

The York University Magazine

Piece by Piece

Artist Ekow Nimako:
Form, Life and Afrofuturism



Winter 2023



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THE PRESIDENT



RHONDA L. LENTON
PRESIDENT AND VICE-CHANCELLOR

AS PRESIDENT of a modern and progressive 21st-century university, with colleagues and an extensive alumni network driving innovation across all sectors, I am often asked how York is supporting our next generation of entrepreneurs. The answer is through York's well-established interdisciplinary programs highlighting leadership and inclusive excellence. With these initiatives, the University is providing the innovators of tomorrow with the skills, support and space needed to develop novel ideas for positive change. There has never been a greater need for this than now.

Job market uncertainty, increased reliance on e-commerce innovations and the changing nature of work have propelled approximately one in four Canadians to start their own business, according to the 2022 Intuit Entrepreneurship Report. The role entrepreneurs play in flourishing economies through job creation is well-documented; their innovative solutions and products are central to solving complex global challenges. They form the fabric of healthy, sustainable communities. But entrepreneurs need more than disruptive ideas to be successful. They need opportunities for sharing ideas, working in teams and accessing resources – all of which York provides.

YSpace for instance, offers 14 tailored programs to support diverse entrepreneurs and startups from ideation to growth across the tech, food and beverage, service and product industries. Incorporated into York's pan-university entrepreneurship hub is ELLA – Ontario's first accelerator that focuses on women-led businesses. Aspiring entrepreneurs benefit from access to mentorship from seasoned leaders, educational workshops and partner resources to take their ventures to the next level. York's entrepreneurship programs have catalyzed significant growth, both locally and globally. Since its inception in 2018, YSpace has supported 538 ventures, generating more than \$119 million in revenue. One such venture, It's Souper, an Afro-fusion soup and sauce line, recently signed with one of Canada's largest distributors, taking their recipes national.

Likewise, Schulich Startups – an accelerator-incubator for Schulich alumni and students – supports more than 1,000 entrepreneurs through an impressive roster of alumni connections, offering mentorship, work placement opportunities and more. York also has several other highly regarded, faculty-specific entrepreneurship programs, including Lassonde's Bergeron Entrepreneurs in Science and Technology Lab and Osgoode's IP Innovation Clinic, which offer programs for engineering and law students.

Through the Government of Canada's \$3-million investment in the Black Entrepreneurship Alliance, YSpace partnered with the Black Creek Community Health Centre and others to offer incubator and accelerator programs (including workshops, mini-MBA courses and mentorship) to support more than 350 Black Canadian entrepreneurs and young professionals in Humber River-Black Creek over the next three years. Other programs, such as Accelerate Newmarket, a partnership between York, the Newmarket Chamber of Commerce and Treefrog Inc., is expected to aid approximately 300 Newmarket entrepreneurs and business owners impacted by the pandemic to reskill and scale up come spring.

Strong entrepreneurship fosters resilient, sustainable communities. By working with community partners and provincial and federal governments, York is committed to righting the future and supporting entrepreneurs to create positive change. To learn how you can get involved, email yspace@yorku.ca or visit yspace.yorku.ca/.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FORD

EDITOR'S NOTES



Time Will Tell

TRUE CONFESSION: I'm lousy at keeping time. As a kid, I routinely missed buses, and arrived late for class. I was also usually the last one to exit the schoolyard at recess, and the student left behind at the community pool following swimming lessons for having taken too long to dry my hair. My Grade 4 teacher bawled me out. But it scarcely made a difference. As the years progressed, I could be counted on to arrive beyond fashionably late at parties and to miss the opening scenes of movies that I'd then have to watch all over again, to ensure I had grasped the plot. It's not that I thought time irrelevant. I just regarded it as something fluid, and open to interpretation. Why am I telling you all this? Because time – how we think about it and also use it to give structure to our lives – ticks throughout the Winter 2023 issue of *The York University Magazine*, uniting an array of articles about alumni accomplishment in such wide-ranging fields as science, sports and the arts. Included are stories on how York astronomers are able to predict the age of the universe with greater accuracy than before, and on why University graduates involved in the growing discipline of sleep medicine say that a good night's rest depends on maintaining the circadian rhythms established by the body's inner clock with a consistent sleep schedule. The cover story on former York visual arts

student Ekow Nimako is also time-sensitive, but in a different way. His fantastical sculptures, made from pieces of black LEGO, are informed by Afrofuturism, a cultural aesthetic and philosophy in which past, present and future commingle in speculative works of art combining elements of Black history and science fiction. Nimako's perception of time is dynamic, poetic and multidimensional. It aligns with my own belief that time isn't rigid. Rather, as the stories in this issue collectively suggest, time fluctuates with the seasons and lingers for an eternity among the stars, awaiting to be discovered. Given that punctuality isn't one of my strong suits, I like the idea of time being a journey, as opposed to a destination. It makes me think I've all the time in the world to get to where I need to go in the end, without missing the plot. ●
— Deirdre Kelly

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PUBLISHER Jaqueline Janelle

EDITOR Deirdre Kelly

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CONTRIBUTORS

Mike Ford, Paul Fraumeni, Michael Grange, Horst Herget, David Jager, Sofie Kirk, Chris Nicholls, Rebecca Payne, Chris Robinson, Rita Simonetta

CHIEF COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING OFFICER

Susan Webb

ADDRESS CHANGES: alumni@yorku.ca or

1-866-876-2228. Update your communication preferences at yorku.ca/alumniandfriends

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Communications and Public Affairs
West Office Building, York University
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ON THE COVER



Ekow Nimako
Photography by
Chris Nicholls



Are We Done Yet?

*Not quite.
But developing a math-based strategy
is how we might (finally) put COVID-19 behind us*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SOFIE KIRK

CAN WE ELIMINATE COVID-19? Probably not, concludes a pertinent new study out of York University examining the efficacy of the citywide Zero-COVID strategy as a form of disease control. According to a body of international research led by professor Huaiping Zhu of York's Department of Mathematics and Statistics, while mass lockdowns did help contain the virus in the early days of the global health crisis, the fast-paced evolution of COVID-19 variants has made eradication of the disease a frustratingly elusive goal. A better approach is to learn how to live with the virus using a suite of sustainable and effective public health guidelines aimed at mitigating the contagion

without permanently curtailing people's freedoms.

"Countries that aimed for eliminating the cases of COVID-19 with citywide-test-trace-isolate (CTTI) policy are found to have lower infections, deaths, and better economic performance, compared with those that opted for other mitigation strategies," says Zhu, who developed a computational model incorporating the CTTI Zero-COVID policy as a mathematical equation to understand how it contributes to SARS-CoV-2 elimination.

