THE KAT’S MEOW

Towson University vocal performance senior Katerina Burton gets national notice
Dear Friends, Families, and Colleagues,

This spring COFAC wrapped up its celebration of Towson University’s 150th anniversary. Our first contribution was the spectacular Dance on Bones, a collection of short interdisciplinary works featuring actors, singers, artists and jazz musicians—all telling a story. Composer, multimedia artist, editor and author Dr Spooky (Paul D. Miller) visited Towson as COFAC’s 150th anniversary speaker, presenting brilliant master classes, performances and lectures during his three-day stay. The Department of Theater Arts assembled a fascinating historic clothing collection exhibition, 150 Years of Black & Gold: Baltimore Fashion and Style in Towson.

While our college has been very busy celebrating this remarkable institution, current students have been getting real-world experience in their chosen disciplines. Center Stage Theater has temporarily relocated to the Center for the Arts, enabling theater major Josh Shuman Fall ‘16, to work with the crew to develop new skills and show off his already impressive knowledge of theater design and production. On the opposite coast, Jack Dunlop, EMF ‘16, is finishing his degree remotely after landing his dream job in Los Angeles with the Electronic Sports League, the NFL of professional eSports. Voice performance major Katerina Burton ‘16, already a star at TU, received the Metropolitan Opera’s 2015 Encouragement Award and was selected as an alternate in a master class series at Carnegie Hall.

COFAC alumni have been making a splash on the national arts scene. Alex Ebstein ’15, MFA Studio Art, and Ellie Dent ’13, Art + Design, are garnering extraordinary recognition in exhibitions from Miami to Rome. Recent theater graduates founded a local theater company, The Oven, whose mission is to produce theater for social change experiences. They accomplished that with their first production, Gone, an intense performance about sex trafficking. Dance major Michelle Michener ’10, made it to the big screen working alongside Samuel L. Jackson, Angela Bassett, and Wesley Snipes in Spike Lee’s latest film, Chi-Raq. We are thrilled with her success and can’t wait to see what she will do next.

To read more about COFAC students and the wonderful projects and events taking place here, visit our website (www.towson.edu/cofac). Our Arts and Culture Calendar (www.towson.edu/main/artsculture/) lists a wide array of upcoming dance, music and theater performances, art exhibitions, film screenings and community programs.

I hope you’ll enjoy the many success stories featured in this issue of COFAC Today.

Susan E. Picinich, Dean
College of Fine Arts and Communication
Katerina Burton, voice performance ‘16, may be diminutive in stature, but her rich voice and warm, dazzling presence fill a room. The soprano is already a star on campus, regularly wowing audiences in Towson University operatic productions, such as The Magic Flute, and Suor Angelica—for which she performed the lead (in Italian, of course). But these days, as Burton looks toward graduate school and plans for a career in opera, her arias are reaching far beyond the confines of Kaplan Concert Hall, to the ears of some of the most influential people in the world of classical voice. And she’s making those folks sit up and listen.

At 21, Burton was the youngest vocalist at the 2015 Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions (Mid-Atlantic). Not only did she hold her own with more seasoned singers in this highly prestigious competition, but she also brought home a coveted Encouragement Award—a signal that the Met has its eye on her.

Burton says the achievement helped validate her decision to pursue her big dream of taking the stage as a member of a prominent, international opera company. “I feel like I can do this,” she says with humble confidence. “I can make a career doing what I love best.” Burton’s private voice teacher agrees. “Katerina is the ‘whole package,’” says Teri Bickham, who leads the TU Vocal Division. “I expect she will go as far as she’d like to in this field and do it with graciousness and beauty. She is truly a rare talent and lovely person.”

Further kudos came this year from none other than New York’s legendary Carnegie Hall, where Burton was selected as an alternate to perform in a master-class series with renowned artists Marilyn Horne, Stephanie Blythe and Sir Thomas Allen.

As all music majors know, the road to this kind of success is long, exhausting and sometimes discouraging. “People think we just show up and sing,” laughs Burton, “but it’s not that easy!” On top of the rigorous curriculum required by TU’s music department, the Ocean City, Maryland, native spends another three hours daily training her instrument and preparing for roles. With opera, that means being a vocalist and an actress, in any number of languages.

“We are looking at the music, taking it apart, learning the notes and the character,” says Burton. “You just have to sit down and really spend the time.” It also takes time and tremendous discipline to improve and maintain vocal technique. Burton points out that the voice continues developing until we are in our 30s. So, regular vocal training involves adapting and readapting.

