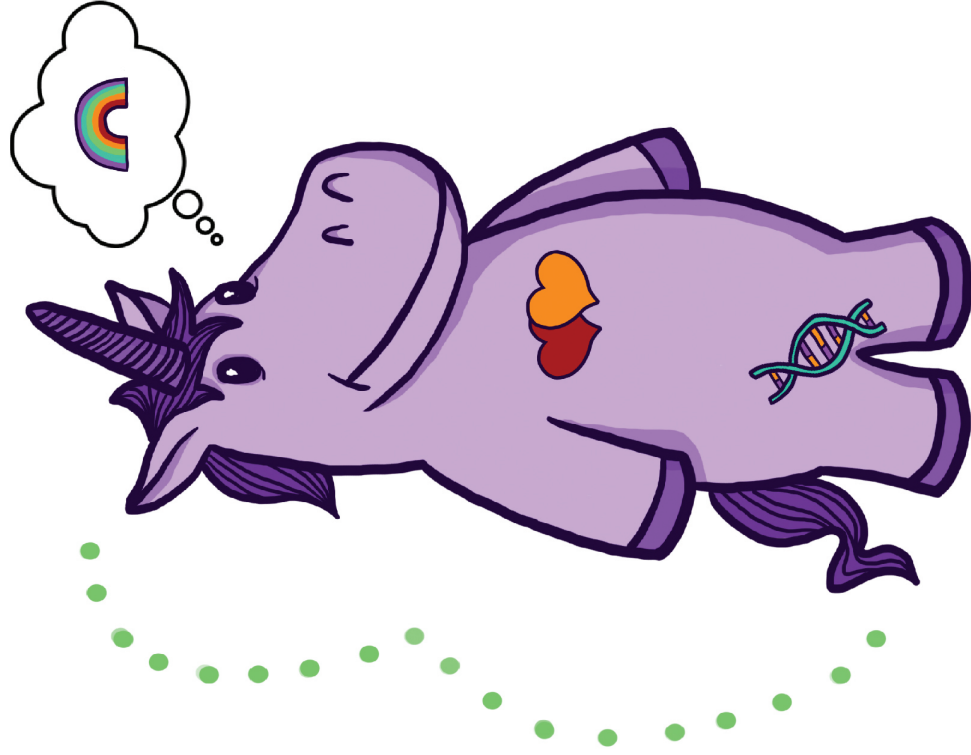
Charming and uncensored, much of Becca's work serves as a document of the stroll they have taken through the funhouse of transition, staring into patriarchy's distortion mirrors and emerging with a euphoric, sometimes ambivalent account of self that revels in the discord their body produces in their public and private lives. As an actor, these categories often prove porous for Becca, dissolving the use value of words like "performance" and "authenticity." There is another kind of quest at play: a journey toward integrity in a world where the commodification of self has become a de facto method of survival. Yet even as trans awareness proliferates at large, Becca refuses the temptation to declare themselves an expert of this experience — because they know firsthand that reducing the narrative via cause and effect logic will always come at the expense of nuance. For an artist intent on actually disrupting the order of their day, this amounts to creative death.

*They, Themselves and Schmerm* is most alive in its idiosyncratic, anti-heroic details and disappointments. Becca creates a teetering comedy of reduced expectations, and from this complex of pain produces beautifully textured accounts of strange and wondrous human collision. As a pre-teen, Becca enters a mental institution and develops a kind of crush on a comely nurse named Tanja.

# The Gender Unicorn

Graphic by:

**TSER**  
Trans Student Educational Resources



To learn more, go to:

[www.transstudent.org/gender](http://www.transstudent.org/gender)

Design by Landyn Pan and Anna Moore



*And Tanja wouldn't ever do cavity searches. And I thought that was pretty cool of her. The bar was low for me, for adults not to be douchebags.*

Becca chooses Tanja as a confidante, but the project fails for the adolescent, instilling a distrust in “adults” that proves hard to shake. From this memory, Becca takes us on a guided tour of the women who have shaped them: a first love named Jessica, their mother who recently passed away. With tenderness, Becca embraces the varying degrees of understanding they have experienced and lets us deep inside a stream of consciousness the average person would prefer to remain private.

