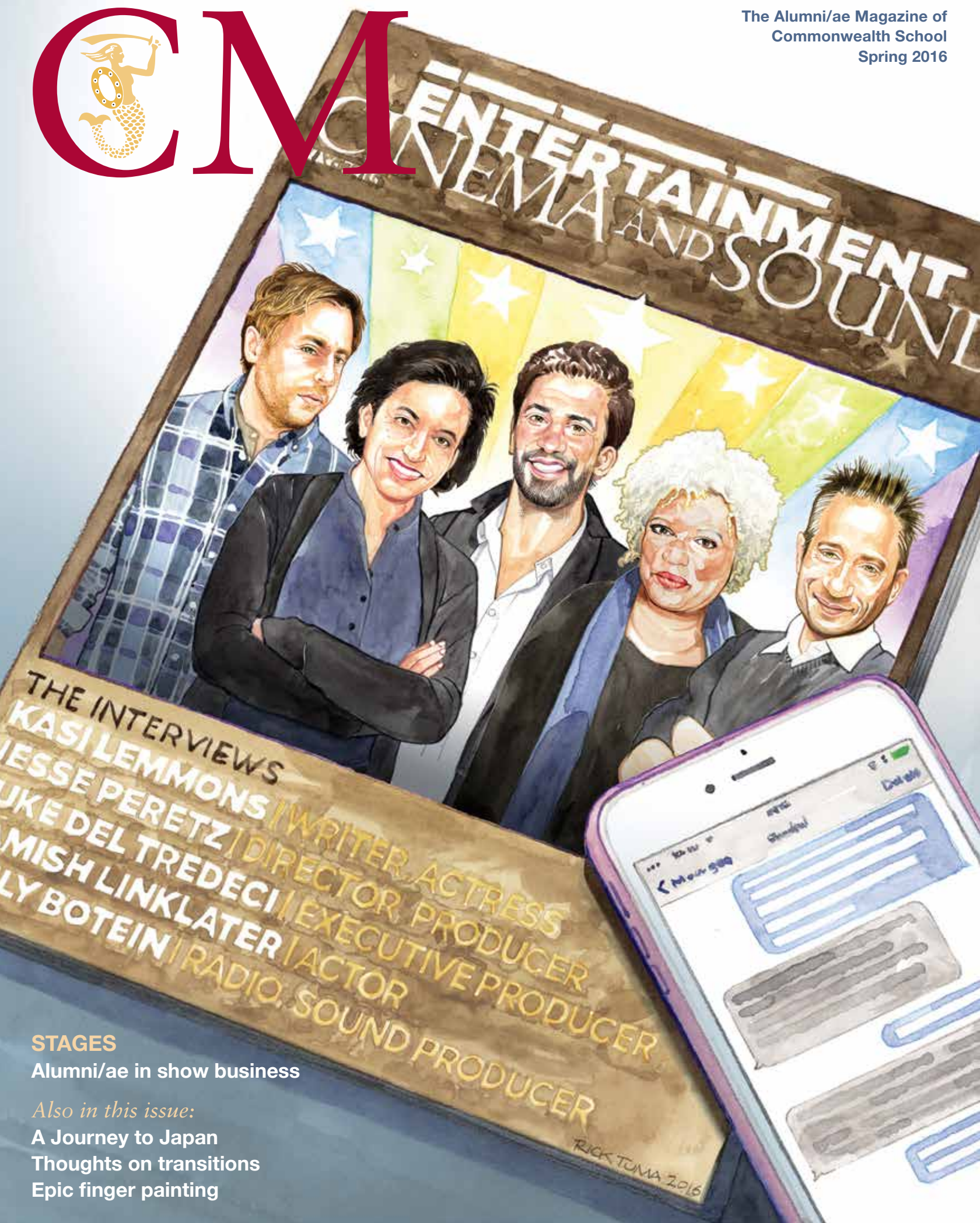




The Alumni/ae Magazine of  
Commonwealth School  
Spring 2016



## STAGES

Alumni/ae in show business

*Also in this issue:*

A Journey to Japan

Thoughts on transitions

Epic finger painting





# Why I Made It

Natalia

*By Chlöe Berlin '19*

**T**his painting was done entirely by hand. By finger painting, I indulged in the satisfaction of a supposedly childish medium while exploring a new frontier: the nude form. Life Drawing during Project Week gave me the opportunity to work intently and without interruption. I found the sudden absence of constraint simultaneously overwhelming and liberating. I encountered a number of obstacles in my conception of the piece: I struggled with palette choice, anatomical accuracy, and overall productivity, all attributable to my decision to finger paint. (I stubbornly refrained from using brushes or a palette knife.) Rejection of convention brought other, technical, disadvantages. I lacked the dexterity to render the detail required in some of the more cramped sections of the composition. Paint, I discovered, is biased in conduct, depending on the method of application. The friction of acrylic on a dry fingertip is far coarser than when it is lacquered with a camelhair brush. I had grown accustomed to the agility of brushwork. The textural resistance of finger painting felt newly authentic, both crude and personal.

As early as the first day of Project Week, I learned how arduous painting could be. The canvas, my largest creation yet, measures five feet by three feet. Tackling it required intense physical exertion: hours of stretching and crouching made my arms and legs sore. My forearms, coated with color, provided the palette; scraping form into the grainy canvas rubbed the pads of my fingers raw; I ended each day utterly exhausted. This was the long process—which left pigment engrained in my fingerprints and lining my cuticles—by which I created my piece.

Through the solitary endeavor of painting with my fingers, I gained an intimate appreciation of the human body and a new experience of space. And yet, the physical impact of my adventure in making this portrait revealed to me just how deeply the painter and her subject can be connected.

## FROM THE EDITOR



When I came back to Commonwealth as director of communications in 2008, nearly a dozen teachers from my student days were still at the school. Soon enough, I was having adult conversations with many of them—even calling most by their first names. But there was one teacher with whom my adult confidence failed. I dug my old transcript out of the file cabinet in the basement and found the dreaded C-minus I’d earned in her class. Finally, one day, I had to face her.

“Ms. Siporin, I need to apologize for being such a bad student in your Fiction Writing class.”

She graciously forgave me, and I was able to move on with my life.

This is the power of a Commonwealth teacher: more than thirty years on, we remember what they asked of us, what they helped us accomplish, and when we failed them.

I’ve had an opportunity few Commonwealth alumni/ae have to create a new set of memories and to leave a new legacy at the school that means so much to me. I’ve enjoyed working with an exceptionally dedicated staff and faculty, and getting to know students who seem a lot smarter than I was at their age. And now I know what happens in faculty meetings.

But the time has come for new challenges. As you read this, I will have just begun my new job at the University of Rhode Island, as assistant director for administration and communications at the George and Anne Ryan Institute for Neuroscience. This brand new center is positioned to boost research into neurodegenerative diseases and also to facilitate the development of new therapies. It’s exciting work, and it draws on my early training as a neurobiologist.

