

New mentorship project
helps ESL newcomer youth
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The Source

forum of diversity

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VIFF

Verbatim

The courage to leave and the courage to stay

by KARIN PAYANY

I am from the South of France... where the sea reigns and the mountains dominate. I grew up in Nice with my gaze turned towards an always dazzling Mediterranean Sea. Nice... a city where people dream of going on vacation, but from which I dreamed of leaving to explore new horizons and meet other challenges. At that time, I admit that I did not really realize how lucky I was to have been born in such a beautiful place... This is what life experiences and travel provide; an awareness of the value of what we already have at home and in ourselves ...

The departure for adventure

I also think that I don't like what is too easy and comfortable. That is how I came to leave family and friends to continue my studies in Paris, to work there... The challenge was great: to resist the grey. The absence of sea and nature weighed heavily on the joy of living. So in September 2018, accompanied by my husband and my little three-year-old boy, we set off on an adventure of expatriation, heading to Vancouver. We left everything, our jobs, our home, our life filled with friends. We arrived with our five suitcases and a work permit. Everything had to be rebuilt and won back.

When I arrived, I immediately thought of my hometown. I had finally found my mountains again, the blue of the ocean... I was at home. We could put our bags down with our heart full of promise.

I am often asked this question: "But why did you leave
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When film festival meets streaming

by XI CHEN

When Vancouver International Film Festival (VIFF) festival organizers planned for contingencies in the past, few had ever thought about the scenario of a global pandemic lasting months with no end in sight, but they are now learning to adapt - and hopefully thrive - in a drastically different environment.

The upcoming festival, running from Sept. 24 to Oct. 7, is moving online with its new-

ly developed VIFF Connect streaming platform, while maintaining some limited in-cinema screenings.

A new format for a new reality

"This is our 39th edition, but it feels like our first festival," says Curtis Woloschuk, associate director of programming at VIFF. "We knew in the spring that it was going to be a different festival and we are trying to figure out how to do this as we move along. Our overall festival program will be available

online through the VIFF Connect platform, which we spent the last few months building."

The new online platform allows the audience to buy individual tickets per program, or to purchase a subscription to binge on all programs offered at VIFF. Online film screenings are only available within B.C., but the panel discussions and talks are accessible wherever people are, Woloschuk explains.

"The new platform has dramatically increased our reach, and we are excited to see the

opportunities that could open up," he adds. "We see this as part of our year-round operation moving forward; we will be offering different online programs to complement what we are doing in the cinema."

To enhance the virtual festival experience, Woloschuk says there will be pre-recorded director interviews with the film screenings so people can have a chance to hear from the creators themselves.

The size of this year's program was also streamlined to
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Cultural Spotlight

Advice for BIPOC individuals working in ecology and evolutionary biology

by GINA HSU

A co-authored article published in *Nature Ecology & Evolution*, an online science journal, outlines career strategies for Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) researchers working in the field of ecology and evolutionary biology (EEB). The article, “Strategies and support for Black, Indigenous, and People of colour in ecology and evolutionary biology,” highlights the low rate of racial diversity in EEB and offers advice on how BIPOC students and researchers can navigate their wellbeing and career advancement in academia.

The authors are Michelle Tseng (University of British Columbia), Rana El-Sabaawi (University of Victoria), Michael Kantar (University of Hawaii at Manoa), Jelena Pantel (The American University of Paris), Diane Srivastava (University of British Columbia), and Jessica Ware (American Museum of Natural History).

As Black Lives Matter (BLM) has gained increasing momentum, they note that BIPOC scholars have been tasked to help non-BIPOCs to “educate themselves, to write statements of support, or to guide their research groups in discussions of racism.” As they observe, “the focus, ironically, has been on how to help the majority.”

Tseng explained in an interview with UBC News: “We felt that there had been a lot of attention paid to how to combat systemic racism in academia, but this was largely geared to a default-white audience. No one was actually talking to Black, Indigenous or people of colour about how to survive in the system, and we knew that this type of advice had to come from other BIPOC researchers. I think, for many of us, we were writing a letter to our younger selves.”

The authors want the article to serve BIPOC students and researchers in EEB by providing strategies and resources solicited from BIPOC scholars working in the field. The seven strategies are: take care of your mental health, be realistic with what lies ahead, speak up, strategically, choose your battles and pace yourself, ask questions, know that you can inspire and



▲ Diane Srivastava, professor in the zoology department at UBC.



▲ Michelle Tseng, assistant professor in the botany and zoology departments at UBC.

effect change, recognize your own privilege and trust yourself.

The survival toolkit emphasizes that, despite all the obstacles facing BIPOC students and scholars, it is important to prioritize wellbeing, set boundaries, and seek support from allies and mentors. The article concludes that although BIPOC scholars often face bias and have to work twice as hard in academia, research passion and survival instincts will help combat the struggles.

