

Celebrating  
50 Years

Columbia  
University  
School  
of the Arts

# ALUMNI NEWSLETTER SPECIAL EDITION

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Dear School of the Arts Alumni:

It was wonderful to see many of you at Alumni Weekend earlier this month. We hope you who were able to take part enjoyed the festivities as well as seeing old friends and making new connections. You can find photos from the weekend here and recordings of both panels [here](#).

Although Alumni Weekend is over, we will continue to celebrate our 50th Anniversary and our wonderful alumni all year long. You can still submit your memories about your time at the School of the Arts and people who influenced you through the [Alumni Stories Survey](#).

On October 22, we are partnering with CAA Arts Access on a special event: an evening for Columbia alumni at *The King and I* at Lincoln Center. The performance will be followed by a talk back with the show's Associate Director **Tyne Rafaeli** ('14) and Chair of the Theatre Program **Christian Parker** ('98). There are a limited number of tickets set aside for SOA alumni. To order tickets, click [here](#).

In this fourth special 50th Anniversary edition of the Alumni Newsletter, we share more on-campus history and profile alumni who graduated between 1995-2004.

As always, please email us at [artsalum@columbia.edu](mailto:artsalum@columbia.edu) with any news you'd like to share.

Best,

**Laila Maher**

Associate Dean, Student and Alumni Affairs

# History of the Arts at Columbia

*Alumni Weekend, 2015. For more images, click here.*

## 1980

The School of the Arts offers MFA in Arts Administration, designed to train leaders for positions of administrative responsibility in the arts.

## 1982

The School of the Arts and the School of Law offer joint JD-MFA in Theatre Arts.

Theatre Arts Division offers MFA in Criticism (later Dramaturgy).

## 1985

Establishment of the Research Center for Arts and Culture—a collaboration between the School of the Arts, the Graduate School of Business, and the School of Law, to meet managerial, legal, and marketing needs of artists and institutions.

## 1987

The first Columbia University Film Festival (CUFF), consisting of four student shorts, held at Symphony Space on Broadway and 95th.

## 1988

Renovation of McMillin Academic Theatre in Dodge Hall as a musical performance venue, renamed the Kathryn Bache Miller Theatre.

## 1989

The School of the Arts, previously a separate division, becomes one of the five major schools organized under the aegis of Arts and Sciences, following recommendation of the Working Group on the Future of the Arts at Columbia (WOGFAC), to restructure and strengthen undergraduate arts offerings, consolidate resources and faculty, and eliminate debt.

The School of the Arts suspends admission to the MFA program in Arts Management, amidst community protest; the program moves to Teachers College in 1991.

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## Pop Quiz

- 1) Which exhibition in summer 2015 featured nearly 50 Visual Arts students and alumni?
- 2) Alumna Barbara Whitman ('05) is producing a new theatre project with which *Will and Grace* star?
- 3) Which award winning alumna poet's work has recently been adapted for the stage?
- 4) Which recently released film features thirteen Columbia Alumni?

*Scroll down to the bottom of this email to check your answers!*

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## Alumni Spotlight

This edition of the Alumni Spotlight features **Liz Engelman** ('96), **Mary Jo Bang** ('98), **Derrick Adams** ('03) and **Ben Odell** ('04). If you would like to submit your own stories to be included on our [website](#), you can do so at [this link](#).



## Liz Engelman Theatre '96

Liz Engelman is a member of the Playwriting and Directing faculty at UT Austin. As a dramaturg, Liz splits her time between the school year at UT Austin and summer in Ely, MN, where she is the founder and director of Tofte Lake Center at Norm's Fish Camp, a creative retreat center in the Boundary Waters. Liz has served as the Alumnae Relations Coordinator at Hedgebrook, a retreat for women writers on Whidbey Island, as Resident Dramaturg at Mixed Blood Theatre, as the Literary Director of the McCarter Theatre, the Director of New Play Development at ACT Theatre in Seattle, Washington, Literary Manager/Dramaturg at Seattle's Intiman Theatre, and as Assistant Literary Manager at Actors Theatre of Louisville. [more](#)

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

Yes and Yes. First Yes: I doubt that a day goes by in which Anne Bogart isn't mentioned. It's been 20 years (oh my god) since I got out of Dodge, and still, whether it be my life in institutional theatre, freelancing, running my own creative retreat center, and/or now teaching at UT Austin, every day I encounter someone who references Anne, who has, as I have, been inspired by something Anne has said, quoted, modeled, shared, or directed. As a human and as a dramaturg I am constantly accessing the vice-ness of Anne when it comes to being curious, being open, leaning in to the unknown, questioning, being fearless, creating spaciousness, embodying empathy, and leading with intention. Anne was always a model for me as she strode both the professional and academic worlds. When she directed, she was teaching; when she taught, she provided direction. What I took - and still take - from Anne is that being an artist is completely dependent on being human - and that we have to awaken all those aspects in ourselves.