I will miss Commonwealth, but I’ll always be an alumnus. I will come back to visit, and so should you. *Nereides in aeternum!*

**Tristan Davies '83**

Director of Communications, Editor



# CM

The Commonwealth School Alumni/ae Magazine

### Issue 10

Spring 2016

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# CM

Commonwealth School Magazine Spring 2016

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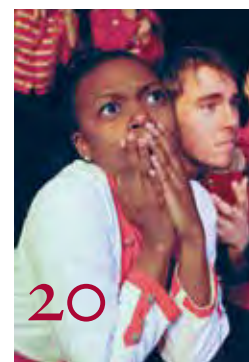
Three ways to stay connected

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#### Where Science Meets Gender

Gabe Murchison '10 combines data and advocacy  
in work for LGBTQ rights



On the cover: Of the many paths Commonwealth alumni/ae follow, a rare few lead to success in the entertainment industry. Beginning on page 10, Jonathan Sapers '79 profiles five alumni/ae who have found success on stage, screen, and the airways. Illustration by Rick Tuma.

## Phase 2

Commonwealth becomes a construction zone again this summer—a much smaller one than last summer, thankfully. In 2015, phase 1 of a major renovation brought new science labs and improved floor plans on the first floor and lower level, along with a building-wide heating and cooling system (whose benefits were much appreciated during the winter!).

Phase 2 is much narrower in scope. At its center, literally and figuratively, is the elevator being installed in the airshaft. Workers began preparing the shaft last summer, and completing that job will take much of this summer as well; installing the elevator cab is one of the final steps.

Other work will make mostly minor adjustments to the floor plan on the upper floors, widening hallways, reconfiguring some offices, and adding small study or meeting rooms.

## Accreditors

## Approve

Once every ten years, Commonwealth is re-examined for accreditation by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. A yearlong self-study was followed by a three-day visit in November by a team of administrators from other independent schools who compared their impressions of the school to those in the self-study.

To no one's surprise, Commonwealth passed in every standard of assessment. As the visiting committee said in its report, "there exists no doubt that the school is a place of the mind; of big, lofty ideas; of social justice; and of a close-knit community within an urban setting."



Workers opening up the airshaft wall in the lower level last June, one of the first steps of the elevator installation that will conclude this summer.

TRISTAN DAVIES

# Award-Winning Expressions

Eight students won thirteen awards in this year's Massachusetts regional Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, coordinated by the School of the Museum of Fine Arts.

## **Mosammat Afreen '16**

Silver Key, Photography,

*"Chef at Work"*

Silver Key, Photography,

*"Curious Children"*

Honorable Mention, Photography,

*"Mother"*

## **Shoshana Boardman '17**

Honorable Mention, Drawing and Illustration,

*"Woman Sitting"*

Honorable Mention, Short Story,

*"What We Say"*

Honorable Mention, Poetry,

*"Never Forget"*

## **Julia Curl '16**

Silver Key, Photography,

*"Leaving Wellington"*

## **Javier Diaz '17**

Silver Key, Photography,

*"Unnamed"*

Silver Key, Photography,

*"Solitude"*

## **Annie Dobroth '16**

Honorable Mention, Photography,

*"Porch Pinhole"*

Honorable Mention, Photography,

*"Maybe"*

## **Alexis Mitchell '16**

Gold Key, Photography,

*"The Woman in the Chair"*

## **Heather Stewart '19**

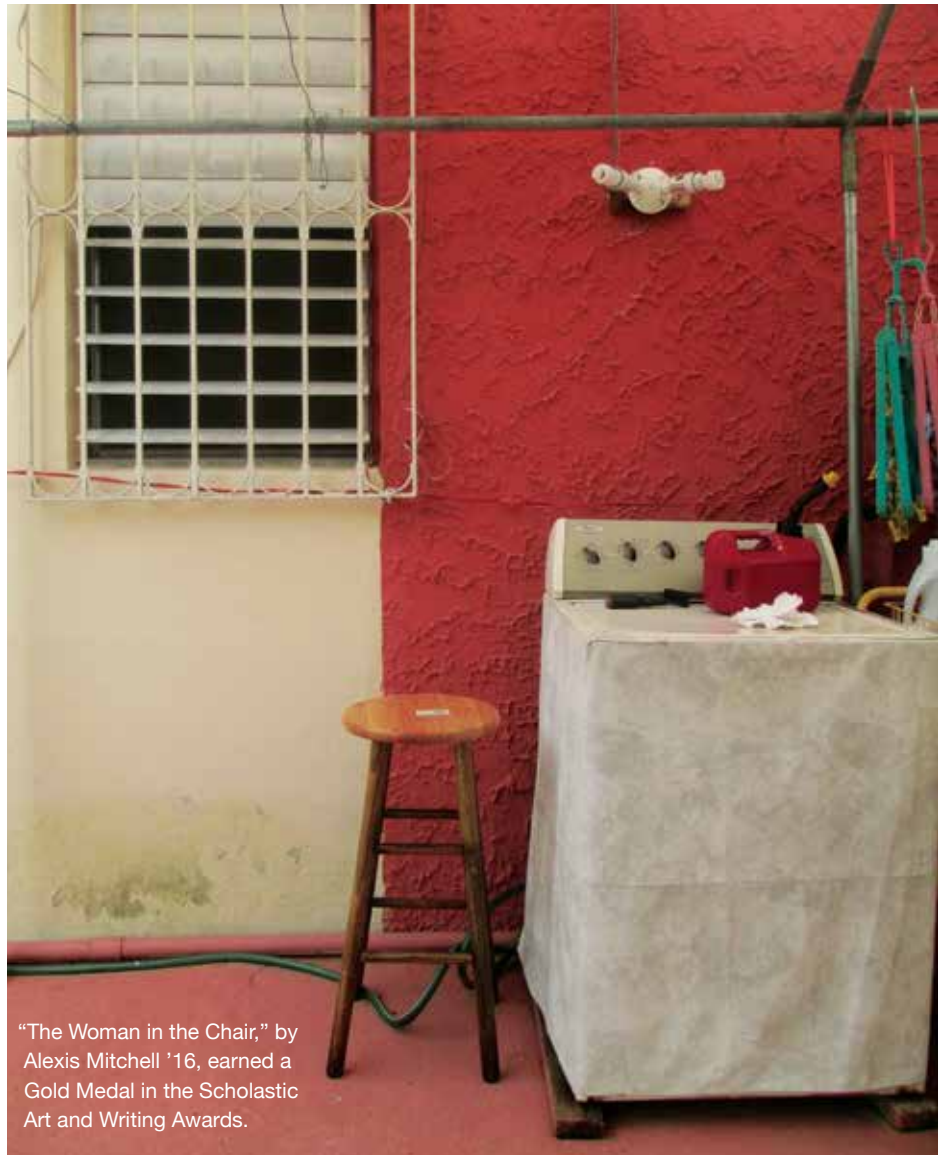
Honorable Mention, Drawing and Illustration,