When asked about the importance of mental health, Srivastava told UBC News that “fish that are always swimming upstream get tired.” If students and researchers do not fit into the dominant culture, they not only have to work harder but can potentially be excluded from the networks of support geared towards and designed for the majority academics who “fit.” Srivastava’s observation echoes Tseng’s suggestion that “a stronger sense of belonging, more role

models, and mentoring may help both with recruiting and retaining BIPOC in EEB.”

While institutional racism affects BIPOC individuals working in academia, as the authors suggest, the survival toolkit also calls for BIPOC researchers to constantly reflect on their own positions in society. The authors note that: “when you are working and communicating with the non-academic community, and especially with other under-represented communities, you may not be viewed as a minority group, but rather as a member of the ivory tower.”

Thus, it is imperative for BIPOC researchers to recognize their privilege, be mindful of their own biases, and continue to educate themselves in order to break down barriers between academia and the general public. “Think carefully about the ways that your community can be both the victim of discrimination and still perpetuate discrimination against other BIPOC.”

When asked about immediate steps to address low levels of diversity in EEB, Srivastava said that recruitment and retention of under-represented minorities should start at all stages of the educational pipeline: “I think we need to start thinking about the intersections of many different forms of marginalization, rather than focusing just on silos of race or gender.”

For more information, please visit www.nature.com/articles/s41559-020-1252-0 and www.news.ubc.ca/2020/07/20/researchers-call-for-support-for-bipoc-in-ecology-and-evolutionary-biology.



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CommuniCreate builds newcomer youths' confidence and community connections

by DANIELA COHEN

The 2018 statistics from the Surrey Local Immigration Partnership show that youth make up over 60% of the area's newcomer population. However, unlike for adult newcomers, there are limited options for these youth to learn English.

The lack of youth-accessible language learning opportunities led SFU students Saba Fatemi, Eunbee Baik and Rufaida Kheraj as well as alumni Trisha Dulku and Ricky Lalli to develop the CommuniCreate program.

"I was also a student who was struggling to find opportunities to learn English. So I was excited about creating a program that can help these students," shares Baik.

Nurturing connection and self-paced learning

CommuniCreate aims to foster youths' success through hands-on activities that teach practical life skills beneficial in their daily lives. The program aspires to create a safe, enjoyable environment where youth can connect with other people in their communities, express their creativity and build confidence.

The program has partnered with DIVERSEcity Community Resources Society, a registered charity in Surrey that offers a

wide range of services to empower newcomers and other diverse communities to build a life they love in Canada.

Mike Lally, Manager of DIVERSEcity's Youth Programs, clarifies that CommuniCreate serves as an extension of Youth Expressions, a new initiative designed to respond to the impacts of COVID-19. He emphasizes that CommuniCreate has helped reduce stress and the sense of isolation and loneliness many youth have experienced during the pandemic. DIVERSEcity's role is to refer eligible youth to the program and provide ongoing support throughout, including first language support.

Lally highlights the importance of the program's informal setting which allows youth to learn English at their own pace in a nurturing environment without the pressure of tests or judgement around making mistakes.

"We want to be sure we're meeting clients where they're at, not where society feels youth should be at," he says.

Dynamic curriculum with individualized mentorship

The inaugural session of CommuniCreate was held twice a week for an hour and a half in the summer of 2020. Participants included 16 newcomer youth ranging from early teens to early twen-



▲ The CommuniCreate team (Saba, Rufaida, and Eunbee) with participants Saw Joe Teeshara and Rola Nasreddine, and Raphael Ochil from DIVERSEcity.

ties and 22 university volunteers. Baik explains that the program was originally intended for newcomer youth ages 13 to 17, but interest from youth outside of that age range led organizers to expand the eligibility.

Baik highlights the structure of a typical program session, which begins by teaching key vocabulary related to the session topic, followed by a film activity and worksheet and the opportunity to play various games related to English language learning. At the end of the session, students are given a real life scenario and apply what they have learned to come up with an appropriate response. Baik emphasizes that the online format necessitated by COVID-19 created a set up where many activities take place one-on-one in

Zoom breakout rooms. This allows the volunteers to effectively adjust to the students' level.

"I think that's the greatest strength of our program," she says.

Multiple program benefits

According to Baik, feedback from both students and teachers indicated that students had improved their English, especially in the particular areas that mattered to them, such as vocabulary and reading. In addition, they developed friendships with the volunteer teachers.

Lally emphasizes that the program has had a significant impact in a very short time.

