"WHAT’S YOUR STORY?"
FALL 2017

COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS AND COMMUNICATION
“The role of the artist is to ask questions, not answer them.” – Anton Chekov

I’m honored to be Theme Scholar for the College of Fine Arts and Communication for 2017-2018. To frame for you how the many talented artists and faculty of COFAC are celebrating our theme “What’s Your Story?” in our events and performances this season is a gift; I’ve been at Towson long enough now to discover my colleagues are amazing. Yet when I got down to work, I panicked. How could I, in just my voice, appropriately represent such a diverse group with its unique talents and all our special events? I’m a comedy writer by training – what can I say about an event like Noontime Jazz in the Library other than its really cool and I hope we worked out the ‘don’t make noise in a library’ part in advance.

It is a challenge to unify behind a singular voice when COFAC is so varied in our disciplines. In no order of preference there’s: Music, Art, Theatre, Dance, Mass Communication, Communication Studies, and my own department, Electronic Media & Film. We even have specializations within those disciplines like our Asian Arts and Culture Center, Community Arts Center, and Community Dance Center. Even with my deep appreciation for the arts, I don’t profess to be able to teach in those departments, nor do the experts in those teach in mine. And no, that time I showed my niece how to do the Macarena does not make me a dance teacher.

So I humbly speak in one voice, buoyed by the fact that artists speak in distinctive voices. We all speak the same human story, yet with as many one-of-a-kind permutations as there are communicators. And you won’t see any two COFAC performances, concerts or events that are identical this semester. Even if you come back the next day, there will be something different – a more intense solo, a longer pause, the different perspective you bring because the weather’s nice or someone didn’t cut you off in traffic.

WHAT’S MY STORY?

“Dying is easy, comedy is hard.” – Edmund Kean

As I teach storytelling, explicitly screenwriting, our theme “What’s Your Story?” is in my backyard. In the four paragraphs we’ve known each other, did I tell you that before I became a professor I used to write material for the late, great comic Jerry Lewis. Well... only for a day; he fired the whole writing staff. At the time it felt awful, but it has since made a fantastic icebreaker at parties.

I respect you can contextualize humor, so some shtick I’ll let slip. But I’ll keep it at a minimum. Which is easy in these times. I imagine you saw the white supremacists
recently marching across the University of Virginia campus. Not funny. Didn’t we beat the Nazis in 1945? And just a few months ago, a congressperson was shot just because of their party affiliation. Do we really think all those who disagree with our political views have evil in their hearts? What happened to tolerance? Do you, like me, think most of those in opposition to your views have good intentions but just poorer approaches? After all, the only way any political party could ever get 100% support is to lower taxes and give away free ice cream to all. Even then some joker would want their taxes raised plus gelato.

It’s actually the opening line from my favorite story that gets me through the daily news cycle after I reach for the antacid. The line goes: “I believe in America.” And I do. I believe we will keep moving toward a more fair and equitable society, which has been the trend since our inception. I truly believe Lincoln’s “better angels of our nature” will prevail. But you can bet there’s going to be a lot of conflict along the way. Any sincere study of storytelling, which is an exploration of the human condition, will tell you that. After all, that positive message about America comes from a film with Marlon Brando playing a mafia don. I won’t even mention the horsehead in the bed.

THE STORYTELLING TRADITION

“You read something which you thought had only happened to you, and you discover it happened 100 years ago to Dostoyevsky. This is a great liberation for the suffering, struggling person, who always thinks that he is alone. This is why art is important.” – James Baldwin

On the first day of my screenwriting classes, we discuss our storytelling tradition. It doesn’t take class long to figure out stories go back to those first cave people. We call them Oog and Aag. But any names with a lot of vowel sounds seem to do. Their communication would seem primitive by modern standards, but when one simply told the other one about their day, they became the first storytellers. Our class considers oral histories, hieroglyphics, the written word and every human form of communication we can think of. We highlight drama from the first time someone on a stage pretended to be someone else to what we’re currently watching on Netflix. (It’s still Stranger Things.) We note how storytelling is impacted by technology. Look how the invention of the printing press led to the rise of serialization! But we quickly recognize that all humans, past and present, have told stories regardless of potentially deep divisions like technological advancement, religion, or professional baseball team alliance.

And as we move through our first day, the class considers whether there are any other species that communicate through story. A hand will inevitably rise from one student hoping to find an exception. “Dolphins?” they suggest with a smile. The room comes to a
complete stop. We all consider. *Dolphins are smart, aren’t they? Hmm....* Ultimately we resolve that while dolphins are highly intelligent beings whom could probably do something that would blow our minds given the chance, they are not storytellers as we define it. Dolphins communicate. Humans are the only species that tell stories. *Stories are for people, by people, and about people.*

A hand rises again from the same student. “Professor, not all stories are about people. I saw a movie called *The Brave Little Toaster.* It was about a toaster, not a person.” The room stops again. We consider. *Well, that’s true, it is about a toaster. Hmm...* Ultimately we resolve that to give the toaster courage in the first place is to personify it and it does indeed follow that all stories are about the human.

