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BLUE MATERIAL

LEARNING TO WRITE FOR FILM AND TELEVISION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN.

It's fall semester. On a crisp, rainy night, leaves changing in the trees, I'm crossing the quad to a lecture hall. If you were to write a college campus on the page, you'd probably describe it exactly like this one. (In fact, the campus plays a large role, as itself, in *The Five-Year Engagement*. It's easy to see why.)

Students fill the hall. Screenwriter Kirsten Smith (co-writer of *Legally Blonde* and *10 Things I Hate About You*) is about to speak at the University of Michigan.

Michigan. It couldn't be farther from Hollywood. Geographically. Culturally. Meteorologically. (It gets effing cold here.) Yet, there are many born-and-bred Michigan names you know well: Michael Moore. Sam Raimi. Lawrence Kasdan.

When you're done reading, there will be a few more to add to that list.

Jim Burnstein, director of the screenwriting program, warmly introduces

Smith. She is funny and engaging. You can see how she'd be great in a pitch meeting (like those for *The House Bunny*, when Anna Faris sat beside her in a Playboy bunny costume). She shares valuable lessons on how to collaborate, how margaritas fuel the creative process, and how public domain stories can give you a head start on a script.

"I was inspired by the program Jim has put together—the faculty, the curriculum, and the tremendous film library," Smith observes. "He's treating young writers like burgeoning professionals, and they seem empowered by it."

The morning after her talk, she was in a classroom with a handful of students. She'd read the first 10 pages of their scripts. "The range of topics and genres surprised me," she says, looking back. There was romance, drama, comedy, action scenes, and supernatural el-

ements. "These are students that aren't afraid to take risks."

Smith shared wisdom gleaned from years in the trenches—a place these students are so eager to enter. "They seemed to respond to the feedback and be willing to revise their work and embrace the notes process," she says. "They were thinking like professional writers, even at age 19."

Working Writers

Smith is one in a long line of professionals—such as Alexander Payne, David Benioff, and John Sayles—to lecture here and participate in masterclass workshops. This is one aspect that sets the program apart and was made possible by the generous support of two particular Michigan alums, former New Line Cinema CEO Robert Shaye and longtime UTA agent Peter Benedek.

Having working writers teach was integral to Burnstein's approach, and it's a way he's transformed the program since being asked to return to his alma mater in 1995. He's been a Michigan-based writer his entire career, in the mold of his mentor, Oscar-winner Kurt Luedtke (*Out of Africa*). From the start, Burnstein decided to challenge the students to write a full-length screenplay—in one semester.

"I have known far too many aspiring writers who have written one act, given up, started another and another, and never finished a single screenplay," he says.

Another innovation was a course built around a cornerstone of successful screenwriting, something he did not see in other major film programs: rewriting.



“I started to feel bad,” he says. “I’m teaching these kids how to do something and I’m not teaching them where the real writing is.”

It was also true to his personal experience.

“Kurt made my career by making me rewrite,” Burnstein recalls. “[Luedtke] taught me the painful lessons of letting go and rethinking and reworking every element. I sold my first screenplay [*Renaissance Man*] because I rewrote it four times.”

Screenwriting is a serious—and seriously intense—sub-major in the Screen Arts and Culture department of Michigan’s College of Literature, Science, and the Arts. In 310: Screenwriting I, students write a feature-length script. In 410: Screenwriting II, they rewrite their 310 script. In 427: Screenwriting III, the masterclass, the top students from 410 write another full-length script and workshop it with visiting writers.

Burnstein’s colleagues include longtime *Detroit Free Press* film critic Terry Lawson and Writers Guild Award-nominated screenwriter Tom Benedek (*Cocoon*, screenplay by Benedek, story by David Saperstein), brother of Peter. Some former students, like screenwriter Dan Shere (*Epic*, screenplay by James V. Hart & William Joyce and Dan Shere and Tom J. Astle & Matt Ember; story by William Joyce & James V. Hart and Chris Wedge) and independent filmmaker Veerendra Prasad (*Ocean of Pearls*), have returned to offer all they learned from him, and in their careers, to help educate new generations.

“The way Jim built the program, it’s always been practical, hands-on screenwriting,” says Shere. “I try to teach how I or any professional would develop a script. Start with a core concept, build it into a treatment. From there, outline, and then go to script.”

