As an organization that strives to embrace fully the ideals of a just and equitable society, we at Yale Schwarzman Center humbly acknowledge the indigenous peoples and nations—including Mohegan, Mashantucket Pequot, Eastern Pequot, Schaghticoke, Golden Hill Paugussett, Niantic, and the Quinnipiac and other Algonquian speaking peoples—who have stewarded through generations the lands and waterways of what is now the state of Connecticut. We honor and respect the enduring relationship that exists between these peoples and nations and this land.
Dear Friends,

On November 11th, 2021, I sat in the orchestra of the Shubert Theater in New Haven and witnessed Dance Theatre of Harlem’s first performance in the city in over twenty years. The gratitude for and the appreciation of the return of the company was palpable. What was also being celebrated might have been the return to live performance indoors, or the resilience of a community after surviving twenty of the most challenging months in most of our lifetimes. Celebrating that occasion with the sublime beauty of highly skilled artists, illustrating the power and grace of the human body, the standing ovation was as much for the artists on stage as it was for each of us in the audience.

That night also marked my second year as the Associate Artistic Director at Yale Schwarzman Center. The significance of this confluence is a personal one. Dance Theatre of Harlem was one of the dance companies my parents made sure to expose me to as a child. In fact, I still have the framed photo of a DTH ballerina that my parents hung on the wall of my childhood bedroom. I count myself lucky to have had parents that illustrated to me early on that a life in the arts was possible. And now at YSC, I have the privilege of working every day with artists—either student, faculty, local, or international—in collaboration with our extraordinary community of learners, scholars, and practitioners.

The last two years have provided a tremendous opportunity for reflection and catalytic change. Each of the projects that we have undertaken at YSC has influenced and inspired my thinking about the role art and artists can play in that change. Whether exploring notions of place and community, or identity and representation, we have come together virtually and over meals to exchange ideas and to think critically about our past, present, and collective futures. It has been a tremendous honor and I am deeply grateful to all who have graced our spaces to date. This is just the beginning.

See you at the Center,

Jennifer Harrison Newman
Associate Artistic Director
Since opening our doors digitally in October 2020, and then in real life for dining on September 1, 2021, Yale’s first-ever center for student life and the arts has come to life with students, faculty, staff, visiting fellows, and community members—local and global—at its core.

A Culture of Invitation

In the summer of 2020, YSC’s cadre of staff, students, and fellows gathered on Zoom to plan for the opening of the Center. The challenge was to essentialize the invitation—to describe in just a few words what we were inviting communities within and beyond Yale to come and experience. With dining, performance, and exhibition spaces, and a charge to bridge Yale, New Haven, and communities beyond, we imagined human connection as a phenomenon more dynamic than the virus that kept us restricted to separate spaces.

The Zoom conversation rendered many ideas, and one hit home. “Break bread. Break boundaries.” It’s a theme that represents our invitation to Yale and the public, an aspiration for the Center’s future, and the action bringing YSC and its programming to life.

The start of spring on Yale’s academic calendar feels like a rebirth despite the challenges of the public health crisis. The distances between invitation, aspiration, and action are beginning to fade as we plan gatherings in spaces like Commons and The Underground—not just for meals, but also for performances—and open the doors to refurbished spaces like The Dome.

When we say that YSC is a center for student life and the arts, we are declaring that academic study is enhanced through the arts. We recognize that artistry is inherent in all forms of experimentation, be it in a laboratory, a gallery, or on a stage.

When we say that YSC is a center for student life and the arts, we are embracing our role as gate-opener. We take seriously our ability to increase access between artists, scholars, and non-academics in ways that build empathy and belonging.

When we say that YSC is a center for student life and the arts, we are holding space for those who have come to explore. The building may prove itself just large enough to embody our ambitious vision.

Although our doors have opened to Yale badge holders this academic year, it’s still too soon to say that we’ve fully opened. We’ve delayed our ribbon-cutting until we can celebrate with the city that makes it possible. We are eager for campus to reopen more widely to our families, friends, and neighbors. In the meantime, the YSC invitation stands: “Break bread. Break boundaries.”
Between the World and Me. Screenings and conversations in African American studies and film studies around the HBO premieres, which include a collegiate panel featuring Yale Professor Daphne A. Brooks, Howard University Assistant Professor Natalie Hopkinson, and composer Jason Moran.


Making the Archive Public: Radical History in Public Television. A screening of the film Mr. Soul! by award-winning filmmaker and Yale alumna Melissa Haizlip and conversation about the lasting significance of public art as demonstrated through the Black Arts Movement with Haizlip, Brooks, and Harris.

The Artist and the Institution: Bill T Jones and Harris. A conversation with legendary choreographer Bill T Jones and Harris in The Underground for a talk with legendary choreographer Bill T Jones and artist/educator Marc Bamuthi Joseph.