"Youth said that with schools being closed, they found this program helped fill that void [and enabled them] to practice their English and improve on their levels

and spend quality time practicing with the mentors at CommuniCreate," he says. "It's helped them to learn new vocabulary, be able to converse with others in a more practical way and really build confidence to be able to do things for themselves in public." ✍

The next session of CommuniCreate starts on Sept. 28 and will run on Mondays from 3:30–5 p.m. Youth can register until Sept. 25 here: www.sfu.ca/cec/get-involved/program-registration.html. University students interested in volunteering in the program can email community-volunteer@sfu.ca.

For more information, visit www.sfu.ca/cec/programs-activities/active-programs/CommuniCreate.html

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► "Verbatim" from page 1

everything to come and live here?" There must there be good reasons? My partner was born in Thailand; he is from Laos. His parents fled the war to come and live in France. For my part, born in Nice, my Italian grandfather left the misery of his country to find work in France. Our son was born in Paris. I guess immigration desires are ingrained in our family histories. Canada held out its arms to us, and here we are, all three of us in Vancouver.

From travel to life project

The euphoria and enthusiasm of the first months of exploring the city and this new country are followed by difficulties, homesickness and missing loved ones. I started to be disappointed and found myself criticizing, blaming, but for the wrong reasons. Fortunately, this phase passed. We then adapted and learned to probe the hearts of the people who could renew our faith in our adventure and lead us on the right path. The Rockies are not the Alps, the Pacific is not the Mediterranean Sea. You don't have to compare when you travel, the main thing is not just to discover new landscapes but to grasp this new gaze, the one from which everything takes shape, and it is at this moment that begins the other journey, that of the real love of a place.

But suddenly this pandemic arrived and everything stopped. After the fright, we had to go on living. And there in the heart of this forced and

prolonged winter the question came back even more forcefully: "But why did we leave everything and go so far from our family, our friends?" Yes, we felt even more cut off from our loved ones with no possibility of going to see them or them to see us. Paradoxically, going through these long months with courage and fragility gave us an unsuspected inner strength and freedom.

Fortunately, we have had over a year to build ties with our new host country. Its lakes, its beaches, its forests, the smiles of the people (which are unfortunately rarer today with the wearing of a mask) still fill my heart as never before and I take root a little more each time.

My love for Vancouver right now is veiled in pain. The pain of not being able to see the people I love in France. But again, I don't like what is easy. The most difficult roads lead to the most beautiful peaks and the most beautiful landscapes. Knowing how to get out of your comfort zone every day, to continue learning and growing, this is the example I want to give to my son. There will come a day when he will ask me, "What did we do in 2020 when everything changed?" I couldn't imagine telling him, "we gave up". So yes, I will stay – for you, Canada – because I dare to think that you also need us a little. They say the best trip is the one we haven't taken yet, so the best is yet to come. I want to be confident – I have to be. ✍

Translation by Barry Brisebois

The Sky on The Skin

A call to discuss the global pandemic of misogyny through theater and performance

by RAFAEL ZEN

Set to premiere in Vancouver in 2021, Santiago Farías Calderón's translation of Mexican playwright Edgar Chías looks at different forms of abuse towards women as it invites the audience to understand sexism as a form of violence.

Calderón's translation of the play *El Cielo en La Piel*, by Chías, shows that discussions written more than 15 years ago on violence against women are still necessary, unveiling this world-wide issue for multicultural audiences.

"Canada's history of the disappearance of thousands of Indigenous women has many simi-

larities to the realities in Mexico. Here, we also have a problem with violence, a topic rarely spoken about, except by those who suffer it, often marginalized", he says. "There's this idea that just because we all live together, we are immediately multicultural. When the cultures that exist do not interact with each other, there can be no dialogue, no exchange. Our next step is to foster spaces that can continuously tell diverse stories, especially those that already have a following".

When Canadian audiences see that what happens in Mexico happens here, too, Calderón expects that the effect may be to learn to identify our own biases and to choose to be better.

The Sky on The Skin, from Mexico to Canada

"It is a historical moment in Vancouver, as the play has a full Mexican cast, composed by artists who live in Canada. I want to make sure the work presented gives space to those who rarely get the opportunity to be seen", says Calderón. "When audiences see a play like this, using colloquial and crude language that is also poetic, there is an instant reaction: they start to reflect about these realities happening all around us".

In its form, viewers can expect an artistic language that draws

inspiration from tempo-spatial arrangements, existential themes, and the use of narration as part of the dialogues.

If Calderón had to choose a short passage from the play *The*

it says. / WOMAN 1: Be careful of what, of who. Puta madre! / WOMAN 2: That's what it says. Just that: Cuidado. Be careful.

EL CIELO EN LA PIEL, EDGAR CHÍAS, 2003

who have lost their lives to misogyny, sexism, and class-race-gender forms of violence and oppression.