*"Desert Sky"*

## **Zelda Stewart '17**

Silver Key, Photography,

*"Packaged, Pure"*



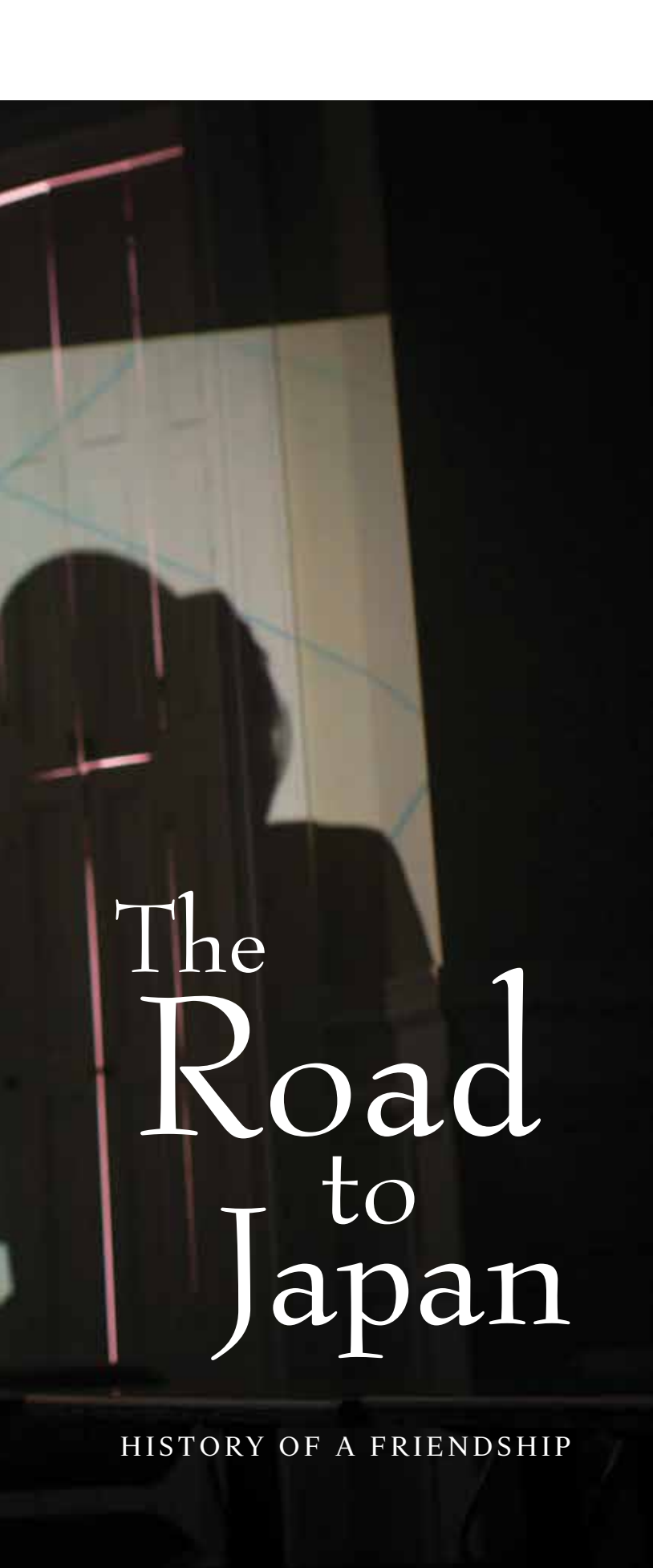
"The Woman in the Chair," by Alexis Mitchell '16, earned a Gold Medal in the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards.

## A Gold for CM

The world of independent school alumni/ae magazines may seem like a bit of a niche, but we are proud nonetheless to report that CM was awarded the Gold Medal in this year's Circle of Excellence Awards for District One of CASE, the Council for Advancement and Support of Education. District One includes New England and eastern Canada. Thanks and gratitude to our writers and photographers; our ace designer, Jeanne Abboud; our red-ink-wielding associate editor, Rebecca Folkman; and Headmaster Bill Wharton, who okayed the creation of CM in 2011.

Juniors Akino Watanabe and Miranda Dukach have become fast friends—in both senses—since they met in ninth grade. They were photographed in classroom 2A by Kathleen Dooher. The other photos with this article are from the girls' trip to Japan last summer.





# The Road to Japan

HISTORY OF A FRIENDSHIP

By Sasha Watson '92

When Miranda Dukach '17 and Akino Watanabe '17 met at soccer practice in September of their ninth grade, they jumped to utterly erroneous conclusions about each other. Today, cozied up together on the Dartmouth lobby sofa, the two BFFs giggle, remembering their initial assessments as they eyed one another: "I thought she was a Brookline mean girl (i.e. snob)," Akino confesses. Miranda, meanwhile, assumed that Akino was quiet and self-effacing. She would soon learn that, once you get to know her, Akino is direct, even blunt in her honesty, and humorously sarcastic. "For Japanese people," explains Akino, "the most important thing is not to make other people uncomfortable, so you smile even if you're unhappy, and you express your real feelings in different ways. I've learned to be open with Miranda."

As for the "mean" girl, she peppered Akino with questions about *anime*. Akino wasn't a fan of the Japanese animation genre herself, and so she had no idea what Miranda was talking about when she referenced books and characters. But not many people Akino met in the two years she had lived in the States had shown an interest in the culture that shaped her, and she was curious about this atypical Brookline girl.

Their friendship took root as their exchanges continued. "I come from a Russian Jewish immigrant background," Miranda says, "so I taught her about Russian tea..."

"In Japan," interjects Akino, "Russian tea means you put jam in the tea and have snacks," and the two laugh.

When Miranda first told Akino at the beginning of sophomore year that she wanted to learn Japanese, Akino just smiled, but Miranda was serious. By this time the pair were confirmed best friends, and Miranda, who spent much of her time at Akino's house, wanted to understand the family conversations. She also, in true best-friend form, wanted the two of them to have a "secret language of our own."

What started as Akino teaching Miranda a vocabulary word here and there soon turned into a rigorous program of study. Akino wrote out lessons on the whiteboard in her room and created worksheets for Miranda, which she then graded. Miranda, meanwhile, devoted much of her free time to studying: she quizzed herself with flashcards while on the Green Line, forced herself to think in Japanese, and when with Akino's family attempted to understand what they said to each other. "I got really passionate about it," says Miranda, adding that "my parents were super excited to see me not watching movies all the time." Miranda credits her friend with being a skilled teacher, but Akino protests: "I felt like we discovered



The two-week trip, which took place in August '15, had three phases. Akino wanted to show Miranda both contemporary Japan and its history. The initial phase of the journey focused on “modern Japanese high-school life.” The girls stayed near Tokyo, first at Akino’s grandparents’ house in Yokohama, and then at her cousins’ home in Chiba. The pair immersed themselves, going to school with Akino’s cousins, singing karaoke, spending time in arcades and shopping malls. In honor of Miranda’s early interest, they visited the Ghibli museum, which is devoted to *anime*.

“We played a lot of Uno, too,” Akino says.

“And it was so much easier to speak Japanese when we were playing!” adds Miranda.

Miranda felt overwhelmed by the generosity of Akino’s family and friends. She’d never experienced hospitality that went so far beyond inviting someone into your home. Here, she found that Akino’s cousins had exchanged emails months in advance to prepare her visit, making arrangements for outings and even every meal they would eat together. Meanwhile, Akino reveled in her Japanese life and self with Miranda. “Being Japanese is a big part of my identity,” she says, “and now Miranda really understands that part of who I am.”

After a week of exploring the modern high-school experience, Miranda and Akino moved on to history, visiting temples and shrines around Kyoto. In the final week they went to Hiroshima. Fushimi Inari, a shrine at the base of a mountain in Kyoto was a revelation. From the base, the girls trekked up the mountain for two hours in the rain to a series of smaller shrines. “It was slippery and terrifying,” says Miranda as the two show photographs of a wet mountain trail lined with orange torii gates, “but so beautiful!”

something new *together*.” She explains that, as a native speaker, she didn’t necessarily know the foundational rules of grammar that Miranda needed, and that Miranda’s enthusiasm allowed her to appreciate her own language in a new way. So they worked things out on the whiteboard: they made charts of verb forms, discussed the differences between the three Japanese alphabets, and wrestled with grammatical principles as they stumbled upon them.