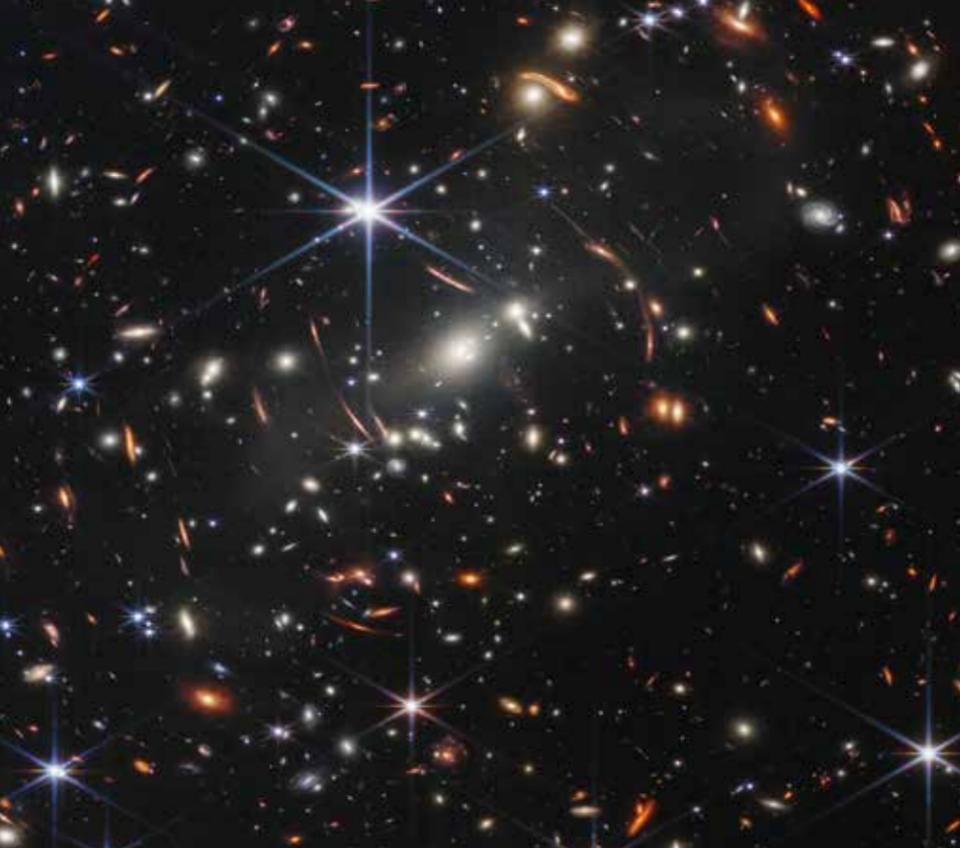
The study focused on China, where Zero-COVID had been, until civil unrest recently made it unsustainable, the main pandemic-control strategy. The investigation found that the

CTTI policy showed a capacity for the eradication of the Delta variant outbreaks, as well as the Omicron outbreaks. Yet, the implementation of CTTI is challenging, as it requires routine monitoring for early detection, adequate testing capacity, efficient contact tracing, and high isolation compliance, which constrain its benefits in regions with limited resources.

These challenges become even more acute in the face of more contagious variants with a high proportion of asymptomatic cases, Zhu says. "In regions where CTTI is not possible, personal protection, public health control measures, and vaccination are indispensable for mitigating and exiting the COVID-19 pandemic." ●
— Deirdre Kelly



Huaiping Zhu



WEBB'S FIRST DEEP FIELD: Thousands of galaxies flood this near-infrared image of galaxy cluster SMACS 0723, known as Webb's First Deep Field

SEEING STARS

**How old is the universe?
The answer is in the sky**

THE MYSTERY OF THE UNIVERSE is that much closer to being solved, thanks to a bedazzling new study co-authored by observational astronomers at York University. Using high-resolution images produced by a Canadian-made instrument on NASA's powerful James Webb Space Telescope (JWST), researchers at the Faculty of Science have been able to detect distant star clusters, among the oldest objects ever discovered in outer space.

These ancient relics of the universe, previously hidden in the miasma of the Milky Way and linked to a galaxy's infancy, contain clues about the earliest phases of star formation. Discovering them, says Adam Muzzin, co-author of a recently published paper providing a detailed look at early star formation, will revolutionize the study of astronomy. Previously, those stars remained undetectable, mainly because earlier telescopes – including the mighty Hubble – lacked the technology to pinpoint them in the dark. By comparison, the JWST is six times more powerful than the Hubble, making it a significant game-changer. "It's expanding our knowledge of the universe, literally before our eyes," he declares.

A member of the international team that helped to build the Near-Infrared Imager and Slitless Spectrograph (NIRISS), launched last December with the state-of-the-art JSTW telescope, Muzzin looked at deep field images of a distant galaxy

estimated to be more than nine billion light years away. Surrounding the Sparkler galaxy and making it glimmer are many star clusters, some of which the team age-dated to be extremely old – much older than the main part of the Sparkler galaxy itself. Muzzin and fellow members of the Canadian NIRISS Unbiased Cluster Survey (CANUCS) team – among them York PhD student Ghassan Sarrouh (BSc '20), another co-author on the study – believe that the Sparkler galaxy, so-called for the compact yellow-red dot-like objects clustering around it, was likely born three billion years after the Big Bang, at the peak of star formation.

It's a remarkable finding and just the beginning of what Muzzin describes as a new revolutionary period for the study of astronomy. Going forward, he and other CANUCS researchers will continue to receive new JWST-generated images of hundreds of galaxies. The goal is to analyze them in the same way and learn if these very old star clusters exist around all young galaxies in the distant universe, and determine what role they might play in the future growth of the solar system.

Says Muzzin, "These are transformative times in the study of galaxy formation. Already in its first few months JWST is allowing us to see things we only dreamed of a year ago. The next few years of discoveries are certain to be extraordinarily exciting." ●
— *Deirdre Kelly*

IMAGE COURTESY OF NASA, ESA, CSA, STSCL



MEET THE NEW CHANCELLOR

The first woman to head York has a history of breaking barriers

CANADIAN BUSINESS EXECUTIVE Kathleen (Katie) Taylor (MBA/JD '84, Hon LLD '14) is York's 14th Chancellor, the first woman to serve as the titular head of the University. Elected to a three-year term as of January, she replaces former Chancellor Gregory Sorbara who had held the ceremonial position since 2014.

"I am honoured and excited to take on this important role," says Taylor, a member of the University's Board of Governors whose first duty as Chancellor will be to confer degrees on graduates at the upcoming spring 2023 convocation. "Many lessons I learned at York – in the classroom and on campus – continue to inspire me today."

Taylor's list of accomplishments is long and impressive. Director of Air Canada and the Canadian Pension Plan Investment Board, she is also Chair of the Royal Bank of Canada and of Altas Partners, a Toronto-based private equity investment firm. As well, she is Chair of the Board of Trustees for the Hospital for Sick Children and past Chair and member of the Board of the SickKids Foundation, among other volunteer positions, including the Dean's Advisory Council at the Schulich School of Business.

Known for increasing diversity on boards and in business and for helping companies to improve their competitiveness, Taylor is also a member of the C.D. Howe Institute's National Council, serving as Chair of its Human Capital Policy Council and as a member of its Task Force on the Digital Economy. In 2022, she became a founding member of The Prosperity Project, a registered charity advancing the economic importance of gender equality during the COVID-19 recovery, with female empowerment initiatives such as online resources for women in STEM, skilled trades and leadership.

"In addition to an illustrious career that has spanned many industries, Kathleen Taylor has tirelessly served her local and global communities in an extraordinary capacity, advocating for more diverse representation in her professional and personal pursuits," says President and Vice-Chancellor Rhonda Lenton.

"It is no surprise that she chose to study at York. She knows us well and has remained actively engaged with our community. She will be an inspiration in her new role as Chancellor, and I am looking forward to working with her in driving the positive change for which York is known." ●
— *Staff*



SPEECHLESS

For Bruce Connell
language is an endangered species

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HORST HERGET

IN THE COURSE of doing fieldwork in Nigeria and Cameroon, where for decades he has been studying the history and phonology of Indigenous African languages, York University linguistics Professor Bruce Connell encountered just two surviving speakers of a Nigerian language spoken only by blacksmiths, casting doubt on its future survival. It's not an isolated problem.