These women, then, become a metaphor to the social and

“Canada's history of the disappearance of thousands of Indigenous women has many similarities to the realities in Mexico.

Santiago Farías Calderón

Sky on The Skin, his translation PhD project at UBC, it would be:

WOMAN 2: You unfold the damn note and find a short sentence that captures you, melts in you, and infuses you with fear. / WOMAN 1: It confuses you. A puddle in your legs. / WOMAN 2: It's fear. A fluid warmth in your legs. / WOMAN 1: You've pissed yourself, literally. You're going back home. / (...) / WOMAN 2: Something, that irreversible something, has begun its walk. It follows you. / WOMAN 1 & 2: Puta madre! Motherfucker! / GUY: I want you to be careful. I want you to be careful. / WOMAN 1: That's what it says, just that, that's what it says. / WOMAN 2: "Be careful". That's what

Born in Mexico, Calderón graduated from the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in London and has pursued a career in experimental theatre.

Now, awarded a public scholarship in UBC's Philosophy in Theatre program, supervised by Professor Hallie Marshall, Calderón's project is called "Theatre translation as intercultural performance in 21st century Mexican theatre." It discusses forms of violence against women providing a space on stage to voices and bodies that are often marginalized.

Although not being an easy topic to present or debate, the project tries to do it from a perspective that honours all those

structurally imposed condition of all women.

Theatre, then, can be an experience that resonates with reality, a performative space to reflect on our experiences as a collective community.

Calderón has presented a staged reading of *The Sky on The Skin* at UBC in 2018, mostly for colleagues and students. The full play was set to premiere in May 2020, but due to the pandemic it had to be cancelled. *The Sky on the Skin* is still set to premiere at the rEvolver Festival in Vancouver in 2021. ✉

For more information, please visit www.grad.ubc.ca/campus-community/meet-our-students/farias-calderon-santiago



▲ Santiago Farías Calderón.

VIFF

**VANCOUVER INTERNATIONAL
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September 24–October 7, 2020

Vancouver International Film Festival (VIFF) announces its 39th edition, on screens September 24–October 7, 2020. Showcasing more than 100 feature films and events, including boundary-pushing Canadian work, adventurous East Asian cinema, inspiring documentaries, elevated genre cinema, and festival favourites, the online-primary festival is available throughout the province of British Columbia on the new VIFF Connect streaming platform. VIFF 2020 will also feature a select number of in-cinema presentations, including the opening film and world premiere of Loretta Sarah Todd's *Monkey Beach*. The adaptation of Eden Robinson's beloved novel will be screened at several independent cinemas throughout the province in compliance with COVID-19 capacity restrictions and the latest provincial health and safety regulations. To explore VIFF's 2020 programming, and to purchase Single Tickets and Subscriptions, visit: viff.org

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The Vancouver Fringe Festival goes virtual and more equitable

by NADIA ELSHERIF

Rohit Chokhani, executive director of the Vancouver Fringe Festival, led the shift to all-virtual organizing while he was quarantined in India.

He talks about the unexpected benefits of planning the theatre festival remotely, ongoing changes in response to the pandemic and how the festival is supporting its Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC) artists and audiences.

The perks of going digital

Though moving to an all-digital approach had its technical challenges, Chokhani and his team found unexpected moments of joy and bonding while planning this year's festival.

"When you're in the office, you have friendly chats by the water cooler or during lunch breaks, and we wanted to make sure that we were still able to maintain that. As part of our team bonding sessions, we got to see each other's homes and family gardens and so we got to know each other more intimately in a different way," he says.

In addition to staggering the dates, the festival is also introducing new digital components in order to make the event as safe for its artists and audiences as possible.

"The jury's still out in terms of what the turnout will be this year, and whether we're ready to engage with each other as humans, with social distancing and wearing masks, is a big question. But I do think that by staggering the festival, we might be able to attract certain other people who are usually unable to attend in September," hopes Chokhani.

Working towards 'theatre for everyone'

Since 1983, the Vancouver Fringe Festival has aimed to produce 'theatre for everyone' as an incubator for independent artists to develop and share their work. After completing an online application and paying the participation fee (based on the length of the show), the lottery system randomly draws applicants to share their work on the main stage. Other options include 'Bring Your Own Venue' artists which are approved on a first-come, first-served basis and must also pay a participation fee to the Fringe.

Chokhani believes that while the Fringe's vision of inclusion for all is still in sight, it is important to stay vigilant in updating the ways through which this vision can be achieved.

"Back in 2017, Vancouver Fringe acknowledged that although we tried to be anti-establishment and create an environment of 'theatre for everyone,' the systemic challenges of the industry, including how the lottery system works, do create some systemic barriers," he says.

Currently, the festival offers discounted participation fees for those who choose them, as

well as an option for artists to participate exclusively through digital live-streamed performances.

Though Vancouver Fringe has committed to some internal changes, including recently hiring an equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) consultant, Chokhani is still looking forward to the forthcoming changes within the theatre community at large.

"As a person of colour myself, being appointed as executive director does mean that some change is happening," he says. "When I came to Vancouver a decade ago and was doing my first show at the Fringe, I don't know whether I could've seen myself getting a position like this, although I believe that I did have the skills and the talent."



▲ Rohit Chokhani believes that the Fringe's vision of inclusion for all is still a work in the making.

Chokhani explains that hiring BIPOC artists cannot be enough if there aren't systems in place to support them.

"As a leader, I don't believe in a check-box approach. Oftentimes, white institutions hire BIPOC and other equity-seeking artists expect them to continue to create the same kind of Eurocentric theatre that is in the mainstream," he adds.

For instance, Chokhani explains that the current understanding and methods of mainstream theatre, including sheet music and long-form musical monologues, are not universal to all cultures, and he hopes to bring more diversity to the festival in the future.

On bringing the Fringe Festival one step closer to this goal, Chokhani believes that the challenge will be ensuring that artists can create the shows they want to create while feeling empowered and supported to do so, both financially and artistically. One of his long-term goals is to bring non-English shows to the Fringe or shows that use English in tandem with the artists' mother tongues. ✍️

This year, the Vancouver Fringe Festival is taking place from Sept. 10–20, Oct. 1–10, Oct. 29–Nov. 8 and Nov. 26–Dec. 6 in the hopes that staggered dates will ensure the artists' and festival goers' safety and increase the festival's accessibility to audiences.

For more information and to purchase tickets, visit www.vancouverfringe.com

Photo courtesy of Rohit Chokhani

Word Vancouver

Grieving and finding solace

by KYLIE LUNG

Summer 2020 may not be the season of traveling and parties we all anticipated, but on-line readings and workshops (from Sept. 19–27) will be available for those interested in the work of countless Canadian authors and poets.

Dakshana Bascaramurty, a *Globe and Mail* journalist, shares her debut non-fiction book *This is Not the End of Me* at the Loss, Grief and Writing event through Word Vancouver.

“Talking about death makes a lot of people deeply uncomfortable,” says Bascaramurty, “but it shouldn’t be that way.”

“I am a master compartmentalizer,” says Bascaramurty. “At times when I was talking to Layton or members of his family, I would be in reporter mode, asking intimate questions, and letting him open up to me, even if the subject matter was really difficult and heavy. And then, when I got off the phone, my private self – the one who was Layton’s friend – would process it all and sometimes feel devastated or scared or helpless.”

Once Layton passed, Bascaramurty found revisiting old interviews and videos of him a comforting presence, as if he was still there with her. She never found it too difficult

“Talking about death makes a lot of people deeply uncomfortable, but it shouldn’t be that way.”

Dakshana Bascaramurty,
author of *This is Not the End of Me*

Bascaramurty is no stranger to the ideas of meaningful collaboration. Her new book *This is Not the End of Me*, is a touching tale of her real life relationship with her friend, Layton Reid. The book details Layton’s battle with melanoma cancer and the painful reality of losing a friend too soon.

Writing and friendship

As her friend Layton battled stage IV melanoma, Bascaramurty decided to document his journey all the way up until his untimely death in January 2017.

“Layton had no clue this might

to go on with this project because she wanted to complete a project that Layton’s surviving wife, Candace, and son, Finn, could also find solace.

Lessons on life and death

Although *This is Not the End of Me* is personal to Bascaramurty and Layton’s family, the content is relatable to all who have lost a loved one. Everyone will someday experience the death of a friend or family member and Bascaramurty hopes Layton’s story will make readers less afraid to talk about death.

“By the end, Layton was open about his fears and his wishes with his family and I think that made the final months and weeks of his life as good as they could’ve been,” says Bascaramurty.



▲ Dakshana Bascaramurty.

one day be a book,” says Bascaramurty, “because the deal [book deal] only came about a few months after his death. He assumed it would be a long story and as his condition worsened and I thought he might not live to see it published, I asked him if he’d like to see a draft. He refused, saying that he didn’t want me to think I needed his approval – he said he’d just read it once it was out in the world.”

Detailing the last four years of her friend’s life is unlike any story Bascaramurty has previously covered. Bascaramurty found it a gift and a privilege to get to know her friend on a deeper level and write a book as a tribute and legacy to a young man’s life.



▲ This is not the end of me.

