



“WHAT’S YOUR STORY?”

COFAC is spending the year celebrating stories. Stories that are deeply true, personal and autobiographical. Our stories. Check out the spring 2018 theme essay to hear about some of the many voices that have brought us to this place and moment in time.

SPRING 2018 THEME SCHOLAR ESSAY BY MARC MAY



I’m honored to continue in the role of College of Fine Arts & Communication (COFAC) Theme Scholar as we celebrate “What’s Your Story?” in the 2017-2018 academic year. This semester, I decided the best way to discover the story of our college would be to interview a cross section of our faculty.

So I set about interviewing seven of my colleagues in the College of Fine Arts and Communication, one from each area. And I made a choice to keep it to tenure-track faculty and a director as opposed to our industrious staff, administration, and adjunct professors. But please realize without everyone not mentioned here, our college would not run effectively. They deserve a special shout out.

LYNN TOMLINSON

Assistant Professor
Department of Electronic Media & Film



You enter Lynn’s office and it feels artistically welcoming. There are posters on the wall of shows and exhibitions, but nothing is lifeless and nothing feels cold. Of course there are books, but somehow there’s a handmade touch, like the row of theater seats you can actually sit in to take a meeting with her. Creativity dripping around her, it is no shock that Lynn is an animator. She’s a graduate of Philadelphia’s University of the Arts and Towson University’s Studio Art MFA program, and her work has been seen on Bravo, MTV, HBO and public television. She was once even nominated for a Student Academy Award, no small feat. Lynn teaches visual effects, production, and post-production amongst other courses like animation history and gender in media. Having seen Lynn teach firsthand, I know she inherently understands the delicate balance between inspiration and execution. It was also Lynn who once simplified for me in language exactly what the process of animation is: the process of bringing to life the inanimate.

Lynn’s last piece “The Ballad of Holland Island House,” is about an island sinking in the Chesapeake told from the point of view of a house. How many honors did it get? I lost count at over a dozen. You can find it on Vimeo if you are interested. But artists aren’t satisfied with what they’ve done. They’re focused on their newest challenge. Lynn’s current work-in-progress is “The Elephant Song” and she told me about its origin.



Photo by Lynn Tomlinson
A gallery visitor watches "The Elephant's Song" at the University of Delaware.

Lynn got her initial kernel of inspiration while listening to the Memory Palace podcast where she heard the story of the first elephant to appear in a circus. And after extensive research, Lynn decided to tell the tale of Old Bet, the African elephant who came to Somers, New York circa 1800 and helped birth the American circus before dying in captivity. One of Lynn's most important creative decisions was determining which point-of-view the story should be told from. She thought the elephant might be too "noble" to identify with and its human master wasn't right either. So she arrived at telling the story from the point of view of the master's dog. Who better than a loyal canine servant to be the dramatic witness to the animal cruelty a human can inflict? Done in the unusual animation technique of clay on glass with blues-based original songs as its complete soundtrack, "The Elephant Song" is as touching as you might suspect and as thought-provoking. Well, if you know anything about

animation, you know how time-consuming it can be. For "The Elephant Song", it's taking Lynn three hours to generate one second of animation. And it's a seven and a half minute short. That's over thirteen hundred hours of work. That's the

equivalent of one hundred seventy (170) eight-hour days.

So what did I learn from Lynn? Well, a short about a mistreated elephant, however beautiful the end result, must be equally joyless to create, right? That's absolutely incorrect. Beyond allowing Lynn some time to listen to books on tape while she works, her studio is her home office. This allows Lynn to involve her family in her process. Her mother and daughter have assisted, helping her with images, and her son composed the songs, which are spot on. She'd regularly show them and her husband clips to get their feedback. Now that's a joyful way to work, having family around. No wonder Lynn's own children are so creative. It also helps explain why she's so good at enabling other people's children to be creative. Lynn Tomlinson never loses sight of the joy of creation and fosters it whenever possible.

