WORLD BUILDING

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Comedy @ SCA
STUDYING COMEDY IS SERIOUS BUSINESS

Bryan Singer
FIRST SCA ALUMNUS TO NAME A DIVISION

Alumni Profile: Jenova Chen
SCA GAME DESIGNER HAS A BIG YEAR
Everywhere we go at the School of Cinematic Arts is grounded in making sure our students are fully prepared as scholars, media makers and entrepreneurs to be innovators in the entertainment industry. That means we are always questioning ourselves, particularly about whether we have the faculty, staff and equipment to best support their talent and vision. The right answer, regardless of what we are doing now, is always that we can do more. As a future-focused institution, our goal is to anticipate the changes that are coming and prepare to meet them head-on.

In June, we officially opened our new Interactive Media Building with an event that featured a panel on the future of entertainment with three giants of the industry: George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, and Don Mattrick. An interesting thread of the discussion was how important new digital technologies and interactivity have become in storytelling—in everything from movies and television to mobile apps and, of course, video games.

Interactive user experiences are obviously central to the work being done in two of our divisions, Interactive Media & Games, which was established ten years ago, and Media Arts + Practice, which is in its third year. The right answer, regardless of whether we have the faculty, staff and equipment to best support their talent and vision. The right answer, regardless of what we are doing now, is always that we can do more. As a future-focused institution, our goal is to anticipate the changes that are coming and prepare to meet them head-on.

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YEAR IN REVIEW

Throughout the year, the USC School of Cinematic Arts welcomed alumni, guest lecturers and friends from the entertainment, technology and video game industries to speak to students and faculty. In addition to these guests, the calendar included the installation of the Kortschak Family Endowed Division Chair, the dedication of the Sumner M. Redstone Production Building, the opening of the Interactive Media Building, the dedication of the Charles S. Swartz Endowed Chair in Entertainment Technology and alumnus Bryan Singer naming the Bryan Singer Division of Critical Studies.

Pat Crowley and husband, producer/critic Andy Friendly ’73 established the Pat Crowley and Andy Friendly Endowed Fund for Student Support.

Head of Student Industry Relations Larry Auerbach funded the Carole & Larry Auerbach and Family Endowed Finishing Fund this year.

Legendary director James L. Brooks leads a Comedy@SCA master class on directing comedy.

Dean Elizabeth M. Daley attended the MASTER media summit in China. Pat Crowley and husband, producer/critic Andy Friendly ’73 established the Pat Crowley and Andy Friendly Endowed Fund for Student Support.

Legendary actor/comedian Billy Crystal makes a surprise appearance following an advance screening of Monsters University in Norris Cinema Theatre.

Recent graduate James Ruff ’12 (center) demonstrated Project Holodeck during the 2012 Demo Day.

Nashville executive producer/director and SCA alum K.J. Cutler visits Professor Howard Rosenberg’s Television Symposium.

Alan George Lucas ’66 receives the National Medal of Arts and Humanities from President Barack Obama.

SCA Faculty John Watson, Pen Densham, actor Ed Harris and faculty member Todd Robinson discuss their film Phantom following its SCA screening.

Electronic Arts Endowed Chair of the Interactive Media & Games Division Tracy Fullerton ’91 (right) kicks off the 2012 Demo Day with Professor Mike Zylla (Viterbi School of Engineering).

Alum George Lucas ’66 receives the National Medal of Arts and Humanities from President Barack Obama.

Robert Evans at the dedication of the Sumner M. Redstone Production Building.

SCA alum Csilla Paul ’92 (right) with writing partner Ken Dean at a special screening of their film Despicable Me 2 at Norris Cinema Theatre.

Saudi students learn how to conduct on-camera interviews, as part of the Saudi Aramco’s iSpark Program.

Robert Evans at the dedication of the Sumner M. Redstone Production Building.

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Magda Davis was keynote speaker at Redefining Animation, the 25th Conference of the Society of Animation Studies.

Dean Elizabeth M. Daley, Michael Fink, Michael Renov, Richard Weinberg and artist David Quayola at Redefining Animation.

(Top) Academy Award-winning writer Robert Towne signs a poster of Chinatown after screening the movie for Professor Ted Braun’s Screenwriters of the 70s course. (Above) Towne with Braun (left) and Writing Division Chair Jack Epps Jr.

Media Arts + Practice Ph.D. candidate Amanda Tasse (left) demonstrates her Miraviz project at the opening of the Interactive Media Building.

Steven Spielberg, George Lucas ’66 and Dean Elizabeth M. Daley play with Pluff, an interactive stuffed animal which helps children with autism at the opening of the Interactive Media Building.

Alum Kevin Bachus ’90, faculty member Chanel Summers and John Riccitelli at the opening of the Interactive Media Building.

Alum Matt Bachus ’90, faculty member Chanel Summers and Dean Elizabeth M. Daley at the opening of the Interactive Media Building.

SCA Parent John Goodman with SCA Board Member Parent, alum and adjunct professor Bob Osher.

Interactive Media & Games Division Chair, Tracy Fullerton, after winning IndieCade’s Trailblazer award.

Matthew Weiner ’90 accepts the Mary Pickford Alumni Award.

(Above) Dean Elizabeth M. Daley, Michael Fink, Richard Weinberg and Stephanie Rothman at the installation of the Charles S. Swartz Endowed Chair. (Below from left) Spencer Stephens, Roberto Schaefer, Stephen Sommers and Michael Fink discuss The Future of Digital Filmmaking.

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(Top) John Ottman and director Bryan Singer at the dedication of the Bryan Singer Division of Critical Studies. (Top right) Actors Jack Larson and Bryan Singer. (Right) Alonzo and Alfred Hitchcock Professor of American Film, Drew Caster and director Bryan Singer.

Celebrating the installation of the Kortschak Family Endowed Division Chair, (from left) Andrew Kortschak, Marcia Kortschak, Chairholder Michael Taylor, Sarah Kortschak and Walter Kortschak.

Martha De Laurentiis (center) with daughter and graduate Dina De Laurentiis ’12 at the 2012 SCA Commencement.

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Alum Matthew Weiner ’90 poses with members of USC’s Comedy Squad after An Evening with Jay Roach.

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THE PROJECT: FRUITVALE STATION

The true story of Oscar Grant, a 22-year-old Bay Area resident, who crosses paths with friends, enemies, family and strangers on the last day of his life.

THE ALUM: RYAN COOGLER

PRODUCTION 2011

As an MFA student, writer/director Ryan Coogler worked at the Robert Zemeckis Center for Digital Arts. Part of his responsibilities included greeting and helping VIP guests who came to campus. Less than two years later, Coogler’s film Fruitvale Station screened in Norris Cinema Theatre where he was welcomed and treated as a VIP guest.

Fruitvale Station, Coogler’s film debut, tells the story of Oscar Grant, who was killed by police on a Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) platform in the early hours of New Year’s Day 2009. Coogler, a native of the Bay Area, was home for the holidays when Grant was killed. He interviewed Grant’s family and friends as background for his script.

After being accepted and working in the Sundance Labs program, Fruitvale Station was pitched to actor/USC alumnus Forrest Whitaker who signed on as an executive producer. The film was shot entirely in the Bay Area, including on the BART platform where Grant lost his life.

The film won both the Grand Jury Prize and the Audience Award at Sundance this year and the Un Certain Regard Avenir prize at Cannes. After Sundance, Fruitvale Station was picked up by the Weinstein company and Coogler embarked on a whirlwind tour that included a screening in Oakland for people affected by Fruitvale Station. The film was given to the most promising filmmakers. After Sundance, Coogler was picked up by the Weinstein company and Coogler embarked on a whirlwind tour that included a screening in Oakland for people affected by Fruitvale Station. The film was given to the most promising filmmakers.

Coogler attributed much of his success to his time at USC. “It was the place where I learned how to make films; it’s the place where I met most of the crew that worked on this film. Pretty much everything I learned about movies, I learned at SC.”

COOGLER’S ADVICE FOR SCA STUDENTS

My main advice is to appreciate what you have and use the resources available to you. You are coming from a campus that has sent so many filmmakers out before you. Appreciate that you are a part of something that is greater than yourself.

