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*The Indy is intrigued.*

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# Follow Your *Bliss*

## Into Folk & Myth?

By MEGAN SIMS

Before I came to college, my father and I sat down to start watching *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth*, the old PBS special with Bill Moyers. For years my father had quoted Joseph Campbell in saying, “follow your bliss.” That was his advice to me looking at everything—schools, classes, jobs, friends. My father has always cared most about what will make me happy.

Neither of us had a clue that a year after we first watched Joseph Campbell, I would declare Folklore and Mythology as my concentration and learn that in fact, Campbell’s universalizing theories about myth across cultures are often not productive in anthropological analyses. Yet where his theories failed, his advice rang true. For declaring Folklore and Mythology was an act of saying no to what was expected and, instead, following my bliss.

When I told this story to a room full of folklorists at the department’s annual symposium in March, they mocked me for bringing up Campbell. I reassured them that I was no Campbell apologist but that my father was. And an alumnus joked that there should be a genre of folklore dedicated to tales that begin, “When I told my father I was studying Folklore and Mythology...”!

This piece is not intended to be an advertisement for the department, though anyone will tell you that I take every opportunity to sing its praises. But what sets the department apart from most others on campus is a sense, strangely, of liberation from prescription. In Folk and Myth, there is no set career path. Very few people come into college planning to be a folklorist, and very few leave to do just that. Those that enter the department do so to learn how to think, to learn a particular way of existing in the world

and understanding it that they can then take in any number of directions.

In a room full of folklorists, it becomes apparent just how varied the postgrad paths of the department’s alumni can be. At one symposium we had Folk and Myth alumni from law, politics, advocacy, medicine, consulting, fashion, business, academia, and more. One alumnus spoke casually about how his knowledge of ethnography has aided him in consulting work, as he’s more easily able to understand the development and dynamics of workplace cultures. David Lerner, a doctor, spoke about how the skills from folklore help him in understanding illness narratives and health policy in his work.

Ruth Goldstein, the current Harvard College Fellow in Folklore and Mythology, discussed the reflections from the symposium of Terrell McSweeney, an FTC commissioner and Folk and Myth grad. “Terrell talked about how her knowledge of Homeric warrior poets informs how she sees the current national and international playing field,” said Goldstein, “how politicians need a given storytelling motif for people to identify and vote with, and that the categories of liberty and equality, so central to thinking about folklore (from the folklore of social justice to who becomes iconic as heroes, tricksters, and the evil stepmother) are the very ones at stake right now.”

Joseph Campbell’s contributions to the academic discipline of Folklore and Mythology may be obsolete, but his understanding of the way archetypes play into our daily lives remains as striking today as it was in 1988. We still live in a world where folklore can mean something, where we can watch the same stories play out over and over again and turn to the folklorist to understand them. Current undergrads and recent graduates in the department have brought folklore into a wide range of disciplines—from astrophysics to pop culture to evolutionary biology to sex education. Its goals have never been to teach students what to think but, rather, how to think.

When I tell my father my crazy plans for the future, he just smiles. What he’s learned about me is that if I love what I’m doing, I can make something work. It’s what I’ve done in Folk and Myth and what I plan to continue doing as I slowly dip my toe into the world of a real career. As life outside of Harvard begins, Campbell’s words will continue to ring in my ears, and I will keep following my bliss.

Megan Sims (megansims@college.harvard.edu) is always happy to spend an hour telling anyone who will listen why Folk and Myth is the best department on campus.



Warren House, home to the Committee on Degrees in Folklore & Mythology.  
Caroline Cronin

# INDY NEWS

## BLOCKADE!

Divest Harvard sit-in and rally for climate change action.

By HUNTER RICHARDS

On March 29, over 20 students willing to risk arrest began occupying University Hall beginning at 6 am. Divest Harvard, a student group which supports the divestment of Harvard University's endowment from fossil fuel companies, invited the Harvard community to join them in blockading University Hall from 11 am to 5 pm to protest of President Trump's efforts supporting the coal industry. The group, which has held similar sit-ins in the past to draw attention to the rising threat of climate change associated with fossil fuels, reached out to the community for support in standing against global warming in whatever capacity possible.

The resistance of Harvard from withdrawing its support of the coal industry has led to Divest Harvard's continued determination to raise awareness about fossil fuel's contribution to anthropogenic climate change. While the university has not addressed any plans to discontinue its investment in coal, the student organization continues to stand and act against the impending legislation impacting the country's carbon footprint under President Trump.