LINDA-DENISE FISHER-HARRELL

Associate Professor
Department of Dance



If you are not aware of the Dance world, then you may not immediately be aware of the impressive stature Linda-Denise has attained. She was

a Principal Dancer in the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater for thirteen years, and as such was a recipient of the 24th Annual New York Dance and Performance Award for contributions to American Dance. L.D., as those who know Linda-Denise call her, has performed at a White House State Dinner, a Kennedy Center Gala, and danced or taught in countries from Israel to Chile. Last year, she traveled to China to successfully represent our college in an arts exchange program.

For someone of such magnitude in her field, Linda-Denise is completely unassuming. She's like the reputation of her native Baltimore: keep your head on straight and keep focused on the work at hand. Thinking of other dancers I've known, I first asked if she came from an athletic family.

Linda-Denise told me she was a very physical kid, playing football and baseball. And her father was a jazz musician, playing clarinet in the Baltimore Westsiders. Just that exposure helped her develop an inherent understanding of time structures. Yet her interest in dance didn't pique until around the height of Michael Jackson's success. She confided

at a young age she wanted to be in one of his videos. Yet despite her athleticism, she was without any formal training when she auditioned for the Baltimore School for the Arts. Accepted into the program (when Tupac Shakur and Jada Pinkett-Smith were also attending), Linda-Denise was a very fast learner and would soon move on to study dance at New York's prestigious Julliard School. Yet, ironically, Julliard was difficult for her because the curriculum wasn't fast enough. She had been used to learning at an accelerated rate to make up for her lack of early training; Julliard was aimed at those who had been dancing since age three. But it was with the Ailey Company where she found not only great professional success, but where she was consistently drafted into a becoming a teacher because others recognized she was good at it.

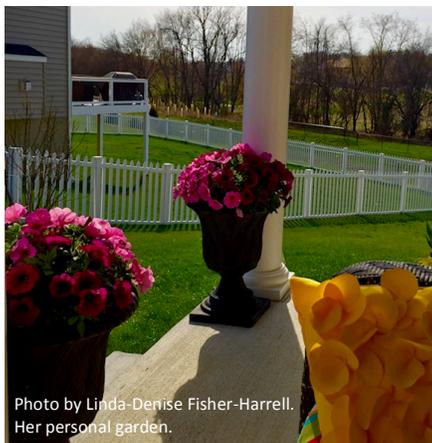


Photo by Linda-Denise Fisher-Harrell. Her personal garden.

In the course of our talk, Linda-Denise revealed to me an interesting detail. Both her Dad and Mom are legally blind. Even when she was younger, they could never see her dance. Yet she recalled there was never any fear of the world in her family. Blind, so what? Her folks still taught her how to ride a bike. Or when it was time to go to Julliard, her father went with her. "So what if he didn't know the streets, we'd

figure it out when we got there." So how did she show her parents the precision of her art? I mean, she's a dancer after all. Linda-Denise would take the appropriate positions and let them touch. That's how she communicated to her parents what her body did in her chosen art form.

STEVEN J. SATTA

Professor

Department of Theatre Arts



Long before teaching Voice and Acting at TU, Steve grew up in the Bronx, New York. Much of his family had

been in the garment industry. He loved the theatre from a young age when his brother and sister would perform in local shows and his mother would take him to Broadway. Still, it seemed a natural fit that he would become a costume designer, or more likely even go into architecture. Then Steve attended the National High School Institute for Theatre Arts at Northwestern and for the first time considered becoming a professional actor. New York University was next and he got to experience all the aspects of a show, working tech on many stages. After graduation, he was a hard-working actor in New York, quickly getting his equity card. His career kept growing and he found himself doing lots of regional work. But he also found himself very vested in social justice theatre.

He told me that during the era of the AIDS-crisis, he wanted to be part of change. Some of it was related to his coming out. "There was an ad

that decried don't ask, don't tell. I said I have to work with these people." I asked Steve if he lost anybody close to him, his response was very sobering. Steve's first boyfriend died of AIDS after they broke up. He considers himself very lucky. But the happy ending is that he's happily married to his husband today.