THE PROJECT: RED QUEEN TRILOGY

In the future, instead of judgments based on class, race or nationality, humans are divided by the color of their blood. When a young girl with normal, red blood begins to develop super powers associated with the elite caste of “silver bloods,” the government works quickly to avoid a revolution.

THE ALUM: VICTORIA AVEYARD

WRITING 2012

Just last year, Victoria Aveyard was a student writer for the Writing Division, getting ready for First Pitch (the Division’s pitching festival). She was excited about her future as a screenwriter but had also started dabbling in writing novels beginning but not completing a book. First Pitch is a “speed dating” style pitch festival where graduating seniors and graduate students meet several representatives from various companies in the entertainment industry. The right went incredibly well for Aveyard, who signed with literary management company BenderSpink.

Soon after, Aveyard pitched her new manager an idea for a young adult novel she assumed was a throw away. As she describes it, “I told my manager, ‘I know you guys probably won’t go for this, but I really want to write a Young Adult novel. I gave them a one-line, basic distillation of the story and they said, ‘That’s what you’re doing. Put all the screenplay ideas on hold, you’re gonna write a YA novel!’” So she went back home to Massachusetts and devoted herself to finishing the first book.

Aveyard’s instincts were spot on, and after a series of pitches she signed a three-novel deal with HarperTeen, an imprint of HarperCollins. The first book in the trilogy, “The Red Queen,” is scheduled for a Winter 2015 release.

AVEYARD’S ADVICE FOR SCA STUDENTS

I think something I learned the hard way was not to get pushed into doing something you’re not comfortable doing career-wise. At the end of my senior year, I knew I wasn’t mentally able to do an assistant for five years and still be writing and still keep my dream alive, I said, ‘I’m going go home. I’m going to write straight through, I’m gonna see if I can do this book. That’s how I’m gonna break in.”

THE PROJECT: FARAH GOES BANG

The story of Farah Mahtab, a woman in her twenties who tries to lose her virginity while on the road campaigning for presidential candidate John Kerry in 2004.

THE ALUM: MEERA MENON

PRODUCTION 2012

Less than a year after graduation, Production Division alum, Meera Menon, became a pioneer in the world of DIY filmmaking by taking her first feature Farah Goes Bang from fundraising site Kickstarter to the Tribeca Film Festival, where it won the inaugural Nora Ephron Prize. The internet and the availability of technology has changed the way that films get made but few have taken advantage of them as successfully or as quickly as Menon. Farah Goes Bang is a true microbudget film made with a USC-heavy crew.

The process wasn’t without bumps, however. Menon had to learn that the world of DIY filmmaking is a little harsher than USC. “I learned through shooting a microbudget that is you have to be flexible,” said Menon. “After going through USC you think that everything is possible because of what the School gives you. For instance, if something was in the script at USC, you made it happen. In the real world, you have to give things up. Sometimes you can’t afford it and you have to work with what’s available.”

MENON’S ADVICE FOR SCA STUDENTS

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In practice, Comedy@SCA functions as an umbrella that encompasses several initiatives. There are classes of course, but there is also a student-run Comedy Club, extracurricular programs, partnerships with professional outlets like Funny Or Die and events like the Comedy@SCA Festival, a weekend of panels featuring comedy heavyweights. The idea is to give students who are interested in forming the kind of startup that the comedy club is currently working on the fundamentals and finally, finally getting comedy the attention and respect it deserves.

Epps says it’s about providing a safe jumping-off point. "First off we want to create an environment where people feel comfortable, where they can find themselves and their talent, and then to that end we want to offer classes and initiatives that help students develop and refine their skills."

In February, Comedy@SCA partnered with Funny Or Die to challenge students to create shorts for the humor site. Writer/Director Judd Apatow helped pick the winner, a short called SnapChat Jesus, which was featured on the Funny or Die home page. Another popular event this year was a workshop with legendary director James L. Brooks and renowned acting coach Larry Moss, where they worked with students to develop their comedic vision, "It is a major benefit that it is a student-led initiative," says Isaacs. "It gives students a head start. "I think this is the kind of education that it's difficult to pick up."

Indeed one of the most important goals of the initiative is to establish a historical archive of comedy at USC that really respects the fundamentals and the edgy comics of today," says Isaacs. "I think those kinds of connections are universal and very informative and important.”

Epps is hopeful the initiative can attract enough funding that even their smaller endowment—that will ensure its longevity. Roach sees the initiative as a way to give students a head start. "First off we want to create an environment where people feel comfortable, where they can find themselves and their talent, and then to that end we want to offer classes and initiatives that help students develop and refine their skills."

The program is actually very strong in that area," he says. "But there was a disconnect when it came to production. No one was teaching comedy the way it's taught in the film or TV programs."

"It is a major benefit that it is a student-run organization because members have more freedom to express their own comedic vision," he says. Comedy Club members have created animation work, podcasts, short films, webisodes, feature-length scripts and even stand-up routines. A truism in the entertainment industry is that while drama wins awards, comedy pays the bills. The irony is that as an academic program the Comedy@SCA initiative needs to be taken seriously enough to attract the kind of funding—perhaps in the form of a substantial endowment—that will ensure its longevity. The initiative’s first donor, director Jay Roach, spent an evening with students, breaking down the directing decisions in scenes from successful feature comedies. He then set up a scholarship fund for students interested in studying the art form.

Roach sees the initiative as a way for working professionals to pass on important knowledge. “People see comedies and think it’s easy, but comedy directors, writers and performers work very hard to make it look easy,” says Roach. “I’ve personally benefited from taking with my friends in the comedy world and I see this as a way to spread that knowledge. There’s a lore that gets passed around in comedy. A lot of it is practical and unless you have access to that, it’s difficult to pick it up.”

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Epps is hopeful the initiative can attract enough funding that even their smaller dreams can come true. “We would love to have a green room that is our space, much like the new Interactive Media Building where they have the think tanks—a comedy think tank,” he says. “It’s a dream come true.”

"I’d go to that room where all the funny people are,” Roach says. "There’s no sort of magic you can do to suddenly make a person succeed. The idea is to give comedians a head start. "I think this is the kind of education that it's difficult to pick up.”

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Why do comedians get no respect?

After all, as SCA Writing Division Chair Jack Epps Jr. likes to point out, Shakespeare wrote more comedies than dramas. Two years ago, Epps, along with Professors Barnet Kellman and David Isaacs, launched the Comedy@SCA initiative to teach comedy as a serious art form, giving students the opportunity to master the fundamentals and finally, finally giving comedy the attention and respect it deserves.

In practice, Comedy@SCA functions as an umbrella that encompasses several initiatives. There are classes of course, but there is also a student-run Comedy Club, extracurricular programs, partnerships with professional outlets like Funny Or Die and events like the Comedy@SCA Festival, a weekend of panels featuring comedy heavyweights. The idea is to give students who are interested in forming the kind of startup that the comedy club is currently working on the fundamentals and finally, finally getting comedy the attention and respect it deserves.

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One day in 2006, Amy Ross (Ph.D. '86) gathered a few close friends at her home to honor the memory of Don Thompson, the late head of Reference Services at the School of Cinematic Arts Library. Don’s great loves in life were film, Trojan football, and the LA Frontrunners, a running and walking club for gay men, lesbians, their friends, and supporters. “Don had an encyclopedic knowledge of movies,” recalled Ms. Ross, and counted completing the marathon at the 2002 Sydney Gay Games in sweltering heat as one of his proudest achievements. He was also willing to bend SCA’s rules on the sly to help out aspiring—if disorganized—student filmmakers, according to alumna Tina Mabry (MFA '05). “We all ran into Don at some point in the film research library,” said Ms. Mabry, “and he was such a sweet guy. He let us film down there with the library.”

Don was prominent both at USC and in the Los Angeles LGBT community. With some seed money donated by Ms. Ross, now president-elect of the USC Alumni Association of Governing, LA Frontrunners founded the Don Thompson Scholarship. This financial award recognizes an undergraduate or graduate student enrolled at SCA who demonstrates a commitment to advancing LGBT issues through creative work, scholarship, and/or community engagement.

