Alumni

Saheem Ali Directs *Buena Vista Social Club*, and Other Columbia Alumni News

Spring/Summer 2025



Buena Vista Social Club (Matthew Murphy)

After an acclaimed Off Broadway run in 2023, *Buena Vista Social Club*, a musical developed and directed by **Saheem Ali** ’07SOA, opened on Broadway at the Gerald Schoenfeld Theatre on March 19. Set in Havana before and during the Castro era, the play tells the story behind the legendary Cuban ensemble of the same name and features songs from the group’s Grammy-winning self-titled 1997 album. Ali, who serves as the associate artistic director of the Public Theater, previously directed the 2022 Pulitzer Prize–winning play *Fat Ham*.



Camden Pulkinen (Raniero Corbelletti / AFLO / Alamy Live News)

In January, **Camden Pulkinen** ’24GS scored his second consecutive bronze medal at the US Figure Skating Championships in Wichita, Kansas. A recent Columbia graduate, Pulkinen balances a full-time finance job with training and competitions.

James Tejani ’09GSAS, a historian at California Polytechnic State University, won Columbia’s coveted Bancroft Prize for *A Machine to Move Ocean and Earth*, which tells the story behind the Port of Los Angeles and the development of Southern California.

Before the end of his term, President Joe Biden honored **Ken Podziba** ’91GSAPP with the President’s Lifetime Achievement Award. Podziba is the president and CEO of Bike New York, a nonprofit that promotes cycling in New York City through bike education and safety programs, the annual TD Five Boro Bike Tour, and other initiatives.



Judy Joo (Emli Bendixen)

Chef and TV personality **Judy Joo** ’97SEAS released her third cookbook, *K-Quick*, a guide to Korean dishes that can be prepared in thirty minutes or less.

Jelena Diakonikolas ’16SEAS, a faculty member in the Department of Computer Sciences at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, received a National Science Foundation Career Award. The honor, which comes with a $700,000 grant, will support Diakonikolas’s ongoing research into optimization algorithms in machine learning.

Filmmaker and musician **Jim Jarmusch** ’75CC, best known for making understated indie flicks, including *Stranger Than Paradise* and *Coffee and Cigarettes*, is also an accomplished collage artist. *Some More Collages*, Jarmusch’s first solo exhibition in Los Angeles, opened at the James Fuentes Gallery in March.

Karim Chaiblaine ’13BUS, CEO of the Saudi sustainable-energy company Nesma Mobility, was named a knight in the National Order of the Legion of Honor, the most prestigious order of merit granted by the French government.

UC Irvine bioengineer **Kyriacos A. Athanasiou** ’89SEAS was elected to the National Academy of Engineering along with Columbia faculty members Michal Lipson and Venkat Venkatasubramanian.

Two alumnae received literature fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts this year: **Madeleine Cravens** ’22SOA, author of the 2024 poetry collection *Pleasure Principle*, and **Elina Alter** ’16SOA, in support of her forthcoming translation of the Russian novel *Steppe* by Oksana Vasyakina.

Screenwriter **Nimisha Misra** ’24SOA won a Filmfare Award — India’s equivalent of an Oscar — as well as a Screenwriters Association of India award for her work on *Kaala Paani*, a Netflix survival-drama series about a tropical-disease outbreak.

Bao Ong ’10JRN, a food writer who has contributed to publications like *Bon Appétit* and *Time Out New York*, was recently named the restaurant critic for the *Houston Chronicle*.



Lee Yaron (Uri Bareket)

Journalist **Lee Yaron** ’24SIPA won the Jewish Book of the Year award from the Jewish Book Council for *10/7: 100 Human Stories*, an in-depth investigation of Hamas’s October 7, 2023, attack on Israel.

Sharon Collins ’99SEAS, a math teacher at the New Heights Academy Charter School in Harlem, received a Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching, the highest honor for K–12 teachers of STEM subjects in the United States.

The 2025 Venice Architecture Biennale, on view from May 10 to November 23, showcases the work of multiple alumni architects: **Charles Renfro** ’94GSAPP and the late **Ricardo Scofidio** ’60GSAPP of the firm Diller, Scofidio + Renfro; **Nile Greenberg** ’16GSAPP, a founding partner of ANY; **Farzin Lotfi-Jam** ’12GSAPP, an architecture professor at Cornell; **Jen Wood** ’12GSAPP and **Emanuel Admassu** ’12GSAPP, founding partners of AD–WO; **Virginia Zangs** ’24GSAPP, a computational designer; **Lluís Ortega** ’98GSAPP, an architectural researcher; and **Fabrizio Furiassi** ’19GSAPP, an architectural historian. Alumni faculty members **Marina Otero Verzier** ’13GSAPP, **Adam Lubinsky** ’01GSAPP, **Adeline Chum** ’22GSAPP, **Madeeha Merchant** ’14GSAPP, **Adam Vosburgh** ’22GSAPP, and **Lindsey Wikstrom** ’16GSAPP, as well as current student **Judd Smith**, also contributed to the exhibition.

Guide to school abbreviations

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