A Conversation with Dance Theatre of Harlem’s performance from Trumbull College in the run-up to Dance Theatre of Harlem’s performance at New Haven’s Shubert Theater.

Research & Scholarship

Faculty-led conversations and virtual events are only a small part of YSC’s contribution to Yale’s educational mission. Our staff includes fellows whose research and scholarship are fueled in part by the YSC platform and mission.

Rewind 2020–2021

To follow is just a sampling of the many programs available in Replay, YSC’s online media gallery.

One. A 22-episode web series about students’ ingenuity and interconnectedness in a time of physical distance.

Transpositions: Dance Poems for an Online World. A web series made in partnership with Associate Professor Emily Coates, students from the Yale Dance Lab, sixty-six dancers, nine sound designers, three student producers, a video artist, and sixteen choreographers from across the globe.

Fast Forward

What you’ll find in the pages to follow is a snapshot of the view from here, cataloging much of what YSC offers today and providing a glimpse of some of what’s ahead. Much will emerge along the way. Rather than offering pre-packaged “seasons” of events, we are excited to offer continually programming throughout the year, often in response to current themes in academic or public discourse. Some YSC programs will even span multiple years, engaging campus and the wider community in the development of new works and in relationships with artists and thought leaders along the way. This is only the beginning as we make space for future academic collaborations and respond to the changing needs of Yale and New Haven.
Partnering with Yale Schwarzman Center through the Sessions program is an enjoyable and very effective way for our graduate students to make connections across Yale and to percolate new ideas over a meal and some conversation. With its beautiful space and creative programming, YSC is becoming a center of gravity on campus where cross-disciplinary thinking can thrive.

Lynn Cooley, Dean, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Vice Provost for Postdoctoral Affairs, C.N.H. Long Professor of Genetics, Professor of Cell Biology and of Molecular, Cellular & Developmental Biology

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**YSC Sessions**

Dana Tai Soon Burgess, long-serving Cultural Ambassador to the U.S. State Department and the Smithsonian’s first choreographer-in-residence at the National Portrait Gallery, logged into Zoom in May 2021 for dinner with novelist and Yale Lecturer in English Susan Choi and 10 on-screen guests. Their conversation topic: Building Bridges in Asian American and Pacific Islander Communities. This virtual bread-breaking was one of the earliest adaptations of YSC Sessions (https://schwarzman.yale.edu/sessions), 12-person gatherings that bring students, faculty, and staff into dialogue with thought leaders and community members over a meal. Since then, YSC has set the table either virtually or in person for conversations on New Creative Producing Models, Sleep Disparities in the Arts and Healthcare, Disability and Accessibility at Yale, and Media and the Shaping of Identities. Anyone can be a Sessionist by proposing a topic or registering to attend a scheduled Session that has available seats.

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**Storyboard**

In preparation for the April 2021 premiere of The Wandering, Yale alumni Calista Small ’14 and Jeremy Weiss ’15 workshoped their immersive media production with a cohort of Yale undergraduate and graduate students. The students, representing a wide range of academic disciplines and creative interests, were selected from submissions on Storyboard (https://schwarzman.yale.edu/storyboard-projects), YSC’s proprietary media-sharing platform. The workshop experience included opportunities for the students to receive coaching on their own artistic projects from creative professionals. Later that year, YSC launched off the grid, a virtual gallery of Storyboard submissions that centered on navigating space, change, and truth during the pandemic. Experience off the grid in Replay (https://schwarzman.yale.edu/replay).

Bambi Banks Couleé plays The Performer in The Wandering.

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Susan Choi
Welcome to YSC—a center for student life and the arts with dining at its core. Here you’ll find ways to connect with people from all over campus, around New Haven, and across the globe—in happy collisions as you travel across campus, over coffee or lunch, in conversation with artists and thinkers—in a place that sparks creativity and self-expression. The vision looks like this...

**Arts Programming**

Once we’re fully open, no one day at YSC will look the same. To start the week, you might catch a comedy act or an a cappella show on the intimate prosценium stage in The Underground, the same place you went for coffee earlier in the day. Tuesday night, you might see a dance performance in The Dome and come to find out that you observed the artists in rehearsal in the Dance Studio all week on your way to The Bow Wow. On Wednesday, you might attend a formal dinner, reception, or meeting in the Presidents’ Room, or rendezvous with friends for drinks and trivia, spoken word, or live music in The Well. Thursday comes around, perhaps you take a stroll through the galleries to see the works of your friend or favorite artist. Then cap off the week in Commons, transformed from Yale’s most-used dining hall in the day to a venue for a gathering or a large-scale production by a renowned composer.

Beyond all we hope you will encounter—one the premises, in person, virtually, or sometimes both—we invite you to make the Center your own through signature YSC offerings like Sessions, Storyboard, and Replay.

**Sessions**

are peer-led gatherings where conversations over meals generate collaborations and move ideas to action. Open to the public, Sessions are valuable opportunities to gather diverse perspectives on a topic that interests you. To encourage wide-ranging collaborations, every proposed Session must meet specific criteria. First, the Session must include at least one participant from three of the following affiliations: undergraduate student, graduate student, community member, Yale faculty, and Yale staff. Second, the Session topic must clearly indicate interdisciplinary inquiry. Third, the Session must be an open-invitation engagement. Whether you’re new to a field or an expert in it, Sessions are a way for you to bring your curiosity to the table and leave with creative possibilities. What are you curious about? Interested in? Hungry for? Learn more and pitch a Session at https://schwarzman.yale.edu/sessions.

**Storyboard**

invites students to respond to creative prompts on the YSC website. Responses are uploaded to Storyboard in the form of music, video, imagery, or words, and are curated as exhibitions or reused as building blocks in other student works. As the Storyboard platform continues to develop, Yale creators will gain access to a collective media library and post-production resources to shape raw media into finished content.

**Replay**

is a media gallery where experiences are shared and live on. Events are searchable on the Replay page of our website by recency or by topic, so you never have to worry about missing a YSC event again. Whether the event is standalone or part of a series, you can find it on Replay (https://schwarzman.yale.edu/replay). Play it, share it, play it again.
New Spaces &
Spaces Made New

The Annex: Lounges, Meeting Rooms, and The Good Life Center

Located on the second floor of YSC, you’ll find quiet spaces for studying, meeting, and relaxing mindfully.

At the west end of the corridor, three bays provide cozy lounges filled with soft, movable seating and loads of natural light. Plunk down and stay for a while.

In between are three bookable meeting rooms for student use, each outfitted with a pan-tilt-zoom camera and a large display, so you can jump on a Zoom call using the in-built computer or wirelessly share your screen’s content to get work done. Host a workshop, hold a club meeting, or rendezvous with a study group.

A new extension of The Good Life Center at Silliman College, established by Chandrika and Ranjan Tandon Professor of Psychology Laurie Santos in 2018, the YSC location offers free wellness-focused programming for undergraduate, graduate, and professional students. Through evidence-backed research on mindfulness, gratitude, social connection, exercise, sleep, acts of kindness, time in nature, play, and time affluence, The Good Life Center encourages students to slow down and figure out just what wellness means for them, personally. Relax—or learn to relax!

Graduate & Professional Student Lounge

The West Balcony, accessible through the Annex, is a dedicated space for graduate and professional students. Quiet lighting and soft, movable furnishings make it ideal for quiet gatherings, study, and breaks between classes.

Dance Studio

Practice spaces for dance have always been in high demand on campus. The YSC Dance Studio answers the call for dedicated space with Harlequin Standfast vinyl over a sprung floor, a full mirror, dance barre, and changing rooms. The 45’×35’ studio is also equipped with mounted speakers, a projector with drop-down screen, and PTZ camera.

A great place to enjoy friends and conversation, The Well is a twenty-one-and-over pub with comfortable seating situated beneath the Rotunda and encircled by the building’s original pink granite foundation. Ambient lighting and fun furniture will make it a popular spot to relax after hours over delicious tapas-style bites and draft beverages including beer and wine. In a rush to your next lecture or meeting but don’t want to be hungry for the rest of the day? The Bow Wow solves this dilemma by providing grab-and-go meal service that’s beaten in speed only by your walk to the next event on your calendar. Swing by to enjoy an assortment of grab-and-go sandwiches, sushi, salads, beverages, snacks, campus essentials, spirit gear, and more.

Dining

Fresh, Contemporary Cuisine at the Crossroads

Two of YSC’s premier dining platforms, Elm and Ivy, are stationed in The Underground and offer dimensions of Yale foodie culture that will make you forget, however briefly, that you’re on a university campus. Elm, magnified by its floating chandelier and square-shaped bar setting, offers freshly roasted coffee and espresso brewed from onsite small-batch coffee roasters, plus teas and other specials. For those with a sweet tooth, enjoy baked goods from New Haven’s own Sanctuary Kitchen and Havenly, or dig into a scoop of specialty gelato. Hungry for lunch? Try a delectable sandwich, soup, or salad with global flair. In the evening, order classic pub fare from Ivy, the perfect accompaniment to refreshments served at The Well. With an open kitchen layout, guests can watch fresh sushi being rolled, sliders on the grill, and more.

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Photos: Francis Dzikowski/OTTO
As a student new to the job community here at Yale, working with Yale Schwarzman Center has been an incredibly welcoming learning experience. YSC highlights what I love most about Yale: the thriving community and countless opportunities to explore passions.