His main lesson from Burnstein? “Pre-writing is essential. To not type FADE IN until you’ve sussed out the major issues and potential problems in your story and worked them out. A lot of them have taken other creative writing classes and it’s usually much the opposite. They just start typing and see what comes out. But as first-time screenwriters, they quickly learn the value of having it better mapped out.”

They teach technique and craft but also how to find your voice and be true to yourself. As Prasad tells them, “Write the thing you want to see that no one else is going to write. Or write the thing that only you can write.”

This is also straight from the Burnstein playbook. As an undergrad, he pitched a script “like *Taxi Driver* with a college kid.” The protagonist was Indian, as is Prasad.

Before he finished, Burnstein said, “Write that. No one’s done that.”

After a successful career in public TV and documentary filmmaking, fellow grad Oliver Thornton now teaches TV writing, including a class he took with Elaine Loeser (*Law & Order*). In 311: Writing for Television I, students write

THE FIRST REWRITE CLASS

Michigan Screenwriting has launched many brilliant careers. With one poignant exception.

WRITTEN BY JIM BURNSTEIN

In 1995 I was asked to teach a course in screenwriting. I wasn’t expecting any miracles. I certainly wasn’t expecting Yao Phillips: tall, dignified, soft-spoken, always wore a long scarf draped over his shoulders, 20 years older than his classmates. When asked why he wanted to write a screenplay, Yao said, “I want to be a producer, and I believe it’s important that I know what a writer must do.”

Let’s just say Yao had me at hello.

Every week, Yao would come to Screenwriting I with a whole new idea. Then one night, he said, “I believe when you find your ideal dance partner, you have found your soul mate.” I didn’t know where his story was going, but I loved his passion and clarity.

At the end of the semester, Yao and I met to discuss his first draft about a middle-aged man buying and renovating the inner-city apartment building he grew up in. His “dance partner” turns out to be the female banker who makes the deal possible. I began by telling him he didn’t have a third act. Yao laughed in recognition. With each flaw I pointed out, there was more laughter. I have never seen anyone react this way. Yao took joy in having his work torn apart, learning from his mistakes.

Yao charged into the first night ever of the rewrite course in mid-January 1997. He had already written a new opening, a prologue that perfectly set up his protagonist, showing him as a child.

I called Yao the last Saturday of the month to bring in his prologue on Monday night. Yao’s mother told me Yao had died that morning of an abdominal aneurysm. I could barely speak.

By Monday night’s class, I learned that Yao first came to Michigan in 1964, only then he was Raymond “Bubba” Phillips, an All-American offensive tackle and guard who was drafted by the New Orleans Saints. He would also play for the Washington Redskins under Vince Lombardi.

After the NFL, Yao served in the Army, worked as a youth counselor in Detroit, then moved to Washington, D.C., where he became a representative of African-American artists, which motivated him to open an art gallery in New York. On a spiritual pilgrimage to Ghana, he saw the need to preserve its rich, rural traditions. That inspired him to assemble a film crew, unexpectedly making him a producer. This sent him full circle back to Ann Arbor to study film. But that wasn’t the real reason Yao came back at 51. His two daughters were in college, and he wanted to show them how important it was to get their diplomas.

Yao was not just rewriting his screenplay. He was rewriting his life.

When I entered my classroom on Monday night, I said, “There’s something you should know. He mailed his first draft to his three closest Wolverine teammates with a note that said, *Learning to write a screenplay at Michigan is more fun than Michigan-Ohio State.*”

The students decided to enter Yao’s script in Michigan’s Hopwood Awards. I told them there would be no sympathy vote. All entries needed a pen name and were judged by industry professionals who would know nothing of Yao’s story. Our students won four Hopwoods that year and, wouldn’t you know it, Yao was one of them. The \$1,500 was bequeathed to his first grandchild.

But Yao’s story could not be complete without Yao being awarded his degree. Somehow Gaylyn Studlar moved heaven and Earth to make that happen, announcing it at his funeral in Evanston, Illinois, six days after his death. The overflow crowd erupted with what can only be called pure joy.

On the last night of every rewrite class, I tell Yao’s story. And I swear, every time, I can still hear Yao laughing.

a spec of an existing show. In 411: Writing for Television II, they write an original pilot.

For 311, says Thornton, “the intent was to give it that writers’ room atmosphere. They pitch ideas, then break down the story beats, do an extensive outline, and get notes. They do a first draft, then a table read. They do a revised second draft.”

