

ALUMNI NEWSLETTER

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF THE ARTS

May 2020

Dear School of the Arts Alumni:

We hope that you are all managing during this very trying time and are finding ways to feel connected and inspired. I recently watched [Little Fires Everywhere](#) with my daughter and was in awe of how it tackled complex themes like loss, race, identity, and the shame that results from an unspoken past. It was so nice to know that **Amy Talkington '99**, was an Executive Producer and Writer. I continue to admire the work that you all are doing.

It's hard to believe that May is already here, and with it a new group of students joining you as fellow alumni. We congratulate them for completing the requirements of their degree during this difficult moment. To send words of encouragement to this year's graduates, [please complete this brief survey](#). These notes will be shared in an email to our 2019-2020 graduates as well as on the [Commencement](#) page of our website. This is also where you can watch our Celebration of Graduates next Wednesday, May 20 at 2:00 p.m., which will include addresses by **Dean Carol Becker** and the Chair of each program, as well as from our featured guest speaker, **John Turturro**.

Since many of you are participating in virtual gatherings to promote your work, the communications team has launched "Columbia Artists Go Virtual," a series covering events that feature alumni from all disciplines. If you are participating in an upcoming event, please send the details to soanews@columbia.edu. We have also revised and expanded our list of grants and resources. Please visit the new [Preparedness](#) section of the School of the Arts website for more information.

For writers that are parents, Pen Parentis is offering free use of their [FOR HIRE](#) job posting board to promote your editing, coaching, tech writing, sensitivity reader, or any other writing-related service (they ask that you not send your author page). [Send a direct link](#) to a website that describes your services and your name as you wish it to appear.

Finally, we are also happy to share with you this month's Alumni Spotlight of Theatre alumnus **Oliver Mayer '89**.

Please continue to send your updates to artsalum@columbia.edu, and follow our alumni [Facebook](#) and [LinkedIn](#) pages, as well as the Artists' Resource Center's [LinkedIn](#).

Best,

Laila Maher
Dean of Student and Alumni Affairs

Film

[Becoming](#), co-produced by professor and alumna **Maureen Ryan** '92, premiered on Netflix this week. **Veronica Nickel** '10 served as Production Supervisor, **Jamund Washington** '10 as Line Producer, and **Kevin Contento** '18 was a Production Assistant. **Jacob Kader** '09 co-wrote *Abe* which was released for [streaming/on-demand](#) and is available for pre-order on iTunes. *Abe* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival 2019. **Laura Jean Gallagher** '14 has just released her film *Clementine* for [digital distribution](#) via Oscilloscope Laboratories. **Cyril Aris** '17, **Harriet Beaney** '18, **Andy Fortenbacher** '15, **Frank Graziano** '19, **Rachel James** '17, **Ben Leonberg** '15, **Alex Cannon** '17 and **Daniel Pfeffer** '18 made the 2020 Columbia Blue List, which represents the finest un-produced screenplays and television pilots written by recent graduates. *Porno*, directed by **Keola Racela** '15, co-written and co-produced by **Matt Black** '15 and **Laurence Vannicelli** '15, and co-produced by Adjunct Assistant Professor **Sarah Seulki Oh** '15, was supposed to have its theatrical release on April 10 but can now be found on streaming platforms instead. Venice-winning short film [Darling](#), directed and co-written by **Saim Sadiq** '19 and produced by **Mahak Jawani** '18 won Special Jury Recognition Prize at SXSW. **Amy Talkington** '99 is the Executive Producer on the new Hulu show [Little Fires Everywhere](#) with Reese Witherspoon and Kerry Washington. She also wrote the final episode. She also wrote *Valley Girl*, a musical remake of the 80s cult classic, [which was released](#) on May 8. **Melina Leon** '08 recently won the [Premios Wapa Award](#), which is given by Wapa Magazine and recognizes women who break stereotypes in their work. [Tangles and Knots](#), written and directed by **Renee Marie Petropoulos** '17, was nominated for Best International Short Film and Best Performance in a Drama at the NewFilmmakers Los Angeles Awards.

