

## NEWSLETTER

AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2019

JOIN US FOR MEETINGS! EVERY OTHER FRIDAY AT NOON IN B20

### WELCOME BACK!

Welcome to Pitt USITT's first edition of our newsletter. This is an opportunity for us to highlight the great work and advancements in theatre tech, both at Pitt and in the rest of the theatre world! This is a big project for this year's chapter to take on, especially with how busy we all tend to be. Knowing this, I would also like to make this a call for any writers who might be interested in taking part in a newsletter like this. Being a part of theatre is a way to show the world your art, practicality, and storytelling. This newsletter should show that, and we need your help to make it the best display possible. We believe in you and look forward to the beautiful work you do.

xoxo

- Your USITT Officers

### FALL PRODUCTION POSITIONS

*next to normal*  
Director: Niffer Clarke

Stage Manager: Melina Yelovich  
Assistant Stage Manager: Eli Wissenbach  
Scenic Designer: Laura Valenti (professional & Pitt alum!)  
Lighting Designer: TJ Hays  
Assistant Lighting Designer: Thomas Bednarz  
Master Electrician: Derek Lamb  
Sound Designer: Max Pelná  
Assistant Sound Designer: Nick DePinto  
Sound Engineer: Nick DePinto  
Costume Designer: Kyle Huber  
Assistant Costume Designer: Stefanie McGowan  
Dramaturg: Diane Brunke

### POPPORTUNITIES

- Auditions August 26th and 27th  
Stage Management students are also needed to help out with auditions.  
Contact Ashley: [Martin.AshleyJ@pitt.edu](mailto:Martin.AshleyJ@pitt.edu)
- Costume Designer - *Ordinary Days*
- *Dr. Faustus* is in need of a :
  - Sound Op
  - Lighting Designer
  - Light Op
- *Storied* (running Nov 16-24) is need of a:
  - Lighting Designer
  - SM
  - ASM
- *next to normal*/ *Dr. Faustus* hang- 9/14 & 9/15
- *next to normal*/ *Dr. Faustus* focus- 9/21 & 9/22
- MTC's 24hr Musical - 9/6 and 9/7!  
Audition or be a part of tech for the club!

### MISSION STATEMENT

Pitt students interested in technical theater and design have created a Student Chapter of USITT to provide them with opportunity to learn and experience as much as possible in those fields of interest. These include but are not limited to the design and production of scenery, props, costuming, lighting, and sound, as well as stage management and dramaturgy.

STAY UPDATED!



@PITT.USITT



@PittUSITT

## SPOTLIGHT

In honor of [Hispanic Heritage Month](#), we would like to encourage everyone to read plays about Hispanic character and stories or written by Latinx playwrights!

*Water by the Spoonful* is a show that was done in recent years at Pitt's Theatre department, directed by Ricardo Vila-Roger. Written by Quiara Alegria Hudes, *Water by the Spoonful* follows Elliot and Yaz as they work through the obstacles in their life. They tell a story of addiction and coping and recovery. It is a beautiful story that won the Pulitzer Prize in 2012. It is also available in Hillman Library!

There are so many other plays to read and expand your view of theatre:

- *Fade* by Tanya Saracho
- *Our Lady of the Tortilla* by Luis Santeiro
- *Roosters* by Milcha Sanchez-Scott
- *Anna in the Tropics* by Nilo Cruz
- *Augusta and Noble* by Carlos Murillo

## IN THE NEWS

Check out this cool video of Scenic Art Studios building the set for the Broadway production of *Beetlejuice*, designed by David Korin.



Scenic Art Studios - *Beetlejuice the Musical*

## MEET YOUR BOARD!

What were they up to this summer?



**Josee Coyle, Chair**  
she/her/hers

"Me and my lighting crew - we hung, focused and ran 4 shows this summer at St. Michael's Playhouse! I'm most excited about the opportunity I have this semester to take huge steps by working with guest directors and taking on my own show in the fall!"

**Derek Lamb, Vice Chair**  
he/him/his

"Me in front of the Taj Mahal just after sunrise. I'm looking forward to stage managing *Head Over Heels* for the next two semesters!"



**Melina Yelovich, Secretary**  
she/her/hers

"This picture is from a trip to Boston I made with my fellow SM interns from Barrington Stage Co. We were invited to tour the American Repertory Theatre and chat with the Director of Production there about the shows they do, which can include touring shows and tryouts for Broadway, as well as a lot of premieres. We also got to check out some of preparations they're doing for *Moby Dick* (directed by Rachel Chavkin!) which begins rehearsals later this fall. This year, I'm incredibly excited to start rehearsals as the SM for *Next to Normal* and to see all of the lovely Pitt Theatre folks again!"

(continued on page 3)



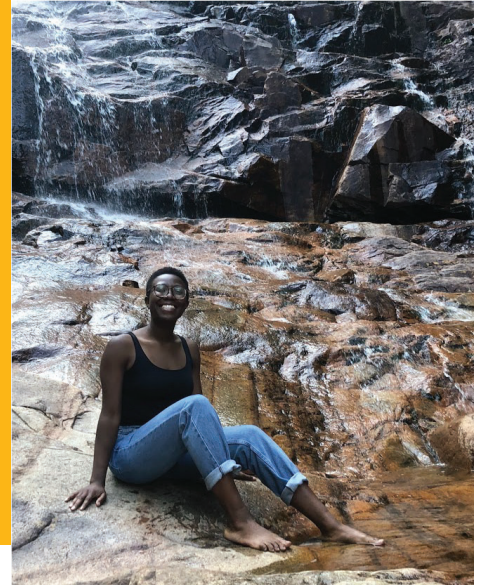


**Sophia Kosowsky, Business Manager**  
she/her/hers

"This is me about to start 'short short change-over' at Berkshire Theatre Group! I'm excited about eating pancakes mostly, but also practicing my carpentry skills and stage managing The Wolves this Fall!"