In the pilot class, they spend significant time developing a pitch, before they write a first draft, a bible, profiles of the major characters, and ideas for 10 to 12 episodes.

“They always find ways to surprise me,” Thornton says of the pilot students. “I have people write an episode of *Bob’s Burgers* in 311, then end up writing some dark psychological drama for their pilot. I get to know them all over again.”

Students are also exposed to production. In 423: Practicum for the Screenwriter, two scripts are selected from the masterclass to make two 25- to 30-minute short films. “The advantage of having a full script is we can pull the story out of it that we need,” says Burnstein. “These shorts will serve these kids well in a *Whiplash* kind of way if they want to make the full feature.”

On these projects, the screenwriting students collaborate with film majors and theater students (such as *Glee*’s Darren Criss one year), and even Ross School of Business students—acting as producers. Through a partnership with Michael Moore, these films screen each year at the Traverse City Film Festival.

Screen Scholars

While the visiting professionals certainly make an impression on the students, that often works both ways. Just ask Oscar-nominee Billy Ray (*Captain Phillips*). “The kids I met at U of M reminded me a lot of the kids I knew when I was at UCLA a hundred years ago,” Ray says. “Except they were humble and talked less about box office. It was pretty refreshing. They just wanted to learn.”

Janet Leahy (*Mad Men*, *Gilmore Girls*) worked with TV students who “had pilot ideas that were so personal, so specific, so creative, I lit up when I

“It’s the great secret of teaching—particularly if you get to be with exciting students—you end up learning as much as or more than they do,” Peter Hedges says. “You’re reminded of why you wanted to be in this wacky business, this art form. You remember that thrill of those early ideas and the first words you wrote.”

heard them. One of the most difficult things to do as a young writer is listen to someone’s opinion of your work. Their willingness to be open in taking notes and feedback was terrific.”

And she was impressed by Thornton’s approach. “He asked all the questions we ask in the room at *Mad Men* and other quality shows. The students are fathoms farther down the road than when we all started. They enter the program with a vast body of knowledge, determination, and much stronger story sense.”

Peter Hedges (*What’s Eating Gilbert Grape*), who first visited seven or eight years ago, has been back twice this year (and not just because his son is a current Michigan business student). “It was thrilling,” he says. “I was surprised how distinct the voices were. There was a lot of ambition in the work. I always come back feeling hopeful and inspired.”

And this is someone who taught screenwriting at Yale, plus courses at Bennington, Northwestern, and the North Carolina School of the Arts, his alma mater. “I went to a school with 600 kids. The thing that surprised me was it’s an enormous school, but within the program, everyone feels like they matter. I didn’t think that level of intimacy, that level of community, would be possible.”

Although he hesitated when asked to watch the 423 films. “I just didn’t have high hopes. When I started watching, my jaw drops. I joked, *I need to get out of here because you guys are going to be taking jobs from me soon. Why am I helping the competition?*”

And even if they’re the competition, the students draw Hedges back.

“It’s the great secret of teaching—

particularly if you get to be with exciting students—you end up learning as much as or more than they do,” he says. “You’re reminded of why you wanted to be in this wacky business, this art form. You remember that thrill of those early ideas and the first words you wrote.”

Ray would agree. “I generally come away completely inspired simply by being in a room full of people who care so much about being good at something, especially since that something has been the craft to which I’ve dedicated my entire career.”

Required Texts

Access is a big part of the program, not only to working professionals, but also materials, in the Donald Hall Collection. This library was initially funded by Bob Shaye and named after former Poet Laureate Hall, one of Shaye’s undergraduate professors. Here, you can find an astounding 4,000 scripts, 25,000 DVDs, and an archival film print collection.

Phil Hallman, head of the Collection, has probably forgotten more about movies than most people will ever know. He has film and library science degrees from Michigan and NYU. The *New York Times* sought his expertise throughout this year’s Awards season. And he manages the Screen Arts Mavericks and Makers Collection in the university’s Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library, with scripts and papers from Orson Welles, Robert Altman, John Sayles, Nancy Savoca, and Alan Rudolph.

The Sayles stuff alone could fuel a writer’s entire education, with early scripts he wrote for Roger Corman, unproduced screenplays, drafts of scripts written longhand on legal pads, plus

notebooks full of ideas and thoughts on other people's movies.

Of course, when Hallman began, he desperately needed materials.