On Tuesday, Trump signed an executive order to dismantle the Clean Power Plan. Under President Obama, the Clean Power Plan ruled to cut carbon emissions from fossil-fuel burning power plants in efforts to combat climate change. With arguments that these regulations have caused coal miners to lose work and challenged by industry groups, Trump has continually expressed his support of repealing such legislation. Although the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has been tasked with developing a new rule-



Students blocking an entrance to University Hall on Wednesday March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2017.  
*Caroline Cronin*

making process in its place, it will likely be over a year before the issue is fully addressed and new action is taken and will be less thorough in its environmental efforts. Environmental advocacy groups have become highly combative of new administrative decisions concerning climate change, defending current efforts addressing climate change.

Bill McKibben, renowned environmentalist, author, and activist who has spent his career addressing global warming, expressed his gratitude and respect of Divest Harvard's efforts via twitter. Retweeting Divest Harvard's coverage of occupying an administrative building, McKibben adds, "thank you for your leadership @DivestHarvard. when DC won't lead, others must" early Wednesday morning.

Divest Harvard's Facebook account shared updates on the group's platform and blockade, along with a statement by Coordinator Isa Flores-Jones '19: "We are asking for a moratorium on coal, a deadly fossil fuel. While Harvard University currently has little to no investments in coal, in our last meeting, the administration could not promise that they would not in it invest again. Moreover, they continue to invest in the fossil fuel industry. This is an implicit encouragement of Trump's dirty energy agenda. This is a political act."

Along with the blockade, Divest Harvard planned a rally outside the administrative building in Harvard Yard to persuade the university to stand against the fossil fuel industry and the recent repeal of the government's clean energy support. The

university's financial support of fossil fuel industries prevents Harvard from being a leader in protecting the planet and vulnerable groups that are more susceptible to the negative impacts of climate change. Even with the national coverage of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's subjection to government-supported displacement as protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline (the #noDAPL campaign), Trump continued to support the mission by citing potential job creation. Endorsement of fossil fuels continues to be a political move, although the university resists acknowledging the impact its continued investment may have.

The student organization also demands a community-wide open forum with administrators, faculty, and students. In a public statement released by Divest Harvard early Wednesday morning, member Maryssa Barron '17 speaks for the movement, saying, "We believe that it is morally reprehensible for the University to continue financially supporting and profiting from the destructive technologies that are doing irreversible damage to the planet and communities around the world." This comes in response to a March 20 response by President Drew Faust to Divest Harvard's recent plea for readdressing the university's support of fossil fuels, Faust continued to express the university's refusal to act accordingly as it would politicize the endowment.

Hunter Richards (hrichards@college.harvard.edu) is anxious to know the outcome of this blockade!

# The Future of Politics

## Public service in the age of Trump.

By EMILY HALL

In the wake of 2016's presidential election upset, have Harvard students changed their minds about public service? The answer seems to be a qualified "no."

Last November's shocking electoral triumph of now President Donald Trump over former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton

was unexpected at Harvard, to say the least. Political operatives were caught off guard by the electoral result, and the administration is still far from full. Harvard graduates seem to be prime candidates for positions in the executive branch, and when Hillary was anticipated to win there was much talk of students trying to find jobs in her presidential administration. With Trump in the White House, though, some are refocusing their plans to make a different kind of impact. Others are simply refocusing themselves.

Michael Kikukawa '17, a senior in Lowell House who spent last summer campaigning for Hillary Clinton, said that while he "was always planning on working in public service," the election has altered his path so that he plans to work in the non-profit sector rather than within government. While he would not want to work in the executive branch, he would

definitely still consider working on Capitol Hill—but he's looking at jobs in New York, at think tanks and NGOs because he would rather avoid Washington, DC for the next few years. Most importantly though, Kikukawa said, "I definitely want to be in a position in which I am engaged with fighting bad policies and working to make our country a better place."

