

FILMMAKER™

THE MAGAZINE OF INDEPENDENT FILM

a publication of ifp



FRENCH CONNECTION

Julie Delpy on
life, filmmaking &
2 Days in New York

Beasts of the Southern Wild

Red Hook Summer

Compliance

How to Survive a Plague

Keep the Lights On

Looper

Cosmopolis

25 NEW FACES of Independent Film

Production and distribution case studies

Pitching with Images

\$5.95 U.S. / \$7.95 Canada
Summer 2012, Vol. 20, #4



www.filmmakermagazine.com

ON FILM SCHOOL AND COLUMBIA'S 25TH

BY CHARLES LYONS

In early May, with much hoopla, Columbia University's graduate Film Program celebrated the 25th anniversary of its annual Film Festival at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall. The auditorium was nearly packed as tuxedo-attired Ira Deutchman, Columbia Film Program chair, took the podium to introduce both the evening, a weeklong series of events and screenings honoring Columbia's film school, and, more particularly, the school's maturation over the past quarter century.

The opening night featured some of the best student films to come out of Columbia, including Adam Davidson's superbly paced Academy Award-winning short *The Lunch Date*, and Greg Mottola's charming *Swingin' in the Painter's Room*. A few days later, Columbia paid special tribute to the host of women who have emerged from the program with distinguished directing careers. Titled "What Glass Ceiling? The Remarkable Success of Columbia's Women Filmmakers," the evening featured such MFA graduates as Lisa Cholodenko, Nicole Holofcener, Larysa Kondracki, Bette Gordon and Kimberly Peirce, and implicitly celebrated other graduates such as Academy Award winner Kathryn Bigelow, Tanya Wexler and Patricia Riggen.

A week after the gala, I met with the ever-youthful Deutchman in his spacious corner office on the fifth floor of Columbia's Dodge Hall. With a stiffening cultural climate for everyone hoping to make movies, particularly small ones with flesh-and-blood characters, I was curious to revisit the question of whether film school is still relevant. Does it really give the graduate a leg up on the competition, or does it just mortgage your future to student loans?

Looking out onto the campus on a bright spring day, Deutchman's voice grew passionate as he discussed his school's curriculum. He said what distinguishes Columbia from other film schools is its concentration on storytelling. "You're a storyteller when you're a director, writer or producer," he said. "No matter what we teach, it's always about concentrating on telling a story." Deutchman added that what makes the program unique is its international student body and its holistic approach; instead of pigeonholing students into a specific creative track, everyone is required to take classes in directing, screenwriting, producing, history and theory, regardless of the concentration into which they were accepted.

For some recent graduates, this approach has already paid off. A 2010 graduate of the program with an emphasis in directing, U.K.-born Jonathan van Tulleken now directs the British

TV series *Misfits* and is writing two feature films for Big Talk Productions, one based on a short he made at Columbia. "The degree itself is a piece of paper, is no use obviously," he wrote in an email. "No one ever asks if you have an MFA. But the work I made in the program with the help of my teachers and friends got me an agent, got me my first writing and directing jobs and started my whole career ... Without having gone to Columbia, I simply can't imagine being where I am."

Merilay Fernandez, another 2010 graduate who also focused on directing, said that Columbia's emphasis on storytelling has definitely worked for her. A native of Venezuela, Fernandez said she worked on a few independent film projects after undergraduate school but needed a more structured experience. "I realized I needed more than a random trial-by-error learning experience since my goal was to pursue a career in film directing." She found that at Columbia, and has been getting work as a director and editor thanks to a connection she made in the program. "I believe that the graduate film program offers the ideal combination of theory and hands-on experience, faculty guidance and freedom for students to embrace projects that are autonomous and ambitious in scope."

Not everyone is so won over. Cressandra Thibodeaux, a 1997 graduate, is skeptical about the value of having attended Columbia film school. "I feel like, for the production side, which is very much what I am doing now, that you should just be doing it," said Thibodeaux. She spoke by phone from Houston, where she runs 14 Pews, a nonprofit arthouse microcinema in a converted old church that hosts theater productions, films and an artist-in-residence program. "I actually tell people not to go to film school if you're into production," she continued. "I still kind of feel like the Stark Producing [Program at USC], or screenwriting programs ... there are certain programs that sort of stand out, and are worth it. But with production, you just kind of need to do [the thing itself]."

Unlike with van Tulleken, a film career didn't readily follow for Thibodeaux. She de-



ANNETTE INSDORF, IRA DEUTCHMAN AND RICHARD BRICK AT THE COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY FILM FESTIVAL.



SHARI SPRINGER BERMAN, CHERIEN DABIS, LISA CHOLODENKO AND NICOLE HOLOFCENER AT THE "WHAT GLASS CEILING?" PANEL

cided to study law for two years at the University of Denver, moved to Los Angeles, married, and eventually returned to her home state, Texas, and to film. Today she's developing a new screenplay while running 14 Pews. She's also taken up cinematography again after all those years, something she felt women weren't encouraged to do when she attended Columbia. "Ultimately I'm very happy that I went," Thibodeaux allowed, but she lamented the burden of the loans. "But paying back my Columbia student loans seemed more implausible than my great grandmother buying her freedom," she said. "I warn future grad students that they too might be enslaved to Sallie Mae, which makes getting your MFA at an Ivy League [school] ludicrous."

Thibodeaux did praise Columbia for teaching her the collaborative process, and arming her with the tools for handling criticism, so essential to her current creative work. Deutchman said such teaching is by design. "We literally enforce collaboration," he stressed. "We make people make movies together. Film has always been a collaborative art. We don't believe in the notion of the single artist that runs

off and does their thing. It's about producers, writers and directors working together."

Statistics suggest Thibodeaux's experience after film school is far more typical than the success stories. Deutchman said only about 5 percent of all film school graduates are working in feature films, but he cautioned that working in features isn't his program's measure of success. "We almost never talk about working in Hollywood," he said. "That would be other schools. If anything, what we talk about is making independent work, and we try to prepare students for that in any way, shape or form."

Deutchman argued that statistics about the feature film industry are deceptive because roughly 90 percent of graduates wind up working in closely related fields. "We find people who are into television, who are doing Web work now," he said. "They're doing all kinds of work directly applicable to the skills that they learned here, that are not necessarily connected to the screen. A new breed of film school students is being trained as the next wave of storytellers, but not necessarily filmmakers."

Which brings us back to the relevance of

film school and whether it increases one's chances for a successful career as a filmmaker. "It's more relevant than ever," Deutchman said. "When you consider that everybody is now a filmmaker — everybody in the world *thinks* they are a filmmaker. You have an iPhone? You're a filmmaker. You know how to work with some Web-editing program? You're a filmmaker. The reality is: the difference between a real filmmaker and the people who think they have the skills is about mastering the craft, and that's something you just don't learn overnight."

If you're a filmmaker, you have a duty to follow that destiny, Deutchman said. "I don't know how you could *not* do it," he continued. "We get testimonials all the time from people who say their parents, or all the advisors they have around them, are always thinking about the practical ... [They] say, 'What's the business plan? What are the odds of getting a job?' You know, the odds are as good as you want to make them. Because the reality is that if you are good at it, if you use the skills in the right way, and you're not an asshole, you're going to end up getting work."