Recently, the singer went through a voice change. “I had to completely reconstruct my idea of breathing,” she says. “You have to realign everything!” Additionally, vocalists of Burton’s caliber must prioritize physical and mental wellness. Not doing so can have disastrous effects on their voices. From constantly tending to tension in the mind and body, to mapping out (and sticking to) a strict nutritional plan, practically every moment in Burton’s life, even when she’s not singing, has to do with singing. “Katerina’s success is due to a combination of natural ability, diligence, her humble nature, her ability to give of herself, her desire to learn, her healthy ambition, her trust in people who are guiding her, her comfort in herself as a person besides being a singer,” says Bickham, “and most of all her ability to work extremely hard.”

But it’s all worth it for Burton because of her deep and abiding love of opera and desire to share it with the world. Whether in Italian, French, Russian, German or English, the words resonate. “It doesn’t matter what language you speak,” says the opera singer. “Everybody understands music.”
Sadie Lockhart is passionate about theater and advocating for social change. So when the 2015 Towson graduate saw an opportunity to combine the two, it was a no-brainer.

Lockhart, who earned a BFA in acting, is a founding member of The Oven theater company. Led by director Jackson Phippin, the company, which also includes recent TU alumni Katharine Ariyan, Chelsea Blackwell, Clifford Doby and Alex Shade, is dedicated to creating theater that illuminates tough topics, inspiring audiences to think, start conversations and maybe even take action.

“We hope to bring new perspective and understanding to many injustices in this world,” says Lockhart, “all the while craft-fully captivating you in an experience that is more than just an evening of theater.”

The Oven is doing just that, exploding onto the Baltimore theater scene with its first production Gone in January at the Baltimore Theater Project. The intense work, conceived from scratch by the company, takes on the devastating subject of sex trafficking, which the cast says doesn’t get the attention it desperately needs.

The show, however, got lots of attention, with rave reviews from the likes of DC Metro Theater Arts and J. Wynn Rousuck.

To further increase awareness and understanding about sex trafficking, The Oven invited a social worker and a special victims’ specialist to lead post-show discussions. The speakers brought home the harsh truth for audiences that sex trafficking is not just a problem in other parts of the world, but also right here in Baltimore.

Although Gone’s run at the Theater Project is over, The Oven is not ready to say goodbye to the piece yet. The company offered performance-theater art based around the topic of sex trafficking on the TU campus this spring.

Currently, company members are revamping Gone for fringe theater festivals.

Towson University’s Costume Shop is abustle with activity. Sewing machines whir on spacious work tables. Stately dress forms give shape to exquisite garments, and meticulously crafted costumes fill racks awaiting the casts of Mainstage productions.

But what’s visible in this big, open space is only a fraction of the treasures in the care of the folks who work here.

An adjacent room, stacked to the ceiling with boxes and portable wardrobes, houses Towson University’s Historic Clothing Collection, featuring more than 2,000 original garments dating to the early 19th century.

When TU’s costume designer Julie Potter started at the university six years ago, she inherited the massive collection that has been building through donations since the 1970s. Potter has been working, aided by staff researcher Kathy Abbott, to sort through and catalog the artifacts, and determine the best uses for the pieces.

Teaching TOOLS

One way Potter has breathed new life into the collection is to take samples into her Costume, Dress and Society class. Experiencing the garments in their true three-dimensional forms has an impact on students you just can’t get from a photograph.

Potter also assigns a project in which students pick a piece of clothing to research and then write a diary page from the point of view of the original wearer's actual size.

“They are amazed at how tiny the garments are, “laughs the assistant professor, pointing to the waistline on a crinoline period gown whose circumference can’t measure more than 22 inches.
The exhibit was very successful with the public, and that is going to help us do even more with the collection in the future.

Julie Potter, TU Costume Designer

The Northeast offers plenty of high-quality educational options for artists. Increasingly, however, the best and brightest are choosing to attend Towson University for their training. With modern facilities, an attentive faculty, and a reasonable price tag, TU is attracting major talent who are going on to make it big in the highly competitive art world.

“I am always amazed by our students,” says TU Associate Professor Amanda Burnham (who graduated from Yale University’s elite MFA program).

“Our graduates are as visible, if not more visible, in the local art scene and in the broader national art scene as students from the top programs and art schools in the country. That’s really something.”

Two prime examples are recent graduates Alex Ebstein and Ellie Dent, both young artists who are gaining remarkable levels of public recognition.