For others, the election had less of a direct outcome on their plans. Former President of the Harvard Republican Club (which notably denounced Donald Trump's candidacy for president under his leadership last summer) Declan Garvey's employment plans have not changed, but his goals within his job have been forced to realign. Garvey '17 will be working at Hamilton Place Strategies, a public affairs consulting firm in DC, after graduation. He's happy with this decision, noting that "I was lucky to have been able to intern



The John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, home of the Harvard Institute of Politics. *Jason Ge*

## Future of Politics, continued.

there this past summer, and even luckier to have the chance to go back full-time,” but his expectations for the job have changed. He noted that the “underlying assumption was that Hillary Clinton would be the next president,” which obviously did not happen. As a result, Garvey said, “Several policy issues that I hoped to work on—immigration, free trade, job retraining— don’t seem likely to be a priority under the Trump administration, so in that sense his election has changed the nature of the work I will be doing at HPS. That being said, I look forward to working on tax reform and other issues where the firm and the Trump administration align.”

Still others have decided to take a step back from politics altogether next year. John Acton '17, of Eliot House, said that the process of the election had a much larger impact on his future career plans than did the outcome. “Basically, during the constant fervor of reading every tweet about the election, I realized that I was a political addict and that I placed far more emotional importance on both 1) my personal involvement in the politics and 2) who holds power in D.C. than either actually merited,” Acton said.

Acton’s Christian faith also had an impact on his reorientation toward politics. He said that he believes “that the kingdom of God is more important than the kingdoms of men. This doesn’t make politics bad, but it does mean that politics should never be of ultimate significance. And politics often felt more important than anything else to me during this election. I also believe in a vision of America where what truly gives our lives value comes from completely apolitical things such as individuals, families, and communities, not from Washington D.C.” Acton was inspired by Senator Ben Sasse as well, who he says exemplifies his own values. He said this helped him realize “that my addiction to politics was fundamentally at odds with these values and in some ways jeopardized them. Not only that, but a political addiction is self-defeating,

because anything that treats politics as the most important thing in the world will naturally turn into an obsession with political power rather than a treatment of politics as the *service of something else.*”

These fundamental changes in the way he viewed politics led Acton to take action to break his political addiction. He will be taking a job in the private sector, working for McKinsey’s Denver office next year. In the long term, however, Acton said “I hope to ultimately do some sort of public sector work in some capacity, because I really am passionate about this stuff and think there are tons of potential areas to serve meaningfully,

“I definitely want to be in a position in which I am engaged with fighting bad policies and working to make our country a better place.”

be it by working for an elected official or politician, becoming a judge or government lawyer, running for office, or even serving on a local school board. I just want to ensure that any public service is because I actually believe it’s how I can best help others, not because I feel some sort of compulsion toward it.”

Garvey has also tried to distance himself from politics—to an extent. When asked about his perceptions changing as a result of the election, he said, “As someone who was opposed to Trump’s election, his meteoric rise to the presidency has been somewhat disheartening in that it seemed to signal the relative unimportance of qualities I previously deemed essential for public service: integrity, experience, thoughtfulness. While at times I want to—and have—stopped reading the news

and tried to ignore the mess in Washington, the election has also motivated me to do what I can to fix what has become an incredibly polarized and stagnant system.”

The consequences of the election were less drastic for Michael Kikukawa’s conception of government careers. He said that his perception of them is largely the same, although “It’s more obvious now how provisional they are, and there are fewer of them that I could or would apply to, but I’ve always known that they aren’t a guarantee of a job.” He has found both disappointment and hope in those who are already in government, noting that “some public servants—both politicians and staffers—have changed what I might consider their morals to adapt to the current political climate. I wouldn’t want to be in a position in which I might compromise what I believe in for my job, and I honestly am a bit shocked by the number of people who either are compromising their principles or don’t have the principles that I thought they did. (I’m not talking liberal vs. conservative here.) I am reassured by people on both sides of the aisle who are refusing to normalize recent actions by our president, and who are, as the saying goes, putting country over party.”

Despite the surprises that came for many this past fall, many Harvard students remain determined to make a difference in the world. This is something of which we should be proud.

Emily Hall (emilyhall@college.harvard.edu) is reassured that, as the world continues to change, her peers also continue to dedicate themselves to leaving the world better than they found it.

**P**ulkit Agarwal of the Harvard Independent (HI) had the opportunity to interview Ms. Gina McCarthy (GM), a former Administrator of the EPA under President Obama, who is at the Institute of Politics this semester.

**HI:** Why do you think climate change has become such a contentious issue, even though the scientific consensus appears to be so clear? Understandably, there are special interests committed against its recognition, but they, too, have been defeated before.