Mark Chung ’25
Graphic Artist

Since I started working with YSC, I have met incredible people, participated in great discussions, and learned so much about marketing and communications. I love how my team and my work push me to improve myself and learn more every day. For me, YSC is the center of campus, a lovely hub of joy that brings people together. I love dining in Commons and that feeling of “Oh this is Yale” every single time I walk in. I am very excited to sit with my friends and talk for hours over delicious food and spend time in The Good Life Center!

Dilge Bukur ’24
Communications Coordinator, Social Media

Helping YSC fulfill its goals through video editing has been incredibly rewarding. I’m continuously learning, and it has been great being a part of a welcoming YSC community. As YSC opens more widely, I look forward to making use of the Annex and seeing what comes out of the performance spaces.

Alanna Rivera ’25
Video Editor

It has been so wonderful to walk through the beautiful connections between past and present in the architecture. Between the history embedded into every surface and all the new spaces for performance and art, there is so much potential to create something really exciting. YSC’s digital programming has also been a great way to foster relationships between the community and artists. As someone working behind the scenes, I am excited to see all these voices being given space, paving the way forward for a stronger community.

Hannah Tran DRA ’23
Video Editor

Translated from Spanish: "Traditions Old & New"

Legacy events long central to the Yale experience are returning to Commons and The Presidents’ Room. Alumni returning to their alma mater will gather in the fondly remembered and now renovated Commons during reunion weekend events. Admitted students will create fond memories in Commons when they get a taste of Yale for the first time during Bulldog Days. The Presidents’ Room will also see the return of Yale Trustee Reunion Dinners, luncheons for honorary degree recipients, and the Yale Medal Dinner, where the Yale Alumni Association presents its highest award to honor outstanding individual service to the university. Alongside events like holiday dinners and formals for first years, seniors are sure to make lasting and last-minute memories in Commons when they dance the night away at the Senior Masquerade Ball and Last Chance Dance. And before they get together on Old Campus for commencement, the Class Day Brunch in Commons will be their bittersweet last meal—until they come back for reunions, that is.

Commons, Yale University’s largest dining hall and part of the newly renovated Yale Schwarzman Center, opened for lunch on Sept. 1, the first day of undergraduate classes. Yale President Peter Salovey helped celebrate the occasion by serving lunch to students, faculty, and staff. Photo: Leigh Budd

Yale Schwarzman Center

Community Collaborations

Don’t be surprised when you see an event across town bearing the Yale Schwarzman Center name. YSC nurtures partnerships with agencies and organizations across New Haven to support and strengthen a robust arts ecosystem. Creating arts experiences with the wider community is foundational to YSC’s mission to build an inclusive, collaborative future.

A few examples include:

The 2021 International Festival of Arts & Ideas: Everything You Touch, You Change: Visionary Science Fiction and Liberation*, a conversation between musician, composer and curator Toshi Reagon, cultural producer and sacred activist Hanifa Nayo Washington, and writer, activist, educator and spoken word artist Walidah Imarisha;

Dance Theatre of Harlem’s performance at the Shubert Theater in November 2021; and


Photo: Herve Locus

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SS22 Yale Schwarzman Center

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Defying Genre: 
A Conversation with 
Musician-Composer 
Nathalie Joachim

Nathalie Joachim is in New York City on the eve of premiering Note to Self, a collaboration with Sō Percussion at Carnegie Hall. She is thoughtful and excited with eyes that sparkle with creativity, a deep intellect, and a willingness to draw you in and connect. “Who knows if I’ve even had my big break?” she jokes with humility. The Grammy-nominated flutist, composer, and vocalist is one of the performance artists forming part of the Bryce Dessner Residency at Yale Schwarzman Center. This extraordinary group of visionary musicians, artists, thinkers, and doers will create new music and collaborate with Grammy award-winning writer, musician, arranger and composer Bryce Dessner ’96 over the next three years.

The Brooklyn-born Haitian-American artist is co-founder of the critically-acclaimed duo, Flutronix, and comfortably navigates everything from classical to indie-rock, all while advocating for social change and cultural awareness. She has performed and recorded with an impressive range of today’s most exciting artists and ensembles. As a composer, Joachim is regularly commissioned to write for instrumental and vocal artists, dance, and interdisciplinary theater, often highlighting her unique electroacoustic style.

The YSC team sat down with Joachim to talk about her groundbreaking work, her inspiration and what she hopes to accomplish at Yale and beyond.

How did you get your start in music? Who inspired you the most? Music has always been such a huge part of my life, and I really credit my grandmother as being the beginning of that story. We had a unique way of connecting… We spent countless hours together in her yard in Haiti, sitting under the mango trees in her yard, singing and making up songs together. She would ask me to tell her about my day or tell her about something that was on my mind, but through song. And what I didn’t recognize at the time was that, for us, as Haitian people, music was the way of preserving our history. Through this loving exchange between us, my grandmother brought me into this centuries-old practice of storytelling through song and music, and I credit her for igniting the young composer and improviser in me, and for being the first person to reinforce that sharing my voice, wholly and honestly, through music is something that I should always really honor and cherish.