Body of Work

Ebstein, studio art ’15, was already a significant player in the Baltimore art scene before starting the MFA program at Towson in 2013. An accomplished artist, curator and critic, she co-founded and co-directed—with TU alum Seth Adelsberger—the groundbreaking Nudashank gallery. Between 2009 and 2013, Nudashank exhibited the work of more than 150 emerging artists in its downtown Baltimore space and in local and national exhibitions, publications and art fairs. She was also independently curating for regional galleries and contributing art critiques to multiple publications—all while trying to fit in her own work.

“I felt like if I didn’t take time to take my studio practice seriously,” says Ebstein, “it was going to get completely eclipsed.” So she stepped back from running the gallery, using her time at Towson to explore perspectives on the human form. The result is powerful and inventive paintings created with the ubiquitous body-conforming yoga mat. The series caught the eye of the Cuevas Tikkard gallery in New York City’s Lower East Side, which presented Form/Fit in 2015, the artist’s first solo exhibition in the Big Apple.

“It’s very rare for any graduate of an MFA program to have a solo show in a New York gallery that’s reviewed by The New York Times,” says Burnham (referring to a December 2015 write-up in the renowned newspaper), “at ANY point in their career, let alone right after graduating. This is incredibly impressive.”
Riding high on the momentum from her New York success, Ebstein currently is exhibiting work at Frutta Gallery in Rome (a two-person show in which her pieces fill a whole room in the two-room space) and has upcoming exhibitions in Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles. In addition, she recently opened a new Baltimore gallery called Phoebe.

The Art of Science

Ellie Dent graduated from the BFA program in 2013. While at Towson, she applied her fascination with biology to her art.

“I have this strange hypochondriac infatuation with illness,” laughs Dent, who is pursuing her MFA at the University of Georgia.

Lucky for the art-loving public, she figured out how to focus her fear into her creative practice, producing a series of works in 2015 that are simultaneously whimsical and creepy, beautiful and grotesque.

Using materials, including fabric, wire, natural dyes and surgical tools, Dent masterfully created objects that mimic human innards (think intestines, scabs and bloody bits). Placed inside specimen jars, the biological vignettes somehow manage to appear at once realistic and fanciful.

Dent was thrilled to find out that the collection would be exhibited as part of Satellite Projects in Miami Beach during 2015 Art Basel—arguably the world’s most influential art fair.

“It was an incredible experience,” says the Baltimore native. “It was really great to connect with other artists … from all over the United States.”

And to top it off, while she was in Florida, Dent’s work was featured in an article and on the Instagram feed of the big-time arts blogazine Hyperallergic.

“It’s a very hard thing to do to operate within the gallery system,” remarks Burnham, “and Ellie is well on her way to doing that.”

Dent says that her mentors at Towson have a lot to do with where she is today and her choice to go into teaching.

“I want to help other people the way they helped me.”
Think online gaming is just for antisocial types? Think again.

Meet the gregarious Jack Dunlop, who is building a career in the industry that he says is all about camaraderie.

In fact, one of the electronic media and film (EMF) major’s favorite parts of his new job as a commentator and host for the Call of Duty World League is “building friendships” with the pro gamers, and now colleagues, he has admired for years.

Getting paid to buddy up with his idols at Electronic Sports League (ESL) is “more than a dream come true,” says Dunlop.

That’s why he was willing to trade his final term on campus (he’s working to finish his degree remotely) for a head start on real life, moving to Los Angeles in December 2015.

If ESL is considered the NFL of professional eSports, then Dunlop is the organization’s version of a young Al Michaels, doing live commentary, interviews and play-by-play. The teams of professional gamers aren’t on a field, though. Instead, they vie for big bucks playing Call of Duty: Black Ops III in dark rooms from the comfort of sleek, black swivel chairs. Uniforms are matching T-shirts with giant sponsor logos. And gear includes not helmets, but headsets.

With a seemingly endless well of knowledge on the games and the players, Dunlop’s on-camera presence is at once authoritative and relaxed, insightful and humorous. At 21, he has the air of a seasoned sportscaster that belies his youth.

“Jack is one of our very best students,” says TU Associate Professor David Reiss, general manager of Towson’s student-run television station, WMJF-TV.

“It comes as no surprise that he was hired as a producer/commentator, as the skills he acquired at EMF are well suited to the position.”

Fast Track

From childhood Nintendo battles with older cousins to diving into new game consoles with his dad at Christmas, Dunlop has always been an avid gamer himself.

