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Storytelling in Motion
Arianna Ross to entertain, educate with tales of culture, humor

There’s nothing about Arianna Ross that is static. Even when she was a child and youth, she was in motion – taking music lessons, traveling with her pianist mother to performances and school visits, participating in music competitions and actively listening to and learning from her grandmother’s vivid stories.

As an adult, she has traveled the world, performing and dancing with a troupe in India and teaching and gathering local lore throughout Southeast Asia. When nearer home, she spends most of her time and enterprise organizing her Story Tapestries network, telling stories herself and finding ways to improve education for today and tomorrow’s young people.

On Nov. 16-18, Ross will focus her vast energies on Johnson City, performing “The Fastest Plane: Around the World in 45 Minutes” Sunday, Nov. 16, at 3 p.m. in Culp Auditorium; speaking and holding a workshop Monday, Nov. 17, at the annual Arts in Education Conference; and working with ETSU storytelling students on campus Tuesday, Nov. 18.

“I really love it – I’m not going to lie – to get the opportunity to go into communities that need it and perform to entertain and to educate while at the same time, we help,” says Ross.

As you can imagine, Ross’ performances are as full of variety as her days. “I’m an interdisciplinary storyteller, so I have music, I have movement, I have words and I also use visual arts that help bring the joy alive,” she says. “You’ll be laughing and learning. There may be moments of pause – I call them the ‘ah-ha’ thinking moments – where the very next moment you might be chuckling. My performance [at ETSU] will be a mixture of personal narrative, stories of adventure, mixed with folk tales, and it definitely fits all ages.”

Ross provided the unique combination that sponsor Mary B. Martin School of the Arts was looking for to perform, educate and mentor on campus and at the Arts in Education conference. “This is the third year we have worked with the Johnson City Area Arts Council on their conference,” says Anita DeAngelis, School of the Arts director. “The first year, we brought in musician Kathy Mattea, and last year, Elizabeth Ellis, a storyteller, came in for the keynote. That community partnership is important.

“Arianna is an artist that doesn’t quite fit a particular box. While she’s a storyteller, she also dances, she sings and she does some visual art, as well. It’s really a whole package with her. She is a perfect fit for us, and she is familiar with our area and campus, having performed at the
National Storytelling Festival [Exchange Place] and worked with ETSU’s Early Childhood Education program.”

Ross attributes her myriad interests and talents to a rich childhood, inspired by her musical mother and wise and voluble maternal grandmother. “Mom in her shows, had a dancer … and they would get up and tell stories of music, and that was sort of my earliest memories of music and art,” she says. “And in my household, TV was not the big thing, and stories were. I was reading all the time and my mother and grandmother would tell stories all the time. My mother’s mother had a story for every moment of the day, a story for every single thing, you know – like taking a bath.”

She remained in one place long enough to earn a theater degree from Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., and glean all she could from Professor Rives Collins, who was a storyteller, but after a year in Washington, D.C., schools, Ross’ future was propelled by an offer to work with a theater and dance troupe from India.

“That really influenced and changed my entire approach to storytelling, because with them,” she says. “They don’t separate storytelling, theater, dance, music into different categories …”

While she learned the language and culture of the country, Ross also learned her troupe director’s style of storytelling, educating and making a difference in the community. After India, Ross spent nine months traveling around Southeast Asia meeting people, learning the languages and gathering folk tales and personal narratives.

“I always joke that people most know I have a sign taped to my forehead that says, ‘I love stories,’ ” Ross says. “Where I went, people would sit down, older men, older women, would sit down and tell me a story. So really, all over Asia, I collected stories. Stories are everywhere … They can be on the wall.”

She brought these oral treasures and experiences back to the U.S. and from her Germantown, Md., home created a network of artists and performers she calls Story Tapestries, designing multi-faceted arts-related programs – for schools, universities, teachers, organizations and communities – to educate, enrich and entertain.

While in Johnson City, Ross will do a little bit of everything – her forté.

She will share her multicultural focus with an Introduction to Storytelling class, taught by Dr. Delanna Reed. “It’s an opportunity for students to realize that the dominant culture is not the only one that is significant,” Reed says. “There is much to be learned and appreciated from other cultures. These students don’t have a strong grounding in the oral tradition, and she has an impressive collection of stories from around the world.”

Ross will seek to encourage arts educators at the annual conference, held at Millennium Centre. Her keynote address, she says, will endeavor to inspire teachers and her workshop, to sustain them. “The workshop is on burnout prevention,” Ross says. “As a teacher, we work ourselves
into the ground … So we will talk about creative exercises and creative nuggets and strategies that they can use to rejuvenate their own creativity.”

And to set the visit in motion, she will take center stage Sunday afternoon at ETSU’s Culp Auditorium for an afternoon’s adventure in word, music and movement. “They’ll be seeing the artist go upside down,” Ross says with a laugh. “There will be at least one cartwheel.”

Ross does not let her audience sit still, either. “It’s a very participatory, interactive show,” she says.

Everyone goes on the journey with her. "Listening to Arianna Ross is like taking a ride on a magic carpet,” says fellow storyteller Carrie Sue Ayvar, “an exciting, amazing journey to exotic places all the while enjoying a feeling of being enveloped in comfort and safety."

Tickets for “The Fastest Plane: Around the World in 45 Minutes” are $5 students of all ages, $10 senior 60+ and $15 general admission.

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