Joachim’s most recent touring project, “Fanm d’Ayiti,” is an evening-length work for flute, voice, string quartet and electronics that celebrate and explore her personal Haitian heritage. Commissioned and developed in residence through St. Paul Chamber Orchestra’s Liquid Music series, “Fanm d’Ayiti” was recorded with Chicago-based ensemble Spektral Quartet. The work, released in 2019 on New Amsterdam Records as Joachim’s first featured solo album, received a Grammy nomination for Best World Music Album, and will make its orchestral debut in 2022 with the Oregon Symphony, where Joachim currently serves as an Artistic Partner.
Tell us about Fanm d’Ayiti and what it meant to you to honor your culture, your grandmother, and be recognized for it by the Recording Academy?

My journey to Fanm d’Ayiti started in late 2015 shortly after the passing of my grandmother. Her absence ignited a deep desire for understanding in me. In what ways did our voices connect with the voices of other Haitian women? What did our songs tell us about our past, and what might they mean for the future? So, Fanm d’Ayiti was the first project for me where I really, truly felt that I embraced my entire identity within that work as a Black woman, as a Haitian American, and as a 21st century creative thinker and artist. To not only have it be well received by my colleagues, but to get the Grammy nod was really something... It confirmed that my grandmother was right! That sharing exactly who you are, and doing so unapologetically and honestly, is the very best way to be received.

How did your partnership with Bryce Dessner come about?

I first learned about Bryce while I was working for the Brooklyn Youth Chorus—he was commissioned to write a piece for them. I knew of him through his band The Nationals, so I remember thinking, “I thought that this guy was in a band. And now I’m hearing some of his concert music, and it’s exciting stuff!” Soon afterwards, he was commissioned to write new work for Eighth Blackbird, just as I was joining the ensemble, and so I got to play some of his music in a chamber setting. And that relationship also evolved from the classical to indie rock. We worked together on a beautiful record with Bonnie “Prince” Billy, in which I got to sing in addition to play flute with him. Bryce and I share this mutual versatility, where we’re not hamstrung by genre, where we are excited about all of the intricacies and technical prowess of classical music. And yet we both come from other traditions that involve communal music-making. So, when he first wrote to me about this residency, I was excited to be involved. I have appreciated Bryce’s curation and his ability to have his ear to the ground and be excited about what might come next from an artist.

Your work tends to honor truth and history. How does that factor into the work that you will be developing around your engagement at the YSC?

So much of my work now has become connected to place and honoring the history of spaces in many ways, but also to be able to transform spaces into something new. This opportunity to unveil this new iteration of the Schwarzman Center in this way intrigued me. What does it mean to actually create a piece that’s very specific to the space itself? What does it mean to transform this space into a sonic environment for a unique experience here? And so, I hope to honor this place in that way.

Launching this spring, Bryce Dessner’s YSC residency is a multi-year engagement anchored by the renowned composer and Yale School of Music alumnus in collaboration with extraordinary musicians, artists, thinkers, and doers at and beyond Yale. As a feature of the residency, Dessner has assembled a roster of women creators—including Nathalie Joachim, Ash Fure, and Julia Bullock—whose music amplifies their lived experiences across gender, race, and culture. Each artist, including Dessner, will spend time on campus engaging in research and conversation as they develop new music and co-create unique artistic experiences with the university and New Haven community.
What is the relationship between your music as a creative process and social change?

As people, we are drawn to individual stories. As an artist, that is how I can affect change. I can’t tell you how many times I describe my relationship with my grandmother, and the person on the other side of that conversation is like, “I have a grandmother who I’m really close to,” or, “This reminds me of my mom and my relationship.” It’s the idea of being able to connect through personal stories—as humans, we really crave that kind of connectivity. And so, for me in my work, I’m most active as an advocate and changemaker by creating and holding space for as many voices and as many stories as I possibly can… to honor what is offered to me and acknowledge that we have a shared existence.

What has your role as an educator meant to you?

As an artist, education is one of the spaces where I can actively affect change. I’m constantly lecturing at universities, all over the country—it’s another reason why I’m excited to be connected with the Schwarzman Center, because it’s a space for really incredible thinkers, active learners and educators. For me, the key to education is not necessarily to make anybody the best composer or the best flutist or the best vocalist, but in fact, to bring every single student that I work with a little bit closer to being themselves. If I can do that every day as an educator and engage people in that practice for themselves, then it feels like I’m making the world a little bit better.

What’s next in terms of what we might expect from you here at YSC?