**GM:** There are a lot of reasons for it, many of which you have already touched base on. There are interests that may well understand science and its implications, but they would be disadvantaged by some of the newer solutions that are coming on board like renewable energy, energy efficiency, that people are readily embracing. These are technological advancements that would be accepted even if climate change wasn't happening. They create more stable communities and maintain a cleaner environment more generally.

But there are a couple of reasons why climate change has been particularly difficult. One is that science is complicated: it's not like you can look out your window, see the smog, and realize you are in danger of air pollution. You have to realize in science - that's difficult - it's long-term. It doesn't allow us to say: "Look at that really intense storm; that's climate change." It can be a difficult thing for people to grasp and fully come to terms with.

It's also about people making significant changes today, for benefits in the future. And that's a very difficult case to make, especially when you need political movement. Changes in laws, rules, and structures that are well beyond anybody's political term. So, it's been difficult. When we started talking about climate, solutions that are around today weren't even there. And people don't want to embrace such a big problem that they can't fix.



Wait for the courts to make the call.

## An interview with Gina McCarthy.

By PULKIT AGARWAL

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Having said that, things are getting better. The market is changing. And the world is recognizing that we need to take action. If those actions are ones that people can embrace from an economic perspective: this is, after all, where job growth is, where economic opportunities are. I think we will continue to see action even if it remains a politically difficult subject to address.

**HI:** What do you think is the greatest obstacle to making this case to the people? Benefits may be observed in the longer term, but where do you think the proponents of green energy are failing in making the case for these long-term benefits?

**GM:** I think we need to have continued recognition of the fact that carbon pollution has a cost, and we have to keep making technological advancements to address this pollution. I think we really need government action. You're not

going to get there just by putting a market price on carbon. Whether you use taxes, cap-and-trade, or regulations, you really cannot get to a low-carbon future that science is demanding without either. Bigger technological advancements in favor of low-carbon require government support to be marketable. I think we need to continue to

push for investment at the federal level: research and investment is going to help drive those technologies of the future.

**HI:** Something that you worked closely with President Obama on, during your time as Administrator of the EPA, was the Clean Power Plan. How do you see changes in the administration affect the future of this plan? Do you sense a receding effort from the government in this regard?

**GM:** Well, the current administration has made it clear that they don't want to support the Plan. Right now, it's in court, and we're awaiting a decision by the DC circuit. I'm pretty confident that the rule that we finalized is really legally and technically—from a science perspective—very solid. The other good thing about it is that it follows the direction that the energy world in the US has taken for continued reasonable progress. From a substantive perspective it makes sense. And if you ask the utility world, this is the direction in which they are investing.

This administration may choose not to support it, but even if the President issues an executive order, the rule will still exist. The question will be whether or not they have the technical and scientific basis to write a different rule that would negate the Clean Power Plan. And that takes time. It takes a record to establish. I assume that they might want to do that, so I expect that we might lose some time. I just don't think that what we will lose is the continued march towards clean energy in the US. It's

# INDY NEWS



Gina McCarthy at her most recent study group, Tuesday March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2017. *Emily Hall '18*

what is marketable. You can promise the world to the coal industry, but if it costs more to use coal than it does renewable energy—which in most parts of the country is true—you're just not going to be able to make that transition back. And I think we all know where the jobs of the future are, where jobs are growing fastest. It's solar, and soon even wind. After this administration moves on, we will have that long-term signal for investment that the clean power plan was delivering.

HI: You mentioned the role of the court. There appears to be a concerted effort by the judiciary to circumscribe the powers of the president. Do you think the court will be more proactive in dealing with the environment as well, due to lack of initiative by the administration?

GM: I think we have done a really good job at following what the law Congress passed actually told us to do, and we implemented effectively for 47 years. We have had an extraordinary track record in the court over the last eight years under the Obama administration. I feel confident about the court's judgment about everything we have done, and if this administration wants to replace really sound rules with rules that are not

based in scientific fact, then I suspect the courts will overturn those. I, for one, enjoy the fact that courts follow the law and make legal decisions in accordance with what Congress has deemed

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It's also about people making significant changes today, for benefits in the future. And that's a very difficult case to make.

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appropriate. I think the disturbing part that concerns me about this administration is that they are trying to take the rules out of the courts with the rhetoric that they overreach. If they are so confident that we overreached, wait for the courts to make the call.

HI: What are your thoughts on your successor, Scott Pruitt? You've mentioned before that you will be keeping close tabs on him; do you think he is the right man for the job? Do you think his views on climate change are even consistent with the mandate of the Agency?

GM: Generally, when you have switches in administration, going from one party to the other, you will have a change in policy. But the person who takes the job of Administrator of the EPA—and we've had some incredible Republican administrators previously—embraces the mission of the Agency. And I think the challenge with Scott Pruitt is that he doesn't seem to be embracing the mission of the Agency: not in terms of how the budget was constructed; his statement that he's not sure if carbon dioxide is causing climate change is a little disturbing. EPA is a science agency, and our job is to protect public health. An administrator needs to show leadership to pay attention to the science, and certainly needs to send signals that they care about the mission of the Agency. Mr. Pruitt doesn't have a very strong record, and some of the actions taken so far don't tell me that there is a strong will to continue protecting public health the way EPA has done for 47 years and must continue to do.

HI: To what extent do you think the powers of the EPA will be inhibited by the recent budget cut? If you were running the EPA today, and the allocation was reduced by 31%, how would you react?

GM: The challenge that it brings is that the Agency simply will not be able to function with that type of reduction. In reality, it's a 43% cut to the operations of the Agency. Some of the money simply gets passed through for infrastructure improvements to states. The discretionary money that EPA has to run itself is now almost half. No agency can function as well with half the money.

I know the argument has been that states should be the line of first protection. But there are two problems with that: state

## Gina McCarthy, continued.

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# Dancing with **FIRE**

## Making Harvard Lit Again.

By CAROLINE GENTILE

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dollars are also being cut by 45%; and federal statutes don't give states primacy. In only a few statutes—mainly the water ones—are states given the line of first authority. But they always have EPA oversight. The budget as it currently sits is inconsistent with EPA's responsibility that Congress has assigned to it. So while our power hasn't been taken away from us, our ability to exercise it has.

HI: Moving on to the political outlook in the country today, what do you think the Democrats need to do in the coming four years to improve their electoral performances? There seems to be a fundamental disconnect between the working class and the Democrats. Do you think that can be reconciled in the coming years, and how would that happen?

GM: I think many of us are concerned that some of the core values of our democracy are being challenged right now by this administration. Speaking of the environment, where my expertise lies, we have always said that the mission of EPA is timeless: it's about clean air, clean water, and a stable climate. That has been a bipartisan goal and a core value forever. I don't think that anybody in the US voted for Trump as basically saying, "I no longer have an interest in clean air and clean water." We care about our children and their future. We will have to wait and see whether the American people actually believe in the actions of this president.

HI: Lastly, it is believed widely today that the costs of climate change will be felt most severely by people in less-developed parts of the world, who cannot afford bigger cars and air-conditioning. Could this be driving apathy towards this issue among a subset of the population here in the US?

GM: I feel really strongly about something President Obama has articulated before as well; that the reason climate is such a moral imperative is that it will hit the most vulnerable the hardest. The low-income households of the world, who don't have the wherewithal to move from the coastal areas to more comfortable places. So the challenge that developing countries face is to not follow our path, and jump over to energy systems that avoid pollution problems that we have had to face and clean up for centuries. This offers an opportunity for developing countries to actually develop cleaner, more effectively, and quicker.

So to those who worry whether or not renewables, energy efficiency, and other cleaner causes are going to be a problem for the developing world to embrace, I would say that those countries are ones that stand to gain the most.

Pulkit Agarwal (pulkitaragarwal@college.harvard.edu) feels confident in the lasting legacy Ms. McCarthy has left at the EPA.

Annie Opel '17, likes to play with fire. No, I'm not talking about lighting up matches just to watch them burn like a crazed pyromaniac. Nor am I talking about the metaphorical sense of that expression. She is a fire dancer, and she can literally light up a room (figuratively speaking, of course—or else that would be a fire hazard!)

It all started during her gap year between high school and Harvard. For the second half of the year, Annie moved to St. Croix, one of the U.S. Virgin Islands, to intern for the Nature Conservancy. When she arrived on the island, Annie didn't know a soul besides her mentor, Lisa. Lisa was a fire dancer. Annie reminisces, "I remember when I landed, I went straight to Lisa's fire show to meet her, and so she could help me get moved into my intern housing." Since then, Annie and Lisa became good friends, and Lisa became her mentor for more than just working at the Nature Conservancy. Slowly but surely, after spending all of her spare time with Lisa and her fire-dancing troupe, Annie learned to fire dance, too.

Interestingly, the first step for Annie in learning to fire dance was to learn how to hula hoop. "All I would do after work was just hula hoop because I didn't have very many friends, and the friends I did have were all fire dancers," she recalls. When she wasn't practicing hula hooping, she would attend all of the fire shows and help with safety

# INDY ARTS



Annie and Rakesh hula-hooping in Tercentenary Theater. *Caroline Gentile '17*



Annie's most recent performance, Sunday March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2017. *Mirel Baysal '17*

and setting up. Her graduation from hula hooping to dancing with fire came when Lisa asked her to hula-hoop at a St. Patrick's Day celebration on the island, and to perform in the background of the fire dancing shows. "Once they saw I was good enough at hula hooping and they were confident in me, they gave me the smallest little prop: a stick with fire on the end of it."

Though this transition seems anticlimactic, Annie soon had to step up to the challenge of learning more fire dancing tricks when the other dancers in the troupe—called Kiki and the Flaming Gypsies—no longer had the availability to do gigs. She quickly went from her dancing with her seemingly measly fire stick to doing three to four hotel gigs a week with Lisa. "It was definitely a steep learning curve!" she remembers. But if anyone who has seen Annie perform will tell you, she certainly knows what she is doing when she's fire dancing.

At Harvard, Annie has continued to fire dance. "When I first got here, I really wanted to start a fire dancing club," she admits. "But as a freshman, I was totally overcommitted and had too much going on. That being said, I would hula-hoop in the yard alone. Soon I became known as hula-hoop girl, and it led me to meeting a bunch of people! I even taught a lot of the freshman football players how to hula-hoop." In fact, you may have seen Annie and her hula-hoops and other fire-dancing props at Camp Harvard and Yard Fest. "I have so many people approaching me who are really curious and enthusiastic. People want to learn. I haven't taught anyone how to do anything with fire because there is no good space for it and I don't teach anyone consistently enough, but I always let people hula hoop or see my poi (a fire-dancing prop)- even Dean Khurana!"

Unfortunately, the City of Cambridge has deemed fire-dancing illegal, which has prevented Annie from performing with fire at any Harvard-sponsored events. However, it is legal for her to fire-dance on private property. "Because I can only perform on private property,

## Fire, continued.

this means I can solely do it for the final clubs on campus. I love performing there but I wish there were more accessible places to do it. Of course, an undergraduate dancing with fire is a total liability, even though I'm covered by insurance."

The first time Annie fire-danced at Harvard was the fall of 2016 at the Owl Club, when Kiki, the leader of her fire-dancing troupe from St. Croix was in town with her boyfriend. "I had told the Owl guys about my fire-dancing and asked if I could do it for the party, and they said yes," Annie recalls. "Everyone at the party freaked out when they saw it-- nobody had seen anything like this before. I was so glad to have Kiki and Neal with me because they have so much experience. Now everyone knows me as the fire-dancer, and other clubs started asking me to fire-dance, too."

Annie credits these opportunities to fire-dance with making her feel comfortable at Harvard. "It has become my 'thing', and given me my own niche. As a performer I can hide behind that costume and embody that character, and that gives me a lot of confidence and a sense of belonging." To Annie, performing as a fire-dancer has been an incredibly empowering experience in general. When she learned to fire-dance from Lisa, she remembers how Lisa never treated her like an amateur, or was belittling or patronizing, which gave her a lot of confidence in her ability to fire-dance. Another empowering aspect of fire dancing was gaining body confidence. "When you fire dance, you can't wear a lot of clothes, especially when you hula hoop. I was pretty body conscious straight out of high school, like a lot of women, and was performing in clothes that bared my stomach and my legs. But it was for functional reasons, and I never felt like people were even watching my body anyway. I could just do my thing and dance with fire, and that is what people appreciate."

Caroline Gentile '17 ([cgentile@college.harvard.edu](mailto:cgentile@college.harvard.edu)) had way too much fun coming up with fire-related puns.

Harvard BlackCAST's spring theatrical performance *Bootycandy* by Robert O'Hara honors queer, black stories and undermines bigotry threatening such communities. The semi-autobiographical subversive comedy follows Sutter, a gay, black man growing up in the late twentieth century. From his childhood home, to church, to dive bars, to motel rooms, Sutter's misadventures with love, sex, identity, writing, family, and friends allows him to grow and develop his own self. Audiences are compelled to consider and challenge their own conceptions of race, sexuality, and gender, as well as how these aspects of one's character play into who they are as a person. *Bootycandy* portrays the impact that each person has, both positively and negatively, on their communities and society as a whole.