Theatre

Nadia Sepsenwol '09 was selected to join [The Mercury Store](#), associated with New York Theatre Workshop, as part of their inaugural acting company. **Elisabeth Frankel** '19 is assistant directing the musical *Assassins* at [Classic Stage Company](#), alongside Director John Doyle. **Lynn Martin** '90 won a [Writers Guild of America Award](#) for Outstanding Writing for Daytime Drama for her work on *The Young and the Restless*. **Sara Rademacher** '16 founded [The Outlet Project](#), a company that began as a response to the social distancing mandate as a platform for creatives that have had their main outlet completely shut off. Though it has functioned as a creative and emotional outlet, it is also proving to be an archive of the daily reactions to the pandemic. **Nadia Foskolou** '08 released a new Greek translation of [The Viewpoints Book](#), written by Professor Anne Bogart and Tina Landau. The translation was published by Patakis Publishers in Greece.

Visual Arts

[Hans](#), an exhibition of the work of **Miki Carmi** '05 and **Tamy Ben-Tor** '06, was shown at CICCIO in

Brooklyn. **Davey Hawkins** '14 and **Patrice Aphrodite Helmar** '15 were part of [not even the half of what we're guilty of](#) at Z Ranch. *Under the Glass*, an exhibition including work by **Tanya Merrill** '18, is up at [Half Gallery](#). The exhibition *House* by **Uri Adan** '07 was shown by [Gavin Brown's Enterprise. Legacy: Seven Decades of Ventura College Art](#), an exhibition featuring **José Zúñiga** '17, was set to show at the Museum of Ventura County in Ventura CA from March 6 - April 26, 2020. **Ivan Forde** '18 was part of *The Radical Collage: Afrosurrealism and the Repurposed Fabrication of Black Bodies* exhibition at [Palitz Gallery](#) at Syracuse University until April 9, 2020. Push Projects, an initiative by **Molly Suno** '13, has set up [Healing Feeling](#), an art fundraiser to support the delivery of essential materials to medical workers battling the COVID-19 pandemic. **Alex Strada** '16 is a 2020 recipient of the NYFA Women's Fund for her short documentary [truths](#). **Jaqueline Cedar** '09 curated the exhibition *Talk Soup* at [Good Naked](#) gallery. **Nancy Cohen** '84 held a virtual Cabin Fever Artist Talk organized by the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey. *New Visions*, the upcoming exhibition by **Matthew Morrocco** '15 is set to run until July 5 at [Fotografiska Museum in New York](#).

Writing

Adam O. Davis '06 has created a hotline for *Index of Haunted Houses*, a collection of poems [to be released in September](#). For more information, dial 619-329-5757. **Christina Chiu** '00 has just released her new novel, *Beauty*, winner of the James Alan McPherson Award. **Sam Ross** '13 received the [2020 Thom Gunn Award for Gay Poetry](#) for his collection *Company*. **Alison Woods** '96 will be publishing her collection of poems, [Bless This Home](#), with Finishing Line Press this summer. **Kristina Tate** '16 interviewed **Jessi Jezewska Stevens** '18 for the article "[The Fragility of Perception](#)" which was published by BOMB. **Melissa Clark** '94 recently published her latest cookbook, [Dinner in French](#). **Eric Helms** '12 published his [debut collection](#) of poetry, *Valley of Empty Pockets*, with Main Street Rag Press. **Sarah Ramey** '07 [published her memoir](#), *The Lady's Handbook for Her Mysterious Illness*, this month. **Terese Svoboda** '78 was selected as a finalist for the [Foreword Book Award](#) for her book of stories, *Great American Desert*. "[Finland is a Capitalist Paradise](#)," a cover story in the New York Times Sunday Review by alum **Trevor Corson** '16, was recently published. The story was co-written with his wife Anu Partanen. They [were also interviewed](#) on "Pitchfork Economics with Nick Hanauer" about the piece. **Mary South** '14 published her debut collection of short stories, [You Will Never Be Forgotten](#), with FSG Originals in March. The title story appeared in the January 27 issue of the *New Yorker*. The book [was also reviewed](#) by **Jenessa Abram** '17 in *The Atlantic*.