By defying the fictional culturally prescribed alignments of sex and gender, or politics and feelings, Becca suggests we turn our focus towards the galvanizing force of desire to destabilize these traditionally held agreements. In Becca's world, hormone therapy awakens a playful crisis of sexuality; a former card-carrying lesbian, Becca turns to Grindr and Scruff almost like a research field trip — “I'm an artist, I decided to unpackage these feelings...” — delicious mocking wordplay, it's a simultaneous send-up of butch packing practice and contemporary process-oriented self-help — to satisfy the libidinal cravings brought on by testosterone.

In their quest to figure out what makes them not-a-man, Becca stumbles into the sadness of masculine repression:

*We tell little boys, “Stop crying. Don't skip. Don't move like that. Don't squeal like a girl.” And so they don't learn how to deal [with] the vast scope of human feelings. They grow up into these testosterone-fueled meat carcasses that have the emotional capacity of a gnat. It's not like they don't get sad anymore. It's just that when they're sad they only know how to get mad, to put it in cat-in-the-hat vernacular. Together, collectively we've all created baby men.*

Remarkably, Becca suggests that we collectively must take ownership for this phenomena. And that the solution lies in holding men accountable to their feelings by modeling acts of tenderness that they can perform with and for each other. In our current take-down culture, the generosity of this analysis is breathtaking. Yet the question of how to embody masculinity while rejecting the toxicity of its forerunners still looms large. It's a predicament so deep it could only ever continue to be a work-in-progress.

*Jess Barbagallo is a writer, director, performer, arts journalist, and teacher based in New York City. Playwriting credits include: Melissa, So Far (Andy's Playhouse), My Old Man (and Other Stories) (Dixon Place), Sentence Fetish (The Brick), Joe Ranono's Yuletide Log and Other Fruitcakes (Dixon Place), Karen Davis Does... (Brooklyn Arts Exchange), Good Year for Hunters (The Ohio Theatre), Room for Cream: A Live Lesbian Serial (LaMama ETC, in collaboration with the Dyke Division of 2HC), Saturn Nights (Ontological-Hysteric), and Grey-Eyed Dogs (Dixon Place). In fall 2017, Jess presented brand new episodes of Room for Cream with The Dyke Division at the New Museum as part of the show Trigger: Gender as Tool and Weapon and acted as resident playwright for New York University's Drama Therapy Queer as Performance ensemble. Jess received a BFA from New York University and MFA from Brooklyn College.*







## GENDER IDENTITY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

by Will Sherry



In ruminating on what to write for a playbill, I couldn't help but reflect on the history of the Spectrum Center and the University of Michigan. If anything, Becca Blackwell's performance is not only a reminder of the individual

journey towards gender truth but of the structural transformations that undergird those transitions. Transgender people have existed throughout history and are not just a product of postmodern society, yet the possibility of the emergence and visibility of trans people is the result of the transformation of institutions today.

Of course, this is not to take away from the importance of leadership, the risk of individual expression, and the long road ahead. Without the vision of our founders and the work from within community, the progress we have seen on campus for LGBTQ people wouldn't exist. For these reasons and so many more, we are humbled by the opportunity to engage in this UMS presentation. A performance like *They, Themselves and Schmerm* plays a part in advancing institutions where categorical limitations bubble to the surface; performances like these allow us to come out together, in laughter. I'd like to explore these thoughts by sharing our history as a center at U-M.

Since opening our doors on the third floor of the Michigan Union 46 years ago, the Spectrum Center has remained a space that centers LGBTQ people. We exist to advance inclusion at U-M by providing support, education, advocacy, and celebration around gender and attractionality. We work alongside students, staff, faculty, and community members to build capacity throughout our campus and to identify systems and structures that perpetuate the marginalization of LGBTQ people. We focus on listening to those most marginalized within the LGBTQ community, those who face complex intersectional oppressions, and we work to advance campus and community change.

As the first gender and sexuality Center on a college campus in the country, U-M has long served as a model around LGBTQ inclusion. Our campus has celebrated many successes, some of which include the addition of gender identity and expression to our non-discrimination policy in 2007, the introduction of gender-inclusive housing on our campus in 2010, and

a new 2016 system for listing designated pronouns on class rosters. Each of these programs and policies has served to advance equity for transgender and non-binary students; and, yet, none of these changes is the answer to an incredibly deep and challenging problem. Transgender and non-binary members of our community continue to experience isolation, anxiety, depression, and other forms of harm and violence at elevated and alarming rates. With each day comes the navigation of spaces and relationships that still render transgender people invisible, specifically and consistently excluding the existence of people whose gender is non-binary. As we see more transgender people in the media, we must not mistake this representation as an indicator that the barriers facing all members of this community are no longer present. When seeking inclusion for transgender and non-binary people, we need to move beyond awareness and acceptance and work toward equity and solidarity in support of those most marginalized within this community.

As we continue to identify and challenge interpersonal and structural barriers that threaten the ability of LGBTQ people to thrive, we must also recognize the many ways in which LGBTQ people create personal and collective agency. We must honor those, who alongside their academic and professional lives, serve as mentors, educators, and activists. It is here through this sharing of stories that connections are formed, relationships are built, and communities are created. As a part of the Spectrum Center, we witness the efficacy of storytelling every day. The choice to share pieces of yourself with others can be a powerful experience, and the opportunity to listen and to learn from another's story is a true gift.

It is with great appreciation for the power and gift of storytelling that we welcome Becca Blackwell to U-M to share *They, Themselves and Schmerm*. This performance gives voice to the many people within our community who have found a way to define and live their own gender truth. We hope that the audience enjoys this performance and leaves with a deep sense of our shared humanity.

*Will Sherry is the director of the University of Michigan Spectrum Center. With sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression as its framework, the Spectrum Center is committed to enriching the campus experience and developing students as individuals and as members of communities. Its work is accomplished through a student-centered, intersectional lens.*



## ARTISTS

**Becca Blackwell** (*writer and performer*) is a New York-based trans actor, performer, and writer. Existing between genders, and preferring the pronoun “they,” Becca works collaboratively with playwrights and directors to expand our sense of personhood and the body through performance. Some of their collaborations have been with Young Jean Lee, Half Straddle, Erin Markey, Jennifer Miller’s *Circus Amok*, Richard Maxwell, Sharon Hayes, Theater of the Two Headed Calf, and Lisa D’Amour. In 2019, they will be helming an all-trans/queer production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* with Soho Rep. They also have a character Snatch Adams, a giant vagina clown, that has a monthly show *It’s That Time of the Month* with their sidekick Tainty McCracken (Amanda Duarte) that delights the pussy in all of us. Film and TV credits include *Shameless*, *Deadman’s Barstool*, *The Impossibilities*, *Jack in a Box*, and *Dylan*. Becca is a recipient of the Doris Duke Impact Artist Award 2015. For more information, please visit [www.beccablackwell.com](http://www.beccablackwell.com).

**Ellie Heyman** (*director*) is a New York-based director and the director-in-residence at Joe’s Pub at The Public Theater. Recent credits include Jason Craig and Dave Malloy’s *Beardo* (Drama Desk Award Nomination; Pipeline Theater), Erin Markey’s *Boner Killer* (Under the Radar/The Public Theater), Becca Blackwell’s *They, Themselves and Schmer* (Under the Radar/The Public Theater); Adrienne Truscott’s *THIS* (Bessie

Award Nomination for “Outstanding Production”; NYLA) and *The Traveling Imaginary*, an internationally touring theatrical rock show with Julian Koster (Neutral Milk Hotel) rated “Top Five shows of the Year” by NPR. Many of these shows are touring internationally throughout 2017–19. International credits include *Elevation 506* in Bulgaria with Yassen Vasilev and *Home/Yuva* in Istanbul with Sami Berat Marcali. Her narrative podcast, *The Orbiting Human Circus (Of the Air)* (Night Vale Presents) was rated number one on Apple Podcasts and downloaded over four-million times. Upcoming projects include *Dinner with Georgette* (New York Theater Workshop), Dane Terry’s *Boomtown* (PS122/COIL), *Fusiform Gyrus* (Talking Band), and new fiction podcasts with Night Vale Presents. She is a graduate of Northwestern University and Boston University, a Drama League alumni, and a Time Warner Directing Fellow at the WP Theater. For more information, please visit [www.ellieheyman.com](http://www.ellieheyman.com).