They worked from September to June of their sophomore year and, however improvised their method, they got results. When Miranda attended Concordia Language Villages for a month last summer, she placed into level 4 out of 5, putting her on par with students who had studied Japanese for 3 or 4 years. After her return from the Concordia camp, when the two friends watched *The Lion King* in Japanese, Miranda realized that she’d turned a corner. “I was so happy I could understand!” That gave her the confidence to start using her Japanese with Akino’s family. Now, she says, she has the courage to speak to them in Japanese, and they welcome her efforts.

While they pressed on with their language lessons, the two also plotted to take a trip to Japan. The major hurdle, they knew, would be to convince their parents.

“Of course they said ‘NO!’ at first,” Miranda recounts, “but then our moms met at Shabbat and they could see how much time we were putting into organizing the trip.” The preparation was as intensive as the language-learning, with whiteboard presentations and GoogleDocs that outlined main goals, possible itineraries, and educational benefits. “We showed them our master strategy, our cultural lists, our safety plans,” says Akino. “What’ll we do if we get lost, how we’ll be responsible. It was only after we thought about all that and made specific proposals that our parents decided it was okay.”

Both girls agree that Miranda experienced a different way of thinking about the self. “In Japan, you act as a group, not as an individual,” says Akino. “I wanted Miranda to feel that.”



Both girls agree that Miranda experienced a different way of thinking about the self. “In Japan, you act as a group, not as an individual,” says Akino. “I wanted Miranda to feel that.”

“It’s so different,” agrees Miranda. “Especially coming from Commonwealth, where you take what makes you different and put it on display. In Japan you move as one with the crowd.”

Following on their journey, the pair plans to make a meal of yakisoba at Hancock, although, says Miranda. “we have to learn to cook first.”

“We burn popcorn,” Akino admits.

This year, Miranda has spurred Akino to learn about American politics and the presidential campaign. Akino has discovered that “Miranda has...well...very strong political stances, and they’re not always what you’d expect.” While Akino acknowledges her previous indifference, Miranda’s political passions have ignited her own, and she’s gone on to do her own research and draw her

own conclusions. The primaries have lately provided the pair with rich material for debate, particularly when they talk with Akino’s father at her house after school. “He has his opinions, too,” says Akino, “so I can compare their arguments, and then come up with my own.”

Miranda, meanwhile, plans to take the AP test in Japanese this spring. Under Akino’s tutelage, she learned the Hiragana alphabet, used for Japanese words, and now she’s working with a tutor to learn Kanji and Katakana, used for Chinese characters and foreign words respectively.

“Akino opened the world for me,” Miranda says.

Akino casts her an affectionately skeptical glance.

“That sounds majestic,” she says. Both girls laugh.

They’re on their way home for a sleepover at the end of winter break, and they’ve got new projects to pursue, like their shared love of K-pop, their experiments in cooking, going to the gym together, and spending time at one another’s homes. Friendship, in the case of these two, proves a fertile exchange not only of interests but also of their essential selves.

*Sasha Watson ’92 teaches English and Fiction Writing.*



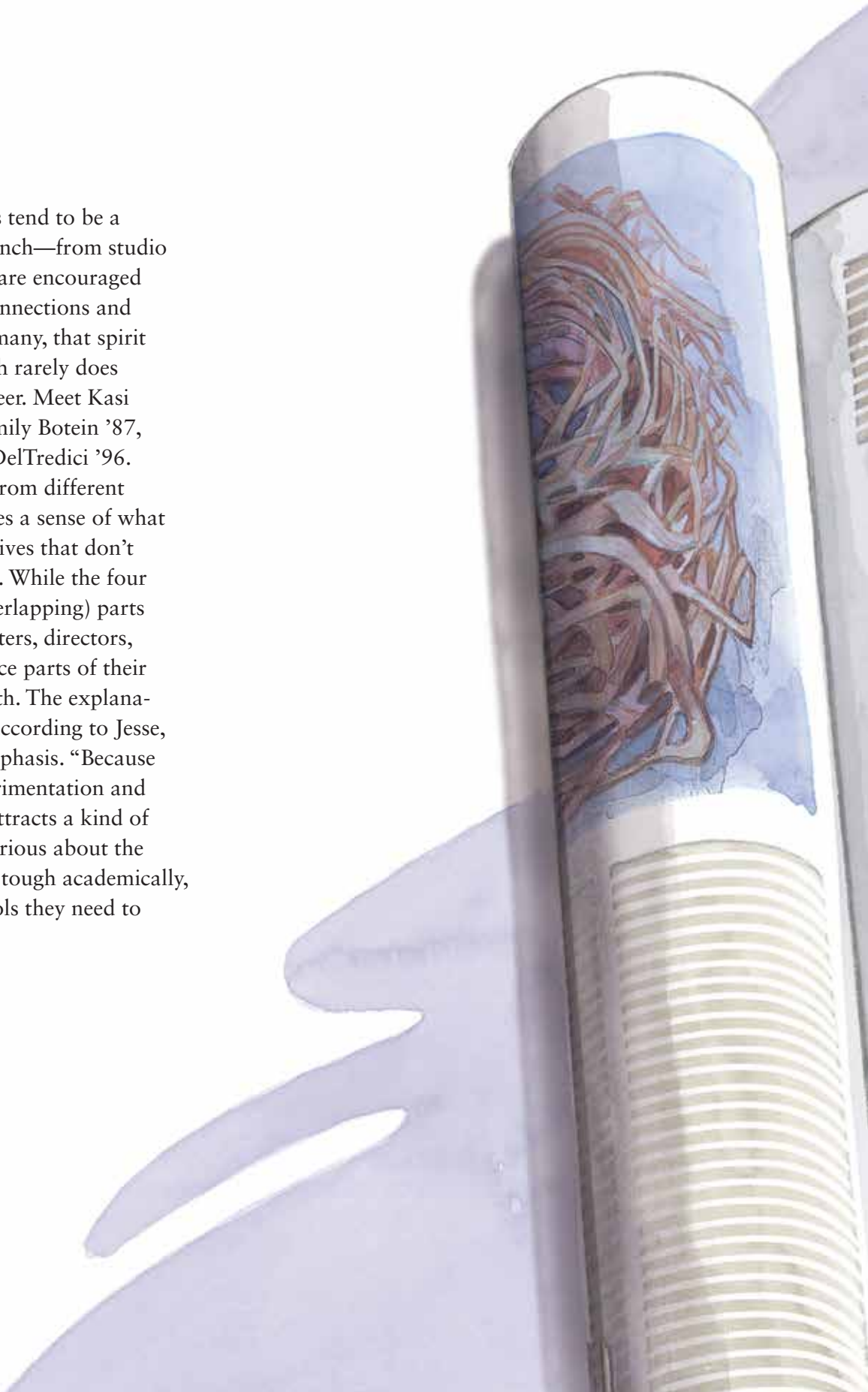
# STAGES

By Jonathan Sapers '79

Illustrations by Rick Tuma

Commonwealth students tend to be a remarkably creative bunch—from studio to classroom, students are encouraged to make unexpected connections and then follow these new ideas. For many, that spirit continues after graduation, though rarely does it become the foundation of a career. Meet Kasi Lemmons '77, Jesse Peretz '86, Emily Botein '87, Hamish Linklater '94, and Luke DelTredici '96.