And then the Second Yes: My fellow student-in-crime, Julie Felise Dubiner. My graduate school experience was formed as much outside of that 4th floor, with her, as it was on it; long night conversations with Julie at Grandma's (is it still there?!) as we planned, plotted, and conspired what the world would

look like as run by dramaturgs (in their 20s). Everyone needs a dramaturg -- even a dramaturg. Julie was mine. And she continues to be. She continues to model for me speaking up, standing up, provoking when necessary, questioning always - and always, always ending with a joke.

*If you could revisit any piece you created during your time at the School of the Arts, which would it be? Why?*

I truly enjoyed working with then PhD student and brilliant scholar director human Ehren Fordyce on his 45 minute adaptation of Hamlet. The process taught me how to focus on what story you want to tell, how to shape/sculpt text accordingly, and how story relates to space. It can't go without saying that, for me, as a younger dramaturg, his respect for my role in the collaboration was invaluable affirming.

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

I still reference the Collaboration class that I took over 20 years ago with Anne -- so that's saying something about the impact it had on me. Some highlights: The first day, we had to define what that word actually meant to us. (I'm still defining it.) How that undercut assumptions, deepened our level of inquiry, required considered articulation. Another class project had all the disciplines create three-act plays using a table and anything from our backpacks. Each grouping had to create a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end, with a blackout between each act. It amazed me to see how designers, directors, playwrights, and dramaturgs all interpreted this assignment through their personal lenses -- not labels, but lenses. It revealed how we saw, organized, assembled, structured, related to space, story, and scale. How we are what we see and do - and vice versa, and how we expand this by learning from each of the other disciplines. Another assignment was our reducing a classic to 7 minutes in its entirety. This showed me the importance of discovering what is essential in any story, and ensuring that these sign posts get highlighted and foregrounded above all else.

I could go on and on about that class. Can we talk *Death of a Salesman*?

[more](#)

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**Mary Jo Bang**  
Writing '98

Mary Jo Bang is the author

of seven collections of poems: *Apology for Want*, winner of the Bakeless Prize; *Louise in Love*, winner of the Poetry Society of America's Alice Fay di Castagnola Award; *The Downstream Extremity of the Isle of Swans*; *The Eye Like a Strange Balloon*; *Elegy*, which was awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award; *The Bride of E*; and *The Last Two Seconds*. Her translation of Dante's *Inferno*, with illustrations by Henrik Drescher, was published by Graywolf Press in 2012. Individual poems have appeared in *Best American Poetry*, *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic*, *Paris Review*, *Fence*, and elsewhere. She's been the recipient of a Hodder Fellowship from Princeton University, a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, and an American Academy in Berlin Fellowship. She teaches creative writing at Washington University in St. Louis. [more](#)

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

I There was a faculty member and two peers who not only inspired me, but actually taught me to write. I learned from my teacher, Lucie Brock-Broido, how to let language instead of narrative do the work of creating the poem's lyric heat. And how to manifest my own complicated interiority on the page. Early on, she told me I needed to expand my sense of what does and doesn't

belong in a poem, and to expand my lexicon. She also once told me that I should aim towards surrealism, but not to worry about getting there, because I never would. Just keep moving toward it, she said. It was excellent advice and I've followed it ever since. From Timothy Donnelly, one of my classmates, I learned to marry a poem's formal elements to its subjectivity in a way that gave the poem both complexity and authority. And from Mónica de la Torre, another classmate, I learned how to let disjunction and indeterminacy mimic the mind's associational leaps. All three taught me how to dismantle a poem in order to see how it works, and how to read my own work with a useful degree of remove. By example, they taught me to read widely and not to imitate others but to put my own inimitable stamp on whatever I wrote.