**Kami Beckford, Outreach Coordinator**  
she/her/hers

"This is me from a hike on a day off while interning in props at Saint Michael's Playhouse (my phone said we climbed 60 stories). I'm excited to design some cool things, consume a lot of art, and eat noodles!"



## INTERVIEW WITH GIANNI DOWNS



### *How did you get involved in theatre?*

In the spring of my junior year of high school the drama club was travelling to a conference and planning to produce the show Brighton Beach Memoirs by Neil Simon. The design included a full interior of a 2-story house as action took place in the boys bedroom upstairs as well as in the downstairs dining and living rooms. It was a massive set, and festival rules were that the full load in needed to take place in 5 minutes or the school would be disqualified. Because of the size, the drama club was looking for as many volunteers as possible to help and following a friend's suggestion I signed up.

I had a blast through the whole process and joined the club for my senior year creating a love of technical theatre that's lasted the rest of my life. I went to UNH for my undergrad and planned to study Computer Science. My heart was with the theatre department, and I quickly took a job working in the university scene shop that paid full tuition. After failing out of my Calc 2 Honors course out of lack of interest and motivation, I decided to follow my heart and pursue technical theatre more seriously. My main interest was in carpentry and painting, and that's what sustained me in the theatre through today.

### *What about scenic design draws you to it as opposed to other design fields?*

When I was young, I used to build constantly. I would build houses and playgrounds for my toys as well as larger structures like tree houses and wooden forts for myself and friends. I used to think I wanted to be an architect, and I believe that scenic design allows me to continue to play in the same way I did as a child. On top of this, the process of scenic design is the most like a studio-artist's process of the major design fields in theatre. As a scenic designer, I get to work alone in my design studio to create work then present it to people for their responses. Other theatre designers do most of their creative work in front of people either in the tech process or in shops where many people have input into the work being done. As a very private person, I prefer to be able to think, test, fail, and repeat without the added stress of having a room full of people watch me do it. *(continued on page 4)*

*Any advice for students hoping to make the leap to the professional world?*

The path I took 20 years ago is much different from the path you will be taking now. The job market was stronger, the cost of living was less, and I was a young white male with parents who were willing and able to help me when needed. On top of this I had no school debt after leaving college due to my full-tuition position in the college scene shop. My professional career was propelled exponentially by the privileges I held, and any advice I give is through this lens of my experiences. With that being said, here are a few suggestions that I believe will help get a professional career started:

**Be brave:** by this I mean take emotional/social risks, follow a position to a city you've never been to, try a position you never thought of before, talk to theatres who are beyond your skill level, reach out and talk to theatre practitioners, let them know you are here and that you are willing to work. You'll be amazed at how many theatres and practitioners will respond to emails and/or a request to meet. If you move to a city, reach out to the professionals in town and try to meet with as many as you can.

**Be persistent:** many theatres need over hires and designers need assistants. These positions are a great way to get a foot in the door and gain valuable experience. With that being said, theatre practitioners and designers don't necessarily keep excellent records. Often times when they need someone in a pinch they look to only the people in front of their faces. The trick is to be in their mind when they are in need. To do this, you want to check in with people every month or season. Let them know you are still around and interested. It takes about a year of persistent foot work to get established in a new city so don't give up too quickly.

**Be consistent and do your best work:** The entertainment industry is still a word-of-mouth profession. Most of your work will come from your previous work. So if you accept a position (whether it's your dream job or not), do the best work you can, be professional, be friendly, and be a good employee/colleague. If you are willing to learn and a good colleague, you will get more work. I can honestly say that most of the designers I know are hired not because they are excellent designers, but because they do good work and directors/producers genuinely like them as a person. Theatre is a team sport, and no-one wants to be in a highly stressful dark room for days on end with someone that is not nice.

Early in my career I had an opportunity to assist Susan Hillferty (head of NYU grad design program and

world-famous costume designer). As I was driving her around looking for props listening to her talk on her cell about the week prior when she won a Tony award for her designs for *Wicked*, I asked her for her advice to a young theatre artist. She said two things: "Never get married, and don't start teaching." She felt that family life and steady money would get in the way of her freelance career. 2 months after this conversation, I moved to Pittsburgh, got married, and started teaching. I've never been happier. So take my advice, and anyone else's with a grain of salt.



Much Ado About Nothing (Top), Rhinoceros (Bottom), both designed by Gianni Downs

*Gianni Downs (Scenic Designer) is the Director of Undergraduate Studies, Head of Design/Tech, and a Lecturer of Scenic Design and Scenic Art in the Theatre Arts Department at the University of Pittsburgh. His work has been nationally recognized with a nomination for the 2019 St. Louis Critic's Award for Best Set Design, a Kevin Kline Award and two nominations for productions at the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis, as well as an Irene Ryan nomination for designs at Stoneham Theatre. He is the recipient of the 2017 Tina and David Bellet Teaching Excellence Award and with his colleague Annmarie Duggan: the 2019 Provost's Personalized Education Grant, as well as both the 2018 and 2015 Innovation in Education Awards. He has had the pleasure of designing over 150 sets regionally at companies like: Theatre Squared, The City Theatre, Merrimack Repertory Theatre, PICT Theatre, The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis, Stoneham Theatre, Pittsburgh Playhouse, Front Porch Theatricals, as well as many others. Gianni received his MFA from Brandeis University, and has been on the faculty of Westminster College, Carnegie Mellon University's School of Drama, the University of Pittsburgh, and Point Park University. Gianni is a proud member of United Scenic Artist local USA829 and his portfolio can be viewed at his website [www.giannidesigns.net](http://www.giannidesigns.net)*