The work of these graduates from different periods in the school's history gives a sense of what it's like to carve out professional lives that don't exactly follow linear progressions. While the four inhabit different (if sometimes overlapping) parts of the entertainment world as writers, directors, producers, and actors, they all trace parts of their experience back to Commonwealth. The explanation for such artistic eclecticism, according to Jesse, lies in the school's educational emphasis. "Because Commonwealth encourages experimentation and focuses on academics and art, it attracts a kind of student who appreciates and is curious about the arts. And because the school is so tough academically, people develop the intellectual tools they need to make more complicated art."





# Girls and Idiot Brothers

## Jesse Peretz

Of the five alumni/ae in this article, Jesse has taken the most circuitous career path. First, he was the bassist for Lemonheads (later called *the* Lemonheads), an alternative rock band he formed at Commonwealth with his classmates Evan Dando and Ben Deily. Then, at Harvard, he majored in visual and environmental studies, while also picking up a “minor” in the local music scene. “So many of my classmates would never leave Harvard Square, let alone cross the Charles River. I feel I got the benefit not only of an awesome college education but also of a more diverse life in Boston and the punk rock scene.”

Jesse was a junior at Commonwealth the first time he found himself on a movie set. A busboy at Rebecca’s Restaurant on Beacon Hill, he was invited by two waitresses to act in a “steamy” student film they were making at Emerson College. “It was incredibly intimidating,” Jesse remembers, adding that “it was the last time I ever acted.” He adds, “In my memory, those three or four days of filming loomed as a big fancy production. It totally turned me on. I felt like, ‘Oh my God, I just made a movie.’” Emboldened, he bought a Super 8 camera and started making movies of his own.

He spent his senior-year Project Month working for documentary filmmaker and Commonwealth parent Frederick Wiseman, who gave him his first taste of the laborious process of matching sound with picture using razors and tape. Jesse values those lessons even today, as he builds a directing career. “I still work with editors who learned to edit that way,” he says. “Even ten years ago they taught the old method in film school because it forces students to think differently. You think hard about where you’re going to make a cut when you’re physically cutting into your own film.”

Meanwhile, life with the band was not always glamorous. “Living on tour is a cycle of being woken up in the morning, eating some horrible breakfast at some cheap motel, getting in a van and driving for four to eight hours, and then getting out and unloading your equipment,” Jesse says. “You’d have fun at dinner; the shows were really fun, but you grew bored and annoyed with each other. For a three-week period during one European tour we sat in the small van not even talking to each other.”

Jesse sees his musical career as a kind of way station, one which held clues to the life he would go on to lead. “I think Evan let me stay in the band not for any musical prowess of mine, but because I dealt so well with practical matters: keeping everything moving forward. I would make sure that we had flights to Europe for all our tours and somebody to take care of all the details.”

After an argument, Jesse and bandmate Dave Ryan left the Lemonheads. Jesse moved to New York, where he made his first effort at that film career he had been set on since Commonwealth. “For a whole year, I tried to get production assistant work, but there was almost no film work in the ’90s in New York. It was just too expensive to shoot there.” Jesse and Dave rejoined the band, toured Europe (twice) and Australia. Then Jesse left for graduate school at NYU.

Nonetheless, the band continued to play a role in Jesse’s career. One of his first films was a video for the Lemonheads song

“Something About Ray,” which involved a stay in the Hollywood Hills mansion of Johnny Depp.

Jesse vividly remembers arriving in L.A. to film the video, just as the 1992 L.A. riots were starting. He got a call from Evan saying that Depp thought Jesse should come up to his house before the riot curfew went into effect. As he drove up the hill, his anxiety mounted. “There was dry brush everywhere. It seemed like I was driving on top of a kindling heap. At the top was a perfect sightline of fires all along the horizon. I remember thinking I’d made a huge mistake.”



It turned out, though, that the video he made led to his first movie, *First Love, Last Rites*, from a screenplay he and Ryan had written based on the Ian McEwan short story. The company that produced “Ray” co-produced the movie, having secured McEwan’s blessing.

Sometime later, on the way to Logan Airport following a visit to his parents, Jesse encountered the inspiration for another career milestone. Their cabbie “started describing to me *verbatim* the Guns N’ Roses video that was in heavy rotation. He basically gave me a close-reading rant on how unrealistic it was.”

At the time Jesse was living with actor Donal Logue, whom he knew from Harvard. “I told Donal about this hilarious guy.” (Logue, Jesse adds, claims the discovery of the cabbie.) Jesse and Logue produced a spec version of a ride with “Jimmy the Cab Driver,” with Donal as Jimmy. “We spent \$75 on [film] stock, and we found someone who lent us an editing room,” Jesse recounts.

Jesse was a junior at Commonwealth the first time he found himself on a movie set. A busboy at Rebecca's Restaurant on Beacon Hill, he was invited by two waitresses to act in a "steamy" student film they were making at Emerson College. "It was incredibly intimidating," Jesse remembers, adding that "it was the last time I ever acted."

"We paid a cabbie to let us get a couple of handheld shots of him pulling up and pulling off. You never saw Donal from the outside, driving the cab."

When MTV commissioned ten of the spots, the character and his tirades became MTV mainstays. "That was the beginning of my being able to direct things, and because I had been in the music world and knew all these bands," Jesse says, "my first videos involved just bands and people." In 2000 his video for the Foo Fighters' "Learning to Fly," won the Grammy for Best Short Form Music video.

Jesse's feature-length film work also blossomed. For his next, *The Château*, "I set myself the challenge of making a farce with a half American, half French cast, that was completely improvised, and really all about communication problems," he explains.

"We literally wrote script between takes, and then we'd go from an 11-take scene to a three-minute scene. We'd start with close-ups, because it's easier to cut that stuff up, and then once we had the scene we would go back and do the medium shot and the wide establishing shot. In broad strokes, that's how we made the movie."

Years later, *The Château* caught the eye of a then-college student named Lena Dunham, who commented on it on the Netflix web site. Jesse and Lena actually met after Sarah Sophie Flicker, Jesse's wife, serendipitously encountered Lena in a kids' clothing store in Manhattan. "They struck up a conversation and talked for an hour!" Sarah ended up being in Dunham's movie *Tiny Furniture*, which won the audience award at South by Southwest.

Meeting Dunham proved propitious for Jesse, as her star continued to rise. He had just finished wrapping his fourth movie, *Our Idiot Brother*, which he wrote with his sister Evgenia. When Dunham asked Jesse to direct episodes for the second season of the acclaimed HBO series *Girls*, his career took another turn.

Today, Jesse and Sarah live in Brooklyn with their three kids. In his second floor office in a former warehouse in Brooklyn, he is preparing to direct the new HBO show *Divorce*. "For all those years I was trying to make features. You work and work and then you're rewriting and taking notes and laboriously pulling together the money to make the project actually happen. Every project takes years to develop. Then you shoot in four to six weeks, and then you edit forever. TV is different. I'm constantly prepping, shooting, prepping, shooting. Two years ago I spent 111 days shooting on set! And for me, production—shooting—is the part that I live for. I have found a good rhythm for my life."