Frances Cha '11 published her debut novel [If I Had Your Face](#) with Ballantine, Penguin Random House on April 21. **Umair Kazi** '16, who now serves as Director of Advocacy and Policy at [The Authors Guild](#), recently led a webinar, titled *Coronavirus Relief Programs for Authors and Freelancers*. *Empire City*, [the new novel](#) by **Matt Gallagher** '13 was published on April 28 by Atria Books. **Laura Zinn Fromm** '02 [published an excerpt](#) from her forthcoming book about mental health in the *New York Times*. The excerpt was entitled "My Father the Heartbreaker." **Kristen Martin** '16 wrote the essay "[Amid a Pandemic, Finding Rootedness in an Urban Forest](#)," which was published by *Catapult*. Alumnus **Lincoln Michel** '09 published his story "The Smart House of Mrs O" in [Granta](#).

In Memoriam

We are saddened to share that **Stacie Vourakis Junghans** '03 has passed away as a result of contracting COVID-19. She graduated from the School of Engineering with a Master of Science in Chemical Engineering and Applied Chemistry in 1995, and then returned to Columbia University to study Playwriting at The School of the Arts. Her novella, *The Ice Storm*, was published in 2016. She is survived by her husband Michael and children Henry and Dagny. A [Gofundme](#) page was established to help them at this time.

William Branch '53, noted playwright, television writer, and producer, passed away in November of last year. He was 92. In his long career, he made significant contributions to African American theatre and literature. Among the many awards and honors he received was the Robert E. Sherwood Television Award, presented by Eleanor Roosevelt, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. He is survived by his daughter **Rochelle Branch** '89 and his two grandchildren. You can read his full obituary in the New York Times, [here](#). His legacy will not be forgotten.

We also want to give special mention to two beloved members of the Film Program faculty who recently passed away, [Milena Jelinek](#) and [Peter Miner](#). Their decades of dedication to educating the next generation of filmmakers is a light and example to us all.

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

This edition of the Alumni Spotlight features Theatre alumnus **Oliver Mayer** '89. If you would like to submit your own stories to be included on our website, you can do so at this [link](#).



Photo Credit Maria Alejandra Cardona

[Oliver Mayer](#) is a playwright, poet, children's author and librettist, whose new opera *3 Paderewskis*, composed by Jenni Brandon, received its world premiere at the Kennedy Center in November, 2020 and won The American Prize for opera composition. He is the author of more than 30 plays, including his ground-breaking *Blade to the Heat* and its long-awaited sequel *Members Only*. Other produced plays include *Blood Match* and *Yerma in the Desert* (inspired by the plays of Federico Garcia Lorca), *Fortune is a Woman*, *The Wallowa Project*, *Dias y Flores*, *Dark Matters*, *Conjunto*, *Young Valiant*, *Joy of the Desolate*,

The Sinner from Toledo, Laws of Sympathy and Ragged Time. He is currently working with The Wallis Annenberg Performing Arts Center for the Performing Arts on his newest play *The Dragon Tree*. Oliver received his MFA in Playwriting from Columbia University in 1989, and his BA in English from Cornell University. He also attended Worcester College, Oxford.

Was there a specific faculty member or peer who especially inspired you while at the School of the Arts? If so, who and how?

