“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.
“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 it’s *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