## First Love, Second Love

### Kasi Lemmons

Kasi Lemmons may have had her first big breaks as an actor, but "I think of myself as a writer," she says. Kasi's star rose quickly when she was cast as Jodie Foster's FBI roommate in *The Silence of the Lambs*; roles in *Hard Target*, *Fear of a Black Hat*, and *School Daze* followed, along with work in stage and television, including *The Cosby Show*. Her writing career began midway through that career, and she has written (or played a role in rewriting) the films *Eve's Bayou*, *Caveman's Valentine*, *Talk to Me*, and *Black Nativity*.

Kasi started acting at Boston Children's Theater when she was nine, having moved recently from Missouri with her two sisters and newly divorced mother. "Acting was my first love," she says. "For a long time I couldn't imagine anything else. I was one of the few black kids at Boston Children's Theater. When people were looking for a certain type of actor, they would hit up that theater company, and when somebody needed a black actor, there I was." A courtroom soap opera called *You've Got A Right* provided her first role.

While acting was going right for her, school in Newton was not. "I dropped out of high school in tenth grade," she remembers. "I felt very depressed and misunderstood; I didn't know



**Stress seems to be Kasi's comfort zone. She gravitates, she says, to projects that focus on "the gray area between heroics and evil," and prefers steep challenges. She once told an interviewer that if a project doesn't require her to step beyond a certain line, it's not for her.**

what was wrong with me. My mother, a psychologist, suggested, 'Maybe you need a different type of education.' So she sent Kasi to Commonwealth. "All of a sudden," says Kasi, "everyone was bright and interesting, and I didn't feel like an outsider. I was with a bunch of outsiders."

She studied with acting teacher Curtis Anderson, performing Inez in *No Exit* and Lady Macbeth. She did summer stock in Western Massachusetts and the prestigious summer program at Circle in the Square in New York City. After Commonwealth, she returned to New York to study at the Tisch School of Drama at New York University, but found herself not quite ready to abandon the love of deep learning she acquired at Commonwealth. "I ended up going to UCLA as a history major with a minor in sociology," Kasi says. "I really needed more tough academics. After college, I came back to New York to study film at the New School."

She enrolled in dance classes and more acting classes and began working in commercials while waiting tables to make ends meet. In the midst of all this, she says, she "crashed" an audition for the 1984 Steppenwolf revival of Lanford Wilson's play *Balm in Gilead*, directed by John Malkovich. Just two months later, she was asked to understudy and be prepared to go on in two days. "At the time I was auditioning for black-girl-next-door roles, because I looked young and cute. But for this play, I got to be edgy—a gay gangster. And that changed my way of looking at myself. It started me thinking, 'I can control my image a little bit.' The world became much more interesting after that show."

During this same period, Kasi regularly wrote scenes for her fellow actors to use in classes. She had written a play about heart-break and, at film school, had created a seven-minute short about homelessness. Called to audition for *The Cosby Show*, she decided she would try to show her film to Bill Cosby himself. "I was shaking," she remembers. "I said, 'Mr. Cosby, would you look at my short? It's only seven minutes long.' And he said, 'No, but what I really need is a writer.'"

Kasi deftly changed gears. "I said, 'I'm a writer.' And he said, 'Okay, write me a scene.'"

Cosby gave her some parameters and a date to return with the finished work, but when Kasi came back Cosby wasn't there. "I wouldn't leave the lobby," she remembers. "I said, 'He told me to be here with this scene.'" She persisted and met with his head writer who took a look at her work and then hired her to write a screenplay with two playwrights, Lee Hunkins and P.J. Gibson. "That was how I got in the union as a writer," Kasi says. "But that was 1988, and the union promptly went on strike, as they do."

Kasi's acting career more than took up the slack. She won the part in *The Silence of the Lambs* and moved out to L.A., feeling as if she'd made it. Still, writing continued to pull at her, particularly in the form of stories circling around memories of her estranged father. "I started writing short stories that had to do with my childhood," she says. "And then I needed a character for the stories to revolve around. So I invented Louis Batiste. And once I invented Louis Batiste, he became like my father. I started telling my therapist about this story, and he said, 'You have to take some time and write it down.' So I did."

The stories became a screenplay. *Eve's Bayou* came out in 1997 (and won the Outstanding Directorial Debut at the National Board of Review Awards). Samuel L. Jackson starred as a Louisiana doctor whose daughter discovers his infidelities. Even before the movie was made, however, the screenplay changed Kasi's life. "My acting agent walked it down the hall to the literary department and handed it to a guy who is still my agent. He read it and called me and said, 'You're a writer. I'm going to try to get this movie made for you. But you're a writer.'"

The agent also sent out the script as a writing sample, and "I started getting crazy interesting jobs," Kasi says. "I wrote a script for Michelle Pfeiffer—one of the best scripts I've ever written; it never got made! I've written more than thirty scripts. It's steady work. It doesn't pay like it used to in the old days, but it's a career of mine. And that is my bread and butter."

She came first as a writer to the next two films she directed: *The Caveman's Valentine*, this time with Samuel L. Jackson as a homeless former-genius musician who solves a mystery despite rather serious hallucinations (the movie draws on the short film she was hoping to show Cosby); and *Talk to Me*, which features Don Cheadle as radio DJ Ralph "Petey" Greene, who calmed Washington, D.C. after Martin Luther King's assassination.

*Talk to Me* is as close as she's come to an "easy shoot." "We just hit it off as a group of actors and a director and crew," Kasi remembers. "It was the first time I'd experienced absolute cohesion. All the drama took place on screen!"

*Caveman* had been more complicated. "When I read it, I felt frustrated by the ending of the script," she says. "I thought, 'I don't know if this will work; this is completely weird.' But I loved the playground. I loved the character. And I loved the playground music. Like wow, I thought, schizophrenia! That's intriguing. I thought a lot about, 'what does this feel like for him?' I went as wild as I could on that budget and had fun." But it was stressful.

Stress seems to be Kasi's comfort zone. She gravitates, she says, to projects that focus on "the gray area between heroics and evil," and prefers steep challenges. She once told an interviewer that if a project doesn't require her to step beyond a certain line, it's not for her. "Let me just say, my agent really, really wishes that was not the case."



## Our Man in Hollywood

### Luke Del Tredici

**L**uke Del Tredici's first humor writing consisted of reports on the broom-hockey matches played after school in the Commonwealth cafeteria. Luke and his friends started the after-school league. The prestigious Merrill Cup rewarded the year's winning team. "I remember writing recaps of the games, which were, I'm sure, horrible, but in my mind very funny, and I enjoyed writing them and posting them on the school message board."

Luke also became interested in the visual arts, particularly in classic film, after taking a class with Rebecca Folkman that met both during school hours and one evening a week. He left Commonwealth thinking he might want to become a photographer. But after graduating from Wesleyan, where he majored in film and edited the college's comedy publication, *The Ampersand*, in his junior and senior years, he opted for writing comedy. "I think there was a bit of the snotty 20-year-old-film-student thing in that decision: you have very strong opinions about other people's work, but

you're scared to find out that you're terrible at it yourself. I had a lot less riding on comedy and on television."

Luke moved to L.A. where he faced the classic Hollywood choice: become a production assistant in the industry or strike out on your own. He chose the latter, temping at UCLA and taking a job doing medical illustrations. Either choice has disadvantages, Luke says. "You take bottom-of-the-barrel entry jobs where you're someone's assistant and you're scheduling dinners and picking up dry cleaning, but you're in the industry and you meet people. Those jobs are good because they have connections. But the hours tend to be terrible. And there's a real risk that you'll always be seen as an assistant. Or you stay outside the industry and get whatever job you can. You can find yourself living in L.A. and feeling utterly disconnected from whatever it is you want to do."