My inspiration then and now remains the legendary Howard Stein, who ran the playwriting program and was the first permanent chair of the Hammerstein Center for Theatre Studies. He was my art father, although I certainly shared him with my other MFA colleagues. He knew more about plays than anyone I've ever met to this day, but he was anything but didactic: Rather, he was playful, curious and incredibly trusting of our voices as young playwrights. His style was passionate, rabbinical, and funnier than you'd have ever thought. He loved to teach. All the way until his death in 2012 at 90, I would call or see him and his incomparable wife Marianne at their home in Connecticut whenever I was on the East Coast. And whenever I needed advice about a play or about being a professor, he was always there for me. I hear his voice in my head often, loud and impassioned, reminding me that "plays are as much caught as taught." Stuff like that.

How did attending the School of the Arts impact your work and career as an artist?

My MFA at Columbia had everything to do with my career's ups and downs, not to mention longevity -- both as a playwright and as a teacher of playwrights. Upon graduating I found work almost immediately as an associate literary manager at the Mark Taper Forum under Gordon Davidson in what might now be termed a Golden Era. While writing my own new plays, I was able to watch Maria Irene Fornes, Terrence McNally, Luis Valdez and a host of others work on new plays. Tony Kushner developed *ANGELS IN AMERICA* nearly from the ground up -- sometimes literally bashing out dialogue on his laptop at the desk across from me in the literary office. When it was finally my time to hit the main stage with *BLADE TO THE HEAT*, I felt like I deserved to be there. But the values that Howard passed along to me regarding dramatic writing could make things difficult, particularly in the world of TV and film, where I never really felt at home. The single greatest impact of the MFA was that, no matter where I have been in my career, I have been able to write -- to actively question the world around me and within me. Columbia gave me my vocation.

What were the most pressing social/political issues on the minds of the students when you were here?

Columbia School of the Arts was not the same in the mid 1980s as it is now! The building itself, though beautiful, was falling in upon itself. We did a lot of our stage work at Teacher's College, because our spaces were falling apart. I was the only Mexican American I remember seeing in the halls, but compared to Yale and other programs of the time, we were a pretty diverse group of writers -- and we had a lot of injustice to address. Then, and now, the main goal was to get our voices out on the page and eventually the stage. Reagan was finishing up his second term, so a lot of us had reasons

to demonstrate and demand to be heard. Collectively, AIDS was our biggest question and fear, and of course at the time there was a lot of mystery and confusion around the subject. But we always had something to write about.

What was your favorite or most memorable class while at the School of the Arts?

I loved any class with Howard Stein, even though we often met in the morning when most of us students were bleary-eyed from the night before. I had a love/hate relationship with Albert Innaurato, who also taught us, and who could be very cruel with his feedback. Even when Howard was critical, he was never cruel. It was all love.

What were the first steps you took after graduating?

It wasn't easy to write on my own, after my three years in the cocoon of my Columbia MFA. But when I finally found my feet, I realized that I had a foundation under me, an education and knowledge of plays that held me up. Playwrights living and dead were like beacons of light in the darkness. I knew that being a playwright was the single coolest thing in the world that I could be.

What advice would you give to recent graduates?

Take your shoes off and root yourself into the earth when you breathe. Be who you really are, particularly when you write. Don't ask your work to make the rent (at least not right away); let it all be worth more than money. Our vocation is worth a price above rubies.

How are you handling the challenges or difficulty of sheltering in place during the pandemic?

In comparison to my wife, who is a working actress and has to wait for the all-clear before she can resume work, I have had it relatively easy during our pandemic. Besides teaching my students on an online platform, I have been writing like a fiend -- a libretto to a new opera, several commissions. My mind wanders to questions about how we will present our work in what appears to be the new normal of social distancing. Maybe we will do it differently now, opening up a whole new set of expectations. None of us will forget this year and its challenges, but at least we are all doing it together. Reminds me of a play....

ALUMNI BENEFITS

- +[Artists' Resource Center \(ARC\)](#)
- +[Update Your Information](#)
- +[Email Forwarding & CU Address](#)

- +[Online Alumni Community](#)
- +[CAA Arts Access](#)
- +[Complete List of Benefits](#)

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