Education was also a part of Steve's life as his mother had been a language arts teacher across grades K-12. Eventually, Steve found himself leading workshops, training crews, and even doing an educational tour of a Moliere play. He found himself teaching for Young Audiences New York and Theatre for a New Audience. But getting his M.F.A. was his official call to become a professor. "Everything I wanted out of the Theater happened consistently every time I was in the classroom. Further I got up the food chain as an actor, the less I saw that was the case."

I asked Steve how he would define himself. He says he wouldn't call himself a teacher but a "teaching artist" per Eric Booth. Steve then left me with a takeaway. What we do, he said, is "all about taking a group of people into the unknown and showing them something new."



Steve Satta & Student

DAVE BALLOU

Professor
Department of Music



When I discovered that Dave—who is from Providence, Rhode Island—has released 11 CD's and was formerly a working musician on

Broadway, I asked him if music was always in his bones. Perhaps a bit surprisingly, he told me that it actually came to him a bit later as he wasn't from a musical family. The exception was that his older brother was in a band program at school. He was a drummer (who later became a bass player) and Dave wanted to be like him. So in grade school, when it was time to choose instruments, he was determined to play the drums like his brother. Yet his Mom did not allow it. Dave laughed as he reflected that his Mom would not allow two drummers in the house. However, influenced by seeing the cavalry bugler Dobbs on the classic TV show "F Troop," he picked up the trumpet. And as a junior in high school, he realized he wanted to play better and started practicing.

Dave then studied classical trumpet and played a lot of classical exercises. And then improv, with which he is so identified today, became the next step on his journey. He became aware of older musicians in the Providence area and he saw the improvisers as "gods" in the field.

After learning how music is structured and graduating from the prestigious Berklee College of Music, he played with the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra for a year as well as the Woody Herman Orchestra. And he especially fell in love with the music of John Coltrane. Coltrane's music "has a larger sense of humanity" and led him down "a spiritual journey."

So, how did Dave come to teach at TU? He told me he realized in graduate school that a university is a place that lets you take chances, foster creativity and teach you things you don't know. And about the same time Dave grew tired of playing the same parts as a regular in New York orchestras, a professor at TU reached out to him about a position here. At the time, Dave had never heard of TU, nor was he really familiar with the work of our late Jazz professor Hank Levy whose legacy had so much impact upon our program. Yet the rest is history.

When I asked Dave about teaching he raised an interesting take that some might even debate. He noted that teaching music in academia is stuck somewhat

in the 19th century model. Everyone is told to learn the rules so you can break them later. Dave says there's a more effective approach toward the same end. "Do what you want and fail so you see why the rules work."



If you don't run into Dave while bird watching, his favorite hobby, you can catch him playing music every Tuesday night as he has for the last three years at Bertha's in Fells Point.

KYOHEI ABE

Assistant Professor
Department of Art + Design, Art
History, Art Education



Kyohei Abe has a cool accent. And though it might be true he speaks English with the accent of his native country, Japan, that's not the

cool accent I meant. His artist's accent is Detroit, Michigan and you'll find it in all his photography. Born in the relatively small city of Anjo, Japan, Kyohei long had an interest in expanding his horizons. He studied architecture at college and did a great deal of traveling. However, photography wasn't a major interest until he saw a showing of Robert Mapplethorpe's work in Nagoya with Mapplethorpe in attendance. Previously, Kyohei had only used disposable cameras with their 5 x 7 prints, but to see large-scale prints from a master photographer at a live showing resonated for life. Kyohei began taking basic photography courses as a student in Connecticut and soon found himself at Detroit's College for Creative Studies where he earned his B.F.A. and later the nearby Cranbrook Academy of Art for his M.F.A.

Now, if you aren't familiar with Detroit or its relationship with the arts, a moment of context.

Photo by Kyohei Abe. *Eggs.*

city.” Artists of all types are present in a “different” melting pot. He likened Detroit to living on an island because it is secluded enough that there’s a lack of pressure to be like anyone else. Detroit allows

you to be yourself.