With its recent shows, BlackCAST has showcased the power of intersections, and promoted both the acceptance and celebration of queer identity. Director and BlackCAST president Darius Johnson '18 believed a comedy like *Bootycandy* would be a good way to do so without detracting from the necessary work being by the queer community to tackle its problems. Important themes such as mental illness, sexual assault, and the portrayal of women allow the audience to reflect on themselves in a safe but interrogative environment through both a celebration and critique. With help and guidance from the Office for the Arts at Harvard and Farkas Hall staff, the production team was able to manage the many literal moving parts of the set and show. The BGLTQ Office and Harvard Foundation also provided support for the production.

*Bootycandy*, which Johnson describes as "a kaleidoscopic wild ride," has chronological structure but is more so an exploration of the main character's mental space. "It's kind of like if you cracked open the head of a queer, black man, and displayed all of his tensions, memories, insecurities, and flaws on a screen. That's what *Bootycandy* is." Throughout preparation for the performance, the actors and staff spent time unpacking the emotional intensity that *Bootycandy* involves. As the play deals heavily with themes of mental illness and sexual assault, BlackCAST remained attentive to the needs of its staff in a way that wasn't as prominent in previous shows where they did

## Theatrical Sweet Tooth

### BlackCAST's *Bootycandy*!



By HUNTER RICHARDS

not deal so intensely with such themes. Such issues required extra directorial and acting work to be creative in a way that would also guarantee the actors were comfortable.

When asked about their hopes for the perception of the performance, Johnson says, "I want the audience to choke' - as Sutter, the main character, would say. There's not a single scene in this play that is easy to watch - some because they dive really deeply into traumatic themes, and some because they are so uncomfortably hilarious that you're not really sure what's going on." As director, Johnson wants the audience to sit in that discomfort and question *why* they are uncomfortable in those moments, and what that might reveal about themselves. They also invite the audience to question BlackCAST and their decisions, becoming active participants in the artistic process and helping BlackCAST to improve and question their art better in the future. While recognizing that there are certain aspects of the play that BlackCAST attempted to assuage as much as possible, Johnson acknowledges that art and

creators are not perfect. "It takes work and collaboration and criticism to improve the art that we put out into the community."

For Johnson, it was the people who make being involved in the performance so rewarding. "The entire staff and cast gets along so well, and we all put a lot into the show because it connects to us on so many levels." While nonblack people with queer identities can immediately identify with the aspects of the show that highlight the difficulties of growing up in a non-queer world as a queer person, they are better able to empathize with how hard it can be to be a queer person within the community itself. O'Hara's work also brings out nostalgic black themes in the show that Johnson hopes will touch the audience after seeing the impact that it has certainly had on the cast and crew.

As president of the organization, Johnson hopes that BlackCAST will continue to be a space where black people can feel validated and celebrated for all parts of their identities. While Johnson recognizes that the organization has yet to find a way to serve the differently-abled black community and uplift their stories, the group is still growing and expanding the range of representation. In the next year, BlackCAST additionally plans to give a bigger focus to female-identifying narratives. In the coming years, it is Johnson's hope that the group will continue to find new ways to serve and celebrate the diversity of blackness that exists both on campus and in our society.

The performance, which involves partial nudity and mention of sexual assault (but no portrayal), is suggested for ages 15 and over. Tickets are SEF-able and can also be purchased at the door or through the Harvard Box Office.

Upcoming show dates and times:

Thurs, March 30<sup>th</sup> at 7:30pm

Fri, March 31<sup>st</sup> at 7:30pm

Sat, April 1<sup>st</sup> at 2:00pm

Sat, April 1<sup>st</sup> at 7:30pm

Sun, April 2<sup>nd</sup> at 2:00pm

Hunter Richards (hrichards@college.harvard.edu) hopes many will get to enjoy and participate in this show!

BLACK  CAST

PRESENTS

# BOOTY CANDY

BY ROBERT O'HARA DIRECTED BY DARIUS JOHNSON & KRISTINA NEAL

## FARKAS HALL

MARCH 24/25 7:30PM  
MARCH 26 2:00PM  
MARCH 30/31 7:30PM  
APRIL 1 2:00PM & 7:30PM  
APRIL 2 2:00PM

## BIT.LY/BOOTYCANDYTICKETS

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