LA Frontrunners members Sean O’Brien and Dan Posten held the first Don Thompson Movie Night in the summer of 2007—an evening of movies, margaritas, and a silent auction fundraiser. They screened Stephan Elliott’s camp cult classic, The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert, starring Hugo Weaving, Guy Pearce, and Terrence Stamp as a trio of drag queens traveling by bus across the Australian outback. In 2010, Ms. Ross teamed with SCA’s queer student organization, Queer Cut, and USC Lambda, USC’s LGBT Alumni Association, to grow the event. With the help of Dean Elizabeth Daley, they brought Don Thompson Movie Night into the newly built School of Cinematic Arts Complex and established it as a signature event in the USC Lambda calendar. The Don Thompson LGBT Film Festival was born.

This daylong celebration of Don’s life serves two important functions: raising scholarship funds, and showcasing short films made by USC’s LGBT and allied students and graduates. “The films run the gamut, from the 210 projects of students at the undergraduate level to the thesis work from MFA candidates,” said Grant Hoover, Associate Director of Alumni Affinity Programs. Films by graduates who have been working in the industry for a few years are also included. By having their films screened alongside more established colleagues—and having them evaluated by visiting judges—current students get valuable exposure to what it’s like to be on the festival circuit.

The Don Thompson LGBT Film Festival has grown in size and scope every year, and its sixth edition, held in the Ray Stark Family Theatre on February 9, 2013, featured seven films chosen from over 40 applications. Alumna Tina Mabry joined the illustrious company of previous judges like Star Trek’s George Takei when she returned to campus to adjudicate with four other jury members. Ms. Mabry was impressed at the quality of the films on display. “Everybody keeps stepping up their game,” she said, reflecting on her graduate studies. “I wish I had the creative and technical knowledge [back then] that they do now—I want to go back and re-do my thesis.”

After an evening hosted by stand-up comedian Drew Droege, known for his viral online impressions of actress Chloe Sevigny, the jury handed out two awards: Dominic Haston (’07) was given the Prize for Artistic Merit for Teens Like Phil, a drama about a pair of closeted teens at a conservative boarding school; MFA student Leopold Déwolf won the Prize for LGBT Awareness for Niagra, which follows a man shaming to steal $1 million from his lover on a road trip. Conor Fetting-Smith’s documentary Bingo Night was feted with the Audience Choice Award. “It was very difficult for us to choose which one should win,” said Ms. Mabry “because they were all great.” All the filmmakers, even those filmmakers who weren’t recognized with prizes, were given a complimentary six-month subscription to Netflix. And after a night of mingling and movies, participants came away with something more valuable: now “you’ve got an open phone call to another alum, whether it’s for support or a job,” said Ms. Mabry.

Beyond accolades and an opportunity to network, the DTFF and Scholarship perform important functions: creative and financial support to keep telling their stories. The Festival “builds a community of LGBT filmmakers at the School of Cinematic Arts,” said Rebecca Lousel (MFA ‘12), a former Scholarship recipient whose film, Genderfresh, showed at this year’s DTFF. “You get the feeling that there are people out there who are supportive and encouraging of your work.” Alumnae who have benefited from being a part of this community include Mitsuyo Miyazaki, whose short film Taniya screened at the fifth DTFF in 2012. Ms. Miyazaki’s film has gone on to win 38 awards, including the Directors Guild of America Award for Best Female Student Filmmaker.

Through the Festival, SCA has witnessed the evolution of queer storytelling over seven years. “It’s changed tremendously in quality and perspective,” said Ms. Mabry. “Every LGBT story is not just about coming out. What happens after we come out? What about the other things that we struggle with: political issues that are really pressing in our community—or just everyday life that straight couples go through as well?”

With the Don Thompson Film Festival and Scholarship’s continued support, SCA filmmakers will continue to find a place to grow and develop in their craft and voice for years to come. A fitting tribute to Don Thompson.

The 7th Annual Don Thompson LGBT Film Festival is slated for Saturday, April 5, 2014 at the Stark Family Theatre. More information at http://usclambda.org.

The 6th Annual Don Thompson LGBT Film Festival, which was held on Saturday, February 9, 2013, at the Ray Stark Family Theatre, featured seven films and winners of the 6th Annual DTFF: Michael Annette MFA ’12, Dominic Haston ’07, John Paul Kurakis ’03, Leopold Déwolf, Corey Schulings ’07, Gregory Fettig-Smith ’13, Josh Diver ’08 and Dan O’Brien MFA ’05.
FACULTY PROFILE
Michael Fink, Richard Lemarchand AND Dennis Wixon

School of Cinematic Arts Trio Point Students Toward Future

By Hugh Hart

They converged on USC from England, Seattle and the San Fernando Valley armed collectively with eight decades of practical experience. After participating firsthand in seismic shakeups of the entertainment technology landscape, new School of Cinematic Arts faculty members Michael Fink, Richard Lemarchand and Dennis Wixon are now importing their hard-won lessons into SCA classrooms with an eye toward fostering a future generation of game-changers.

Fink

As a kid growing up in Sherman Oaks, California, visual effects wizard Professor Michael Fink, remembering unspooling a roll of celluloid film as far as his arms could stretch so he could capture the entire breadth of his neighborhood in a single image, Fink’s childhood fascination with the big picture continues to inform the Oscar winner’s mastery of new technologies and his story-comes-first approach. While he lives to innovate, he stresses that the technology has to be in service to narrative.

Last year, Fink co-created a course titled “Directing for the Virtual World” with Associate Professor Peter Sollett. The course, which allows students to home green-screen techniques, acknowledges the central role visual effects now has in filmmaking. “The great transition that’s happening now with movies like Life of Pi is that effects have become so integrated into the story that people in the audience are not even thinking about them,” says Fink. “When I’m teaching, no matter what we’re talking about in terms of specifics or the evolution of technology, the whole emphasis is on telling a story.”

An early champion of computer-generated characters—he directed Coca Cola’s iconic Polar Bear commercial that aired in 1993 a few months before Jurassic Park came out—Fink encourages students to exercise restraint in the face of unprecedented technical advancements. “So much of visual effects over the last ten years has been about the power to create characters and build incredible worlds,” he says. “People forget there’s a difference between what you can do and what you should do.”

Fink pushed the limits of visual effects storytelling capabilities with his work on The Golden Compass (2007), for which he won an Academy Award. Besides building a photorealistic North Pole environment inside the computer, Fink digitally constructed entire sequences from scratch during a frenetic, five-week post-production period: “I was hanging on by my fingernails on that movie,” Fink recalls. “What I really focused on was making it look beautiful.”

In between such projects as The Tree of Life and Life of Pi, Fink began teaching “The World of Visual Effects” class at SCA one afternoon a week. His course load soon expanded: “I went to a faculty meeting and Everett Lewis, head of the directing track, said he hoped to do a directing for green-screen class. And I said, ‘We have to do that class.’”

Fink got the gig. He and Sollett (Raising Victor Vargas, Nick and Norah’s Infinite Playlist) team-teach “Directing in a Virtual World” and a sequel they added this year, “Advanced Directing in a Virtual World.” Between such projects as The China Syndrome, Associate Professor Richard Lemarchand was soaking up punk rock, watching Star Wars and doing algebra “for fun” in his native England. He also spent a lot of time playing video games. He recalls, “I was one of those kids in school who loved science and mathematics, but I was also drawn to history and geography, and was always getting up on a stage to sing in a choir or act in the school play. For someone like me, who loves the intersection between art, entertainment and technology, video games were exactly the right place to be.”

Lemarchand

Around the time Fink started work on his first movie, 1979’s The China Syndrome, Associate Professor Richard Lemarchand was soaking up punk rock, watching Star Wars and doing algebra “for fun” in his native England. He also spent a lot of time playing video games. He recalls, “I was one of those kids in school who loved science and mathematics, but I was also drawn to history and geography, and was always getting up on a stage to sing in a choir or act in the school play. For someone like me, who loves the intersection between art, entertainment and technology, video games were exactly the right place to be.”