"There are 7,000-plus languages in the world," says Connell, an endangered language specialist at Glendon College, "and the most dire prediction is that only 10 per cent of those languages will be around at the end of the century."

Many Canadian families have experienced language endangerment in the home. For all of the Indigenous languages in Canada, intergenerational transmission is weak or broken, and there's ample anecdotal evidence of immigrants who, after leaving their country of origin, fail to teach their first language to their children once they resettle.

Connell says a language becomes endangered when it's not passed on to the next generation.

"When you look at the ecology of endangered languages," Connell explains, "you see several common factors, and one is the desire for a better life. For some, that means learning to speak English, or another dominant language, in order to advance. The thinking is, you don't need the old language in order to get ahead."

But doesn't that speak to our adaptability as a species? Is language death a part of evolution, and not the catastrophe some might think it is? Emphatically not, says Connell, a member of the Linguistics and Language Studies program at the Department of Multidisciplinary Studies.

According to his ongoing research, languages have never been as vulnerable to extinction as they are today. It's a new and pressing problem.

"We've reached a critical juncture in the history of civilization," Connell says. "Linguistic diversity and diversity of worldviews are important to the advancement of humanity."

What can be done about it?

It's a key question, and one that's difficult to answer in a nutshell. Recognizing that languages exist in an ecology, as Connell teaches his students, points to two important considerations. The first is that the strategy adopted for any one language will depend on its particular situation. Second, from this point of view, what is important is preserving language ecologies, the conditions that sustain a language, rather than individual languages. In this way, languages may follow a "natural" evolution and not be wiped out. Connell offers up the example of Old English, which didn't die but transformed over time to become what many of us – in English Canada – speak today.

Language is a living thing that will adapt in accordance with shifting cultural conditions. Some of those conditions may even help preserve languages under the threat of extinction. Social media can be a tool to breathe new life into endangered languages by connecting speakers with one another, sometimes across great distances. Language revitalization by means of internet technology is occurring in Lakota-speaking communities in the U.S., with Yucatec Maya – an Indigenous language of Mexico – as well as among the Igorot, an Indigenous people living in the Cordillera Mountain Range in the Philippines.

In Toronto, Connell has been observing how Chimwiini, a Bantu language spoken in Somalia and its diaspora, is being kept alive by means of the internet and social media. These efforts all contribute to salvaging unique forms of communication that might otherwise be lost. "Language is essential to human existence," he says, "so we have to take it seriously." ●

— Deirdre Kelly

Reclaiming the Stage

*Kym Bird rediscovers
the plays of Canadian women
previously lost to history*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HORST HERGET

“When I began my work 30 years ago, there was one essay written on a single play by a single Canadian woman,” says Professor Kymberley Bird (BA '83, MA '85, PhD '97), who teaches courses in York's English and Humanities departments. “I have spent my career trying to fill in and fill out this history, because if there are no books on the library shelves, nothing you can point to that demonstrates that women participated in the artistic past of the country, then the easiest and most obvious assumption is that either they did nothing, or nothing they did is worthy of recovery or academic quarter.”

With this realization propelling her forward, the three-time York grad set out to collect, transcribe and annotate plays by early Canadian women dramatists in her suggestively titled new book *Blowing Up the Skirt of History*. It was a formidable task, because the male gatekeepers of the time considered women's artistic expression a matter of whimsy. “They simply did not value the work that women did,” Bird says.

In response, her book gives a second life to plays by Canadian women written between 1876 and 1920. Introductions for each of the 10 plays in the collection provide insight into socio-political contexts.

“The formation of middle-class women into feminist movements is related to the many revolutions of the late 18th and 19th centuries, but it is also the direct result of women being increasingly confined to the home and excluded from the

public sphere,” observes Bird, who writes with an approachable and engaging style, allowing readers to appreciate these innovators and their talents. “The plays in this anthology reflect this shift and women's fight against it. To stand up at that time and speak in public was a violation of their femininity. I really admire their bravery in doing that.”

As such, the book is an eye-opener regarding women's contributions to early theatre, and many of their works continue to resonate – particularly *A Mock Parliament*, a text adapted by Bird from a variety of primary sources. In fact, it's not a single play, but a collection of works originally written, performed and produced by various women's organizations to raise awareness and funds for the suffragist movement in Canada. Nellie McClung, one of the movement's leaders, helped write and arrange the Walker Theatre Parliament of 1914, as did many of the country's first wave of feminists. The work imagines a scenario in which men are denied the right to vote and must plead their case to women parliamentarians.

“Today, a play like this could be revised and reformed for a variety of political purposes, the most topical of which may be the newly resurrected abortion debate in the U.S.,” Bird says, noting how the voices of the past still resonate today. With *Blowing Up the Skirt of History*, she's succeeded in rediscovering and redeeming the history of some important plays and women dramatists in Canada – and in putting them centre stage. ●

— Rita Simonetta (BA '99)





BY DAVID JAGER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS NICHOLLS

The work of artist Ekow Nimako addresses form, life and Afrofuturism

TO FIRST WITNESS the obsessively detailed sculptures of Ekow Nimako is to experience astonishment. You are plunged into a world of mythical figures and futuristic cityscapes almost too fantastical to be believed. Yet at the same time, they feel oddly familiar. Sorting out your impressions, you can detect elements of science fiction, a touch of the Marvel and DC universes, strong aspects of African culture and folklore, and some elements of wild, dreamlike reverie.

Then it hits you:

Wait, they're made out of LEGO?

Nimako, 43, is a self-styled Afrofuturist sculptor who works exclusively in the universally beloved building toy known as LEGO. Black LEGO, to be precise, which he uses to construct cities, masks, animals and figures from Afrocentric. Yet none of his sculptures have the blocky, pixelated aesthetic that one might recognize in the window of a toy store.

The married father of two grown daughters (one now works as his assistant) is walking me through his Toronto studio, a repurposed basement apartment where eight or more sculptures are under meticulous construction on scaffoldings of metal and wood. Floor-to-ceiling plastic drawers with thousands of LEGO components neatly line the walls. It looks wonderfully impressive, providing a view into another world of miniature bits and pieces to be patiently put together over long stretches of time. But that's not what matters to him.

PIECE PIECE by PIECE PIECE

**I decided to call my suppositional process of cultural recovery
'speculative reclamation.' This is one way
powerful Black identities get built – not just from written histories
but from traditions of oral and visual storytelling**

“To be honest,” Nimako says, “the material is secondary to what I do.”

Seeing these creations up close, it's easy to understand why he says so. Nimako – who studied visual art at the University from 2007 to 2010 – makes sculptures that transcend their material in much the same way past sculptors (Michelangelo or Rodin, for instance) created marvels that transcended wood, clay or marble. Nimako's figures are so imbued with physical presence as to be animalistic, vibrantly alive. Using the visual language of Afrofuturism – a cultural aesthetic combining history, mythology and fantasy to explore themes of the African diaspora – they overflow and crackle with energies expressed in undulating lines and curves.

“I'm always struck by the level of detail, patience and creativity that go into Ekow's work, but this is just characteristic of who he is and the kind of artist he chooses to be,” says Alyssa Fearon (BBA '09, MA/MBA '14), director and curator of Regina's Dunlop Art Gallery, which recently presented an exhibition of Nimako's sculptures. “His world-making projects envision new ways of understanding African and diasporic identities – carrying us on journeys through time, space and imagination.”