"I wasn't sure where I would get all the stuff," he says. But then he remembered something. "I had been a student at NYU and knew someone was selling scripts on the street. I had seen him out there all the time."

He went to New York. "I just ordered everything that guy had. *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Rebel Without a Cause*, *A Clockwork Orange*. Those were some of the first scripts."

With few exceptions, there is now a corresponding film for every script.

"The students can read it and then watch it to see how it may have changed or developed," Hallman says. "It was always [Shaye's] desire to have a viewing facility."

Hallman credits Shaye's vision for what the Collection has become.

"This was his dream to have a script library. It's unusual, outside of the Writers Guild and places in Los Angeles. It's more common there, but not in the Midwest," Hallman says.

When Alexander Payne visited, he and Hallman got to talking. (In the printed script of *Sideways*, a production still shows Payne wearing a Michigan shirt, a gift from this visit.) In particular, they discussed the early works of Japanese film director Yasujiro Ozu, only available then in Japan.

"We had a boxed set, which included *I Was Born, But...* and *Dragnet Girl* on laserdisc," Hallman says. Payne had long searched for these films.

Hopwood to Hollywood

In many ways, Burnstein is carrying on a longtime Michigan tradition, nurturing and celebrating writers. After all, this is the place to which alum (class of 1905) and playwright Avery Hopwood donated one-fifth of his estate, to develop young writers.

Since 1931, a host of Hopwood awards, with scholarship money, have been handed out for works of non-fiction, fiction, drama, and poetry, to more than 3,000 students, amounting to more than \$3 million. In 1936, the Drama award

went to some guy named Arthur Miller.

Lawrence Kasdan has said that he went to Michigan specifically to learn from Kenneth Rowe, who taught Miller, and to try for the Hopwood—the prize money helped him get through school. He ended up winning three, including one in the 1970 Drama category for a screenplay called *Just This*. (There would not be an official category for screenplays until 1986.) Interestingly, he was not the first.

In 1962, Merrill Whitburn won the Drama award for a screenplay called *Voices of the Dead*. Today, he is the Louis Ellsworth Laflin Professor of English at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) in Troy, New York. He studied writing but wrote the script on his own. "I have always loved the movies," he says. "Great movies were coming in from Europe, and I just decided to try my hand at a screenplay."

Voices of the Dead was a drama based on real events from Whitburn's youth in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The title refers to something his father once said about the wind carrying the voices of all the hunters who had died in the woods.

When Whitburn became chair of the Department of Language, Literature, and Communication at RPI, he took on their McKinney Contest for writing students. "I transformed the competition, modeling it after the Hopwoods," he says. "I have directed the program many times since, including during the past four years. It still follows the Hopwood pattern."

Today, throw a rock in Hollywood and chances are good you'll hit a Hopwood winner. Since Burnstein started, the program has produced no shortage of success stories. Writing might be an artistic vocation, but it's also a job. And this program has turned out workers. After all, that's why people send their

kids to college. Some of them were born writers; others found themselves—and their voices—in these classrooms.

These are a few of their stories.

Writers Working

Michigan native Audra Sielaff was one of Burnstein's first students. "I started writing in junior high. By the time I was in high school, I had it in my head that I wanted to write for movies or TV," she says.

Sielaff won a Hopwood for her feature-length romantic comedy *Paper or Plastic?* But after grad work at USC, she met Becky Mann while working a publicity day job at Warner Bros. and they were accepted as a team to the ABC/Disney Fellowship. That led to staff gigs on *Notes From the Underbelly*, *Better Off Ted*, and *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, and most recently on CBS' *The McCarthys*.

Sielaff acknowledges a parallel between the classroom and the writers' room. "It's very similar. Everyone reads each other's stuff and gives notes. That's all part of the business of writing. That was good training for the future. It's such a team and group effort, especially with comedy. I like the writers' room. I



get to sit in a room and make jokes all day and go off and write fun scripts."

One of her classmates was another Michigan native, Craig Silverstein. "That one-two punch of 310 and 410 allowed me to generate material that started my career. 410 was unique. The entire semester was dedicated to rewriting, which is key to the craft. Personally, I didn't want to rewrite the script I wrote in 310."

It was a fantasy adventure called *Thieves*

“If you boil down the success of our program, it’s about three things: rewrite class, library, and visiting artists,” Jim Burnstein says. “Once I knew we were going to have those three things, I had a feeling we could go someplace special.” But he also attributes it to the caliber of students he’s encountered. “They come in with so much natural talent. You’re just trying to coach it up.”

Guild. Silverstein’s pitch for that script “remains to this day the single best pitch I have ever heard—including every one that my writing partner, Garrett Schiff, and I have ever sold,” says Burnstein.

But still. “I asked Burnstein if I could rewrite another one,” Silverstein continues. “He said sure, but only if I could write a new script before the class began.”

Challenge accepted. “I wrote my second script, *Hungry*, a dark comedy, during winter break,” Silverstein recalls. “I took the rewrite to Los Angeles. Those classes started my career, period. I got my first opportunity to staff on a show because of my feature spec. I loved TV and never looked back.” His credits include *Nikita*, *Bones*, and *Standoff*. His current project is AMC’s *Turn*, where Silverstein works with a more recent Michigan graduate, Mitchell Akselrad.

“I wanted it as a career since middle school,” says Princeton native Akselrad. He first tried writing a script at age 13 or 14, “a James Bond feature that was awful and about 300 pages. I wrote all the different camera angles.”

At Michigan, his first script was a World War II story. “They were saying as a first-time writer, maybe try something a little easier, so you don’t have to do the extra research.” Only he loves doing research. “I like finding a world and learning everything about it. I’m attracted to real-world events. *Turn*’s a great example.”

That script, *The Pacific Eclipse*, was a fictional story inspired by real events, in which a musician and a Naval Intelligence agent pose as German spies to

embed a musical code in the Tokyo Rose radio program. It won him a Hopwood.

Before *Turn*, his work has been in features. “I sold a script to New Regency about cold war espionage. I had a script on the Black List, *Titans of Park Row*, about William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer. I’ve got something with Warner Bros.” *Splinter Way* is another period story, set during World War I, about early motorcycle racing.

Like Silverstein, Akselrad only studied feature writing at Michigan. “When I started on the show, I realized how much I didn’t know about television, about how to construct a story that runs the whole season. Craig has been a fantastic teacher.”

Also moving between film and TV, Yoni Brenner (*Rio 2*, screenplay by Don Rhymer and Carlos Kotkin and Jenny Bicks and Yoni Brenner, Story by Carlos Saldanha) grew up in Ann Arbor, the university there in his backyard. He has a number of animated film projects in development with Blue Sky Studios and he’s working on a half-hour show about “dysfunctional therapists” for HBO. He also writes for *The New Yorker*.

“I was a comedy nerd. I’d written plays. I did a lot of theater in high school,” Brenner recalls. “When I was 19 or 20 I was interested in seeing if I could be a screenwriter.”

The program got him there. “The greatest thing was that I finished a screenplay,” he says. “That already puts you far ahead. Though I wouldn’t look at it now.”

Original Celtics did win him a Hopwood. “I cringe at the recollection,” he laughs. “It was an ill-advised foray into the

vaunted genre of basketball time-travel.”

But the award was definitely meaningful. “Having people read your material and saying you’ve got talent—you can’t underestimate how important that is to a 20-year-old.”

Beth Schwartz always knew she’d go to Michigan (most of her family did) but beyond that wasn’t sure what she wanted. Currently a staff writer on The WB’s *Arrow* (before that, *Brothers and Sisters*), she started out a psych major. “I didn’t feel passionate about it,” she recalls. “I took a playwriting class to fulfill my English requirement.”

The teacher called to praise her play. “Your teacher just never calls you at home,” she says. “He pushed me toward being a writer.”

This was not, technically speaking, her first work. “When I was in middle school, for my drama class, I did a play of *90210*.” She laughs and calls it her “first spec script.”

Schwartz took screenwriting classes with Lawson and Burnstein, and an independent study with playwright and screenwriter Wendy Hammond (*Julie Johnson*). “It got me really excited about writing. They gave you so much freedom to explore.”

Her first job in L.A. was working for Dan Fogelman (*Crazy, Stupid, Love*) on The WB comedy *Like Family*. “I liked that process. I’m more of a social writer; I like bouncing ideas off people.” Fogelman encouraged her to pursue TV writing and offered great advice: “Write a spec for a show you would want to write for.”