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

My most memorable class was far from being my favorite class. It was instead memorable for how much I learned, and how important what I learned has been to me as a poet. That class was Alfred Corn's prosody class. Unlike many of the other students, I came to the class knowing nothing about prosody. I hadn't been an English major. I'd studied sociology, and after that, medicine, and then photography. I didn't know how to metrically scan a poem, and I certainly had no idea about how to write in meter or form. It was difficult to know nothing, surrounded by those who knew all of those things and more. Both speaking and listening to speech are usually so thoughtless that it takes a great deal of attention to recognize the patterns. You have to train your ear to hear the way stress falls on some syllables, and not on others, and how to measure the relative stress of one syllable against the sound-weight of the word or syllable next to it. To understand what sound can do in a poem, and to manipulate the sonic echoes with any degree of sophistication, requires years of practice. Trying to write formal poems that were metrically correct, had interesting rhyme schemes, and were interesting to read—as failed as those early efforts were—taught me the expressive potential of sound in poetry. I didn't realize at the time that I was beginning something that I would dedicate myself to for the rest of my writing life, but that is, in fact, what I've done. I'm still learning with every poem I write and Alfred Corn and his prosody book, *The Poem's Heartbeat*, are part of the mind with which I write.

[more](#)

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*Formal 2015, Derrick Adams*

## **Derrick Adams**

### **Visual Arts '03**

Derrick Adams is a multidisciplinary New York-based artist working in performance art, painting, sculpture, music and collage. His work focuses on the fragmentation and manipulation of structure and surface, communicating and exploring self image and forward projection. Adams received an MFA from Columbia University and BFA from Pratt Institute. He is a Skowhegan and Marie Walsh Sharpe alum, and a recipient of a 2009 Louis Comfort Tiffany Award, and 2014 S.J. Weiler Award. Since 2001, Adams has exhibited extensively, both nationally and internationally, including MoMA PS1, Brooklyn Museum of Art, PERFORMA '05 & '13 (commissioned by the Calder Foundation), Studio Museum in Harlem, Brooklyn Academy of Music, Contemporary Art Museum Houston, and the Birmingham Museum of Art. Adams' work is in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Studio Museum in Harlem, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and the Birmingham Museum of Art. His work can be seen in

New York at Tilton Gallery;  
Rhona Hoffman Gallery,  
Chicago; Gallerie Anne de  
Villepoix, Paris; and online  
at [derrickadams.com](http://derrickadams.com). [more](#)

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

OI do remember having very candid, constructive and motivational conversations with faculty member and artist, Rirkrit Tiravanija. His easygoing personality helped me to not care as much; to unwind and to step back and think about my work from different perspectives, which was helpful for me to trust in my own concepts.

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

Naturally it helped me gain insight and intellect on critical issues surrounding my subject matter through conversations with faculty and fellow students. It also helped to align me within the structure of the institutional art world through visiting artists, critics and curators from notable institutions.

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

School started a week before September 11, 2001, so its aftermath was pretty much in the air for the duration.

*If you could revisit any piece you created during your time at the School of the Arts, which would it be? Why?*

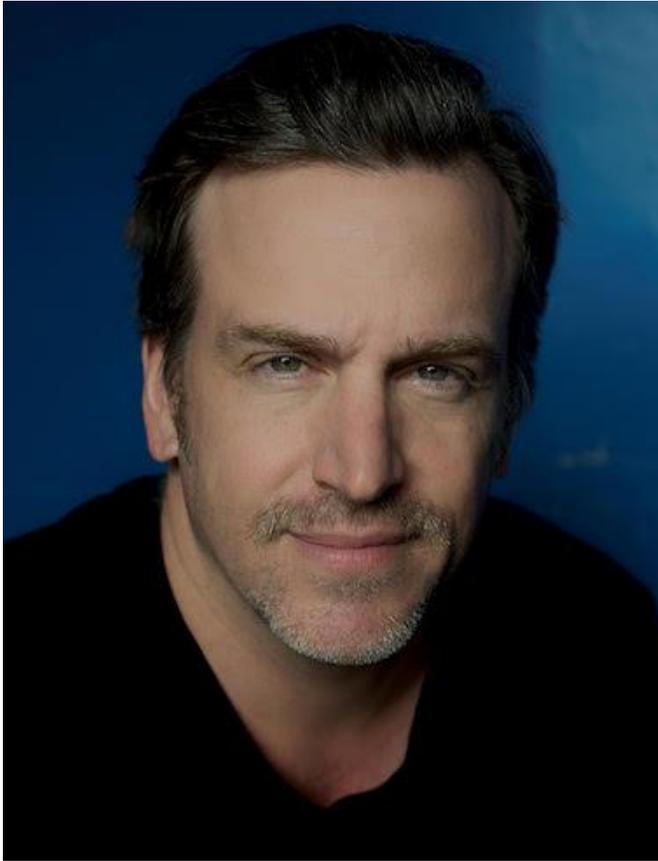
I did create a piece called "Play Things" in which I dressed small African figure sculptures in Barbie, Ken and G.I. Joe clothing. As the only black student in the program at the time, there were some difficult conversations. I think recent events have since primed the audience for such conversations.