**HATE TO TELL YOU THIS, WE’RE ALL THE SAME**

“If you prick us, do we not bleed?
If you tickle us, do we not laugh?
If you poison us, do we not die?
And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?” - William Shakespeare

Our world can seem so divided sometimes, but stories highlight our commonalities. We all love, hate, hope, fear. All people know what it’s like to have wants and to strive to achieve them, to have them meet with obstacles, and to fail or succeed. Our theatrical tradition references our common experience in the two masks of the human condition: happy and sad. Thousands of years later The ABC Wide World of Sports coined a phrase: “the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat.” Look, just because they covered demolition derby and jai alai doesn’t make it a less valid take.

That’s why I love stories. They communicate our human experience to each other. You don’t have to have been to Mars to identify with an astronaut. Or been a political prisoner in Chile to understand that person’s plight. If you’re a straight male, you can connect with a gay female character. Rich with poor. Jew with goy. Contemporary with an ancestor whom lived a thousand years before. And they are just like me, even those who are not just like me.
HATE TO TELL YOU THIS, WE’RE ALL DIFFERENT

“My mother wanted us to understand the tragedies of your life one day have the potential to be the comic stories the next.” – Nora Ephron

Once my class makes the discovery about how similar all people are, we actually start to feel good. That feeling of our lonely place in the Universe falls away a bit and life seems just to make a little more sense. We’re all in this together. Then our apple cart approaches a huge banana peel. We ponder that if we are all the same, why do we prefer to spend an evening with a loved one as opposed to someone, say, trying to sell us insurance? A hand rises. Again, it’s the same student. “Professor, but what if my loved one actually sells insurance?” Ok, that was a bad example. Still, the point should be clear. Though we are all the same, we are also different. No two human beings are exactly alike. Neither are any songs, sonnets, paintings, nor their creators. If two artists react to the same stimuli, one may create a blue tragedy, the other an orange polka dot comedy. No audiences are the same either. You may find it a biting satire on American morality in the 21st century; I find it six jokes in search of a plot. But just because I see a six and you see a nine doesn’t necessarily mean either of us is wrong; we may simply be standing in different places.

While stories utilize human commonalities to be relatable, they do expressly focus on contrast. The most obvious difference of course is that no two characters are exactly alike, but think more deeply about what makes a story. A story is never a singular moment, it has to be comprised of two or more points on the curve. There is always some sequencing. This, then that. Before and after. First, then last. On a deeper level stories are always about collision. Because being human is full of collision.

WHAT’S OUR STORY?

“Live music is healthy.” – John Lydon (aka Johnny Rotten)

You may think I’m over-apologizing for representing COFAC with solely my voice. I hope you’ll come out to our events this year so you can see I haven’t apologized enough. All of our departments are approaching “What’s Your Story?” in their own inimitable ways. The Department of Music is presenting several faculty recitals including Souvenirs: An Evening of Song and Story, Come Ready and See Me: An Art Song Cabaret, as well our jazz faculty improvising to the college theme. In addition to highly anticipated Ailey II, Dance is presenting Inertia, Synergy, and our senior seminar where you can see student work in progress. Jane Austen’s classic Pride and Prejudice will be on the Mainstage of the Center of
the Arts this Fall and Theatre Arts is also bringing us Steven Berkoff’s adaptation of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. If you haven’t seen it, it’s worth a look, and, yes, the author is the actor who played all those bad guys in 1980’s Hollywood. In addition to MFA exhibitions and lectures from leaders in the field, Art and Design is hosting *PRINTFEST*, a collection of four interrelated exhibitions on printmaking in the 20th and 21st centuries. The Asian Arts and Culture Center’s is open regularly during the day for its *The Korean Wave!* exhibition, so consider stopping by and spending time. And following up on “Journalistic Objectivity in the Age of Trump,” Mass Communication will be presenting its Second Annual Media and Culture Lecture Series. Lastly, my own Department of Electronic Media and Film is keeping our college theme in mind with the “What’s Your Story?” Fall Film Series as well as our Annual Veterans Film Series, co-sponsored by the TU Military & Veterans Center. We appreciate art, and we appreciate their service. For a full list of our events, please look to our Fall 2017 Towson University Arts & Culture guide for more information. Though I will tell you now, *Noontime Jazz in the Library* is October 17th from 12-1pm, 3rd floor lobby of Cook Library.

...They know we’re bringing musical instruments to a library, right?

On behalf of all of us at COFAC, I look forward to seeing you at one of our many events this Fall. Enjoy the show.

- Marc May, Assistant Professor of Electronic Media & Film
“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.

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.
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.

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 becoming a teacher because others recognized she was good at it.

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
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 improvers 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.
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 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.

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
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 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: 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
Suewehi 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 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.

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