The Detroit of the past twenty years, Kyohei’s Detroit, is very different than the Motor City of the 1950’s and 60’s, when my own mother grew up there back in the days General Motors reigned supreme. Over time, jobs have diminished, poverty and crime have grown, and people have fled. In many ways, it’s similar to the story of Baltimore. And as with Baltimore, Detroit and art are brethren. From Motown Records to the invention of techno music, creativity has often flourished in Detroit in both good times and bad.

Kyohei found it “shocking” going to school in Detroit in the mid-90’s. Explicit parameters were given as to where and when students should travel. Why? Decrepit buildings with broken windows covered in spray-paint were everywhere. There weren’t just burned down houses but “often you could see the fires raging.”

For Kyohei, it was a far cry from the non-violence of Japanese society. But he found it utterly inspirational. Because Detroit was so oppressed, “there’s a hunger and honesty in the

Kyohei characterizes himself not as a photographer but as a “visual artist who uses lens-based media.” His architectural background collides with his exploration of collage, surrealism, and Dada art all in his Detroit accent, which means its uniquely individual. He says his biggest challenge as an artist is remaining inspired. He’s constantly taking and making pictures with his phone, just playing around “always making images.”

He’s especially interested in how the process generates the idea. “It’s not like I go I want to photograph refugees; here’s the story and then apply techniques to get it.” Kyohei first gets inspired -- by anything -- and then goes from there. Once in the studio, he might do multiple constructions, or move the camera left or right, it depends. He loves looking for that moment where repetition leads to accidental composition. But the process itself is more important to him than the outcome. “I have to be engaged.”

MICHAELA FRISCHHERZ

Assistant Professor
Department of Mass Communication
& Communication Studies



Dr. Michaela Frischherz specializes in rhetorical theory and criticism with an emphasis on feminist and queer theory, sexual

communication, and communication and gender. How women communicate pleasure and sex in public is her area of focus. For example, a recent scholarly article by Michaela is [Cosmo complaints: Reparative reading and the possibility of pleasure in Cosmopolitan magazine](#). She’s also incredibly down-to-earth and a great ambassador to make scholarly topics accessible to twenty-year olds.

So how did she arrive at her specialization? As an undergraduate, Michaela was thinking of political affairs professionally. But a Queer Studies course she took dovetailed with her coming out to herself as a queer woman. A European citizen by birth, she pursued her Masters’ degree in Amsterdam and appreciated being in a culture that is permissive and more diverse than the U.S. And Amsterdam with its red-light district uniquely has a decriminalized sex industry that is very central to it, even geographically. This would cause Michaela to reflect with questions about sex and



Photo by Michaela Frischerz
Her office bookcase.

University of Iowa classrooms are “predominantly white.” She found it very exciting to be able to teach “Black Girl Dangerous” at TU after the Uprising and have it be organically meaningful. “It was great to be in this compelling environment.”

I asked Michaela if she had any teaching tactics. I know from experience it's hard enough to get students to think with a scholarly approach, but I imagined even more difficult if the topic is sex and communication. She typically has students write a reflection paper for class wherein they must reflect on their orientation:

communication, especially in the public sphere. She would come back to the University of Iowa to pursue her Ph.D., writing her dissertation about how women express pleasure in various publics.

Aspects of Michaela's research involve case studies. She especially finds it extremely important “not to exploit my research participants.” She's been collaborating with fellow TU faculty member Desireé Rowe on focus groups in Baltimore and Dover, Delaware to research the intersection between a woman's orgasmic imperative and radical negativity and failure. Michaela: “We were sick and tired of women being treated like zombies who passively take on messages of media.” Of the faculty members I met with, Michaela was one of the more recent additions, having arrived at TU just three years ago. While she appreciated teaching at the University of Iowa, she was very excited to be teaching in a classroom that had more diversity because

sexuality, identity, race. Michaela: “Are we ever engaging in the process of learning if we are not challenging what we already know?”

JOANNA PECORE

Director
Asian Arts and Culture Center



COFAC houses TU's Asian Arts and Culture Center, founded back in 1971 when a gift of Chinese and Japanese ivory carvings were donated by businessman Frank Roberts. Since then the collection has grown and is also often supplemented by materials on loan. You can spy the gallery space immediately on the second floor of the Center for the Arts. Dr. Joanna Pecore, Director of the Center says: “we are small, but what we do is very wide.”