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

Film Theory.

[more](#)

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## Ben Odell

Film '04

Odell is currently partner of 3pas Studios with Mexican comedian and director Eugenio Derbez. They have first look deals with Pantelion Films / Lionsgate in features and Universal Studios in television. Odell was previously Head of Production for Pantelion Films. In his role there, Odell developed and produced films aimed at the Hispanic market in the US as well as for Mexico and Latin America. Amongst others, he produced inspirational true story, SPARE PARTS, starring George Lopez, Jamie Lee Curtis and Marisa Tomei and the coming of age comedy, GIRL IN PROGRESS, starring Eva Mendes, Matthew Modine and Patricia Arquette. [more](#)

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

There were so many faculty members who inspired me--Ira Deutchman, Maureen Ryan, Richard Brick, Michael Hausman, Nick Proferes, June Stein, Dan Kleinman. That said, Eric Mendelsohn, with whom I took a directing class, was the only teacher I've ever had who taught us how to create through feeling instead of thinking. He really forced us to work from the gut. While I am a producer and not a director, it was one of the most miraculous experiences of learning I've had in my life, and I take that with me into everything I do.

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

Endless ways. While I was at school, I gained the concrete tools to produce movies. The film program believes that every student, regardless of his or her concentration, should learn to direct, act, and write. As a producer, it allowed me to understand the various processes from different points of view. The impact continued after school. I made two movies with Columbia grads, Chris Zalla ('04), with whom I won the grand jury prize at Sundance, and Patricia Riggen ('03). I workshop scripts and rough cuts with friends from my class who live in Los Angeles. I speak to several of my professors, including Ira Deutchman and Maureen Ryan, on a regular basis. They still give me advice.

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

9/11 occurred in my second year of classes. It informed a lot of our conversations from that point forward. It forced a lot of discussion about points of view and perspective.

*If you could revisit any piece you created during your time at the School of the Arts, which would it be? Why?*

I wrote and directed a mockumentary about Columbia's 250th birthday for the anniversary. The thesis was that Columbia was built as a back lot in the 40s. It took us through a history of all the movies shot there and how when production slowed down in New York in the 90s they turned it into a working university and gave it a fake history. We screened it right on the quad on several massive screens during the 250th celebration. Ten thousand people watched it and shared in this common experience. I've never had that size of an audience in one screen since. It was fun!

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

June Stein's acting class where we all had to act in each other's scenes and humiliate ourselves. Michael Hausman's producing classes where he would teach us how you get an A list star to show up on set on time when he's being a diva (you treat him like the kid he is and call him: "We are paying you 15 million dollars and we expect you to be on time for that kind of money." It works.) Any of Ira Deutchman's or Maureen Ryan's producing classes. But my favorite was Nick Proferes' master directing class. Twelve students, all were close friends, putting on scenes in a little theater down town and then shooting them on video. It was intense, difficult and soul stretching. And it led to some epic conversations at a bar around the corner.

[more](#)

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*All alumni are invited to tell us about your time at the School and its influence on your life as an artist. All spotlights will appear on our website, [arts.columbia.edu/soa50](https://arts.columbia.edu/soa50). Please note that there will be an editing process prior to publication. To submit your story for an Alumni Spotlight, [CLICK HERE](#).*

**POP QUIZ ANSWERS:**

1) [Floating Point at the Judith Charles Gallery](#) 2) [Sean Hayes](#) 3) [Citizen, Claude Rankine](#) 4) [The Mend](#)