Bascaramurty hopes Layton’s story will encourage people to talk more openly about the things that scare them. Death is the great inevitable and unknowable force in this world, and stories like Layton’s can help us take a step back and appreciate every day. ✍

To learn more about Word Vancouver, visit www.wordvancouver.ca.

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Travellers arriving in Canada

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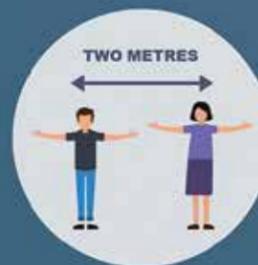
COVID-19 Mandatory Quarantine



Do not leave your home for 14 days except for medical emergencies.



Avoid sharing living space with others.



Do not have visitors and stay two meters (6 feet) from delivery drop-offs.



If you go outside for fresh air, you must stay in your back yard or balcony.

For general information from the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC), call 1-888-COVID-19, text 604-630-0300 or visit www.bccdc.ca

A ninja with a cause

by RAMAN KANG

“I think by doing this kind of work I’m helping everyone a bit and helping make the world a better place,” says Laura Rivera, the creator of *Ninja X*, a self-published children’s graphic novel that teaches kids valuable life lessons with a bit of humour, fun and adventure.

Rivera will debut the second installment of *Ninja X* during September and October at the Richmond Arts Village where she’ll also be showing kids how to make comics themselves.



Photo courtesy of Laura Rivera

▲ Laura Rivera, creator of *Ninja X*.

Her presentation will be accessible both in person, requiring everyone to wear a mask, and online.

Breaking stereotypes

“I wanted to make stories that included people from all over the world,” says Rivera.

When the creator left her home in Mexico to study digital animation in the United States and eventually to Canada in 2014 to study screenwriting, her entire world opened up; back home she was used to the same circle of friends, but here, she was surrounded by people from different countries and cultures.

“I saw a lot of stereotypes that I used to believe about other cultures being broken so I decided to make these comics and this character about breaking stereotypes,” says Rivera.

In *Ninja X*, the main character is a Mexican wrestler with blonde hair and blue eyes – this stemmed from Rivera’s own experiences being Mexican, but being told she didn’t look the part by her peers because of her lighter skin tone.

“Every single representation of Mexicans that I saw in the media was the same, so I tried to make something that commented on and mocked that in a way that was natural and not in the direct commentary,” she says.

Rivera wanted kids to understand where they come from



▲ First two issues of the self-published graphic novel, *Ninja X*.



Photos courtesy of Laura Rivera

and what they look like is second to who they are so she created characters that looked and acted differently from their stereotypes.

“We all come in different shades and colours. What is important is who we are inside, how we relate to others and how we are as people,” she says.

Ninja who?

“I’m trying to do something that people can relate to, but they can have fun reading it,” says Rivera.

Ninja X is an action-comedy enveloped in magic; it has characters who go around the world doing good deeds, a mysterious magical phoenix that

only a few can see and a ton of wacky adventures.

In the first volume, readers are introduced to the characters and magical creatures; in volume two, they discover there are some bad guys coming for *Ninja X* and her friends.

Their adventures take them to Mexico, Brazil, Europe, China and many more places as they look for others who have special gifts and magic to join them.

For all of the fun the characters in *Ninja X* have, they also teach people they’re not alone.

“I make comics because I know that children, and some adults and teenagers as well, need some comfort and they need

tools to learn certain values that are not trying to tell them what to do,” says Rivera.

Teaching children

Rivera’s artistic lifestyle and desire to teach children can be traced back to when she was young.

“I believe children don’t like people telling them what to do all the time. They need some space to learn on their own and I think by seeing these characters, who are also children and teenagers, they can learn by their own experiences,” she says.

Coming from a big family with tons of cousins, Rivera spent a lot of time babysitting and doodling in her notebook. Later on she learned she could make a career out of it, combining the two to become a teacher that teaches animation to children and creating her own graphic novel.

She says the kids she’s been surrounded by in her family and in her classroom inspired her to make this comic and to put messages of tolerance, understanding and friendship in them.

“I think children are the future and we have to be kind to them and help them learn,” says Rivera. ✍

Learn more here:

www.culturedays.ca/en/events/d7a00c7b-821b-495a-96a6-0e16e10913cb
www.ninjaxcomic.com

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Please call 604-324-7733, go to www.pics.bc.ca, or visit us at 200-8161 Main St., Vancouver, to find out how we can best help you.



Cultural Calendar

September 22–October 6, 2020

by SIMON YEE
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

I hope you all had as great a summer as you could in the spectre of the coronavirus. With the passing of the Autumnal Equinox, fall 2020 is finally here – and like the spring and summer, many events have been postponed or cancelled. The world has gotten used to hosting more online and fewer in-person events, and the fall season is shaping up to be no different. So, as you begin to adjust to the falling leaves, why not check out some of the events happening online below?