These kinetic tensions are evident in Nimako's studio. They are in the writhing tentacles of an African water god under construction, and in the drawn bow and flank of a centaur archer. They are in the multi-limbed figure of Anansi the spider, one of the reigning tricksters of folklore from Nimako's native Ghana.

“That is part of the challenge,” he says, pointing out different details on the boy-spider sculpture. “Looking at a standard piece and repurposing it entirely as a bicep or a cheek. This is part of the LEGO car kit that I really love to use, but you wouldn't recognize it until I pointed it out.”

Jenn Goodwin, a Toronto curator, choreographer and arts producer who supervised Nimako's 2018 sculptural presen-

tation at Scotiabank Nuit Blanche, sees his work as transformative on different levels.

“Ekow's work utilizes but then transforms and transcends the seemingly simple LEGO block to connect any and all ages to a deeply powerful message: the beauty, power and majesty of Blackness in form, structure, narratives and futures,” Goodwin says.

To understand why Nimako would choose to struggle with a material not normally associated with contemporary art is to understand the history of African art and music in diaspora. Black artists and musicians in Canada and the U.S. have always “made do” with the materials at hand, especially when resources were scarce. Salvaged cigar boxes and baling wires were transformed into early blues guitars. Junked stereo components were reconfigured into the early sound systems of Caribbean dance hall. Dusty R&B record collections were deconstructed and woven into the first tracks of hip hop. In this way, Nimako belongs to a long and storied tradition of Black artists who build new, Afrocentric art forms out of whatever mainstream commercial materials are at hand. But in his case, his art is also inspired by his upbringing.

Born in 1979 in Montreal to Ghanaian parents, he grew up in Toronto's Scarborough district, where the other Black families were mostly of Caribbean descent. He always felt that his African heritage marked him as different and has spent much of his career exploring that identity.

“I remember how my being seen as ‘African’ set me apart from the other Black Canadians I knew growing up,” he says. “It was strange to see how they made these distinctions, and so I always felt myself to be a part of two separate cultures, an African and an Afro-Canadian one.”

This feeling of bifurcation (and a series of questions about Black identity in general) led Nimako to Afrofuturism, a movement that he expresses an allegiance to but continues to question.





**They are still growing and evolving into something new.
But we are honouring the legacy of the ancestors as well**

Some scholars trace the core concepts of Afrofuturism to eccentric 1960s jazz musician Sun Ra, who forged a vision of a new Black identity built on Afro-Egyptian cosmology. It was his belief that diaspora and racism had erased Black identity and a new one needed to be constructed from elements of history and fantasy. It was also the thinking driving Rammellzee, a pioneering 1980s artist and rapper who built futuristic warrior suits out of detritus from the streets of New York City. Nimako most definitely belongs to this eclectic tradition.

This is why his art continues to tread a fine line between African history, folklore and unabashed fantasy. “That was my thinking when I made my figure the Bandit Queen of Walatah,” Nimako explains, showing me the figure of a striking caped woman holding a bow, with a horned mask on her head.

“She’s not a confirmed historical figure but one I imagined,” he says, adding that she first came to him as an idea. “One day, I thought, ‘It would be really amazing if there had been this strong African warrior queen who attacked and liberated slave caravans on the Silk Road in the Middle Ages. And, considering the complex history of colonialism, what if she was the original inspiration for the English folk hero Robin Hood?’ I decided to call my suppositional process of cultural recovery ‘speculative reclamation.’ This is one way powerful Black identities get built – not just from written histories but from traditions of oral and visual storytelling.”

Nimako also cites the work of sci-fi author Nnedi Okorafor as an inspiration. Like Nimako, she is caught between two worlds. In her own work, she blends her strongly rooted Nigerian identity with a vision of a futuristic Africa awash in speculative possibilities.

“Okorafor’s term is ‘Africanfuturism,’ which in her own words is ‘concerned with visions of the future,’” he says, quoting verbatim from the author’s website. “It is centred on and predominantly written by people of African descent (Black people),” he continues, “and it is rooted first and foremost in Africa. It’s less concerned with ‘what could have been’ and more concerned with ‘what is and can and will be.’” For Nimako, it’s the guiding principle behind his art.

“It’s why I refer to this new series as ‘Building Black,’” he

explains. “We’re building, which is why I portray these ancient African deities as children. They are still growing and evolving into something new. But we are honouring the legacy of the ancestors as well.”

Nimako’s unique blend of fantastical creations, combined with his commitment to his African roots, has already attracted attention across the GTA and abroad. Toronto’s Aga Khan Museum, with its mandate to represent local artists rooted in Islamic and African culture, staged Nimako’s show *Building Black: Civilizations*, a handsome retrospective that featured figures such as the Bandit Queen of Walatah, along with his depictions of cities, desert caravans and fantastical creatures – work that museum curator Michael Chagnon describes as “fusing technical and aesthetic finesse with conceptual depth.”

More exhibitions are on the horizon. Nimako now appears to be at the edge of a wildly successful international career. He’s already exhibited in the U.K., the U.S., the U.A.E., Germany and Korea. Future projects include a touring show (the details of which are still to be announced) that is expected to travel the world when it launches in Europe in 2024. Closer to home is a new public art commission from the City of Toronto, a series of four stand-alone artworks that together will be entitled *Children of the Rogue Valley*. A continuation of Nimako’s *Building Black MYTHOS* series of sculptures, they will be erected on site at the yet-to-be-built North East Scarborough Community and Childcare Centre, located close by the Malvern neighbourhood where Nimako grew up. Both the building and the artworks are expected to be completed in the fall of 2024. “I’m really excited about this project,” Nimako says. “For me, it will be like a homecoming.”

One that will be rendered in a particular colour

“This is what I love about the aesthetic of black as a material,” Nimako says, while standing next to one of his ebony-like LEGO sculptures. “It contains something very fundamental that goes to the source. It is everything and nothing at the same time. Ultimately, though, my main emphasis is not to highlight the medium – it’s to portray life, to express form and life.” ●

With additional reporting from Deirdre Kelly

GONE BATTY

Biologist and TV personality Dan Riskin's new kids' book takes flight

BY PAUL FRAUMENI
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FORD

IN A CHANGE OF PACE from his usual work as a respected science journalist, York alumnus Dan Riskin (MSc '00) has just published a children's book. It's about a baby bat that is afraid to take its first leap into flight.

Fiona the Fruit Bat took Riskin a couple of years to write with illustrator Rachel Qiugi. But the story actually got started two decades ago in a tropical rainforest, before Riskin had a career where he would regale the likes of Jay Leno with science stories, before he was a prime-time TV host himself, before he had any notion that he would someday be a children's book author.

York University, where Riskin studied biology as a post-graduate student, planted the seed.

One of the only evolutionary biologists to become a household name, Riskin had been fascinated by bats since he was a boy growing up in Edmonton. That passion became the pathway to an illustrious career after renowned bat expert Brock Fenton, then a professor at York, sent Riskin on a study trip to Costa Rica, where the University has a campus in the rainforest. It pretty much launched Riskin's career as a bat scientist. It also gave him the moment that eventually led him, many years later, to write his children's book.

In May 1999, while doing research in Costa Rica, Riskin stuck his head in a very tight cave in the country's northeast. It wasn't the kind of cave you could easily walk into – Riskin really had to squeeze into it. Once he got his head into the





I HAD THIS REAL SENSE OF BLISS, THIS FEELING THAT I CAN'T BELIEVE I GET TO DO THIS

cave, he looked up and saw a short-tailed fruit bat. It was staring back at him and wiggling its nose. That's what bats do when they use their superpower, echolocation. Then something powerful happened.

"It looked at me and I looked back at it," Riskin vividly recalls. "I had this real sense of bliss, this feeling that I can't believe I get to do this. I've always remembered that image in my mind."

A few years later, in 2019, Riskin realized that image was something he could build on. He'd spent two decades developing a successful career as a science communicator – host of the Discovery Channel's *Daily Planet*, and a host on Animal Planet, a guest on big-time talk shows such as Leno and *The Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson*, author of the critically acclaimed 2014 book *Mother Nature is Trying to Kill You*, and a busy science reporter for CTV News.

Then a friend got him together with Greystone, a Vancouver-based publisher that does a lot of work in children's books.

Riskin and Greystone's editors then started talking, sharing ideas on how he might use his biology knowledge and storytelling talent for a young audience. Riskin liked the idea. "My goal as a science communicator isn't necessarily to get people to understand science," he says, "it's to get them to like science and feel science is a good use of their tax dollars. And a big part of that is how kids are introduced to science."

While figuring out what he should write, Riskin thought back on his years as a York grad student, when he had first learned that when bats are babies, they don't know how to echolocate. They develop the ability to find their way in the dark as they get older, when their mental circuitry advances to a point where they can navigate their environment using echolocation. Ruminating on this bat factoid, Riskin then thought of his own three kids, who are now grade-school age and learning to do new things, like taking public transit on their own. That's how a story about a baby bat came to mind.

"A kid goes to the dentist, and they're scared," Riskin explains. "Their parent says, 'It's fine, you have nothing to worry about.' But the kid has to experience it to get over their fear. A similar thing, I thought, happens when a young bat has to take flight. Its mom says, 'It's going to be fine. Just use your own hearing and you'll know what to do.' And the baby bat does that, it takes this leap of faith."

Published this past September, *Fiona the Fruit Bat* has since become a hit.

On the day I spoke with Riskin, he was in a parking lot talking with me over the phone. He had just done a live taping of CTV's *The Marilyn Denis Show* and after our call, returned home to be interviewed on CFRA, an Ottawa talk radio station.

Is children's lit a new storytelling path for Riskin?

He isn't sure. His whole career, he says, has always been a bit of a surprise to him.

After completing his studies at York, he moved to Victoria, B.C., intending to make documentaries. When that didn't work out, he waited tables in restaurants. "But I missed bats and I missed travelling," Riskin says; he then returned to university (in the U.S.) to earn a doctorate in zoology and animal biology. Soon after, a TV production company came calling.

Riskin thought he'd be an academic, but he wound up hosting a show on Animal Planet about parasites called *Monsters Inside Me*. Then Leno's people called, then Ferguson's. And when the Discovery Channel asked him to replace Jay Ingram (who was retiring) as host of *Daily Planet*, he committed fully to a different kind of teaching.

"I'm the last person who should give advice on how to find or change your career, but maybe I'm a good person to give advice on how to have an interesting career. And that is to just take the opportunity that's presented to you and go for it as hard as you can." ●





Pillow Talk

Time to get serious about snoozing

BY RITA SIMONETTA (BA '99) • PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS ROBINSON

AFTER JULIA GLOWINSKI (MSW '09) had her second child, neither baby nor mom were getting enough rest. "We had struggles with my baby not sleeping, and I noticed the toll it was taking on me," Glowinski says.

The experience sparked an interest in sleep research, a growing field touching on everything from disease control to mental health.



UPON COMPLETING her Master of Social Work from York University, Glowinski went on to become a certified infant and toddler sleep consultant. Then in 2018, she launched Glow Sleep Services, a clinic that helps parents and their kids develop healthy bedtime habits.

“These are kids who are up every half hour,” Glowinski says. “Some of them will wake up as soon as they are put down, so their parents end up holding them the entire night.”

It’s a scenario that results in extreme fatigue, an issue that’s becoming increasingly common.

More than ever before, Canadians are struggling when it comes to both sleep quantity and quality. According to a 2022 Statistics Canada report, 25 per cent of adults report

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THE PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCY OF CANADA recommends seven to nine hours of sleep for adults aged 18 to 64, and seven to eight hours for adults aged 65 and older.

Poor sleeping habits add up to serious consequences. Getting only five hours a night is associated with higher incidences of chronic diseases, according to a 2022 study published in *PLOS Medicine*.

Experts say that sleep debt – the accumulation of several days without enough sleep – is a problem without an easy fix.

“You can’t bring back time,” says Anjali P. Patel (BSc ’21), who works as a sleep technician at MedSleep in Brampton. “The human body has a biological clock, a circadian rhythm, and the body has to be asleep at a certain time.”

It’s not just about how much you sleep but the quality of sleep, which refers to various factors, including falling asleep relatively quickly after going to bed, and sleeping without interruption.

Also essential is what researchers term sleep architecture – the sleep cycles necessary to achieve restorative effects. Short-changing on quality or quantity produces moodiness, irritability and stress.

Michael Mak (BA ’85), a sleep medicine specialist and psychiatrist at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), notes that up to 80 per cent of people with mental health disorders can have sleeping issues, according to a CAMH-led study.

“When we examined the brain waves of participants, we noticed a disruption of sleep architecture,” Mak says. “And those with sleeping disturbances are at a higher risk of depression.”

Kenton Kroker, a historian and professor in York’s Health & Society Program, believes that the rise of sleep as a medical sub-specialty has changed the way doctors link sleeplessness and depression. “Sleep physicians used to think of insomnia as a separate health condition, or perhaps a symptom of depression,” says Kroker, author of *The Sleep of Others*, a book providing a history of scientific investigations into sleep and sleep-related problems. “With the deeper integration of sleep into medical practice,” he concludes, “many sleep specialists now tend to think of depression and insomnia as co-morbidities.”

Improving productivity, regulating hormones and strengthening the immune system are some known benefits of sleep.

Julia Glowinski. Portrait by Horst Herget

**When we examined the brain waves of participants,
we noticed a disruption of sleep architecture...
and those with sleeping disturbances
are at a higher risk of depression**

It's also essential for memory retention, finds Annabelle Torsein (BA '13), a York psychology major who has conducted research at the Sleep and Depression (SAD) laboratory at Toronto Metropolitan University. "Sleep stores and consolidates information that you learned throughout the day," Torsein says.

Unsurprisingly, the pandemic heavily impacted our ability to sleep. Luigi Nicola Bragazzi, who teaches Applied Mathematics at York, co-authored a 2021 study that found sleeping disruptions reached 35.7 per cent. Those who had COVID-19 experienced the worst of it (74.8 per cent), Bragazzi found.

Children's ability to sleep was also deeply impacted by the pandemic.

"Their sleeping habits changed during COVID-19," says Indra Narang, the director of Sleep Medicine at the Hospital for Sick Children (SickKids). "Children had interrupted sleep or difficulties falling asleep because of a lack of social contact and what was happening around them."

According to the Public Health Agency of Canada, children ages 5 to 13 should sleep for nine to 11 hours, and those 14 to 17 years old should get eight to 10 hours. But the majority of Canadian children and teens are not meeting those levels. "Most children are sleep-deprived," Narang says. And that's not good for their health.

Sleep deprivation, if left unchecked, can lead to serious

problems as a child develops into adulthood, adds Torsein, whose clinical psychology lab research focused on late adolescents.

She says that a good night's sleep is crucial for the release of growth hormones: "And those with sleeping problems had less of them."

Academic performance is also affected.

