Montage

few black women are showrunners, especially considering her lack of television experience. “It’s extremely scary,” she says—but she’s hoping for more.

Though The Hot Wing King closed early due to the pandemic, Hall is now in discussions to turn that into a series as well. “Yeeeyeyeyeyeyey,” she exclaims, excited to expand the characters’ lives but also to put Memphis on the screen in a positive light.

Yet Hall cannot imagine leaving theater behind. It’s the place where she can create the worlds and tell the stories she wants, the ones she believes can change America. “I do think theater is church. It is a space we gather in—the people on stage are our pastors for that moment and they’re up on a pulpit and they are preaching a kind of story,” she says. “I am spiritual. But while I don’t go to church every Sunday, I do go to theater every Saturday.”

The Power of Unreason
Composer Paul Moravec’s soulful music
by Lydialyle Gibson

Deep in the second half of Sanctuary Road, an oratorio by composer Paul Moravec ’80 based on stories from the Underground Railroad, the heart of the whole piece seems to crack wide open. In an aria titled “Rain,” an enslaved woman summons a downpour (“Come down Noah’s Ark heavy”) to scatter her pursuers as she flees north to freedom. The melody begins with a poignant minor chord, and then, as the lyrics build and begin to soar, and the singer imagines herself free and dancing in the rain, the music brightens into a major key. “It’s like, the sun comes out,” says Moravec. “There’s this emotional opening—up—this is the spiritual anchor of the entire piece.” The rest of the ensemble joins the soprano soloist, and the aria resolves into what Moravec calls a “freedom” motif threaded throughout the oratorio. When it washes over the waning seconds of this song, listeners have heard variations of it a few times already at pivotal moments, and its repetition here is suddenly, powerfully moving.

That’s the idea, says Moravec, who teaches at Adelphi University on Long Island and won a Pulitzer Prize in 2004. Music, he explains, “is both an extremely rational, analytical art, and also a fundamentally irrational one. And at the end of the day, its power lies not in its reason, but in its unreason, its emotion.” That’s why the “freedom” motif works even if listeners don’t consciously register that they’ve heard it before. “Music plays directly on our central nervous system,” he says. “It’s primordial.” He pauses for a moment. “You know, Darwin had the idea that song preceded speech in human development, that our distant ancestors sang to each other before they could speak words.”

Song began speaking to Moravec at a very young age. He was six, growing up in Buffalo, when the Beatles appeared on The Ed Sullivan Show in 1964. Their irresistible cool, and his older sisters’ excitement, bowled him over. “I got a tennis racket and pretended to play it left-handed,” like Paul McCartney. His formal music training began in first grade, when he learned to play the recorder, and, later, the piano, but most important was singing in an Episcopal cathedral choir. “From eight, nine, to years old, I was a little professional musician, sight-reading pieces, performing on Sunday,” he says. “It was wonderfully rigorous and nourishing.” Soon, he began writing songs for guitar, and then piano, and by high school, he’d decided he wanted to be a composer. “It was like, ‘Now I just have to figure out how to do it.’”

At Harvard, he concentrated in music, sang with the Harvard-Radcliffe Collegium Musicum, and worked as a teaching assistant to legendary music professor Elliot Forbes (“It was fun. I was basically his piano accompanist”). He won a Prix de Rome arts scholarship and spent the year after graduation at the American Academy
in Rome (“I just composed music all the time and walked around the city. Rome was a whole other education in itself”). After that came a doctorate in music from Columbia.

Moravec’s body of work, spanning nearly 40 years, is prodigious and difficult to summarize. “Polystylistic,” is how he puts it. He’s written oratorios and operas—most recently, 2013’s The Shining, based on the Stephen King novel—but most of his work is instrumental and abstract. Sometimes it is inspired by place: Albany, Rome, Berlin’s Brandenburg Gate, the Montserrat monastery in the mountains of Catalonia, the aurora borealis in northern New Hampshire. He has set to music the letters of soldiers and their loved ones from the Civil War to Vietnam. In May, as a response to the pandemic, the nonprofit OPERA America brought together more than 100 singers by video for a virtual performance of Moravec’s 2016 composition “Light Shall Lift Us.”

He won the Pulitzer for Tempest Fantasy, a five-part chamber work for violin, cello, piano, and clarinet that unfolds as a meditation on Shakespeare’s play The Tempest. A demanding and complex work—sometimes sprightly, sometimes contemplative, closing with an ecstatic rush of sound—it largely tracks the emotional trajectory of Prospero, the melancholy sorcerer-prince who finds happiness and hope in the play’s final act. Three years later, Moravec revealed that Prospero’s trajectory mirrored his own: suffering from severe clinical depression in the 1990s, he had undergone electroshock therapy. It changed his life—and maybe saved it. That experience remains central to his work, “the sand in my oyster, so to speak,” he says. “As a composer, I try to make beautiful things. Everything else radiates from that. And joyous things too, because in my experience, the alternative is too awful. It’s too appalling.”

