Arts & Humanities

Columbia and the Artist

We asked a few of Columbia's uncounted alumni artists to reflect on how their student years turned them toward the lives they've lived since.

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I quickly learned the teachers at Columbia were unimpressed with my "celebrity"; in fact, I sometimes got the distinct impression they were going to make me prove my seriousness about education even more than other students, perhaps. They weren't about to foster some dilettante. I understood and accepted that and necessarily worked very hard, learning to focus instantly on my homework even on planes, during rehearsals, and into the wee hours at home and on the road. Once the various teachers saw that I was indeed serious, warm relationships developed. I learned to ask no quarter, no special consideration, and to prove myself by performance. Isn't that one of the main values of a college education anywhere?

—Pat Boone '58GS, *singer and actor*

Columbia gave me an opportunity to integrate my study in the studio and the lecture hall. I took courses in dance history, choreography, and technique at Barnard (my years were the first that Columbia students were allowed to major in dance) while also studying the Core Curriculum. This combination inspired me to ask a range of questions about the cultural, philosophical, and political dimensions of dance: How do dance techniques embody cultural values and beliefs? How is dance related to yet distinct from other forms of expression? How do dances enact political resistance? In sum, what makes dance such a generative subject within the humanities?

—Paul Scolieri '95CC, *dancer*

When you're 21 years old you have a capacity to be inflamed by ideas. Edward Tayler's Shakespeare class—his whole approach—made me want to be a playwright. I remember leaving a lecture on *Richard II and Twelfth Night*, and I thought I was going to faint, I was so overwhelmed by the experience—it made the world look different. Tayler had his famous lecture style, a cigarette hanging out of his mouth—this small guy grumbling his way through, in a great performing style.

I learned then that the heart of playwriting is fundamentally dialectical, and I followed this through Marx and Brecht. Tayler pointed out over and over again, "To read Shakespeare, you just have to be able to count to two." Everything in Shakespeare is built around dialectics, contradictions, great oppositions—holiday and everyday, sex and death. Later, after I left Columbia and got interested in Jewish thinking, in Talmudic thinking, I saw how, there, understanding contradiction and paradox is enormously important, and that was Tayler's emphasis: The play of contradiction is what charged a drama and made it live.

—Tony Kushner '78CC, *playwright*

I composed my first opera, *Marco Polo*, after finishing at Columbia. It is a musical journey that crosses the boundaries of Eastern and Western musical systems in a reflection of my personal experience, being raised in a village in China and then living here in New York. My ultimate question in composing this piece was: Could I make everybody think of himself or herself as Marco Polo? Every piece I write raises the question: How can I get different people in different cultures to understand each other through my work? One of the biggest advantages of the University is that it has one of the most diverse student bodies in one of the most diverse cities in the world. The campus itself is a large classroom, so even your spare time becomes a learning experience. As an artist you have to have your own style. The whole purpose of learning at the University is to try to find a way to establish that style. I saw Columbia as a huge garden with lots of trees—I was one of those many trees, and every professor was like a gardener. If you can find a very diverse garden, then you will be a fruitful tree.

—Tan Dun '93SOA, *composer*

Columbia was decisive in my becoming who I am. Not until entering Columbia did I feel I was being educated. Freshman year I took these magnificent required courses—“Lit Hum,” “Contemporary Civilization,” “Art Humanities.” One week we’d be reading and discussing Rabelais or Cervantes, Hobbes or Rousseau, and looking at paintings by Brueghel or El Greco, sculpture by Michelangelo or Bernini. It was a lot to take in, and writing poetry seemed a way to deal with that. I had some poems published in the *Columbia Review*. It seemed to me the height of achievement to get the approval of its editors. That year I also won the University’s Van Rensselaer Prize for poetry with a poem entitled “The Presidential Years,” which was published a year later in *The Paris Review*. What an amazing year that was. By the end of it I thought of myself as a poet.

I had terrific teachers: Lionel Trilling, Kenneth Koch, Edward Tayler, Edward Said, Bob Hanning, Michael Wood, David Rosand, Morris Dickstein. My classmates were inspiring. Robert Siegel, of National Public Radio’s *All Things Considered*, was two years ahead of me, and we roomed together one unforgettable summer. Paul Auster was a year ahead of me. Both he and Richard Snow, now the editor of *American Heritage*, wrote for *Columbia Review* when I edited it senior year. Even after more than 30 years, I’m still very close to a bunch of people from Columbia.

—David Lehman ’70CC ’78GSAS, *poet, editor, and nonfiction author*

My graduate work in history totally prepared me in my work as a critic to attempt to be curious and, I hope, maintain an inquiring mind so that when I approach an art form, I do so with no preconceptions.

I particularly treasure the historiography course and all the assignments that, in my day, had to do with the nuts and bolts of doing research. And that was not only pre-computer, but pre-Xerox.

I consider my 250-page master’s project the best thing I have written.