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The artists give special thanks to: Ryan Seelig, Barbara Samuels, Megan Lang, Elizabeth Mak, Lily Lamb-Atkinson, Under the Radar/Public Theater, New York Theater Workshop, Linda Chapman, Erin Markey, Jill Pangallo, Jess Barbagallo, Nicholas Zeig-Owens, Ellie Heyman, Andrew Kircher, Mark Russell, Ann Blackwell, Michelle Matlock, Duke University, Connie Rotunda, and SUNY Purchase.

## UMS ARCHIVES

This week’s performances mark **Becca Blackwell**’s second appearance under UMS auspices, following their UMS debut in January 2016 in performances of Young Jean Lee’s *Untitled Feminist Show* at the Power Center.

# Making Connections in Our Community

*Below is a directory of regional organizations whose work intersects with the themes encountered in No Safety Net. The listing here is by no means comprehensive, but we hope it will provide a starting point for learning more about our local community.*

## **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion / Anti-Racism Organizations**

**The Dispute Resolution Center**, based in Ann Arbor, is a local non-profit whose mission is to offer conflict resolution services that are affordable, constructive, restorative, and healing. It offers peacemaking circles that invite a variety of topics to be discussed and/or resolved in a space that is non-judgmental, non-punitive, and supportive. The outcomes of peacemaking are improved communication, increased understanding, stronger relationships, and mutually satisfying outcomes.  
[www.thedisputeresolutioncenter.org](http://www.thedisputeresolutioncenter.org)

**ERACCE (Eliminating Racism & Creating/Celebrating Equity)**, based in Kalamazoo, is dedicated to organizing and facilitating antiracism workshops, providing mentoring, and transferring knowledge to individuals and institutions interested in resisting and dismantling structural racism and other forms of oppression. ERACCE offers an ongoing series of workshops that are open for anyone to attend.  
[www.eracce.org](http://www.eracce.org)

**Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion**, based in Detroit, serves as a catalyst for change. It develops, organizes, and empowers individuals and communities to advance equity and opportunity for all.  
[www.miroundtable.org](http://www.miroundtable.org)

**Race2Equity** is a community engagement campaign of the Michigan Roundtable that explores how our regional history of place-based racism has impacted our regional viability by intentionally segregating people of color from access to resources affecting quality of life and lifetime wealth accumulation.  
[www.race2equity.org](http://www.race2equity.org)

**South Adams Street @ 1900** was created by Matthew Siegfried as a master's project of Eastern Michigan University's Historic Preservation Program and explores the legacy of this historic African-American neighborhood in Ypsilanti. Walking tours and presentations are available by visiting [www.southadamstreet1900.wordpress.com](http://www.southadamstreet1900.wordpress.com).

As a unit in University of Michigan Student Life, the Office of **Multi-Ethnic Student Affairs (MESA)** uses the lens of race and ethnicity to engage the campus community and transform the student experience to build inclusive spaces and equitable opportunities for all.  
[www.mesa.umich.edu](http://www.mesa.umich.edu)

## **Child and Community Trauma**

**The University of Michigan's Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry** offers a range of services to children and families who have been impacted by trauma, stress, and anxiety. **The Infancy and Early Childhood Clinic (IECC)** is the specialty clinic that provides assessment and treatment services to infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and their families, and is an affiliate of the National Traumatic Stress Network. **The Trauma and Grief Clinic for Youth** provides trauma-informed assessment, intervention, consultation, and community outreach to children, adolescents (between the ages of 7–17 years), and families who anticipate or have significant histories of traumatic- and/or grief-exposed circumstances, broadly defined, to promote understanding of responses and healing.  
<https://medicine.umich.edu/dept/psychiatry/programs/child-adolescent-psychiatry>

The mission of the **University of Michigan Comprehensive Depression Center** is to detect depression and bipolar disorders earlier, treat more effectively, prevent recurrences and progression, counteract stigma, and improve public policy.  
[www.depressioncenter.org](http://www.depressioncenter.org)

## LGBTQ Community

**Affirmations** is an LGBTQ community center in downtown Ferndale, providing a welcoming space where people of all sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and cultures can find support.  
[www.goaffirmations.org](http://www.goaffirmations.org)

