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Hollywood Transgressor

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“**It was a peerless experience,”** says Kathryn Bigelow ’81SOA, reminiscing about her years as a film student at Columbia during the late ’70s. On the phone in her sunny production offices in the hills above Los Angeles, the 51-year-old director of *Point Break*, *Strange Days*, and *K-19: The Widowmaker* still sounds smitten by that period in her life when she had to negotiate snow and the A train on her way to Morningside Heights from her loft near the Fulton Fish Market.

Those were years she was learning film criticism from Andrew Sarris ’51CC, film theory from Peter Wollen and Stefan Scharff (who died earlier this year), and the art of cinematic storytelling from Milos Forman. “Having them as your mentors—can you imagine? Each one provided an ideological canvas more enticing than the other. It was an extraordinary place, and an extraordinary time.”

As a woman in what was then a young department, Bigelow was something of a pioneer. During the ’80s and ’90s, it wasn’t hard to put together a list of male School of the Arts graduates who were winning recognition and box office success. Jay Russell ’85SOA developed the original screenplay for his directorial debut, *End of the Line* (1988), while studying under Forman and has since followed it up with two popular book adaptations: *My Dog Skip* (2000) and *Tuck Everlasting* (2002). Peter Farrelly ’86SOA has, in tandem with his brother Bobby, written and directed a string of zany comedies: *Dumb and Dumber*; *Kingpin*; *There’s Something About Mary*; *Me, Myself & Irene*; and *Shallow Hal*. James Mangold ’99SOA won the Grand Jury Prize for Best Director at the Sundance Festival in 1995 for his first film, Heavy, originally conceived in graduate school. While finishing his degree he also directed *Girl, Interrupted*, which earned an Academy Award and a Golden Globe in 1999 for actress Angelina Jolie.

But in the last ten years a dazzling array of women graduates have created some of the most strikingly original narrative films released anywhere in the world, and they have the critical awards and the box office receipts to prove it. Kimberly Peirce ’96SOA put a match to the combustible issue of sexual identity in the American heartland in *Boys Don’t Cry*, which won the 1999 Independent Spirit Award for Best First Feature and earned a Best Actor Academy Award for its star Hilary Swank as well as a nomination for costar Chloë Sevigny. The comedies written and directed by Nicole Holofcener ’88SOA—in particular *Walking and Talking* (1996) and *Lovely and Amazing* (2001)—are among the most rewarding pleasures to be found these days in a movie house. Her deft touch with stories about impossible relationships has also brought her work directing episodes of HBO’s *Sex and the City* and *Six Feet Under*. Lisa Cholodenko ’97SOA has taken on “creative people.” Her second film, *High Art* (1998), may be the most lethal picture of the downtown New York art scene ever drawn, and in this year’s Laurel Canyon, Frances McDormand plays a Los Angeles record producer who has hit middle age but has yet to grow up.

Only a year out of film school, Sabrina Dhawan ’02SOA already has a veteran’s résumé. She wrote director Mira Nair’s indie smash hit, *Monsoon Wedding* (2002), and will garner another feature credit as screenwriter for the soon-to-be-released *Cosmopolitan*, in which a clueless man adopts the romantic advice churned out by the oversexed women’s magazine as a guide for wooing a divorcee, played by Carol Kane. Dhawan was also recently tapped to write the screenplay of Manil Suri’s acclaimed novel, *The Death of Vishnu*.

From its beginning, Columbia’s film division fostered an atmosphere of experimental and aesthetic freedom. Before venturing west to make big-budget, aggressively macho films, Bigelow, who was trained as a painter, had not yet decided whether film was for her. “I came from a nonnarrative background, and the film program was fine with that,” Bigelow recalls. “They encouraged an interdisciplinary approach.” It was the heyday of structuralism and semiotics, and she absorbed French theory in classes taught by Edward Said, now University Professor of English and Comparative Literature. Her first student film, *The Set-Up*, consists of two men beating each other to a pulp while two professors philosophize in voice-over about the dynamics of the action. “I wanted to evidence and examine violence at the same time,” she says.

The brutality of American life remains one of Bigelow’s preoccupations. Her first feature, *The Loveless*, a biker picture that marked the film debut of Willem Dafoe, overflowed with fight scenes. She incorporated the Los Angeles riots of 1991 into her

cult hit *Strange Days*—set in a dystopian Los Angeles during the millennium, with Ralph Fiennes as a paranoid junkie and Angela Bassett as a kung fu–fighting chauffeur. The director's not-exactly-mainstream oeuvre has amassed enough critical attention to inspire a collection of essays, The Cinema of *Kathryn Bigelow: Hollywood Transgressor* (Wallflower, 2003).

So how did a Columbia film student deeply into art theory end up in Hollywood making genre pics?

"It never was a decision," Bigelow says, after a pause. "You're carried on a wave. I think film picked me before I picked it." For the flood of accomplishments that followed, her professors and mentors at Columbia can claim as much credit as they want. "That university and that program changed my life. No question."

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