—Anna Kisselgoff ’62J ’63GSAS, *dance critic*

I was fortunate to be able to partake of the musical life of New York and to have Otto Leuning as my composition teacher. A pioneer of electroacoustic music and a prolific

composer in his own right, Otto promoted openness to all kinds of musical experiences. That was unusual at the time, and Columbia encouraged his iconoclasm. Under Otto's tutelage, I was able to develop the way I wanted to develop—without anybody censoring me.

—John Corigliano '59CC, *composer*

I came to Columbia when, after other careers—school teacher, editor, interior designer—I decided to do what had always mattered to me most: writing poetry.

As an older student, I went with some trepidation, but it turned out that many of the other students in the Writing Program were also not fresh out of college. The atmosphere was intense, open, and challenging. Much of my work was different from that of my classmates. I was particularly interested in linguistic experimentation within forms—forms received and forms invented. Those were days in which prosody was a stepchild; free verse held sway. Sometimes others in the workshops weren't too positive about my efforts. I remember one teacher, Cynthia Macdonald, came to my rescue more than once. And a number of other faculty members—Jane Cooper, Ann Lauterbach, and Sandy McClatchy, for example—were wonderful mentors. I audited a film class with Annette Insdorf and a class on Buddhism with Robert Thurman. It was a heady atmosphere. As I have said many times, being at Columbia made it possible for me to reinvent myself and to transform my life.

—Anna Rabinowitz '90SOA, *poet and editor*

At Columbia, I learned to keep myself open and receptive to new experiences in the arts. My time there coincided with a very significant year in the life of the theatre, with Off Broadway burgeoning and *Waiting for Godot* opening on Broadway. *Waiting for Godot* changed the course of theatre—and, parenthetically, it made me think that reviewing and writing about the theatre would be a rewarding career choice. I also learned to ask challenging questions and to listen, a lesson that was extraordinarily helpful.

—Mel Gussow '56JRN, *cultural writer*

Studying at Columbia helped me to internalize the educated audience, to anticipate the reader's expectations and tastes. Originally, of course, that was the professor—I studied with Trilling, Bentley, Meyer Schapiro, and others. I learned to be obliging, but also to frustrate expectations.

There was a cult taste for the ironic—Italo Svevo, Michado de Asis, Dostoyevsky—cheeky writers. I remember two courses that sharpened my sense of intellectual perversity, of thinking against oneself. One was on Diderot and Sterne, those two proto-postmodernists. The other was on Nietzsche, Freud, and William James, which pushed me toward the analytical and made me aware of how large a part rationalization and self-delusion play in reason. I took on a demolitionary stance, one that was still with me when I wrote *Against Joie de Vivre*, which was most influenced by Montaigne, somebody I had read in Humanities and didn't like at all, but who later became the single most important writer to me.

You had to learn how to talk, how to pick up your lines. I remember being in someone's room, and he was playing Bartók, and I said, "That's nice." "Nice?" he said. "You can't call Bartók nice."

—Philip Lopate '64CC, *writer and essayis*t

I graduated Oberlin in '52, and I went into the army for two years, and both my brother, James, now dead, the author of *The Lion in Winter*, and my friend John Kander, the composer, were going to Columbia. Since I was eight years old, turning the pages of the *Times* and seeing all those ads for all those plays and movies in New York, I'd thought: I must try to live there some day. If John and my brother had gone to the University of Chicago I don't know if I'd have come, but they were in New York, and New York was this wonderful place, and so I came. And it was a wonderful education for me. Columbia had a fairly phenomenal English department—Jacques Barzun, Mark Van Doren. But a great deal of it was being able to take the subway down to Times Square. I was essentially a movie nut, and in Times Square there were 17 movie theaters that had double features. There was a Western double feature, and a musical double feature—everything you could want. And the Thalia, at 95th and Broadway, had a different foreign double feature every day.

—William Goldman '56GSAS, *screenwriter, novelist, and essayist*

Studying at Columbia, and being in New York, gave us ready access to other writers, to professionals. We were encouraged to take ourselves seriously and to believe that there was a pretty good chance we would work. And we were given training not only in writing, but in editing and critical reading. Based on the success and competence of my classmates, I always have the sense that going to Columbia was not a vanity project.

—Meghan Daum ’96SOA, *essayist and novelist*

When I came to Columbia from Chicago, Douglas Moore and his family became my surrogate family and continued to be for the rest of their lives.

At Columbia, I had an assistantship in the Opera Workshop, accompanying singers on the piano, and I was studying conducting and writing some respectable chamber music, but I’d always been a musical split personality. All my life I had loved musicals, as well as opera and classical music—which is really my whole world of listening. Anyway, one semi-drunken night Douglas said, “You know, if I had it to do over again, I’d write for Broadway.” That was the kick that I needed to direct myself. It was a very important thing to hear. It legitimized the whole endeavor. So the connection between my Columbia experience and my later career is an enormous one.

—John Kander ’54GSAS, *composer*



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >