Dear School of the Arts Alumni:

I want to begin this month’s newsletter by drawing your attention to an important university initiative. This year, Dean Carol Becker is spearheading the Year of Water. For the next two semesters there will be art exhibits, concerts, lectures, and symposia focusing on the Earth’s most precious resource in all of its social, political, cultural, economic, and environmental complexities. Watch this video with Dean Becker to learn more about what’s to come. You can be proud of the School of the Arts for taking the lead on this initiative. All of the events will be open to the public. Information on specific happenings can be found here and below under Events.

We are making some adjustments to our social media channels to better connect with you and promote your work. Therefore, we’re retiring our alumni Twitter account and focusing on the alumni Facebook group and LinkedIn page, as well as the Artists’ Resource Center LinkedIn page. In addition to our Facebook group, School of the Arts alumni news will still be shared via The School of the Arts Twitter and Instagram accounts.

Below are some exciting updates from your fellow alums, followed by this month’s Alumni Spotlight: Farooq Ahmed ’06.

FILM

Director and Co-Writer Sean Dunn ’17 and Co-Writer Shakti Bhagchandani ’18 screened their film Kingdom Come at the La Biennale di Venezia. Citizen K, a new documentary associate produced by Ophelia Harutyunyan ’15, also screened at the festival. Screenwriter Karen Sztajnberg ’06’s newest feature film, Variações, had a great debut. Awake, directed by Mark Raso ’12 and co-written with his brother Joseph Raso ’04, is currently in production for Netflix. Chris Teague ’06 won an Emmy for Outstanding Cinematography for the Netflix show Russian Doll. You can read an interview with Chris about the show here. Yellowjackets, a series co-written by Ashley Lyle ’07, will begin production for Showtime this Fall.

Sister Aimee, co-written and co-directed by Samantha Buck ’16 and Marie Schlingmann ’16, is available on iTunes and other digital services. Porno, directed by Keola Racela ’15, co-written and
co-produced by Matt Black ‘15 and Laurence Vannicelli ‘15, and co-produced by Sarah Seulki Oh ‘15, will screen at the Brooklyn Horror Film Festival in October. In August, it had its European premiere at the FrightFest Film Festival. Green, written and directed by Suzanne Andrews Correa ‘17 and written and produced by Mustafa Kaymak ‘17 will screen at the Nashville Film Festival, Tacoma Film Festival, DC Shorts, 24FPS and AfterImage Film Festival. The film was edited by Pinar Yorgancioglu ‘16, assistant directed by Nicolas Becerra ‘18 and Fabio Montanari ‘16, and line produced by Mark Castiilo ‘17. Emre Gulcan ‘17 served as the digital imaging technician, and Bam Johnson ‘19 was a camera operator.

Ava in the End, directed and edited by Ursula Ellis ‘17, premiered at the Fantasia International Film Festival before screening at FilmQuest, where it was nominated for Best Sci-Fi Short, Best Director, Best Actress, & Best VFX. It will be screening at Mill Valley next month. Ursula’s short, For George on His 30th Birthday will also be screening at the Lone Star Film Festival. Baby by Thais Drassinower ‘17 received the Audience Award at the NALIP Latino Media Fest in Los Angeles. Her film Memories of the Sea was selected by KQED for their Film School Short series.

THEATRE

Kareem Fahmy ‘07 and Melis Aker ‘18 will be featured at the Middle Eastern American Writers Lab Launch on October 7 and 8 at the Lark Theatre. Ross Berger ‘01 has published a new book, Dramatic Storytelling & Narrative Design: A Writer’s Guide to Video Games and Media. Karen Malpede ‘72’s play Other Than We is a New York Times Critics’ Pick for fall theater. It premieres at La MaMa Theater this November. Tyne Rafaeli ‘14’s new play Power Strip opened on October 5 at the Lincoln Center Theater. Rehana Lew Mirza ‘07 was selected as a Playwriting/Screenwriting Fellow at the New York Foundation for the Arts. Kim Katzberg ‘09 won the 2019 New York Innovative Theatre Award for Outstanding Solo Performance for Dad in a Box.

This month there are a number of great collaborations between our Theatre alums. Anna Jastrzembski ‘19’s play The Happy Garden of Life, produced by Halla Tryggvadottir ‘19, will be at The New Ohio Theatre October 18-27. Benita de Wit ‘16 will direct Anchuli Felicia King ‘18’s play Slaughterhouse at Belvoir St Theatre in Sydney, October 16-November 2. Kareem Fahmy ‘07 will direct Clarence Coo ‘10’s play On That Day in Amsterdam at Primary Stages October 29-December 18. Dara Malina ‘15 will direct Kate Mulley ‘16’s play Grey Lady as part of Montclair State University’s New Works Initiative.