Joanna's own interest in diverse cultures developed as a girl back in her native New Jersey. An Italian-American, she grew up in a part of town that was not and it caused her to become fascinated by different cultures. After graduating from college, she applied to jobs around the world and landed one with the Japanese Ministry of Education's Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program. Notably, she didn't choose a big city like Tokyo where she could speak English and be understood any time of the day or night. Her time was focused in the rural town of Tono, which she describes as “the heart of Japanese folklore.”

In Tono, Joanna immersed herself in the local culture, and her own background as a piano player made her especially interested in Japanese music. She was especially excited to share with me her passion for the instrument known as koto. “The learning process was really the main difference. There's a strict set of rules, once you start with a teacher, you are not supposed to start with another teacher.” She would continue her studies at the University of Hawaii and spent an additional year in Japan working on her research and developing her language skills.

So how did TU appear on Joanna's radar? During her thirteen years at the Smithsonian, she organized several Japanese and Cambodian events with the Asian Arts & Culture Center. She was impressed by Towson and being “a teacher at heart,” Joanna wanted to do more that would have a long-term impact. Still, it wasn't until retiring Director

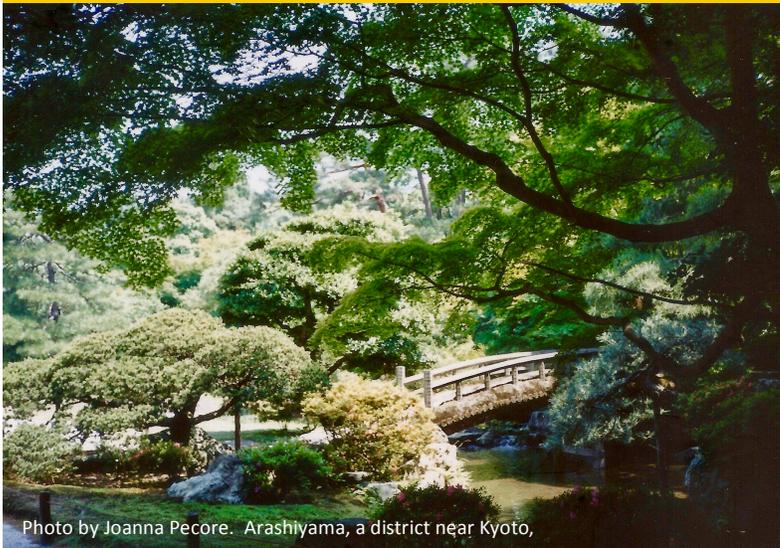


Photo by Joanna Pecore. Arashiyama, a district near Kyoto,

regular donors. Nonetheless, with only one other staff member, there is a lot to accomplish between raising funds and the non-profit's simple day-to-day functions.

Suewei Shieh's recommended Joanna apply as her replacement that she was ready to leave the Smithsonian.

While Joanna's passion for what she does is infectious, I don't envy how broad her job description must be. The Center is a unique division within COFAC in that it is self-supporting. There's a membership program and

I was curious if Joanna had gotten back to Tono after her studies years ago. She hadn't yet, though she had made it back to Cambodia. Revisiting Tono is still high on her list. Joanna's closing words to me probably sum it up best: "I want to see and experience the world, that drive never ends."

WHAT'S OUR STORY?

We are all very different in what we do. I hope our differences give you some insight into the breadth of our college and the scope of our mission. However, these seven educators are also unified by one commonality. It's what unifies all of us in COFAC. We seek to share knowledge in an effort to make us collectively wiser, make greater meaning, and understand what it means to be human just a little bit better than the day before. That's the real story of COFAC.

*- Marc May, Assistant Professor
Department of Electronic Media
& Film*

Editors: Susan E. Picinich, Dean, Greg Faller, Associate Dean, Michael Angelella, Chair of Department of Electronic Media & Film, and Marissa Berk-Smith Communications & Outreach Coordinator

Interested in sharing your story?

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