I pride myself on being someone who continues to defy genre. What’s happening in this premiere at Carnegie Hall is going to be very different than what most people have heard from me before. My last record, bringing in oral histories in that way, was also quite different than what folks had heard from me before. And so, I won’t pigeonhole myself into any one genre. I hope that anybody who follows my career or is a fan of my work trusts that I am a creative artist who has many mediums through which I can communicate. Whether it’s flute playing, my voice, electronics, something that’s traditional or rather experimental; or something that ventures into the world of sound art, there is this trust that I will approach each project with my whole self and with my whole heart, hopefully resulting in work that really resonates. I am grateful for being entrusted as an artist in this moment to create something at the Schwarzman Center that is moving, that is memorable, and that is an offering to anyone who’s willing to receive it.
The Yale Dance Lab partnered with YSC to create “Transpositions: dance poems for an online world,” a year-long research project that unfolded over the 2020–2021 academic year and resulted in an anthology of digital “dance poems” created by sixteen choreographers, sixty-six dancers, nine sound designers, three student producers, one video artist, one artistic director, and two advisers. Faculty and students from Yale College, David Geffen School of Drama, and Yale School of Art participated. Released online in installments by YSC, the project premiered in its entirety in November, projected high on the walls of Commons during lunchtime. The startling presence of innovative, collectively devised Yale arts in Commons—a space devoted to the daily ritual of eating lunch—was especially transformative, a culminating triumph. We never could have pulled off creative work of this scale and scope without YSC’s presence and support for big ideas.

Emily Coates,
Professor in the Practice of Theater & Performance Studies, Professor in the Practice of Directing at the David Geffen School of Drama, Faculty Director of the Yale Dance Lab
Bringing the Life of Anthony Shadid to the Stage

Yale Schwarzman Center, along with the Yale Council of Middle East Studies, is proud to present a staged reading of *A Thousand Strange Places*. This new play, directed and co-developed by Kirsten Sanderson, coincides with the 20th anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. It follows the career of renowned Lebanese-American journalist Anthony Shadid and is based on the Shadid archive housed at American University of Beirut’s Jafet Library.

YSC spoke with playwright, author and scholar Robert Myers, author of *A Thousand Strange Places*, about the life of the extraordinary Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, the playwright’s artistic process and the ways in which he explores themes of interconnectivity and crossing boundaries in this new play.

What inspired you to create a play based on the life of Anthony Shadid?

I've taught for the last 18 years at the American University in Beirut. I'm a playwright and a literature professor, but I'm also the Director of the Alwaleed Center for American Studies and Research (CASAR), which was founded in 2004 with a mission of understanding the fraught relationship between east and west. I had the privilege to collaborate with the renowned journalist Rami Khouri, and he proposed that we use Anthony Shadid's archive for pedagogical purposes. Shadid was an absolutely fascinating writer, reporter, and journalist. Since I have written 15 or 16 plays, a dozen of which are historical and documentary, when I looked at the material in the archive, I thought, “This is a play.” And so that is how *A Thousand Strange Places* came into being.

What was it about Anthony Shadid that impacted you or made him a compelling figure?

I couldn't have found a more synergistic figure than Anthony Shadid—this kid who grew up in Oklahoma, learned Arabic as an adult and immersed himself in Arabic culture. It allowed him access to a world that was not available to other Western reporters, places like Anbar province. If you read the stories of people he talked to, you would get a counter narrative to the one being put out by the Pentagon. They were not happy about the American invasion and had vastly different point of view. So I loved researching and writing his story, because it allowed me to go back and re-experience my own time in the Middle East through Shadid’s experience.

As a storyteller, what parts of Shadid’s life did you pick to feature in the play and why?

I focus on the period from 2000 until his death in 2012. During that decade, he was a reporter, first in Afghanistan, and long before other Western reporters, he was insisting on going out to villages that had been bombed to see for himself. Even though Arabic isn’t the language that was spoken there, he understood that’s where the story was and was able to connect sufficiently with people to their story in a way that was authentic and engaging. Given the recent American withdrawal from Afghanistan, this story is timely and relevant today. I see this period that Shadid spent in Afghanistan as antecedent action for the American engagement with the Arab world, which is the focus of the play I wrote.

As a playwright, the story I’m tell is sort of the tip of the iceberg, but I’ve embedded within it a kind of complexity that performers and designers can draw upon—subtext and antecedent action.

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In Shadid you have a figure who is multi-
faceted, who had the ability, the where-
withal and the understanding to let people
tell their own stories. He would find the
most humble people, people who are shoe-
makers or somebody selling stuff on the
street, but then he would also talk to very
sophisticated people, like a psychiatrist in
Iraq. He was able to connect with so many
kinds of people. There is a scene that I use
in the play in which someone says to him:
“Your’re like us. You speak Arabic. But the
difference is, you can leave, and we can’t.”
In other words, he’s this figure who can
cross these borders, as it were, and in so
doing, he has provided us with information
to reinforce the complexity of the situation
and the region.

It’s this constant complexity which puts
the onus on the audience—and that’s
what attracts me. I want to create
a dynamic on stage so that the audience
must think and interpret without my
preaching to them or telling them what
to think. I’m just insisting that it is infinitely
more complicated than the simplistic nar-
ratives that people have been spoon-fed.
Everyone needs to tell their whole story.

What is something you admire
about Shadid?

He was a really great listener, a great
journalist. Other reporters talk about his
technique—he would sit there and have
lunch with you. Then after two hours, he
would say, “I’m a reporter, do you mind
if I take my notebook out and start taking
notes?” So, after he’s taken the time
to truly get to know his subject, he’d take
the next two hours to write things down.
He constantly sought a kind of under-
standing by looking directly at them
and by trying to tell their whole story.
This is what is truly beautiful about having
his archives at the Jafet Library because
you can see the layers of the story,
almost as if it were a film script. I do think
that the people who read his stories
were changed.

Shadid wrote about these very deep, com-
plex aspects of identity that many people
don’t have access to. I’m really interested
in the extent to which you can cross bor-
ders. Language can only get you so
far, but it was this deep immersion
into culture that Shadid was so adept at.
Americans have this idea that they’re
spreading freedom, but if you go to any
of these places and spend time with
the people, you’ll hear them say quite
the contrary, that Americans are really
imperialists. I can’t think of a better prism
to provide a different perspective than
the life and work of Shadid. He valued
the Arabic culture and worked harder to be part
of it. Through his work, you’ll have a better
understanding of what happened with
this engagement between the U.S. and
the Arab world.

It sounds like Shadid was an extraordi-
nary man whose stories showed us
that we may be different, and yet,
we’re all the same. How are you explor-
ing these themes of interconnectivity
and breaking of boundaries
in A Thousand Strange Places?

You’ve got to be able to cross borders—
and if theater and literature and art cannot
do it, if writing cannot do it, if music
cannot do it, then we’re in a terrible state.
I find Shadid so appealing because he’s
done it internationally. If you want to
understand people in Cambodia or any-
where else, you have to study, work and
make an effort to do so. Well, here’s some-
body who made an enormous effort to be part
of something to which he was deeply
drawn. Even though these were his roots
he was going back to, Shadid was the kind
of artist that had the ability to change or
transform the world, even if just a little bit.

As a prelude to A Thousand Strange
Places, YSC and the CASAR Working
Group on Anthony Shadid will host
a panel organized by prominent jour-
alist and American University of Beirut
Professor Rami Khouri, and consisting of
celebrated foreign correspondents and
journalists from The New York Times,
The Washington Post, and the Columbia
School of Journalism who knew and
worked with Anthony Shadid. Subscribe
to our newsletter at https://schwartzman.
yale.edu for updates.
love. Betrayal. Honor. Free will. Slavery. These are complex themes on their own, but an original musical developed by a mother-daughter creative team combines all these elements, taking the audience on a three-dimensional journey of body, voice, and heart. The vision of Grammy-award winning singer, songwriter, activist, and actor, Angélique Kidjo, and her daughter, actor, writer, multinational performer, Naïma Hebrail Kidjo, *Yemandja: A Story of Africa*, blurs the boundaries of real life and art and uses culture-inspired storytelling to bridge gaps in human understanding and forgiveness.

The story begins with a traditional Yoruban baptism, where a child is welcomed into the family and a ceremony reveals if there is an ancestor or deity who wants to be a guiding spirit to this child on earth. Yemandja, the goddess of water, fertility, and love, breaks through the veil and becomes the guide for this timeless yet timely story of the Kidjo family who resists slavery in the West African country that is now Benin.

“Imagine you’re in a time when the wall between the real world and metaphysical world of deities is thin... and the slave trade was in full swing. What does that tragic moment represent?” said Hebrail Kidjo. “We wanted to bring culture and history together to offer different perspectives while telling the emotionally complex story of slavery through the eyes of our family.”

With more than ten years in the making, *Yemandja: A Story of Africa* provides a nuanced yet full and human portrayal of this period. To provide balance, the Kidjos sprinkled the storyline with the magic of deities and infused powerful lyrics with West African music as a vehicle to carry the audience through a palate of emotions.

“There is something magical about two generations honoring our family’s legacy and our people’s traditions in an authentic way,” said Kidjo. “Collaborating on this story and infusing our culture into the costume design, sound, and lighting was a rewarding process.”

Both mother and daughter hope that *Yemandja: A Story of Africa* can serve as a springboard for conversation, forgiveness, and healing. “How do you carry all of those who have fought against slavery, and at the same time, let people know that forgiveness is possible, that our differences can bring us together? There is so much more interconnectedness in the world than we realize” added Hebrail Kidjo.

YSC will host “A Conversation with Angélique Kidjo and Naïma Hebrail Kidjo: The Making of a Musical” and will later present *Yemandja: A Story of Africa* in performance. Subscribe to our newsletter at https://schwarzman.yale.edu for updates.
YSC has greatly contributed to the creative and intellectual life of multiple communities, harnessing the medium of film and virtual technologies to connect them—all while grappling with the limitations of the pandemic. I am looking forward to future possibilities as well as the communal collaborations with YSC.

Thomas Allen Harris,
Senior Lecturer, Film and Media Studies & African American Studies
Ezell Offers Ballad of Healing for the Appalachian Community

For artists Bob Martin and Carrie Brunk, truth-telling through performance is a way to support communities, process trauma and reframe their stories in a way that is transformative and healing. That is the enormous undertaking of Ezell: Ballad of a Land Man, an environmental, cultural, and spiritual parable centering on the challenges of living in the foothills of Appalachia.

In the story, Ezell is one man among many seeking to make sense of the time, place, and condition in which we live. His choices, traumas, and ancestors intersect with themes of domination and resilience as he seeks to take advantage of an anticipated fracking boom. According to Carrie Brunk, Clear Creek Creative co-creator, community activist, facilitator, and transformative coach, Ezell is a piece of art that explores the complexities of today’s issues of climate change, indigenous erasure, and environmental extraction.

Ezell: Ballad of a Land Man blurs the lines between activism and real life, but it also conveys an underlying sense of optimism and collaboration. “Whatever revelations are brought up by Ezell, we hope you hold those questions of climate change, of colonialism and power struggle a little bit longer and make you think, wow, these characters are really complicated, or this path has given us a lot to think about,” said Clear Creek Creative Executive Producer Bob Martin.

“We all need to do the work of healing and reframing… to create a future that we all can be in, despite and in spite of tremendous challenges.”

Today’s headlines are not lost on Martin and Brunk. Their work continues to be relevant and holding meaning, particularly for those communities devastated by poverty, climate change, and fracking. “This is art that matters and helps us make sense of what we’re going through as both a local and a global community,” said Brunk.

“Whether you are conservative or progressive, directly affected by fracking or not, Ezell is for all of us, because we can see our shared humanity and the complexity that is inherent in issues surrounding trauma, displacement, and self-healing.”

Full audience integration was important to Martin’s vision; in fact, Ezell takes art imitating life to a deeper level by having its performances outdoors in nature—with the stage resembling a series of tree-houses and tarps—and culminating in a community feast. Clear Creek Creative and its partners also encourage audiences to get involved at the local level by directing their viewers to local grassroots efforts undertaking long-term climate change work.

Presented by Yale Schwarzman Center, Ezell will be performed outdoors at the Landscape Lab on Yale West Campus. Subscribe to our newsletter at https://schwarzman.yale.edu for updates.
Ezell is for all of us, because we can see our shared humanity and the complexity that is inherent in issues surrounding trauma, displacement, and self-healing.
ART & TRUTH-TELLING: TOTO KISAKU'S REQUIEM FOR AN ELECTRIC CHAIR
In 2015, Toto Kisaku escaped from death row in the Democratic Republic of Congo and fled to Connecticut, where he was eventually granted asylum in 2018. The crime for which he was sentenced to death by the electric chair: his series of one-man plays detailing the real-life horrors of disinformation and child abuse by local churches and the government’s complicity.

“I used art as a weapon. What is destroying my country is the silence. I wanted to give people on the ground the possibility to change their condition,” he said.

Yale Schwarzman Center, along with Yale’s Council on Middle East Studies, is proud to present Kisaku’s one-man play *Requiem* for an Electric Chair that tells the story of his persecution as a truth-teller.

Challenging the boundaries between performance and daily life, Kisaku explores themes of faith, family, and courage through the lens of oppression and poverty. The play explores Kisaku’s detention experience in the Democratic Republic of Congo, with mannequins on stage standing in for the cellmates whose faces he could not make out in the dark. The story culminates with his harrowing escape and journey to the U.S. and exposes audiences here to the plight of many African immigrants escaping corruption, collusion, and authoritarianism.

“I want to show people what happens to people who are waiting to be executed. Two minutes before you are executed, what are you seeing? What are you thinking about the world?” he said. “Requiem reflects a reality that people are ignoring. People hear about people being incarcerated and executed, but they ignore what’s going on inside the human being in that moment. I want the audience to know that each second in our life counts.”

“I want to show what happens to people who are waiting to be executed... What are you seeing? What are you thinking about the world?”

Subscribe to our newsletter at https://schwarzman.yale.edu for updates on the YSC premiere of *Requiem* for an Electric Chair by award-winning playwright, actor, director, and producer Toto Kisaku.
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