"Students are unable to take in information because they lack focus," Torsein continues. "Some students fall asleep in class because they aren't well rested."

How to treat insomnia? Sometimes the solutions are simply a matter of tweaking some personal habits.

In Mak's opinion, the most important tip is to say good-night to screens – ideally two hours before bed. "The blue light emitted from screens," he says, "tricks our bodies into thinking it's daytime, hampering the production of melatonin." He also suggests waking up every day at the same time, to set up the start of a new circadian cycle.

Glowinski endorses this; she says that practicing a specific set of rituals cues our bodies for sleep. Keeping your bedroom dark, and avoiding exposure to natural light, can also make you drowsy. "As light dims, a hormone called melatonin is released naturally and will help stimulate sleep," Narang says. Why is this important? Because sleep is a balm. It cures, restores and keeps us happy and functioning as human beings. It's a substantive public health issue, which is why we need to care. ●



Alumni

Accountability

Creating a more inclusive business world

BY DEIRDRE KELLY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY HORST HERGET

WHILE AN UNDERGRADUATE at York University, Alamgir Khandwala (BAS '17) woke up one day paralyzed from the waist down. A rare inflammatory disease called polymyositis had unexpectedly taken over his lower limbs, incapacitating him to the point that he had to temporarily drop out of the School of Administrative Studies, where he was a student in the accounting stream. He spent four months in hospital and another two recovering at his family's home in Thornhill, Ont., concentrating on walking again and repairing the disease's impact on his mental health. He did it by relying on the support and care of others, and by determining that, once he was better, he would give back and become a helping hand to those also affected by disabilities. "I focused on the positive," he says, "on what I could do, as opposed to what I couldn't. I decided to use my setback as a catalyst that would push me forward and make me rethink my priorities."

Khandwala already had some community experience to draw on by the time he returned to campus as a purpose-driven individual in the fall of 2015. In his teens, he had been a volunteer sports leader in a downtown Toronto immigrant neighbourhood and participated in youth programs at his mosque. A whiz at numbers from a young age, he also served as president of his high school's investment club, where he first learned how to use business to invest in socially responsible causes. He redoubled his extracurriculars at York, joining Student Council and becoming a student member of Senate, the University's highest governing body, while managing a disability alongside his coursework. He also threw himself into research – unusual for a commerce student – by contributing to a peer-reviewed paper on living with a chronic health condition and associated disabilities.

He led by example, emerging in 2016 as York's choice of student representative at the annual UN-sponsored University Scholars Leadership Symposium, held that year in Hanoi, Vietnam. As one of 700 students from 69 countries (and one of only six Canadians), Khandwala participated in discussions and action plans centred around such social justice issues as eradicating world poverty, stopping human trafficking and improving educational outcomes for youth

in marginalized communities around the globe. In 2017, the year he graduated, York bestowed on Khandwala the Murray G. Ross Award, one of the University's most prestigious honours, citing his "academic strengths, professional accomplishments and unconditional generosity when it comes to serving fellow students and the University." But his commitment to helping others didn't stop there.

Post-graduation, after having secured his first job as a staff accountant with Deloitte, Khandwala followed up on a piece of advice given to him by one of his York professors and became a volunteer treasurer at Success Beyond Limits, a youth empowerment organization in the community located at the intersection of Jane Street and Finch Avenue, near York's Keele Campus. Simultaneously, he did volunteer advocacy work for Lime Connect, a global not-for-profit connecting post-secondary students with disabilities to scholarships, internships and full-time careers offered by its network of corporate partners. Khandwala knew the organization well, having been a two-time Lime Connect scholarship recipient before returning as a community ambassador. "My philosophy," he says, "is to never give up or lose willpower. This is something I want to share with others in the hopes they too can excel, despite the setbacks and hurdles life sometimes puts in our way. Even if I'm just sitting down with someone for a 15 minute coffee and letting them know they're not alone with their struggle, it gives me the feeling that I'm having an impact. That's important to me."

Today, at age 28, with his mobility almost fully restored, Khandwala's mission is to bring some of that community activism into the financial sector. At Moneris, the fintech company he joined in 2021, Khandwala took a leadership role in guiding the firm's Disability and Diversity Awareness Month activities. He also helped to implement and monitor its environmental, social and governance (ESG) strategies, experience he hopes to build on in his new position as finance manager at Uber in San Francisco.

"I want to do more than just numbers," he says. "I want to invest in a company's purpose and drive progressive change." For Khandwala, this isn't just a slogan. It's a plan of action for creating sustained prosperity on humanitarian principles. Invest in people and the yield will grow. It's what he is counting on to build a better future. ●

Next Level

Olympian
Melissa Humana-Paredes
says her experience
at York has made her
one of volleyball's
top female athletes

BY MICHAEL GRANGE



WHEN MELISSA HUMANA-PAREDES (BA '17) was deciding where to go to university, York was not initially her first choice. It wasn't because the volleyball program wasn't up to snuff for the future Olympian, or because the school itself was too intimidating or unfamiliar.

In fact, it was the opposite.

For the Canadian beach volleyball star, York University was

— quite literally — home. She learned to ride her bike there. Some of her earliest memories are of having the run of the place on weekends: going for a swim at the recreation centre, shooting hoops at the Tait McKenzie Centre or running around and making mischief with her brother at sporting events. The Keele Campus was in her blood.

"I knew it like the back of my hand. I grew up there," Humana-Paredes told me over a Zoom call from Jumala, Latvia.

She was on the Beach Pro Tour, keeping sharp with an eye toward representing Canada at the 2024 Olympics in Paris, as she did at the 2020 Games in Tokyo, where she finished fifth with former partner Sarah Pavan.

Her father, Hernan Humana, is an associate lecturer in the Faculty of Health in the School of Kinesiology and Health Science. The former Chilean national was himself a York grad, a former Lion, and served as head coach and assistant coach for the women's and men's volleyball programs, respectively, over his more than 40-year association with the school. He was also a residence don at Founders College when Melissa and her older brother Felipe — who also played volleyball for the Lions — were youngsters. She remembers taking in movie nights in residence and interacting with students who seemed cool, mature, and sophisticated to an eight-year-old.

"I got to live campus life as a kid, and it was honestly the best childhood ever," she says.

But when it came time to choose where to go to school and play volleyball, she wasn't so sure. The thought of trying something new and different loomed large; Western and Queen's were possibilities. There was even some consideration of playing volleyball at a school in the United States, but York it was.

"York just made the most sense — it checked a lot of boxes," she says. "And I remember being a tiny bit resentful, like, 'I don't know if this would have been my number one choice, just because I wanted a different experience.'"

However, within the first week of being there, during frosh week and meeting the team and being in my own dorm, I knew that it was the best decision for me."

Over a four-year career beginning with the 2010-11 season, Humana-Paredes was a three-time OUA all-star. She was an All-Canadian in 2012, the same year she was named York's female athlete of the year as she worked toward a degree in communications studies.

"I have so many great memories of that team. One, we were a phenomenal group in terms of performance; I think we were incredible," she says. "But the main thing that I always remember and really value from my experience there was the group of girls and the experiences of the team off the court. Those are the reasons why they're my best friends, still to this day. We have a true sisterhood."

The relationships endure. Humana-Paredes's new partner as

I FEEL LIKE IT SHAPED ME WHEN I
WAS A REALLY YOUNG KID TRYING
DIFFERENT THINGS AND LEARNING
WHAT LIFE IS ABOUT



she takes aim at the 2024 Games is former York U teammate Brandie Wilkerson (BA '15), herself a 2020 Olympian.