So she did. Her first spec was for The WB show *Everwood*. When *Like Family* was cancelled, her next job, oddly enough, was to work for Greg Berlanti. On *Everwood*. “Which was strange,” she says. “I was a huge fan.” Did she tell him about her spec? “I told him, but I definitely don’t think he read it.” It’s bad form to offer a spec of a show to that actual show. “Especially if it’s the first spec you ever wrote.”

Her older brother, Adam, took one of Burnstein’s first masterclasses. Formerly a Disney Channel staff writer on *So Random!*, he’s developing a kids

show pilot. “Burnstein handpicked four or five people to be in that class,” he recalls. “It made you feel like you were selected into this elite group. That maybe you actually had talent.”

The class was held at Burnstein’s house, around his dining room table. “We never met in a classroom,” Schwartz says. “It felt more like a writers’ group before I knew what that was.”

Which was the intent. “It’s a transition class,” Burnstein says. “They learn to work as writers by forming a group and helping each other and reading each other’s work. It’s a competitive business, but you need help from your friends.”

Schwartz remembers Burnstein’s insights as a working writer. “He would pitch stuff he was working on, that he was actually pitching to studios,” Schwartz says. “In retrospect, that was probably great practice for him.”

Schwartz’s work in 427 paid off. “That class got me to write the script that helped me get an agent. The first couple years, that was my sample.”

Burnstein’s guidance did not end when the semester did.

“When I went to L.A., I would email him about things I was doing and he’d give me advice,” Schwartz adds. “He’d be like, *Send me a draft. I’ll read it.*”

Burnstein even helped him land an early gig, an option to write a script. “He was definitely trying to help people get their foot in the door,” he says. “Which is just as important as the writing.”

Finally, there’s Daniel Pipski.

“I was a geology major,” he recalls. “It stemmed from seeing *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. I wanted to be an archaeologist or something in that vein.” Two English courses changed that. In “Comic Approaches to Catastrophe,” they read Woody Allen’s *Without Feathers* and watched *Dr. Strangelove*. In “Fiction to Film,” they studied films adapted from literature, like *High Noon*.

“I declared an English major after that,” he says. He took creative writing courses every semester and completed all his credits by the end of junior year.

“I was telling a kid from one of my creative writing classes my dilemma and

he said, ‘Oh, I’m a film major. It’s so awesome.’ I thought, *I like things that are awesome.*”

His first screenwriting course was with a professor visiting for only one semester: Oscar-winner John Briley (*Gandhi*). In the first lecture, Pipski realized his creative writing experience was not applicable.

“Someone raised their hand and said, ‘You’re using this word *slugline*. What



does that mean?” Pipski felt the same.

The script he wrote for Briley was called *Papa’s Clocks*. “It was bad. I went on to rewrite the script for Jim and make it slightly less bad.”

Slightly less bad enough to win a Hopwood, actually.

He moved to L.A. and found a receptionist job at Working Title Films (*Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Love Actually*). Through circumstance and proximity, he was soon promoted to be the president’s assistant, and a few months later was offered the job of director of development.

“I didn’t write again for 10 years,” he admits.

In 2009, after more development and producing jobs, he collaborated on a script with a friend. He joined the WGA in 2011, after they sold a feature pitch called *Parents and Children* to Disney. His writing partner was Ol Parker (*The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*). “Always good to have a partner who’s way more talented than you,” Pipski adds.

As a writing team, they pitched a

show to Working Title. The company passed but asked Pipski to run their TV department. He did. Today, he’s Vice President, Television, at Miramax. It might not be a writer’s career, per se, but Pipski attributes the entire journey to that fateful junior-year decision.

“I might be the only person I know who uses their exact major every day,” he says. “Every meeting with producers and writers where we’re talking about

making a screenplay better—that’s what I did my entire college career.”

Ask Burnstein about these varied careers and accomplishments, if he foresaw any of this at the start, and the answer is an emphatic, “No!” (Repeated several times.)

He does recognize that he has put the right pieces into place. “If you boil down the success of our program, it’s about three things: *rewrite class*, *library*, and *visiting artists*. Once I knew we were going to have those three things, I had a feeling we could go someplace special.” But he also attributes it to the caliber of students he’s encountered. “They come in with so much natural talent. You’re just trying to coach it up.”

And while it’s clear Burnstein has inspired an ever-growing number of writers, their impact on him cannot be underestimated either. “Teaching has definitely made me a better writer,” he believes. “When you see kids come in with ideas that blow you away, that are so original, it encourages you to step up your game.”

Class dismissed. **WB**