VISUAL ARTS

Rachel LaBine ‘19 was awarded a Rema Hort Mann Foundation Grant. Nancy Cohen ‘84 has an exhibition at Accola Griefen Gallery in Brooklyn that opened September 23. Contact info@accolagriefen.com to make an appointment to view the exhibition. Suzanne Hodes ‘62 has a show at Three Stones Gallery in Concord, open through October 16. Alumna Alexandra Lerman ‘12 currently has artwork in the Museum of Hygiene in Saint Petersburg, Russia, as
part of the ProArte Festival Contemporary Art at the Traditional Museum. Jonah King ’16 is part of a large-scale exhibit, titled Desire: A Revision from the 20th Century to the Digital Age, currently at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin until March 2020. Maria Antelman ’11 currently has an exhibition titled Mechanisms of Affection on display at the Visual Arts Center at the University of Texas - Austin, until December 6. Nadja Verena Marcin ’10 performed her show OPHELIA at Stadtgalerie in Saarbrücken, Germany. Steve Sas Schwartz ’85 is in a new exhibition, In These Woods, at 719 DTLA Gallery.

WRITING

John James ’11, recipient of the Max Ritvo Poetry Prize, has released his collection The Milk Hours. Book tour events can be found here. He is also reading with fellow alums Julia Guez ’11, Joseph Fasano ’08, and Monica Ferrell ’02 at Book Culture on October 11. Julia was also recently featured on the Poetry Society of America website for her poem “Still Life with Vicodin.” The feature includes memories of and insights from working with Lucie Brock-Broido ’82. Cyrée Jarelle Johnson ’19 released his debut collection of poetry, Slingshot, on September 17. Terese Svoboda ’78 will publish her nineteenth book, Theatrix: Play Poems, with Anhinga in 2021. She was featured on Irish Radio for her biography of poet Lola Ridge.

Aaron Hamburger ’01, Lauren Grodstein ’01, and faculty member Joshua Furst had a reading at KGB Bar as part of their Sunday Series. Gnaomi Siemens ’18 has been named a 2019 Travel Fellow of the American Literary Translators Association (ALTA). Jenessa Abrams ’17 has published her short story “Griddlecakes, or the World Above Grief,” with Platypus Press. Johnny Greene ’73 was profiled in the Oxford American. Johnny was an activist and writer in the New Journalist mode who died in 1990 from complications from AIDS. Anna Rabinowitz ’90 is having the world premiere of a multimedia performance based upon her book-length poem, Darkling, at Theater Wit in Chicago.

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, Student and Alumni Affairs

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

This edition of the Alumni Spotlight features Writing alumnus Farooq Ahmed ’06. If you would like to submit your own stories to be included on our website, you can do so at this link.
Raised in the great state of Kansas, Farooq Ahmed is a graduate of the Columbia University Creative Writing Program and of Brown University, where he studied biochemistry. He is a Contributing Editor for Photonics magazine, and his writing has appeared in the Financial Times, Nature, and The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. His work has been lauded by the South Asian Journalists Association. He lives in Los Angeles. Find him on Twitter and IG: @faroqtheahmed.

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

Several professors contributed in innumerable ways to my writing and my understanding of literature. From Ben Marcus, I learned how to view and use language as a tool — how to wield it like a sculptor might a chisel. Binnie Kirshenbaum and Victoria Redel showed me how to construct scenes — literally sentence-by-sentence. Victor LaValle and Sam Lipsyte helped me understand world-building — how to add texture and conflict to the environments in which my characters lived. Together, these lessons continue to inform my writing.

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

The terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 happened a few weeks after my graduate school cohort started our MFAs. As one can imagine, it took time for us to regain a sense of normalcy. And many, including myself, questioned the art that we were making, and how best we could interact with the world.

As a brown-skinned Muslim man, it didn’t take long for suspicion and scrutiny to find me. I lived in lower Manhattan at the time, and the NYPD and FBI investigated my apartment; members of the FDNY threatened my life; and fellow New Yorkers paid extra attention whenever I stepped onto the subway or into the airport.

So, it’s fair to say that my perception of the world, as well as its perception of me, altered my writing in ways that took a very long time to comprehend. (Shout out to all those in workshop who suffered through some pretty bad attempts!)

I know many other artists of color who felt the same way at the time, confronting a new unease.
that was hard to process. Eventually, I channeled a lot of those conflicting emotions into the main character of my recently released novel—envisioning him as a worst-case-scenario fabricated out of the perceptions of Muslim men.

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

One of the perks of attending art school was the opportunity to take courses outside of my division. And while I had memorable workshops and lectures in the writing division, some of my favorite classes were in the film school—particularly Andrew Sarris’ and James Schamus’ seminars. Learning about film from an esteemed critic and producer, respectively, also gave me another way to approach narrative. This has been helpful in writing fiction and in other projects like screenplays.

**What advice would you give to recent graduates?**

Perhaps because we had spent so much time together in the previous years, many of my graduate school friends and I lost touch after graduation. Slowly, however, we revived those friendships, and they have proven, both personally and professionally, to be one of the best resources that Columbia gave us.

So, I would say: Take time after school to completely break away from the academic cycle and environment. Cleanse yourself of it. Find your art again without the other voices, the workshops, and the critiques. And then, reconnect! Seek those folks who care about you and your work. The outside world will not always care about either, but your friends and colleagues will.

**ALUMNI BENEFITS**

+ Artists’ Resource Center (ARC)
+ Update Your Information
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+ Online Alumni Community
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+ Complete List of Benefits

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