**Equality Michigan** has been working for 25 years to achieve full equality and respect for all Michigan residents regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.  
[www.equalitymi.org](http://www.equalitymi.org)

**The Fair Michigan Foundation** is fighting to end discrimination in Michigan and ensure everyone is treated fairly. Its vision is to create a Michigan where the presence and contributions of everyone are welcomed and celebrated regardless of their gender, gender identity, sex, or sexual orientation; where intolerance is challenged and defeated; where justice prevails and where the civil rights of all people are valued and respected.  
[www.FairMichigan.org](http://www.FairMichigan.org)

**LGBT Detroit's** mission is to increase the prominence and visibility of Detroit's LGBT culture, and build a strong, healthy, and vibrant community. LGBT Detroit's annual summer flagship event, *Hotter Than July*, hosts nearly 20,000 people over a six-day period. Programming is relevant for today's growing and diverse lesbian, gay, bi, and transgender communities in Southeast Michigan, and currently includes community discussion groups, resident empowerment activities, and tailored offerings particularly to women, elders, and youth.  
[www.lgbtdetroit.org](http://www.lgbtdetroit.org)

Since 1969, **Ozone House** in Ann Arbor has actively developed unique, high-quality housing and support programs for youth and families in crisis. Up to 40% of youth who are homeless identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Questioning (LGBTQ+). Ozone House is available 24/7 to help youth get out and stay out of unsafe situations. Ozone House

also operates a weekly support group, **PrideZone**, in Ypsilanti, where young people who identify as LGBTQ+ can socialize, build community, have fun, and access support services.  
[www.OzoneHouse.org](http://www.OzoneHouse.org)

**Riot Youth** is a youth-run, safe space for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, and agender/asexual (LGBTQQIA) youth and their allies housed in the Ann Arbor Neutral Zone. Through leadership skill building, community organizing, networking, and socializing, Riot Youth connects youth to build an inclusive community.  
[www.neutral-zone.org](http://www.neutral-zone.org)

**The Ruth Ellis Center (REC)**, based in Highland Park, is a youth social services agency with a mission to provide short-term and long-term residential safe space and support services for runaway, homeless, and at-risk lesbian, gay, bi-attractional, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth. As LGBTQ youth continue to be disproportionately affected by homelessness, the Ruth Ellis Center remains dedicated to ensuring that these vulnerable youth and young adults receive the services and inherent protections available to all citizens.  
[www.ruthelliscenter.org](http://www.ruthelliscenter.org)

**The University of Michigan Spectrum Center** seeks to prepare LGBTQ+ students to navigate a diverse society. The Center works toward enhancing the campus climate and support services for LGBTQ+ students, staff, and faculty at the University through education, advocacy, and community building.  
[www.spectrumcenter.umich.edu](http://www.spectrumcenter.umich.edu)

**Stand with Trans** is a 501(c)(3) whose mission is to provide the tools needed by transgender youth so they will be empowered, supported, and validated as they transition to their authentic life.  
[www.standwithtrans.org](http://www.standwithtrans.org)

### **MAY WE ALSO RECOMMEND...**

- 3/17 Steve Lehman & Sélébéyone  
4/14 Colin Stetson: *Sorrow*  
4/19–21 *Cold Blood*

*Tickets available at [www.ums.org](http://www.ums.org).*

### **ON THE EDUCATION HORIZON...**

*For more information on activities surrounding No Safety Net, please refer to pages 8–9 of this program book.*

- 2/12–3/26 UMS Night School: Writing About Performance  
(Ann Arbor Rec & Ed, Pioneer High School, 601 W. Stadium Boulevard)  
*Paid registration required; please visit [www.a2schools.org/reced](http://www.a2schools.org/reced) to register.*
- 2/13 Artist Interview: Janai Brugger  
(Watkins Lecture Hall, Moore Building, 1100 Baits Drive, 2:30 pm)
- 2/16–17 *The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess: A Symposium*  
(Gallery, Hatcher Graduate Library, 913 S. University Avenue)  
*Please visit [smttd.umich.edu/Gershwin](http://smttd.umich.edu/Gershwin) for full schedule details and to register.*

*Educational events are free and open to the public unless otherwise noted.*