"I made the decision to give myself as much time as possible to write." He found work writing for what he remembers as a "terrible" sketch comedy show on VH1. Next, he wrote for Nickelodeon's *All That*, whose stars included Amanda Bynes and Kenan Thompson, and then for several Fox shows—one was cancelled after six episodes and another never saw the light of day.

Luke's first major break came when he signed on as one of three writers for a quirky, much-beloved-by-its-fans HBO animated series, *The Life and Times of Tim*. "The show was created by a very funny guy—but all of his work had been in advertising," Luke recounts. "He had made a couple of short films that he based the show on, but he had no experience writing for television or collaborating with other people or producing a season."

As a result, a great deal of responsibility and creative freedom fell to Luke. "During the first season, I ended up also doing a lot of the animation," he remembers. "We had a fine team of artists drawing it, but if you've seen the show it looks as though it was animated by a five-year-old. I helped keep things together and consequently was promoted far above where I should have been."

After *Tim*, Luke moved to New York to join the staff of *Bored to Death*, an HBO show whose central character, Jonathan Ames, was based on the show's creator—Jonathan Ames, a novelist with a distinct personality. "What's peculiar to being a TV writer is that you're hired to bring your own thoughts and ideas and your own voice to a show; ideally the show becomes a sort of melting pot and absorbs everyone's voices. But your job is also to write like someone else. When the creator has a very specific tone and voice, you try to ape that, and I think it can seem a little freaky for people to have writers copy them."

**"Every talented person I know who wanted to be in comedy ended up succeeding," he says. "But while some people succeeded right away, for others success could take like twelve years. So much is based on serendipity."**

Though Luke was eager to return to L.A., he couldn't resist the offer that came next—to join the staff of NBC's *30 Rock*. "It was remarkable to watch Robert Carlock and Tina Fey," Luke says. "It's a very difficult thing to run a show well, and be really funny, and put your stamp on it, and to be open to other people's ideas. They always wanted everyone to contribute, so you could get your ideas and jokes through. And for me, since there were always eight or nine people on that staff who had been there longer than I had, I never felt any weight on my shoulders."

That feeling has changed now that Luke is an executive producer on *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, a mock police procedural starring Andy Samberg, Chelsea Peretti, and a deadpan Andre Braugher. Luke has been part of the show from its inception, and beyond writing he now also takes on other roles in production, including hiring.

It's a role to which he brings perspective. "I'm always more interested in people who have had a bit of a struggle because I think that they make stronger employees," he says. "Some people are just driven and they're great no matter what. But some really talented, smart people, given too many opportunities too early, don't always take the work seriously."

Luke brings similar a perspective to advising Wesleyan students on careers in comedy writing. "Every talented person I know who wanted to be in comedy ended up succeeding," he says. "But while some people succeeded right away, for others success could take like twelve years. So much is based on serendipity: who you happen to meet, and what job you happen to get, and who was hiring at the time you happened to be available, and random chance. Of course when you tell students that, they assume that they'll be among the lucky ones."

in *The Crucible* his first year. "I never had any sort of sense that I was a good actor," he says. "My mom was encouraging, but I was Scottish and assumed the worst about all things. We did *Much Ado About Nothing*, and then a Vaclav Havel play where we smoked cigarettes in the cafeteria. Then we put on *Romeo and Juliet*. I got to do Romeo, which I played a couple of times more after I had grown up, but never as well as when I was actually the right age to play the role."



## From the Bard to the Big Screen Hamish Linklater

**H**amish Linklater grew up in the Berkshires, breathing iambic pentameter, living in a commune of actors in a "big haunted house," and regularly performing with the troupe from the age of nine. He jokingly calls his mother "my career guiding light—or my albatross." A Scottish voice teacher who came to the United States in the 1960s, Kristin Linklater moved from New York City, where she was teaching at NYU, to Lenox, Massachusetts, soon after Hamish was born. In Lenox she co-founded the theater troupe Shakespeare and Company.

When Hamish was old enough, his mother declared it was time for her to "pay for high school and college" and moved them to Boston so she could teach at Emerson College while Hamish went to Commonwealth.

The grandson of a best-selling novelist and the nephew of two journalists, Hamish aimed to become a writer, but Commonwealth kept casting him in good theater roles—including John Proctor

After Commonwealth, Hamish went to Amherst, still thinking of a career as a writer. But after performing in summer stock, he decided to give acting a try. "I called my mom and said, 'Maybe I'll go to New York.' And she said, 'Drop out now, save me the money, you're going to be an actor; just go there.'"

So he did. "I hung out doing soul-strengthening lame jobs for a while. I worked as a sign maker. I filed death certificates at an insurance company as a temp. I worked for my father very briefly painting stairs, but I always used the wrong paint. After two weeks at these jobs, I'd get fired or quit or just not show up anymore."

Finally, Hamish got his first acting job, at Actor's Theater of Louisville. "Whomever they had cast to play Tom Sawyer found a better job, so I got his, and I went to Louisville when I was nineteen and got my [Actors] Equity card doing *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*."

After that he continued doing regional theater. “I despaired a lot. I would apply to drama schools and then get enough of a regional theater gig to keep me from leaving,” he remembers. “At one point, I had been accepted at Juilliard, but then I was cast to play Romeo at Portland Stage Company in Maine. And Mom said, ‘Don’t go to Juilliard, go and do Romeo.’ It’s particularly weird because she teaches acting. But I think that while there are substitutes, experience is one of the most valuable ingredients you can throw into your development stew—that and rejection. It’s invaluable to go to the open calls, to wait outside the Equity Building at five o’clock in the morning and then just be rejected over and over again. I mean, boy, does that make you so strong and glowing and wonderful.”

In 2000 he landed a role in an independent movie called *Groove*, his first time in front of a camera. “It was a \$100,000 movie that got picked for Sundance and that led me to a pilot for a TV show. In retrospect, everything tumbled out so easily; but at the time it was like, ‘God, this is just the luckiest—, by the skin of my teeth—, I’m barely—’” Hamish stops short of completing any of his three attempts at describing scraping by as if he were searching for the most wrenching, morose way to describe the experience. He regularly tries out lines and experiments with jokes, remarking, after one elaborately mixed metaphor, “It’s so wild that Amherst didn’t encourage my writing more.”

The post-*Groove* pilot was for *Gideon’s Crossing*, a medical drama for CBS. Hamish played a doctor on the same staff as Andre Braugher (who is unaware, as far as we know, that he has worked with two Commonwealth alumni). The show lasted only a season, but it led him to L.A. in 2002 with his soon-to-be wife, screenwriter Jessica Goldberg. After *Gideon*, more struggle. “I did pilots that didn’t get picked up or pilots that I was fired from. But then *The New Adventures of Old Christine* came along.”

That show starred Julia Louis-Dreyfus as Hamish’s older sister learning to put up with her former husband and his new wife. Hamish remembers, “Julia Louis-Dreyfus is the most unbelievable person to teach you how to do comedy.” He also liked the way the show was shot. “Those multi-camera sitcoms are so unsexy, but they’re the best jobs in the world,” he says. “Instead of shooting out of sequence, which you do with a single camera, you get to tell a story once a week from the beginning to the end with a live audience. It feels like a version of theater. Or as close a version as you can get and still get paid way too much money.”