Lemarchand studied physics and philosophy at Oxford University while steeping himself in the UK’s burgeoning computer gaming culture. “Britain in the eighties had a really healthy scene of bedroom programmers,” he says. “Teenagers prodded away at the personal computer hardware that was beginning to become affordable and discovered different ways we could make our computers sit up and beg.”

After college, Lemarchand moved to Northern California in 1995 to design games for Crystal Dynamics. Nine years later, he relocated to Los Angeles and became lead game designer for Santa Monica-based Naughty Dog, now a division of Sony. While guiding the creation of three blockbuster games in Naughty Dog’s Uncharted action/adventure series, Lemarchand began mentoring MFA students at USC.

Citing SCA Interactive Media & Games Division Chair Tracy Fullerton’s book Game Design Workshop as a seminal influence, Lemarchand says, “My life as a game designer prepared me very well for life as a university professor.” Video game designers spend a lot of their time teaching the player how to play the game, and they have to be clever about it. They can’t seem too didactic, they have to present concepts clearly, in a way that can be understood immediately, and they have to present those concepts in a way that captures the imagination of the player. “The work I’ve done on games over the years set me up to convey the right information at the right time in order to get a concept across in the classroom,” Lemarchand, who teaches “Virtual Experience and World Design” as well as “Intermediate Game Design & Development” (with Assistant Professor Peter Brinson), encourages his students to experiment with alternative approaches to the cinematic aesthetic increasingly featured in big budget video game productions.

He says, “Play game developers chase the dream of photorealism, but something that really excites me about this next generation of games is that I think we’ll start to see more developers using all this computer processing power in the service of non-realistic kinds of rendering. We could imagine a video game that looks like an impressionist painting or perhaps a 3-D video game where the geometry is constantly collapsing into some kind of Cubist rendering. I’m interested in game ways to use the computer processing power in the service of non-realistic kinds of rendering. We could imagine a video game that looks like an impressionist painting or perhaps a 3-D video game where the geometry is constantly collapsing into some kind of Cubist rendering. I’m interested in game
At Microsoft, Wixon used both quantitative data and “qualitative” real-time video capture to document hiccups in pre-release beta versions of Halo for Microsoft’s Xbox console. Game designers, at Bungie, the company that developed Halo, used the research to improve player experience, which contributed to the game’s rise as one of Xbox’s biggest hits.

At SCA, Wixon teaches students to apply similarly rigorous research tools for projects ranging from physical therapy applications for Microsoft Kinect to the use of humor in game design. “My students come forward with a diversity of questions that I wouldn’t have been exposed to in the industry,” he says.

Wixon says, “All products begin with an intention to communicate something to an audience. The contribution of research is to see if that intention was communicated. Did it come across or is there something in the design of the system that gets in the way of the experience, where people got hung up on some aspect of the interactivity and they’re not getting the message? That’s where research comes together with design. It’s been fascinating to expose students to some of these capabilities.”

For Fink, Lemarchand and Wixon, the SCA experience, which contributed to the rise of the video game industry’s new generation of designers, is a focus of their teaching. “I’m exposing people to different research technologies and the assumptions behind those technologies,” Wixon says, “so far, Lemarchand has been pleased with classroom response. “Students have made such wonderful, richly expressive work that I’ve been blown away by the size of their imaginations.”

Wixon, speaking to students at the installation of the Microsoft Endowed Professor on June 6th, “It’s rare to be in an industry where you get to see multiple revolutions. Doing graphical user interface at DEC, then going to Microsoft to work on games and gestural interface, I’ve seen two revolutions.”

Wixon began giving guest lectures six years ago for a class called “Usability Testing for Games” which was created by lecturer Heather Desurvire, owner and principal of the game research company Behavioristics Inc. Wixon began teaching full time at SCA last year when he became the first holder of the Microsoft Endowed Professorship. “When you work in a corporate environment, your job is to be very focused on making products better. It’s not at all oriented toward Let’s explain and provide some background on the research techniques we use and why we use them. But at SCA, that’s the major focus of my teaching. I’m exposing people to different research technologies and the assumptions behind those technologies.”
of my computer background, it was easier for me to adapt to the new digital tools than people with only an art background and I was ready when the digital art revolution happened.”

Seeking to expand his love of art and his technical skills, Chen applied to the Master of Fine Arts in the John C. Hench Division of Animation and Digital Arts but was told that, with his extensive background in computers, he would be perfect for a division that was then in its first year—Interactive Media. (In 2013, it was renamed the Interactive Media & Games Division.)

“At the time, [the division] was doing mostly interactive media with no games direction. Other students were doing mobile apps, internet apps, virtual reality but no one was working on games,” says Chen. The spark that convinced Chen that the video game industry was his calling was a USC trip to the Game Developers Conference in 2004. “When I went to GDC and saw 20,000 people who were so excited about the industry, I thought ‘Wow, these people are the real thing. These people are proud of their work and that work is making games.’ It changed things for me.”

CRASHING THE SERVERS
Upon returning to USC, Chen and a team of students including thatgamecompany co-founder, Kellee Santiago (EMD ’06), began working on a game. Chen shared a childhood experience with the group. Hospitalized after an asthma attack, he had spent the time daydreaming about the world outside. Inspired, the team made Cloud, a game where the player assumes the role of a child in a hospital bed who flies outside in their imagination.

Cloud started out as a student game and was later released (after extensive tweaking and expanding) as the first of three thatgamecompany games released by Sony in 2007. The player guides a small, multi-segmented worm-like creature through an aquatic environment. Chen’s primary goal with Cloud was to create a game that both hardcore and casual gamers would enjoy.

Journey
The third game in thatgamecompany’s deal with Sony, Journey, won eight D.I.C.E. awards, including Game of the Year, in 2013 and has developed a rabid fanbase, cementing thatgamecompany as one of the most innovative forces in the entire video game industry. The player takes the role of a robed figure in a desert that must travel to a beacon on the top of a mountain.

THE WISDOM OF JENNOVA CHEN
What advice would Chen give today’s students who are interested in game design?

“With Cloud, the real breakthrough [in game design] was figuring out a way to make all gamers enjoy the game in their own way.”

“Keep your games small in scope until you have the resources to make a bigger game. It’s about the quality of the game, not the size.”

“I learned about business the hard way. It’s easy to be a game designer; but to own a company you have to learn how to deal with money and people. That’s a whole different challenge.”

ON THE FUTURE OF THE GAME INDUSTRY
Of all of the disciplines taught at SCA, video game design has changed the most in the shortest amount of time. While volatility can be a challenge for recent graduates, it also presents incredible opportunity for individuals and teams who are paying attention and anticipating the shifts.

Chen believes demographic shifts caused by technological advances are going to change everything. While the industry’s backbone has always been blockbuster; “Triple A” games, Chen believes the low level of entry for what were traditionally termed “casual” games is going to make hard core console gamers a niche market.

“The biggest changes aren’t going to come from console gamers,” says Chen. “The mobile industry is changing everything and the biggest revenue games on iOS right now don’t even monetize or reach gamers in a traditional way. Ten years ago, you would have to know how to find a game, how to download the game and pay over the internet. Now, playing a game has no entry barrier. It’s essentially a viral concept when it comes to game marketing and distribution. Game designers can’t ignore this.”

With technology tearing barriers down, the definition of who plays games is going to shift, redefining the business side of video games, he adds. “There is going to be incredible opportunity for designers and business people to create games that speak to women or families or to people who don’t consider themselves gamers in the traditional mold,” says Chen. “This is the greatest time in the world to create games for those people or games that speak to themes that are more emotionally relevant.”
As one of the School of Cinematic Arts’ two original divisions (along with Film & Television Production), Critical Studies has a long history. In the early days it was seen as the academic side of a film school, with classes that were focused on film theory and history. But as SCA grew and evolved, so did Critical Studies. In fact, the Division has embraced change by adding classes on new, emerging media like web series and video games, and global movements.

Today, Critical Studies is the division that unites all of SCA, educating students from every major, and boldly going wherever the next media trends take it. Its outlook is reflected in its new name, the Bryan Singer Division of Critical Studies.

In February 2013, Singer, the director/producer/writer known for films like *The Usual Suspects*, Superman Returns and the *X-Men* Franchise blockbusters, donated $5 million to the School to name the division from which he graduated in 1989, becoming the first alum to do so. What makes it a perfect match is that Singer and Critical Studies have similar reputations, cerebral and heady, even when it comes to controversial topics.

