

Arts & Humanities

Screenwriter Ivan Rome Looks Homeward

As the inaugural recipient of the Bobby Kashif Cox Memorial Scholarship, the Columbia MFA student takes inspiration from his native Georgia.

By

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Ivan Rome (Tia Carr)

It's hard to get into film school. But it's easy to see why Ivan Rome made the cut.

Rome, who grew up in Columbus, Georgia, is in his third year at Columbia's School of the Arts. He is easygoing, open, and observant. Seated outside the [Hungarian Pastry Shop](#) on a balmy day, he watches the flow of people and traffic, admitting everything into the workshop of his imagination. "Stories are everywhere," he says, glancing around. "It's a city full of inspiration." But Rome, who studies screenwriting, isn't out to capture New York, his love for Spike Lee notwithstanding. Western Georgia is his flavor. Down-home stuff. "I love going back to Georgia, because that's the voice I write in," he says. "There's something about being home. There's a different level of love in everything: in the food, in the music. It just feels right."

This past May, Rome became the first winner of a crowdfunded [scholarship](#) started by SOA alumni in honor of [Bobby Kashif Cox '12SOA](#), a gifted storyteller who died of colon cancer in 2017 at age thirty-three. Humble, humane, and funny, Cox was loved and admired by his classmates, fourteen of whom make up the scholarship committee. They include director Olivia Newman '12SOA, whose film *Where the Crawdads Sing* was released this past summer; Shukree Tilghman '12SOA, a writer-producer on *This Is Us* and *Animal Kingdom*; and Gina Atwater '11SOA, a writer on *Westworld*.

"After graduation, we found out Bobby was diagnosed with stage 4," explains committee member and author Alexandra Jamison '13SOA. "We were devastated. We thought he could beat it. Unfortunately, he got sicker and sicker. We raised money and brought him out to LA for the first time. His favorite thing was the Griffith Observatory."



Bobby Kashif Cox (Courtesy of Bobby Kashif Cox Memorial Scholarship)

After Cox's death, Jamison started making calls to set up a scholarship through Columbia. "We got some seed money together, reached out to classmates, and showed Columbia we were serious about this," Jamison says. To date, the committee has raised some \$300,000 for a scholarship intended for an SOA screenwriting student who embodies Cox's talent and spirit.

Rome's path to Columbia was improbable. In high school he played football, ran track, and wrestled, but a broken fibula suffered during football practice ended his athletic ambitions. He studied journalism at the University of Kentucky with an eye to becoming a sports broadcaster. Then, in his senior year, a writing teacher steered him toward film as a way to tell stories. With minimal equipment and funding, Rome made a short comic piece about a standoff between friends over the last slice of pizza.

That summer, he worked maintenance at an apartment complex during the day and made food deliveries at night to pay for his film-school applications. Having never written a screenplay, he quickly learned the basic format so that he could send writing samples. He got into Columbia and entered during the pandemic, which gave him plenty of time to view the classic films on the syllabus. “I forced my family to watch old black-and-white movies,” he chuckles.

Rome is working on a slew of screenplay ideas — a buddy comedy, a murder mystery — and recently traveled to Los Angeles to meet the scholarship-committee members and celebrate. Film-department chair Jack Lechner went out too, and they all had lunch on a hotel rooftop with a wraparound view of Hollywood. The next night the committee took Rome to dinner. “They’re all so welcoming,” Rome says. “It’s like family.”

Rome is already plotting his thesis script for next year — a coming-of-age story set in his hometown. “There’s a feeling you get when you go home that’s irreplaceable,” he says. “That Southern feeling. That’s the thing I can’t escape.”

This article appears in the Fall 2022 print edition of Columbia Magazine with the title "Georgia on His Mind."

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