* * *

The First Century of Opera with Nicolas Krusek
Tuesdays Sept. 22–Oct. 13
www.westvanlibrary.ca/event/the-first-century-of-opera-with-nicolas-krusek-virtual/

The West Vancouver Library will host a series of online discussions exploring the spectacular rise of opera in 17th-century Europe. Simon Fraser University music educator Nicolas Krusek will discuss some of the works that have stood the test of time, alongside others that were once tremendously popular but have since suffered unjust neglect. Krusek will discuss opera's beginnings in Italy, and the development of the art in France, Great Britain and the Germanic countries.

* * *

Our Existences are Political: Identity and History as Pathways for Transformation
Sept. 23, 2:30–4 p.m.
www.events.ubc.ca/ubc-connects

In 2019, James Makokis and Anthony Johnson became the first two-spirit Indigenous couple to win The Amazing Race Canada. The pair used the competition as a platform to tackle topics like gender and sexual identity, racism, mental health and the environment. They did so through an Indigenous lens, naming their team Ahkameyimok, a Cree word that roughly translates to “never give up.” In this talk, they will share their personal transformations, from their early years fac-

ing adversity around two-spirit and Indigenous identities to a lifetime of education, transforming them into leaders, activists and role models.

* * *

Shot of Scotch Vancouver
Sept. 23–Oct. 8
www.thedancecentre.ca

According to legend, the roots of Highland dance go back centuries, with warriors imitating epic deeds from Scottish folklore. Dancers from Shot of Scotch Vancouver will demonstrate, through an online streaming session hosted by The Dance Centre, the athleticism and artistry this form requires, emphasizing precise footwork, timing and technique, and talk about its history, tradition and ongoing evolution.



▲ Enjoy a hop and a scotch.

* * *

Witnesses to History: The Life and Death of a Town called Buczacz
Sept. 24, 6–7:30 p.m.
www.eventbrite.ca/e/117345755313

The SFU History Department will host a Zoom session discussing the history of ethnic cleansing in Buczacz, a small European border town now part of Ukraine. For more than four hundred years, Buczacz was home to a highly diverse citizenry. It was here that Poles, Ukrainians and Jews all lived side by side in relative harmony. Then came World War II, and three years later the entire Jewish population had been murdered by German and Ukrainian police, while Ukrai-

nian nationalists eradicated Polish residents. A conversation with Lauren Rossi (SFU History), Omer Bartov (Brown University) will illuminate how significant individual witnesses are to the writing of history, particularly of conflict and war.

* * *

Vancouver International Film Festival
Sept. 24–Oct. 7
www.viff.org

The Vancouver International Film Festival (VIFF) announces its 39th edition, showcasing more than 100 feature films and events, including boundary-pushing Canadian work, adventurous East Asian cinema, inspiring documentaries, elevated genre cinema and festival favourites. The primarily online festival is available throughout the province of British Columbia on the new VIFF Connect streaming platform, but will also feature a select number of in-cinema presentations, including the opening film and world premiere of Loretta Sarah Todd's *Monkey Beach*. To explore VIFF's 2020 programming, and to purchase Single Tickets and Subscriptions, visit the festival's website.

* * *

The Spirit Keepers of Makuta'ay: An Artist Talk with Yen-Chao Lin
Sept. 25, 6 p.m.
www.centrea.org

The Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art will be hosting an online artist talk by Montréal-based multidisciplinary artist Yen-Chao Lin via Zoom in conjunction with the current group exhibition, *We cast Spells on the Mothers of our Daughter and Daughters of our Mothers*, at Centre A. Lin, a self-described postmodern archivist and natural history enthusiast, explores divination arts, occult sciences, oral history, religion and power in her work through means of intuitive play, craft techniques, collaboration, scavenging and collecting. In this talk, she will discuss the inspirations that

influence her practice and the making of her 2019 short film, *The Spirit Keepers of Makuta'ay*.

* * *

B.C. Culture Days
Sept. 25–Oct. 25
www.culturedays.ca

Culture Days is a nationwide event celebrating and showcasing local arts and culture in Canadian communities. Traditionally held over a weekend, because of the global pandemic, Culture Days has been extended to a four-week interactive, immersive arts and culture experience happening across Canada in-person, where possible, and online. Here in Metro Vancouver, many municipalities and cultural centres will be hosting hundreds of virtual concerts, live shows, exhibits, demonstrations, workshops and more. Culture Days hopes to instill appreciation for the role artists, historians, designers and creators play in the creation of art and the enrichment of our cultural fabric.