That is why the Bryan Singer Division of Critical Studies will continue to welcome every perspective. “If you look at our students and the work they do, we have people who work on avant-garde, people who work on Indian cinema, people who work on post-nationalist Indian cinema, people who work in entertainment cultures,” says Lippit. “We haven’t made a decision to have a single identity. What we’ve tried to do is to really give students a very broad range of things to think about.”

This approach, he says, is why Critical Studies could produce a filmmaker like Bryan Singer, whose projects have grossed more than $2 billion worldwide, as well as professionals in other fields. “We have lawyers, scholars, journalists, people who go on to become agents or work in many other aspects of the film industry, so we like to think that Critical Studies will not foreclose any of your options,” says Lippit.

Lippit, adding, “I don’t think we’ve produced any astronauts; but virtually everything else.”
The Future is Now for WORLD BUILDING

Yet another paradigm shift is afoot in the entertainment industry. Technology is enabling the biggest, most imaginative entertainment experiences in history and is causing a rethinking and redefinition of the industry’s creative processes. Those technological advancements, and the storytelling they enable, are inspiring new educational approaches at the School of Cinematic Arts. So the timing couldn’t have been better this summer when George Lucas and Steven Spielberg suggested, in no uncertain terms, that big interactive and immersive experiences are where the entertainment business is headed.
gestural interface that computer engineer John Underkoffler created for the film is now being used in the real world. These days, McDowell routinely embraces a nonlinear workflow where the director and the production designer are continuously communicating and perhaps making changes throughout the production. In the case of the gritty Superman reboot, *Man of Steel*, the design of Krypton grew out of the idea that its people could modify the world on a molecular level. Krypton’s design was therefore extremely important to the goals of the script and influenced the way strands of narrative evolved as there needed to be a seemingly organic symbiosis between structures and people. While McDowell’s work model was initially based on rethinking the film process, it is applicable to all narrative media. He has now brought the world building discipline to the USC School of Cinematic Arts. As a full-time Associate Professor, he has developed a cross-divisional graduate world building course centered in the new Media Arts + Practice Division and has set up a practice-based research lab called the World Building Media Lab. He has also established the 5D Institute, an organized research unit within the School that serves as a premiere discussion space for new ways of thinking about design in narrative media. “We are moving into a landscape where art and science, design and engineering are inseparable,” explains McDowell. “At their intersection lies world building. In a practical sense, it’s a different way of thinking about the future of narrative space that we’re all moving into. A lot of the confusion and the problems we’ve been dealing with in the last few years has been a disconnect between the potential story spaces and our traditional ways of iterating and producing for stories that are not making the best possible use of the tools at our disposal.”

McDowell divides the process of world building into Inception (in which the world is developed), Prototyping (in which it is tested and visualized), Manufacturing (in which it is produced and captured) and Finishing (in which it is completed in post and experienced by its audience). “We need to move into a space where these silos are not constraining our ability to think about new stories and new story space,” he insists. “It’s about finding the spaces in between and then finding ways to establish a deep cross-divisional collaboration. Last semester, we thought a lot about development, the idea that world building precedes script. We formed small collaborative groups for the whole semester that were tasked with developing worlds which then evolved into stories that in turn ‘chose’ their medium.”

You could call that sort of thinking the gospel of Alex McDowell. As one of the industry’s most imaginative production designers, McDowell, who joined the School last year, is one of the world’s leading ambassadors for the importance of world building in the creative process. McDowell calls world building a creative process that involves not only conceptualizing an imagined physical setting, but also that setting’s politics, culture and technology. The thinking is, if you create a “container” for a narrative with all of these factors built in, then you open up new creative possibilities for a writer, director, game designer, cinematographer, production designer and producer. With advancements in digital technology, particularly with respect to creating visual effects, world building is becoming particularly central in storytelling because it is now possible to create whatever you can dream up. In movies like *Minority Report*, *Man of Steel* and *Fight Club* McDowell worked to make the worlds the characters inhabit an integral part of who they are and how they live. By creating worlds that were as affecting as the story being told, McDowell was able to give the audience a more immersive experience, even in 2-D. And when the world is so integral to the storytelling, he realized, the old analogue model of preproduction, production and postproduction is no longer viable. On the Spielberg-directed *Minority Report*, McDowell started work on the same day as the scriptwriter and his ideas about how people lived, commuted and the products they used all influenced the script. The g-speak

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Spielberg and Lucas were participating in a discussion on *The Future of Interactive Entertainment* to mark the dedication of the School’s new Interactive Media Building. In front of a rapt audience they offered support to the idea that, from movies to games to television, entertainment needed to become more interactive and more immersive. “I believe we need to get rid of the prosenium,” Spielberg said. “We’ve got to put the player inside the experience, where no matter where you look you’re surrounded by a three-dimensional experience. That’s the future.”

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The result was that students from Production, Critical Studies, Interactive Media & Games, and the School’s other divisions had to think outside the box and work collaboratively to build virtual worlds that accommodated multiple storylines. “And out of that collaboration, which is really unique in the cinema school at that level, ownership changes, intellectual property changes, and the whole development changes. And also the media platform potentially changes,” McDowell says. “There were a lot of Interactive Media & Games students interested in weaving traditional cinematic storytelling with the game space. And there were Production students interested as much in Interactive as they are in Film.”

In the past year, McDowell’s students have created as many as twenty new worlds, each with a unique outcome of the new world building process, and each challenging the notion of traditional process and media outcome.

“It’s the discovery of a new, non-linear mindset,” says McDowell. “Even if the director is powerful or there’s a strong script at the center, the best directors are the ones that remain open to all the influences around them and form an alliance with their core creative team. My background comes from this linear, script-based narrative space. But if you try to apply that to a trans-media space and multiple platforms, it just doesn’t work. The whole point is that the world provokes many strands of narrative that evolve and intersect in different ways, and form different component parts of the storytelling process. It forces one to have to start thinking about story differently, and when you bring in Interactive Media & Games, collide it with Production or even Architecture or Animation, the way that stories evolve really changes.”

McDowell was recruited by Dean of Research, Scott Fisher (see sidebar), who was inspired by the way McDowell connected world building with storytelling in Minority Report. In addition to installing world building as part of the new Media Arts + Practice Division, Fisher empowered McDowell to create a test bed for trying out new technology. To that end, a new home to the World Building Media Lab is currently under construction in the School’s Robert Zemeckis Center for Digital Arts, as a research and practice space for all students.

“I think this is a huge deal for the School of Cinematic Arts in the sense that production has been very successful and Hollywood is populated by many of our alums,” Fisher explains. “But typically they come out of here learning the same process, the same workflow, the same approach that’s been taught for five decades. As Dean of Research, I’m looking at new kinds of initiatives for the School, new areas we should be exploring. One of the biggest initiatives fueled by hiring Alex is to build a new component in the School focused on world building and virtual production.”

McDowell believes Fisher is viscerally engaged in pushing tech and storytelling forward. “We’re of one and the same mind with Dean Elizabeth Daley, who is leading the charge to break down the silos,” he says. “This progressive approach has the possibility of putting the School ahead of the narrative industries.” Indeed, McDowell is creating a proof of concept for the future of the inception process. “How do we evolve stories, how do we organically allow this non-linear, collaborative process to evolve?” he muses. “How do we put the tools to the service of good storytelling, combining an interactive war room with modeling tools, painting tools, rapid-prototyping and a fully immersive performance space where you can put your models in a virtual environment—where you can experience it with a head mount display, with tablets, with a virtual camera. You can do location scouting, performance and put immersive sound right in there from the beginning.”

McDowell says the lab can be a democratic space. “And the great thing about the university lab setting is that it’s an agnostic space where you can talk to studios and corporate partners and faculty from other departments and bring them...
all together. I hope that people will set aside ownership, to an extent to collaborate on the future of education and the future of work.”

In the last decade, Virtual Production has helped improve effects-filled storytelling. The process allows filmmakers to shoot in real-time against virtual worlds that are already realized, replacing green-screen techniques. At SCA, they are beta-testing an interactive virtual camera system and using real-time technology developed for use in the interactive space.

