

**Dr. Glen Baker***Continued from page 5*

brain. When I started research, we were focusing almost exclusively on neurons, but now we know that glial cells actually have many very important functions related directly to brain activity as well," he says.

"Research on the brain has advanced a great deal in the last four decades, and years from now it's going to be very interesting to look back on this period and see just how far we have pro-

gressed. Brain imaging is getting more and more sophisticated all the time. Many people are now exploring areas like machine learning and artificial intelligence to help with diagnosis and with predicting the occurrence of various mental illnesses," he adds.

"These are obviously very complex, but really exciting, areas. They are not fields in which I have been involved, but several other researchers in the Department of Psychiatry are working in these areas. Hopefully they will make great breakthroughs that will benefit people suffering from mental illnesses." **C**

## On Stage: Brad Necyk's New Play Stormshelter

### PhD Graduate Student Brad Necyk's New Play Stormshelter Garner National Media Attention

**H**e's an accomplished multimedia artist, teacher, researcher and PhD student in the Department of Psychiatry's Graduate Program.

Now, Brad Necyk can add another appellation to his growing academic and professional resume: playwright.

In October, Necyk's play, *Stormshelter*, premiered at Toronto's Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) as part of the annual Rendezvous with Madness Festival.

Funded by the Canada Council for the Arts, the Edmonton Arts Council, and the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, *Stormshelter* was produced by StoneMarrow Theatre and directed by Perry Gratton.

Starring actors Samantha Jeffery and Michael Peng,

*Stormshelter* is the story of Alberta, a troubled mother with bipolar disorder who, aided by her psychiatrist, struggles to overcome life-shattering illness and trauma.

As she embarks on her difficult journey toward healing and recovery in a psychiatric hospital, Alberta looks forward and backward at her life, trying to learn how to be the best parent she can be while living with illness.

During one manic episode, Alberta is struck by visions and insights that yield a heightened understanding of her life and condition, guiding her back toward her children.

Although *Stormshelter* was only performed a handful of times in a small, intimate space at CAMH, it has attracted

time playwright – especially in view of the fact that Necyk had no intention of writing a play in the first place. As he tells it, the play only came about due to a miscommunication with Workman Arts, organizer of on the Rendezvous with Madness Festival.

"I was in Buenos Aires last February

doing an arts residency and I was sitting at this little café when the idea for the play came up," he says.

"I had written the story itself before that. It was in a narrative form that I would read, about myself and my family as I went through a manic episode. So when I was contacted by Workman to submit something for the festival, I sent them this live narrative that I planned to read, called *Alberta #3*."

But Workman said

it wanted something more "performative," he explains.

"I knew they had a site-specific theatre component to the festival, and like a flash, the whole structure of the play came to me. It was built around a mother and a doctor at CAMH, and a series of small vignettes – jumbled and out of order – of conversations

*Continued...*



*Brad Necyk*

national media attention.

CBC Arts ran two stories on the production, including one last July by CBC Arts Senior Writer Leah Collins, and a follow-up piece in December by CBC producer Lise Hosein. The latter included a five-minute video of the play by filmmaker Tamarra Canu.

That's quite a media splash for a first-

## Stormshelter

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that would cut out every time the subject of her children came up,” he explains.

The entire concept for the play came together in minutes.

“I paid my bill, ran back to my apartment and started writing everything down before I forgot it. When I had written a 20-minute rough draft of the play I submitted that to the festival, and it was accepted. But the curator asked why I submitted a play, and not art. I said I thought that’s what she wanted. In fact, she wanted an art performance, not a theatrical production. But it all worked out in the end.”

While the structure of the play came together quickly for Necyk, the subject matter stems from a much longer process: his own multi-year battle with bipolar disorder, and the time he spent at CAMH in 2017.

Necyk was already living with bipolar disorder when he completed a Master of Fine Arts degree at the University of Alberta in 2013. Much of the research and art he has created since revolves around what it means to be ill, what it means to have a mental illness, and how that relates to psychiatry as a medical discipline.

As a result, he has spent a lot of time creating art with and about patients of all kinds, including psychiatric patients. And that’s what led him to CAMH in the first place.

“The play follows a mother’s story, but it was essentially my story,” he says.

“In June of 2017 I had a very severe manic episode. I had just finished a year going back and forth to CAMH and spending time in the unit. On any given day I might be in the nursing station with the psychiatrists and nursing staff, sitting with patients in the

common area or in therapy sessions, or just making art,” he recalls.

“While *Stormshelter* is a two-person play, the main characters are really composites of people, including the patients I met there and became close to as I learned about their personal stories and journeys. The psychiatrist is also a composite of a number of doctors and health care professionals that I met, including my own psychiatrist, so it was all a big mix.”

The play was performed in a tight rectangular-shaped space – similar to a long

roughly based on the same story, and I’m making a lot of visual art right now for a number of exhibitions that are coming up, all around my doctoral studies. I’ve got five or six major exhibitions this year, including one at the Art Gallery of Alberta and another at the Scott Gallery in Edmonton. As for the play, it is probably going to be shown again in Calgary and in Edmonton over the summer.”

Meanwhile, Necyk has already completed a first draft of his doctoral thesis and is awaiting feedback from his supervisory

committee. If all goes well, he’s hoping to complete his PhD by spring or summer.

“I’m applying for academic positions now, and my hope is to find a position in a Medical / Psychiatry Department and a Fine Arts Department. I really love engaging with arts students, making art and thinking about art. But I also enjoy being in a completely different domain where I can enrich the overall research environment, and that’s why I love Psychiatry.”

That said, Necyk admits that casual

friends and neighbours often have difficulty wrapping their heads around exactly what he does for a living, or the specific nature of his academic work.

“To keep it simple I often boil it down by saying that I’m an artist. Then people will say, ‘Oh, that’s interesting.’ And then it might come out that I teach at the university, or that I’m doing a PhD in Psychiatry. And then I’ll start talking about my research into creative altered states of consciousness,” he says.

“Well by then everyone thinks I’ve just gone bonkers,” he chuckles. “So I would say that the general reaction I get is one of confused interest.” **C**



*Stormshelter actors Samantha Jeffrey and Michael Peng*

boardroom – that placed the audience within the play itself.

“I really wanted them to be immersed in it rather than just being passive, objective viewers, so it was pretty emotionally intense. It was also a different experience for me because I had to collaborate with so many people. People bring new ideas and energy and heart all sorts of things to a project, and that’s really beautiful. All of their efforts brought the play to a different level than what I could have imagined on my own.”

So what is next on Necyk’s agenda? A lot, apparently.

“I’m about halfway through a novel