But in 2007, the loquacious extrovert added another aspect to his hobby—being a fan. Some people watch football. Dunlop and his friends watched Halo.

His intense interest turned into a passion as he established an online presence and attended tournaments, developing connections with people in all aspects of the industry. Those relationships led to an internship with Major League Gaming (MLG) in New York City the summer before his sophomore year. And when the host of MLG’s daily live show was out sick, the college student, who had thus far worked only behind the scenes for MLG, asked for a shot to fill in.

He got it. And the bigwigs were so impressed that he stayed on camera for the rest of the summer, followed by invitations to host tournaments all over the country (and the U.K.).

Talk about real-world experience.

Add strategically chosen Towson courses in production and broadcasting, and Dunlop was well positioned to jump directly into the job with ESL.

“The EMF department has some great professors,” says Dunlop, “and I’m extremely grateful for everything they taught me and how they helped me prepare for my career.”

Those faculty members, like David Reiss and Marc May, may not be surprised by the star student’s success, but he is still pinching himself.

“It doesn’t even feel like I’m working half the time,” says the friendly guy from Jersey. “Because I just love what I’m doing.”
CLASS ACT

Michelle Mitchenor ’10 shines in Spike Lee’s Chi-Raq

BY WANDA HASKEL

What’s it like to work alongside acting legends Samuel L. Jackson, Angela Bassett and Wesley Snipes?

Just ask Michelle Mitchenor. She got to do just that in Director Spike Lee’s latest film, Chi-Raq.

“I was able to watch the masters at work,” says Mitchenor, who more than held her own as Indigo, the fierce girlfriend of Snipes’ character, a gang leader named Cyclops.

Lee’s modern-day adaptation of the ancient Greek play “Lysistrata,” is a powerful canvas for the TU dance major’s breakout acting role. Set in Chicago’s violent Southside, Chi-Raq’s fearless female characters organize a sex strike—Indigo is one of the main agitators—withholding affection until their men put down their guns. (No peace, no piece!)

Mitchenor delivers her lines of rhythmic, urban verse with intelligence and convincing street sass, stealing the show during dance numbers.

Being in Chi-Raq “was a defining moment for me,” says the striking performer, “and it lit even more of a fire in me to work harder and to push forward.”

Forward indeed.

Never one to rest on her laurels, Mitchenor hit the lots when she finished filming Chi-Raq and “auditioned like crazy.”

Her reward was booking the role of Eva Adams in A&E’s upcoming hip-hop crime drama pilot The Infamous. Details are still hush-hush, but stay tuned.

From a lead supporting role in her first film to a series regular in her first television project, it’s clear that Mitchenor is not just watching the masters, but is on her way to becoming one.

Giving Back

And does she spend her free time hobnobbing with celebrities in Hollywood hotspots? Maybe a sliver of it, but she’s also created space in her busy life to make a difference for disadvantaged kids on the other side of the globe.

Shocked to discover that not all children in Uganda are offered a free education, Mitchenor volunteers with the Breakdance Project Uganda, a nonprofit dedicated to increasing access to formal and informal education for Ugandan youths.

“I fell in love with the mission,” says Mitchenor, who now travels to the East African nation annually to teach free dance classes.

“Seeing how joyous these children were in my class... just happy to be learning from someone, it was a life-changing experience for me and something that I will continue to support as long as I can.”

TU NYC LA

Being busy is not new to the talented 27-year-old. As a Towson student, besides completing the demanding dance major, she served as an R.A., pledged Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., and earned the title of Miss Black Towson University in 2008.

That alone, is enough to fill a schedule, but on top of it all, Mitchenor got herself a New York agent during her sophomore year and began booking professional dance gigs—the first with none other than Ashanti.

She admits it was tempting to leave school as her dance career took off. But Mitchenor was determined to finish college, so she made it work, attending class for as long as she could before hopping a bus to the Big Apple and borrowing notes from trusted friends.

After graduation, Mitchenor worked full-time out of New York, performing with the likes of Beyoncé, Rihanna and CeeLo Green.

Dream fulfilled, right?

Yes and no. Happy with the success she’d achieved, Mitchenor also knew she wanted more for herself, so she started taking acting classes and moved to California in 2012. Before long, she was discovered by Spike Lee’s casting director. After doing a video game film project with the renowned director, she was hand-picked for the part of Indigo.