There is some irony to the fact that, as Humana-Paredes has thrived on the global athletic stage, her time at York has become even more cherished.

"I think that's why I feel so connected to the school. Because I feel like it shaped me when I was a really young kid trying different things and learning what life is about, and then again at a very formative time when you're becoming an adult and trying to figure out who you are and create your path.... It's really meaningful."

The path takes her everywhere. There are no complaints — travelling the world to play volleyball in the sun and sand in what is now her third Olympic cycle beats most nine-to-fives. And, knowing that it's not a career that can go on indefinitely, she's made a point to soak in the local culture wherever she visits, scoping out restaurants and looking for opportunities between travelling, training and competing to take time for a museum, gallery or walking tour.

But with a professional life that demands long periods far from friends and family, the decision to study and compete at York takes on a different meaning.

"It was actually a blessing, because my parents could come up if I ever needed anything, and they were there at all my games," she says. "And right now, one of the hardest things I deal with is being away from home, so I'm glad that I had those years. They were the best years of my life — I can say that with complete confidence." ●

High Note

Soprano Jonelle Sills is creating change at the opera



Post-graduation, at Bogle's recommendation, Sills enrolled at The Royal Conservatory of Music's Glenn Gould School, where she took master classes with York professor emerita Catherine Robbin and Canadian Opera Company veteran Liz Upchurch. The warmth and power of her vocal line established Sills as one to watch by the time she left the program in 2018. After a couple of years performing minor roles

in works such as Benjamin Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia* and doing community engagement work with Jamii, an inner-city arts organization with links to Canadian Stage, Sills landed her first major contract, a 2019 production of Claude Vivier's contemporary opera *Kopernikus*. Staged by Toronto's celebrated Against the Grain Theatre company, the show went on to earn a Dora for best ensemble performance, an auspicious beginning for a singer on the rise.

Other opportunities soon followed. In 2020, Against the Grain cast her again, in a lead role this time, for a touring production of Giacomo Puccini's *La Bohème*, which it presented in dive bars across Canada. She performed Mimi, opera's most famous consumptive heroine, and loved every minute. "That was a dream role," says Sills, whose stellar performance as Mimi earned her a position on Canada's 30 hot classical musicians under 30 list, published by CBC Music.

During the pandemic, when theatres were closed, Sills remained busy. She participated in online performances and performed with the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir. She also moved out West at this time to become a member of Vancouver Opera's Yulanda M. Faris Young Artists Program. Her roles since joining the organization in 2021 have included Masha in Richard Wargo's chamber piece *The Music Shop* and Micaëla in a scaled-down production of Georges Bizet's *Carmen*. Sills performed these works with "glorious soprano finesse" and "sure technique and gracious stage presence," to quote the critics. This year, the now-30-year-old soprano made her mainstage debut, performing the role of Helena in Vancouver Opera's production of Benjamin Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which opened in February. "I just keep telling myself to keep going, to keep moving forward," Sills says. "The goal is to be the best singer I can be." ● — *Deirdre Kelly*

U P-AND-COMING lyrical soprano Jonelle Sills (BFA '16, BEd '16) is on her way to putting her mark on Canada's thriving opera scene. One of York University's Top 30 Changemakers Under 30, she is one of only a handful of Black women performing in the rarefied world of opera – a situation she hopes to change by becoming a trailblazer in the field.

"Representation in the arts is important," says the youngest of five children born to British-Guyanese immigrant parents in Markham, Ont. "My hope is that other Black singers see me and know that it's possible to push ahead and get noticed. It's the work that counts."

As Sills is quick to point out, there are no overnight sensations in her profession. The road to success is long and arduous, requiring a dogged sense of commitment to complete the journey. Her own experience attests to that. She grew up singing in church and, after showing promise as a child, was invited to join Toronto's Bach Children's Chorus at the age of 12.

Following years of private coaching with Barbara Fris, the teacher who told her she had what it takes to become a professional singer, Sills went on to study voice at York University with Stephanie Bogle, an acclaimed soprano with extensive operatic experience on the world stage. Bogle took Sills's raw talent and made it soar. "I was pretty rough when I arrived at York," she says, "and I experienced a lot of failures. But I set a series of small goals for myself, and I didn't give up. I've been given a gift from God, and I knew not to waste it."



Top of the Props

Travis Lahay sets the scene at Cirque du Soleil

O BACKSTAGE AT THE BIG TOP, Travis Lahay (BFA '10) has his hands full. There's a model of a llama's head on a stick to steady, a stage with 160 independent panels to build and a 340-kilogram mechanical hand made of steel and fibreglass to roll into position for the contortionist act at centre stage.

It's all in a day's work at *Kurios: Cabinet of Curiosities*, the critically acclaimed Cirque du Soleil show now touring the U.S. and Europe after playing in Toronto this past summer. As the head of carpentry and props, Lahay has more than 400 props to take care of (in addition to a skilled team of woodworkers, painters and technicians) to ensure all the movable parts look good as new for every show. "It's like a backstage choreography," the 36-year-old York theatre grad says. "Every step counts."

Born and raised in Scarborough, Ont., Lahay studied production at York as a part of his University education, learning carpentry along with set, lighting and costume design – all training that has helped him since he joined Cirque du Soleil

in 2015. He started in logistics, which includes tent and bleacher set-ups, before working his way up to his present position behind the scenes.

Ironically, Cirque du Soleil was part of his curriculum at York, studied as an example of the highest standard of safety in the global performing arts industry. Lahay never dreamed that one day he'd be working for the Montreal-based company, responsible for putting those production values to work. It's a balancing act, as demanding as anything Cirque puts in front of the public in one of its many blockbuster touring shows.

"When you create art," Lahay says, "you need to know all the angles, especially when dealing with a circus show, which is a combination of many things – visual art, dance, acting, the spoken and written word. I'm grateful to my University for giving me that knowledge." ●

— *Deirdre Kelly*

Classes

1972

HAIRE (GROVES), SUSAN
(BA MATHEMATICS)

A resident of Winnipeg for more than 30 years, Susan had a varied career – technical writer, consultant, author of a series of books on computing – before she turned her hand to fiction upon retirement. Her first book, a time-travel romance called *The Viking Who Fell Through Time*, was published this summer under the pen name Maureen Castell, and is the first in a series of four.

1973

GIBSON, ROBERT
(BA, MBA '75, CPA CA '78)

After spending his career as a chartered professional accountant in the commercial real estate sector, Robert retired in 2013. Since then, he's played an active role in the community. Currently, he's chair of the board of directors of the Peterborough Regional Health Centre, where he also chairs several key committees. He's also director of the Port Hope Rotary Club, and heads up the Northumberland Physician Recruitment and Retention Committee.

1978

LAPERRIÈRE, LOUISE
(BFA VISUAL ART)

With co-author Margaret Olson Tassin, Louise published the *Forms Management Book of Knowledge* after spending a career in the forms industry and real-

izing there was no formal training or education programs in that discipline.

1981

SIMONE, NICK
(BA GEOGRAPHY AND ENGLISH; BED EDUCATION)

President of personal injury firm Pace Law, Nick used his York education to take him through numerous successful careers as a retail entrepreneur, business strategies consultant and capital markets and real estate investor. A community leader, he is presently Chair of the Humber River Hospital Foundation Board in Toronto.