* * *

A Talk with Kent Monkman
Sept. 26, 11 a.m.–12 noon
www.moa.ubc.ca

Cree artist Kent Monkman's *Shame and Prejudice*, currently on display at the Museum of Anthropology, takes you on a journey through the past 150 years of Canada. It is a journey that reclaims and reinserts Indigenous voices into the collective memory of Canada, challenging and shattering colonial ideas of Canadian



▲ Nativity Scene by Kent Monkman.

history. His work is known for its provocative reinterpretations of Romantic North American landscapes, and it explores themes of colonization, sexuality, loss and resilience – the complexities of historic and contemporary Indigenous experience. Monkman will discuss his exhibition online via Zoom on Sept. 26. Check out MOA's website for registration information.

* * *

Broken Promises
Opening Sept. 26
www.centre.nikkeiplace.org

Grounded in research from Landscapes of Injustice – a seven year multi-disciplinary, multi-institutional, community engaged project, *Broken Promises* explores the dispossession of Japanese Canadians in the 1940s. It illuminates the loss of home and the struggle for justice of one racially marginalized community. The story unfolds by following seven narrators. Learn about life for Japanese Canadians in Canada before war, the administration of their lives during and after war ends and how legacies of dispossession continue to this day. Opening day programming will include the launch of a Landscapes of Injustice book, knowledge mobilization outputs and exciting information about digital offerings.

* * *

22nd Vancouver Improv Festival
Sept. 30–Oct. 4
www.vancouverimprovfest.com

Since 1999, the Vancouver Improv Fest has showcased over 1200 international and local performers for thousands of Vancouver theatre and comedy fans. The annual festival features over 40 unique performances, inspiring public workshops and an opening night gala to celebrate Vancouver's booming improv scene. This year the 22nd annual festival returns in an online format, featuring workshops, shows and a panel, with guests from all around the globe. For festival information, please check out their website.

►“VIFF” from page 1

about half of the size of last year's, although works from 66 different countries, including many award-winning pieces and several premieres, are still represented.

“A more streamlined festival allows us to think about the curation a lot more. What are the stories we are telling, and who are the people telling these stories?” Woloschuk says.



▲ Scene from *Nadia, Butterfly*.

He sees the 2020 festival as a steppingstone to the future, to see how the curated programming can better serve different communities.

Films reflecting the zeitgeist
Woloschuk says many of the films selected for this year's festival are very much of the moment. Aside from the usual universal themes, there are films exploring topical issues,

such as police brutality, healthcare, and climate change, as well as the crisis of capitalism.

One noteworthy film is *Nadia, Butterfly* by Canadian director Pascal Plante, about an Olympic swimmer vying for a medal while staring down retirement at the age of 24. It reflects the struggle of an individual facing an existential crisis while operating at the peak of her capabilities. The film will also be a case study topic at VIFF's *Totally Indie Day*.

“The director went to Tokyo last year to shoot it with Canadian swimmers, as the film is supposed to take place at the 2020 Olympics. It then became a strange, speculative film about a game that never really occurred, but was shot in a social realist style,” explains Woloschuk.

Animation works, long and short

This year's festival will also offer a wide selection of animated works showcasing a range of artistic styles and approaches. It will feature the full-length

Canadian premiere of the Korean animation *Beauty Water*, which is a dark, intense, and gripping tale that strives to keep the audience on the edge of their seats throughout.

“It is about a woman who would go to any length to be beautiful. It tackles the dark side of human nature, the body-shaming culture, the powerless situation of women in society. It is also a lot about money, that if you can pay for cosmetics or plastic surgery then you can have it all,” says VIFF programmer Maggie Lee, who selected the film.

“The film has all the trappings of a horror movie, but it would be difficult to see the film as live-action because it is quite misogynistic. Once it becomes animation it is stylized, the violence towards women, and the way it is presented. It has that nightmare kind of edge that can only be achieved in animation,” Lee explains.

Lee used to be a film critic and has worked for several film festivals around the world. She adds that it is the first time

in many years she has seen animation this good coming out of Korea, where animation has not traditionally been a strength.

The other animations are all shorts, each impressive in its own way. *Malakout* is a theatrical animation piece with a distinct look and atmosphere that tells a philosophical and sinister tale about the bargain with fate. *The Rose of Damascus* is an interpretative animation of a poem on the experiences of a Syrian refugee from war-ravaged Damascus. And *To: Gerard* is a heartwarming piece about inspiration and magic with the easily recognizable style of DreamWorks.

Lee speculates that animated productions could be on the rise post-COVID because the category cuts across cultures and races. She sees it as a positive trend to give behind-the-scenes workers in areas such as voice-overs more opportunities. ✍

For more information, please visit www.viff.org.