Mitchenor, who credits her success to her faith and “insane work ethic,” is also grateful for the “phenomenal” faculty at Towson, like Professor Susan Mann, and the discipline she learned from the dance department.

The rising star’s advice for Towson University students who want to break into the business:

“The discipline and work that you put in now is what’s going to prepare you as you elevate. Whatever level you are, attack your work as if you are already where you want to be so that by the time you get to where you want to be, preparation will meet opportunity.”

Words from a woman who practices what she preaches.
When Center Stage temporarily relocated to the Center for the Arts this year, it was like one big job interview for senior Josh Schuman, who runs sound and video for TU productions.

The theatre arts major (design and production track) saw a chance to demonstrate his technical skills to people who might one day offer him employment.

And he took it.

“I did a lot with the load-in and set-up because I know the spaces really well. When anyone had questions, I was usually able to answer them,” says Schuman, who also regularly helps out with lighting and scenery.

“It was a good opportunity to make connections and show my work ethic.”

Schuman's initiative paid off. In fact, Center Stage folks from the departments of sound, construction and lighting all asked him to submit his resume.

Major renovations to the company's historic North Calvert Street location required that Center Stage adopt a short-term home, and Towson University fit the bill. It’s a complicated business staging a full-blown production away from your own turf, though, and challenges were inevitable. But they have proved also to be valuable learning experiences for Schuman.

“They came in and undid everything,” says the Baltimore County native, “and started from the ground up.”

That meant building a new false proscenium and sub-level stage to go on top of the already existing stage for their first production, Shakespeare's "As You Like It." It also involved making changes to the lighting set-up and intertwining their sound system with TU's.

“They bypassed and unplugged stuff,” says Schuman, who had to keep track of everything so that he could put it back in place during the short time between "As You Like It" runs and the March 2 start of a TU production.

It's been stressful at times, admits Schuman, but that pressure has propelled the technician to stretch, and grow professionally. Plus, witnessing the transformation has been instructive.

“We’re so used to looking at the same thing,” he says. “It was really cool to see a different take on our space.”

Playing with Pros

Center Stage is also giving actors in Towson's BFA Acting program a shot. Professor Steven Satta drove a handful of students downtown to meet "As You Like It" director Wendy Goldberg and to audition. Others submitted video auditions. Six were chosen to be part of the ensemble in the 18-member, all-female cast.
Freshman Sydney Pope was one of them. And this was her first Mainstage production.

Imagine that. It’s your first theater production at Towson, and it happens to be with a professional company.

“It was such an amazing opportunity to be with them and to get to call them my colleagues,” says Pope, who chose to attend Towson because of the “incredible” theater department.

“Every day was like a master-class!”

Senior Allie Press agrees.

“It was an incredible learning experience getting to be around so many industry professionals,” says Press, who even had a couple of lines in the show. “I just tried to soak up whatever I could.”

Press also shared the wealth with students who weren’t necessarily in the production by hosting a dinner with Julia Coffey, the actress who played Rosalind. The event, which took place in the Center for the Arts green room, gave students in the theater department an opportunity to hear about Coffey’s experience as a professional and to have their questions answered.

Everyone in on the Act

In addition, benefits of the collaboration between Center Stage and Towson University include $20 tickets for students, faculty and staff to Center Stage’s two Towson productions—a bargain when full-price can fall in the $50 to $70 range. Towson students are also being treated to workshops, class visits and other interactions with the resident experts.

“We are delighted at the opportunities this collaboration has created to enhance our students’ education,” says Professor Robyn Quick, chair of the TU Department of Theater Arts, “whether these students are working alongside the Center Stage artists on stage or behind the scenes, learning from them in workshops and class visits, or seeing their productions.”

Definitely a win-win.

Josh Schuman, Fall ’16, set lights, welded, constructed sets and ran tech backstage for Center Stage’s production of As You Like It at the Center for the Arts Mainstage Theatre.

Professor Emeritus C. Richard “Dick” Gillespie

Professor Emeritus C. Richard “Dick” Gillespie passed away April 2, at the age of 86. Gillespie, who retired in 1998, was founder of Towson’s undergraduate theater major and taught in the Department of Theater Arts for 37 years. He also served as vice president and dean of students, and chair of the Department of Theater Arts. Gillespie was married to Maravene Loeschke, Towson University’s 13th president and former dean of the College of Fine Arts and Communication, who died in 2015. In honor of his life’s work, memorial gifts can be made to the Towson University Foundation C.R. Gillespie and Maravene S. Loeschke Scholarship Endowment.