However, McDowell and his team see larger opportunities with corporations outside of entertainment as a vital source of funding and to solve similar workflow problems. With Boeing, they are investigating how to translate engineering language into scenarios for world building and narrative. Thanks to a grant from the Hay Foundation, USC is collaborating with the Salk Institute and UCLA to investigate the future of Neuroscience and Architecture.

And with Intel they are developing platforms for using and narrative. Thanks to a grant from the Hay Foundation, they are beta-testing an interactive virtual camera system and using real-time technology developed for use in the interactive space.

For McDowell, adjusting to academia has been an eye-opening experience. In the past year he has been exposed to more technology than in the last decade of moviemaking. For one thing, working on improving fully immersed virtual design, alongside deeply experienced faculty like Scott Fisher and Mark Bolas of USC’s Institute for Creative Technologies, is stimulating his instincts as a designer and leading him to rethink his creative process.

“He goes the distance, and we have a better understanding of what narrative means, what visual effects means, what a camera is—all of those fundamental questions.”

He welcomes the constant questioning and requestioning, and the challenges they present. He works to encourage his students’ excitement about innovating a new paradigm. “I think we’re all aware of the change in the air and it’s a huge responsibility of the students to say ‘Do not conform to traditional methods at this point because it’s not going to serve you well.’”

Still, for McDowell and everyone else at SCA, the point is still how best to tell emotionally compelling stories. The goal is simple, even if the technology is inspiring. “How do I think differently about what narrative means, what editorial means, what a camera is—all of those fundamental questions?”

For Fisher, the biggest question of the last decade has been how to figure out how to create different kinds of story experiences for many burgeoning platforms. “And as a School, we are seeing our students doing this. They are immersed in studios and we need to tweak our curriculum and our research efforts to think about how we approach this.”

This kind of interdisciplinary approach is a big focus of the new Media Arts + Practice Division. “We want to open it up and think about these multi-platforms, even traditional ones as well as reality TV stories. And the world building approach enables that in unique ways.”

Fisher communicates how this might all come together by computing and design. “You’re looking at the same previs or even the exact same storyboards, you are a participant, you can go check in on these virtual spaces, you are a participant, can go check in on these different story threads. That’s exciting, it’s a lot of interesting research questions.”

Whether you have no agency, whether you’re just listening, whether you can start participating in the conversation. That’s what we’re trying to figure out. How does narrative survive all of this and how do we get more interactive games experiences. “That’s a fascinating Holodeck experience: ‘Using a head-mounted display, these virtual spaces have multiple characters about going about their business in this story world and you’re having conversations with you as a participant, you can go check in on these different story threads,’” he explains. “There are a lot of interesting research questions. Whether you have no agency, whether you’re just listening, whether you can start participating in the conversation. That’s what we’re trying to figure out. How does narrative survive all of this and how do we get more interactive games experiences.”

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The Interactive Media Building (IMB) is home to some of the most “cool stuff” the School has to offer. From cutting edge interactive labs to touch screens to places to watch others play your games, the IMB has it all.

Mobile and Environmental Media Research Lab
This lab investigates location-specific storytelling, exploring how environments can act as narrative entities. Its projects demonstrate that buildings, cars, city streets, and even everyday objects like benches and podiums, can all deliver stories—showing that everyone (and everything) can have an engaging tale.

Creative Media and Behavioral Health Center
The projects developed at the Center apply the principles and processes used in creating entertainment to behavioral science, medicine and public health.

Student Collaboration Areas
As is the case with other buildings in the Cinematic Arts Complex, collaboration spaces were central to the design of the Interactive Media Building. From small benches to large patios, there are many places for students to meet, work and share ideas.

Screening Room
The screening room is equipped with 4K projection, which will enable screenings in high resolution 4K—approximately four times the resolution of standard HD.

Jury Classroom
This conference-style room can facilitate large seminars and allows students to each have a customizable workspace. It contains the latest equipment for multimedia presentations, including live streaming of remote events.

Render Farm
This state-of-the-art server room has dozens of racks for the most advanced technology. The Interactive Media Building is home to the School’s “Render Farm” which features 130 servers for rendering.

Game Innovation Lab
SCA is known for encouraging experimental video games and the work in this lab focuses on bringing game design to a broader audience. There are useful applications for game design in the arts, education, science, politics and other fields.

Fabrication Lab
Interactive projects aren’t just about software; physical prototypes are a frequent requirement. This lab contains 3D printers, arduino electronics kits, and other tools students need to bring their projects to life.

Think Tank
The cinematic arts are all about collaboration but interactive media, in particular, requires multiple group projects on a large scale. The Think Tank is designed in the mode of Silicon Valley group-centric workspaces to facilitate meetings and collaborative work.

Lower Level

Level 1

Level 2

Level 3

Collaboration Lab
This lab allows students to set up workstations for advanced projects and offers enough space to test kinetic, space-intensive projects like gestural games utilizing Microsoft Kinect.

Advanced Game Development Lab
Advanced Games is the flagship course of USC Games—a partnership between SCA and the Viterbi School of Engineering. Students taking this class now have a dedicated workspace.

Multimedia Labs
These customizable spaces allow students to create work groups around multiple screens. They were designed to facilitate the unique teaching paradigm of the Media Arts + Practice Division, which encourages students to continuously showcase and workshop the projects they are developing.

Lobby Gallery
Designed to feature large installations of state-of-the-art touch screens, the gallery will showcase faculty and student projects. It is the main conduit to the entire building so its exhibitions will serve as an introduction to cutting edge interactive media with a high “wow” factor.

Game Innovation Lab

Level 1

Student Collaboration Areas

Level 2

Level 3

Screening Room

Jury Classroom

Render Farm

Game Innovation Lab

collaboration lab

Multimedia labs

Fabrication Lab

Think Tank

Creative Media and Behavioral Health Center

Student Collaboration Areas

Mobile and Environmental Media Research Lab

Lower Level

 Takes 30 • IN MOTION • USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS

 LEVEL 3

 LEVEL 2

 LEVEL 1

 LOWER LEVEL
For years, the Entertainment and Technology Center (ETC) at USC operated in a number of off-campus buildings, giving it an under the radar feel that belies its extraordinary importance not only to the university, but to the cinema industry as a whole.

Founded in 1993 with support from George Lucas, ETC acts as a kind of entertainment technology United Nations, a neutral ground for technology and media companies to meet and discuss issues surrounding the technical side of the industry. Recently, the organization moved into the Robert Zemeckis Center for Digital Arts. With this new, prominent campus location, ETC’s groundbreaking work will be a lot more visible, especially to SCA students.

In the early 2000s, Charles Swartz, the noted technologist who was then ETC’s Executive Director, worked to position the Center as a leader in establishing digital cinema standards. Swartz, who died in 2007 and was commemorated this year with an Endowed Chair in Entertainment Technology, wisely saw the need for a neutral facilitator in the process. During this time, ETC provided a safe, collegial space for media competitors to meet and discuss the technical issues around converting to digital, and also helped coordinate testing of the new technologies at the Hollywood Pacific Theatre (originally the Warner Bros. Theatre) in Los Angeles. “People had ninety years of successful experience with 35mm and no one wanted to give it up unless the digital solution was well conceived as a global standard,” says Ken Williams, the Center’s current Executive Director. “The idea of digital cinema coming up as a series of standards now in wide-use. “All these things now seem old hat, but frequently we were dealing with brand new ideas and technologies for the very first time,” says Williams.

ETC has also begun a number of public-facing forums, leveraging its long-standing industry connections to give students and faculty a glimpse of where entertainment technology is heading. They recently wrapped up a two-day event dubbed “Silicon Beach@USC,” a joint conference developed with the Marshall and Viterbi Schools, where more than seventy USC student and alumni teams pitched business concepts, and some five hundred students and industry professionals showed up for keynotes and panels on the intersection of digital technology and Hollywood. In October, they held their quarterly Digital Town Square, a new series initiated this year which showed up for keynotes and panels on the intersection of digital technology and Hollywood. In October, they held their quarterly Digital Town Square, a new series initiated this year which showed up for keynotes and panels on the intersection of digital technology and Hollywood.