He began work on Sanctuary Road in 2016. It is the second in a three-part series of large-scale American historical oratorios. The first, 2008’s Blizzard Voices, told the story of the “Children’s Blizzard” that devastated the Great Plains in 1888. The libretto borrowed from the poems of Ted Kooser, which had incorporated actual words from survivors. For Sanctuary Road, Moravec worked with librettist Mark Campbell (his collaborator on The Shining, “Light Shall Lift Us,” and other works), who adapted the writings of William Still, an African-American businessman, (please turn to page 54).
historian, and conductor on the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia. “I think this is very moving, and very American in a way, the idea of ordinary people caught up in extraordinary circumstances and describing them in their own plain speech: the most harrowing, incredible, astounding narratives, with suffering and courage and joy and celebration—all these extreme human emotions.” (The work premiered at Carnegie Hall in 2018, and was released on CD this past spring.) The third oratorio in the series is A Nation of Others, set during a single day on Ellis Island in 1921. Originally scheduled to premiere at Carnegie Hall this summer, it has been postponed to November because of the pandemic. “Knock wood,” Moravec says.

Which reminds him of one last thing, regarding the sand in the oyster and the gift of music in an upside-down world. “You know, one thing that’s kind of remarkable: when I play a Bach fugue, my fingers are doing what Bach’s fingers did 300 years ago,” he says. “There’s this very physical, visceral connection between me and a past composer, a very great spirit and imagination. And particularly in a time of extreme anxiety and uncertainty and disruption, there’s something grounding about that connection, which has survived world wars and holocausts and genocides and all the horrible things that have happened in the last 300 years. We still have it. And that connection to a tradition and the actual sound”—Moravec pivots to his piano, fingers cascading across the notes—“it’s not an abstract thing. It’s sound waves, and it’s still here. Music is essential to the fabric of who we are as human beings. And even if we’re not aware of it, it’s still there.” Like that motif woven through the arias in Sanctuary Road, “it still resonates.”

Seriously Goofy
Comedian Karen Chee finds her voice.
by JACOB SWEET

When Karen Chee ’17 was a child, her parents proved definitively that TV was bad for her. During a Jeopardy! broadcast, Chee’s mother had her count how many times producers cut to different shots. Each change, her mother said, sapped one’s ability to focus. Chee counted, and the number was astounding. “I was completely convinced by the argument,” she says. In the dentist’s waiting room, she would train her gaze away from the TV, desperate to preserve brain function.

As a writer for Late Night with Seth Meyers on NBC, her fear of television has long faded. Now she often appears herself, mostly on the recurring segment “What Does Millennial Late Night Writer Karen Chee Know?” in which Chee, the youngest writer, attempts to identify ’80s and ’90s cultural touchstones (the PalmPilot, Garbage Pail Kids, MC Hammer) and fails spectacularly.

Comedy wasn’t always on the radar for Chee. A first-grade devotee of the Cam Jansen and Encyclopedia Brown mystery series, she was first set on becoming a detective. That year, looking for undercover work, she designed a business card—with a self-portrait, a phone number, and her home address—and dropped it in mailboxes around the neighborhood. When her mother found out, they went house to house to retrieve them. “And then I realized as you get older, the detective stories get scarier,” Chee says. “And I was like, ‘I can’t do this anymore.’”

An outgoing, bossy, and precocious child growing up in Foster City, California, she had another interest that would last longer: writing. Around the time her detective work fell through, she wrote a story about her grandfather that was so long, her teacher felt compelled to call home and inform her mom.

Though TV comedy wasn’t a staple of the Chee household, laughter was. “We have a bunch of family members who are very silly, funny people who joke around,” she says. “And so in our house, people laughed constantly.” She remembers sitting in her bedroom, listening to the muted sound of her parents’ conversation, waiting for her mother’s laugh to cut through.

In eighth grade, Chee discovered comedy. First, it was Whose Line Is It Anyway!, recommended by her drama-class teacher. Then, The Office, pointed out by a classmate. When her brother brought home DVDs of The Colbert Report and The Daily Show from the library, her world changed. “I didn’t know political satire was fake, and I didn’t know television comedy was a thing,” Chee says. “It felt like my brain had exploded.”

To grapple with the unfamiliar content, she took copious notes. She noticed that each episode of The Office began with a short, off-topic intro and how the show’s writers established each character with a unique, unvarying perspective. When she liked a joke, she’d write it down. She’d look up her favorite shows on the movie database site IMDb, find their writers, and watch other projects they’d worked on: an ad hoc comedy education. She was especially obsessed with late-night television. With her grandpa, she watched David Letterman, Conan O’Brien ’85, and Johnny Carson.

Encouraged by her drama teacher, she also started performing improv comedy. “I was really bad at acting,” Chee says of her early days. “And really bad at improv.” She “broke” constantly, giggle at jokes on stage that were supposed to be taken in stride. But she loved it: the playful atmosphere, the way that improv had rules and a structure, but that all the dialogue was made up. “That was really exhilarating,” she says. “I think