1983

PETRUNIA, NEIL
(BA CREATIVE WRITING AND PHOTOGRAPHY)

In 1997, Neil and his wife bought Frontenac House, a Calgary-based independent publisher where he had previously worked as a graphic designer. Since then, Frontenac House has published a wide range of fiction and non-fiction, including Billy-Ray Belcourt's *This Wound is a World*, which won Canada's Griffin Poetry Prize in 2018.

1989

GRIEVE, JASON
(BA ECONOMICS)

Jason is the chief client officer at Canadian-owned online brokerage Questrade Financial Group. Previously,

he worked as vice president, operations at Fidelity Investments, vice president at HSBC InvestDirect, and vice president of investor relations at Altamira Financial Services.

1996

DANTO, DAVID
(BA PSYCHOLOGY)

A past head of psychology at the University of Guelph-Humber, David was recently appointed dean of the faculty of health and community studies at MacEwan University in Edmonton. Last year, he co-edited *Indigenous Knowledge and Mental Health*, which pulls together a global, scholarly perspective on mental health in Indigenous communities around the world.

1998

FALVO, NICHOLAS
(MA POLITICAL SCIENCE)

Nick has a PhD in public policy and 10 years of experience working directly with people experiencing homelessness. In 2021, he was awarded the President's Medal for Outstanding Housing Research – the highest honour given by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. The \$20,000 award recognized his work examining the factors affecting housing stability for Indigenous residents of a non-profit housing provider in Calgary, where Nick lives.

1999

WANAMAKER, ROBERT
(BFA MUSIC, MA MUSIC '01)

Associate dean at the California Institute of the Arts' Herb Alpert School of Music, Robert has just published a two-volume study, *The Music of James Tenney*. A groundbreaking composer, Tenney taught at York University for 24 years. His contributions to computer music and sampling culture (among other things) make him, Robert argues, one of the 20th century's most important experimental music contributors.

2005

MAXWELL, BRUCE
(MA HISTORY)

Bruce recently published *Failed Promise: Five Reasons Why R.B. Bennett Lost the 1935 Canadian Federal Election*, the first book to dive deep into this pivotal election cycle in Canadian political history. An educator specializing in social studies and English, Maxwell is currently vice-principal at King Heights Academy in Thornhill, Ont.

2006

CHOI, ERIC
(MBA SCHULICH)

An aerospace engineer, Eric recently published his first collection of short stories, *Just Like Being There*. The collection of 15 pieces of science fiction and alternate history – including a story that won the Aurora Award, given by the Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Association – is followed by an explainer of the real-life engineering

and scientific principles that undergird Eric's imagined worlds.

2007

FERGUSON, JENNY LEE
(BA ENGLISH)

Jen is the winner of a Governor General's Literary Award in Young People's Literature for her latest novel, *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet*. She is presently an assistant professor in the Department of English at Coe College in Iowa. Her next YA novel, *Those Pink Mountain Nights*, is scheduled for release in the fall.

2009

FRIESNER, SADIE (NÉE GLENDINNING)
(BA KINESIOLOGY AND HEALTH SCIENCE)

Sadie works in long-term care with a focus on recreation therapy and resident well-being. She recently became the executive director of the new Humber Meadows Long-Term Care Home in North York, Ont.

2011

SATOV, JULIA
(BA PHILOSOPHY, MA EDUCATION '14)

Currently global director of diversity and inclusion at Chicago-based productivity and risk management software firm Litera, Julia has had a 15-plus year career spanning academia, legal, finance and tech. A published author who's written for Huffington Post, she

was a finalist at the 2022 Women in Tech Awards for Ally of the Year, recognizing outstanding achievement as an ally to minorities in tech.

2013

SAXENA, ROHIT
(MBA SCHULICH)

A non-profit industry veteran and management consultant, Rohit co-founded Untold Unknown (UTUK) in 2022. Untold Unknown aims to spark conversations about lesser-known social and environmental issues through art and fashion. Partnering with emerging artists based out of Toronto, it creates limited-edition sustainable apparel. Issues highlighted by UTUK include celebrating the migrant farmworkers who grow Ontario's food, the impacts of local climate change and the ineffectiveness of recycling.

2014

WALL-ANDREWS, CHARLIE
(MA ETHNOMUSICOLOGY)

Charlie is executive director of the Society of Composers, Authors and Music Publishers of Canada (SOCAN) Foundation. A Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation Scholar, she is presently a PhD candidate at Toronto's Ted Rogers School of Management. In 2022, she was appointed to the board of directors of the Canada Council for the Arts.

VO, JEREMY
(BBA SCHULICH)

Part of the early founding team at Flashstock – a custom content platform acquired by Shutterstock in 2017

for \$65 million – Jeremy is a venture builder and investor in early stage B2B startups. In 2020, he became co-founder and CEO of LeapMotiv, a startup advisory firm where he's helped to launch more than 14 ventures across AI, SaaS, cybersecurity, fintech, adtech and more.

2016

MADRENAS, NURIA
(BA LIBERAL ARTS AND PROFESSIONAL STUDIES)

Named as a 2022 Bay Street Bull "Woman of the Year," Nuria is the founder of Tacit, an online gallery and consultation platform that exclusively features the work of women artists.

2020

HICKEY, NATASHA
(BA LINGUISTICS, ENGLISH)

After working as an English language assistant in Quebec, Natasha completed the Teaching Assistant In France (TAPIF) program while working in the suburbs of Paris. Still living abroad, she plans to apply to speech language pathology programs to further her education.

IN MEMORIAM

SOBELMAN, DAVID
(BA '76, FILM AND VIDEO)

A filmmaker, editor, translator and poet, David won the Governor General's Michener Award for Broadcast

WANT TO BE IN CLASSES?

Email us at magnotes@yorku.ca

Television for his work directing and producing films, television series, and feature-length documentaries. He was born in 1950 in Haifa to a French-Jewish family. He came to Canada in 1972 to study film and literature at York. He died while recuperating from surgery in Oakville, Ont., on November 7, 2022. His wife Rishma Dunlop, a former York faculty member in the Department of English who died in 2016, predeceased him.

PETROFF, NEIL J.
(BBA SCHULICH '82, MBA SCHULICH '83)

Neil worked in the financial sector before joining the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan. Recognized as a pension fund investing innovator, Neil received numerous industry awards before taking retirement in 2016. A passionate golfer and all-round athlete, Neil was also a philanthropist who, with wife Leanne (née Lansdown, BSCN '03), founded the Neil & Leanne Petroff Foundation supporting research at SickKids Hospital. He died unexpectedly in Toronto on November 20, 2022. He was 62.



Flashback

Have a great photo from your days at York?

Email us at magnotes@yorku.ca

WITH HIS RICH BARITONE VOICE and engaging personality, Clive Braham seemed born for radio the night he took to the airwaves at CHRY-FM (now VIBE105), armed with a new three-hour music and chat show curated for members of Toronto's Caribbean community. The year was 1999, and Braham says many of the volunteers at York's campus radio station shared a common purpose. "Everyone there had a passion to tell the truth," he recalls. "We all believed there was a story to be told, and that we'd be the ones to tell it."

You Got Soul delved into themes of Black identity and belonging. Listeners could call in and add to the conversation, which is what made it engaging. "It covered every genre and gave people a chance to discuss the issue of the day." The weekly program ran until 2012, by which time Braham had joined York full time as a member of staff.

Today, after advancing through the ranks, he is frontline manager of security operations at Glendon College where, at age 59, he recently returned to the classroom as a mature student to complete the degree he forfeited more than 20 years ago, when radio proved all-consuming. "The opportunity," he says, "is there. I want to take advantage of that." ●

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