ETC Executive Director Ken Williams (left) presents Chuck Dages, who oversees emerging technologies at Warner Bros., with the Bob Lambert Technology Leadership Award.

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Among the major media companies to utilize ETC are Disney, Sony Pictures Entertainment, Twentyfirst Century Fox, Paramount, Universal Pictures, Warner Bros., Entertainment, DTS and Lucasfilm Ltd. “We’ve become a place where content and technology players can really sit down and convene around issues that have traditionally involved the facilitation of high level architecture,” Williams explains.

While the mission of ETC was for a long time strictly technical, it has recently begun to broaden its focus on the intersection of issues that affect both the business and the consumer side of the industry. Williams described research the Center is doing around 4K and Beyond viewing explaining that some of the questions being discussed include whether the industry should “be moving towards spending more money on more pixels or better pixels” and “would higher contrast 2K have more impact than 4K”? This kind of consumer-facing research is a new direction for the Center, which in the 90s focused more on secure networking protocols, digital file formats and a bevy of technical standards now in wide-use: “All these things now seem old hat, but frequently we were dealing with brand new ideas and technologies for the very first time,” says Williams.

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By the end of 2013, the American Film Showcase will have visited 47 countries on 51 separate trips. They will have traveled to places as small as rural Malawian villages and as large as the great, sprawling metropolis of Seoul, South Korea. And yet, within the SCA, they keep a low profile.

Started in 2011 with a grant from the State Department, the American Film Showcase (AFS) exists to bring a unique offering of American documentaries and independent films to countries around the world. They begin with a list of recommendations provided by film experts, industry leaders and other media organizations. From there, the American Film Showcase and the State Department work to select the films they think are the most interesting.

What’s unique about the AFS is what happens next. Instead of simply touring the films around the world, individual embassies choose a selection of films and work with the AFS to create an event. The AFS then sends films, filmmakers and content experts to participate in presentations and workshops. For example, in 2012, Mexico hosted a showing of Steve James’ The Interrupters—a film about violence and poverty in inner-city Chicago—with former gang members in attendance. The discussion following the film revealed that many of the viewers were surprised to learn that such levels of violence can exist in the United States and, to some extent, took comfort in knowing that their problems are universal and not unique to Mexico.

This kind of cultural exchange via film is at the very heart of the American Film Showcase’s vision. Often called “soft diplomacy”, it seeks to encourage person-to-person contact, to reduce the kinds of misunderstandings that cloud cross-cultural communication. Rachel Gandlin, the Project Administrator of the AFS, says that films are often selected for their “more nuanced view of American life”, adding that “we have films that take place in rural, poverty-stricken parts of America. Lots of normal, average people. No Iron Man, no Superman, just this sort of regular life that people have no idea about.”

Gandlin goes on to note that part of the mission of the AFS is to “bring award-winning contemporary American documentaries to audiences around the world, offering a view of American society and culture as seen by independent documentary filmmakers.” Judging from their progress, they’re well on their way to being yet another unique SCA success story.

Among the selections for the 2013 showcase are 43365, a slice-of-life documentary about the small town of Sidney, Ohio (the title is the town’s zip code), and Brooklyn Castle, about a chess team in a poor Brooklyn neighborhood. The showcase also includes several animated shorts and a small number of independent narrative films.

Although it keeps a low profile, the American Film Showcase, has been a sleeper hit, already having been fully funded for the 2012-2013 year. Gandlin is optimistic that they’ll be back for 2014. When the program first started, she says, “we had to explain it to filmmakers and ask them to be part of it. But now we’re getting a lot of filmmakers coming to us saying ‘how do I get involved? How do I do this?’” And while many filmmakers are initially wary of working for a government-funded film showcase, the AFS runs a two day orientation to dispel fears of censorship or interference, noting that “You’re not representing the United States government, but rather yourself as an American.”

The American Film Showcase represents some of what makes SCA such a unique and extraordinary institution—that it is not just a program devoted to supplying high quality talent to Hollywood, but to exploring the power of film in all of its forms. The mission of the AFS is to “bring award-winning contemporary American documentaries to audiences around the world, offering a view of American society and culture as seen by independent documentary filmmakers.” Judging from their progress, they’re well on their way to being yet another unique SCA success story.
Lunch With Larry
CATCHING UP WITH THE CHAIR OF THE PETER STARK PRODUCING PROGRAM

by Ryan Gilmour

THE PETER STARK PRODUCING PROGRAM HAS MANY REPUTATIONS. TO SOME, IT’S THE “BUSINESS” PROGRAM AT THE SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS (SCA). TO OTHERS, IT’S THE SOURCE OF AN INCREDIBLE PERCENTAGE OF HOLLYWOOD’S INTERNS. TO THIRTY YEARS WORTH OF ALUMNI, IT’S HOME.

Tucked away on the third floor of the George Lucas Building, a small, four-office suite has been launching the careers of some of SCA’s most successful and well-known graduates. From Robert Greenblatt ‘87, President of NBC, to Twilight writer Melissa Rosenberg ‘90, to Producer Ed Saxon ‘84, who won an Oscar for Silence of the Lambs to Paul Gerard ’99, Creative Director of Disney/Toon Studios—Stark success stories are as diverse as the entertainment industry itself.

To understand how the Stark Program is evolving, In Motion sat down with Larry Turman, Chair of the Peter Stark Producing Program, whose fifty-year career includes films such as The Goodbye Girl, American History X and Short Circuit. Turman also wrote one of the benchmark books on the art of creative producing “So You Want to be a Producer.”

Our conversation ranged from the philosophy and practices of the Stark program, to the future of the entertainment industry and the success of the musical The Book of Mormon (which he loves), with Turman articulating his views with his characteristic intensity and charm. It was easy to see why he is such a legendary producer.

Right away, Turman wanted to make it clear that the Stark program is not an entertainment industry MBA. He said the program got a reputation for being business-focused because of its founder Art Murphy, who was a mathematician by training and, as the lead film critic for Variety, pioneered the practice of reporting on grosses. Murphy recruited producer Ray Stark, who endowed the division in honor of his son Peter. Turman said Murphy approached the Stark curriculum as training for the entertainment business. “He was one of those visionaries who brought a brand new perspective to the business,” he said. “He was one of the first people to articulate the business with statistics—a great business mind.”

When Turman joined Stark in 1991, he changed the program to approach producing as a creative position, broadening its spectrum to include courses that focused on the creative challenges of making movies. “The main difference from my tenure has been philosophical,” said Turman. “My primary philosophy is to train creative and entrepreneurial producers.”

Essentially, Turman believes that today’s producers have to be knowledgeable about the whole process, because they are frequently the people who are moving everyone forward. “Producing, I believe is a noble profession,” he stressed. “Most of the movies that get made only get made because a producer kept pushing and pushing and pushing and never gave up. Stark business courses are very focused on how the theories are actually being employed in the business, and are taught by people who are currently working on those deals. Turman explained it this way: “I preach art but I teach commerce. There are hundreds of film schools in America. All of them will teach you how to make a movie. I teach how to get a movie made.”

Turman’s philosophy is in line with the evolution in the industry as increasingly producers are seen both as the creative forces behind projects, as well as among the main benefactors of their success, so they have input both creatively and commercially. Ironically, many of Art Murphy’s former students helped re-shape the industry in this new mold. Consider that people like John Wells ’82 (ER, Shameless), Stacey Sher ’83 (Em-Brookedich Djongo lucheno), Ed Saxon ’84 (The Silence of the Lambs) and Neal Moritz ’85 (Fast and Furious franchise), are all seen as creative collaborators.

Turman also included television, and eventually interactive media to a curriculum that was previously all about film. He said television offered “more job opportunities and more opportunity to do serious content.” And the program’s students are increasingly as likely to be working on web animation projects or a multi-player video game. They also increasingly become multi-genre practitioners, like writer John August ’94 who wrote both the film and Broadway musical scripts of Big Fish, and was nominated for a Grammy for writing the lyrics of “Wanda’s Welcome Song” from Charlie and the Chocolate Factory—one of several of director Tim Burton’s films that he has scripted.

The Peter Stark Producing Program is a two-year graduate program that admits twenty-five students a year. Students take courses in writing, marketing, budgeting and all other aspects of the entertainment industry. In the second year, all Stark classes are in the evening so that students can either work jobs in the industry or, if they are more interested in independent producing, can focus on their creative work.

And what does Larry look for in a Stark student? “It’s inevitable. You know when you see it. There’s no way that someone can prepare other than his or her life. What I look for is entrepreneurial spirit, someone who is smart. Some people have one or the other. I have turned down straight A students from Harvard and taken a B student from Southwest Texas State who, on his application said in his junior year he started a car wash business on fraternity row and had five kids working for him.”

As lunch wound down, I asked Larry for some parting wisdom for the next generation of entertainment industry luminaries. “I’ve learned how much I don’t know,” was his reply. “I’m still looking for wisdom myself. Wise decisions come from making several poor decisions.” But then he offered this: “Here’s my wisdom: Follow your bliss. As they’ve said for years in the entertainment business, if someone can talk you out of it, you don’t belong in it.”

Food for thought.
Matt Arnold ’02 has written and sold Emerald City to NBC.

John August ’94 wrote the book for the Broadway musical adaptation of Big Fish. Irima Billa ’77 Her project, Floodgate Steps was selected for Film Independent’s 14th annual
Forbidden Steps
Her project, was nominated for Best Broadway musical adaptation of Hello Ghost
Stephen Chbosky ’92
While We’re Young television series,

DANCE SHOWDOWN—
comedy pilot Main Street for ABC, 2013

helen childress ’91 has written and sold Emerald for HBO.

Phil Davis ’07 producers;
Jessabelle
Kevin Greutert ’88 keep him at NBC through 2017.

Mick Jagger, and will executive produce the film based on the novel
The Astronaut to Fox; and with Michael Alaimo to develop an untitled workplace comedy from Aseem Batra; a half-hour

Megan Ellison will produce the film adaptation of The Manhattan Project for Millennium Films.

Barry Levy ’96 has been hired as President of Original Programming for FX Networks and FX

Eric Schrier ’98 was named President of the studio.

Karen Cronen ’87 will adapt the Korean

Dan O’Connor to write and executive produce the series

Ira Rubenstein ’92 will write and executive

Ira Rubenstein ’92

Electra Bulger for LD Entertainment.

Kevin Reynolds ’81 wrote

and director, will be published in November 2013.

The Voices
David O. Russell
Stacey Sher ’85 is producing

Paul Gerard ’99, Director of Creative Affairs at

Barry Poznick’ 95

Chad Stahelski
Stacy Buxton ’92

Nina Paley and Harmony House, LLC for NBC. It was nominated for Best Actor in a Miniseries or Made-for-TV Film.

Raye Davis ’08 wrote

Kirsten Schaffer

and

Barry Levy ’96

and

Stacey Sher ’85

for Turner Broadcasting System. Her project, was nominated for

Dolphin Entertainment and Open Road.

Jatin Surendra

Jon Hurwitz ’85 wrote

and
directed the comedy film

Aaron Kaplan ’96 produced the romantic comedy

Lea Thompson

is Vice President of Comedy

Jim Toth, who will executive produce

Chris Terrio ’92 wrote The Forger for Paramount.

Tate Taylor is producing the adaptation of the play of the same name. The film was especially crafted to play on small-format/mobile devices.

Barbara Stepansky ’82 has been selected as a 2013 Nicholl Fellow winner for her screenplay Sugar In My veins.

Kirk Sullivan ’06 directed The Dead Man, written by Nick Jonas, an adaptation of the play of the same name. The film was especially crafted to play on small-format/mobile devices.

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2013 ALUMNI QUICKTAKES

Matt Arnold ’02 has written and sold Emerald City to NBC.

John August ’94 wrote the book for the Broadway musical adaptation of Big Fish. Irima Billa ’77 Her project, Floodgate Steps was selected for Film Independent’s 14th annual film festival. Paul Boardman ’93 and Scott Derrickson ’93 wrote Devil’s First, slated for a 2014 release by Image Entertainment.

Joseph Berogue ’92 Screenplay and Best Director as part of total nominations for his film Hidden Moon, at Mexico’s prestigious Silver Goddess Awards.

Christopher Boyd ’06 won the Annies Award Best Sports Documentary for The First Pitch.

Bryan Turk ’91 will executive produce the

Marc Silverstein ’96 and Abby Kohn ’96 comedy pilot Plan Street

Wickham ’92 will produce. Turk will executive produce Westworld for HBO.

Shelden Candas ’02 and Justin Wilson ’98 will write and co-executive produce the 12-hour

All Together

in Boston in June 2013.

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and

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The Walcott Company at 20th Century Fox TV.

Davey Wreden ’11 to form The Walcott Company at 20th Century Fox TV.

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Ben Queen ’96 wrote

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Amazon.com.

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Diana Ross

will executive produce the

in 2011.

in 2011.

Anya Loder to direct

Ludwig for

and
directed the comedy pilot

and

will executive produce

and

won the People’s Choice Award for

Megan Ellison will produce

and

will executive produce

and

will direct

and

won the People’s Choice Award for

Evan Katz ’86 will executive produce

42. Also signaled a new two-year deal with Venezuelan cable network Radio

Alaimo to develop an untitled drama.

Kevin Bacon will produce

and

will direct and

will executive produce

and

will direct

Michael Alaimo to develop an untitled drama.

Kevin Reynolds ’81 wrote

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for NBC.

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IN MEMORIAM

Ray Harryhausen
(1920–2013)
USC Alumnus, SCA Lecturer and Visual Effects Pioneer

Born and raised in Los Angeles, California, Harryhausen’s groundbreaking work in visual effects would influence filmmakers like Steven Spielberg and George Lucas.

Harryhausen was greatly influenced by King Kong (1933), a film that both fascinated him and sparked his love for the cinematic arts. Harryhausen conducted his own experiments, which included borrowing a 16mm camera to film his handmade marionettes as they “came to life,” even before he studied filmmaking at USC.

Harryhausen began taking night classes while still a high school student. While his primary passion was in visual effects, he took classes in art direction, photography and editing under the newly formed Department of Cinematography. In 1942, Harryhausen worked with USC staff member Richard L. Bare on the short film, So You Want to Give Up Smoking. In 1949, Harryhausen took home the Academy Award for Special Visual Effects for his work on Mighty Joe Young. His breakthrough effects featured in the film The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms (1953) inspired the monster movie genre.

Other memorable works include The 7th Voyage of Sinbad (1958), Jason and the Argonauts (1963) and the original Clash of the Titans (1981), his final film before retirement. Numerous modern-day films have paid homage to Harryhausen’s work, including Monsters, Inc. (2001), The Incredibles (2004), and Corpse Bride (2005). In 2005, Harryhausen was inducted into the Science Fiction Hall of Fame. The 2013 film Pacific Rim was dedicated to Harryhausen and fellow filmmaker Ishiro Honda.

Harryhausen is survived by his wife, Diana Livingston Bruce, and their daughter, Vanessa.
SCA NETWORK MEMBERSHIPS

The SCA Network is a great way to stay connected to fellow SCA Trojans and make a difference in the School’s future. Through exclusive screenings and mixers, the SCA Network provides an outlet for USC School of Cinematic Arts alumni and current students to gather and network. Best of all, Network benefits are complimentary with an annual donation to the USC School of Cinematic Arts. Recent screenings have included The Heat, This is the End, Fruitvale Station, Elysium, Pain & Gain and Don Jon.

$25 Level
Invitation to exclusive SCA Network only screenings and mixers plus website recognition

$50 Level
SCA Military Style Cap*

$100 Level
Print SCA Alumni Directory (printed annually) and access to the online SCA Alumni Directory through Community*

$250 Level
SCA Network Athletic T-shirt and Reality Ends Here History book*

$500 Level
Exclusive SCA Embroidered Fleece Jacket and Reserved Seating at SCA Network screenings and events*

$1000 Level
Invitation to SCA Special Events as part of the Annual Leadership Circle membership*

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