Hamish continued to do live theater; in the middle of *Old Christine*’s run, he joined a production of *Hamlet* directed by Dan Sullivan, who later asked him to come do Shakespeare in the Park at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park. He appeared in *Twelfth Night* as Sir Andrew Aguecheek opposite Anne Hathaway, Audra McDonald, and Raul Esparza, and as Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice* with Al Pacino as Shylock and Lily Rabe as Portia. “It’s become this wonderful gift of getting back to doing outdoor Shakespeare, which is what I grew up with,” he says.

Since *Old Christine* ended, Hamish has appeared in a range of movies, including *Battleship*, 42, and most recently the Oscar-nominated *The Big Short*. He made his Broadway debut in *Seminar*, with Alan Rickman. He has written several plays, appeared in more TV roles, and has chalked up several more well-reviewed performances for Shakespeare in the Park, including *Cymbeline* and *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Though it almost seems as if his career had been planned, “there hasn’t been a career scheme. But really, one has bills. This is not news. So that can influence a little bit what stuff you pursue. The

**After Commonwealth, Hamish went to Amherst, still thinking of a career as a writer. But after performing in summer stock, he decided to give acting a try. “I called my mom and said, ‘Maybe I’ll go to New York.’ And she said, ‘Drop out now, save me the money, you’re going to be an actor, just go there.’”**

word ‘career’ is something that I think all actors—certainly all artists—should excise from their vocabulary. It’s too burdensome. And it’s not actually a useful tool. Very few actors get to make decisions about what their career is going to look like.”

His own, he says is a case in point. “I got work telling jokes, and that’s been such a surprise,” he says. “If I were the master and commander of my career, I would say, ‘Oh well, I’m going to be the great tragedian, because I grew up watching Romeo and Hamlet ... Maybe that’s what I’ll grow up to.’”

The trick, he says, is to remain limber (a feat he explains using exercise metaphors). “What parts I’ve been able to play so far, you know, have built up very useful muscles. I can’t be the younger brother much longer. I’ve gone gray. I mean, the older sister is going to get older and older.”

Instead, he says, the key lies in continually trying different things. “I think that you want to put yourself in as many uncomfortable positions as possible, so that you work muscles that otherwise would just be your latent lats. You want to give your latent lats a workout so they don’t turn to flab. It’s all about staying supple.”

An actor particularly needs flexibility in the transition from stage to film. “When you’re working for the camera you have to figure out, ‘Oh, well, how do I translate that into not being able to move at all because I have to stay on my mark? That doesn’t come naturally, but that’s work. And it’s something you have to learn every day and try to figure out.’”

On blockbusters, even those rules aren’t sacrosanct. “Making *Battleship* was the best,” Hamish says. “Pure filmmaking. That director, Peter Berg, is just out of this world, so fun. They have four cameras rolling all the time, running around you. And he’s like, ‘What if you said this? Okay, what if you said it more badass than that? Do it again.’ And he throws popcorn at you. We’re making a popcorn movie. It’s just adrenaline. And you don’t get the drop-off. That’s hard in movies: ‘Turn it on. Okay that’s good. Let’s move on.’ And you’re like, ‘Oof. Now I gotta wait.’”



## Air Waves and a Life of Sound

### Emily Botein '87

**I**n 1992, fresh out of Amherst College, Emily Botein '87 found herself in New York City concocting edible legends at the Quilted Giraffe. "I made these very intricate beggars' purses filled with caviar, and all this fancy, fancy food." She adored cooking, and had done so ever since working for a friend's mother's catering business during grammar school. At the same time, she harbored a secret desire: "I wanted to work in radio...but I was too shy to try it."

Why radio? "I grew up in the heyday of public radio. At the time, it felt so different; it stood out. And we listened every day at home, always in the kitchen. So I guess radio and food preparation

have always been connected for me. In addition, I love overheard conversations. In fourth grade we had an assignment to write one down. I went to Rosie's Bakery in Inman Square and eavesdropped. It was *such* fun. I felt so powerful."

When the Quilted Giraffe closed in 1993, Emily took a chance. She moved to Washington, D.C. for a radio internship—and a position at the Smithsonian's Folk Life office. She likes to say that her life in folklore paid for her life in radio.

When she landed her first paying radio job (for a show about food on National Public Radio), her cooking skills helped her—in an unexpected way. "The person who hired me said, 'When I heard you had kitchen experience, I knew you would work out, because you knew how to use your hands.' At that time, we were still cutting tape with razor blades. I remember being trained how to cut, and I thought, 'Well, this is fun.'"

Today, editing for radio (like film) is done digitally, but Emily still views it as a highly physical process (like cooking).

In 2010, for *Reality Radio, Telling True Stories in Sound* (a collection of essays about working in radio), Emily's piece, "Salt is Flavor and Other Tips Learned While Cooking," compares editing to creating a *mise-en-place* in a restaurant kitchen. "A mix on my digital editing software, Pro Tools, should be set up in such a way that if someone else has to work on the piece, he can find what he needs quickly. Good habits enable better collaboration and, one hopes, better radio."

Currently a producer at WNYC (these days she commutes to New York from D.C., where her husband works at the Consumer Protection Agency and her seven-year-old daughter attends school in Maryland), Emily explains how teamwork is essential to what she does. She is Vice President for On-Demand Content, overseeing the podcasts *Here's the Thing* with Alec Baldwin; *Death, Sex, and Money* with Anna Sale; and a new program produced with *The New Yorker* magazine. Her goal is to create "a safe space and provide enough slack for people to do their best and reveal themselves" (for example helping Anna Sale make more personal connections with her listeners). "And the participants don't necessarily reveal their nicest part," she adds. "It's just their most self-y self."

Beyond the voices, conversations, and interviews, sound plays the defining role in setting the mood of a broadcast. Emily revels in what she calls the "physicality" of sound. "I love the layering; I love the silence; I love the background pauses. I love the fact that sound can create a 3-D world that listeners can paint in their imaginations," and that even broadcast to the public, sound remains "intimate and private."

Emily is always exploring how best to frame each radio narrative, how and where to find the right music or sound effects. When the show *Death, Sex, and Money* went to New Orleans for a segment on Hurricane Katrina, hiring a brass band to re-record the theme song changed the way listeners perceived the series. Emily points out that even over a distance of years, sound remains a powerful vehicle to elicit emotion. For the tenth anniversary of 9/11, she produced a memorable piece for WNYC that combined sounds from Ground Zero with newly recorded interviews in which people faced up to ten-year-old memories. "Audio can and does become increasingly evocative, because audio never fades."

# Looking Back — And Forward

**H**amish describes his career trajectory with deadpan Scottish pessimism. “I don’t have to audition for theater as much as I once did, but you always wonder, what about *that* job? Why did *he* get that show? You try to get your brain out of it and figure out, ‘How can I make my rejection-audition a useful bit of process for myself as an artist?’”

Thinking back to Commonwealth, he considers the roots of his emotional approach to his work.

“When I was starting out, I had two unbelievable tools at my disposal,” he says. “The first one was to have been taught all this close reading—a thirst for getting to the heart of the paragraph, the sentence, and the story. ‘I did Romeo twice. I did Hamlet twice. And I can actually unpack my ability to analyze the text in a wonderful way.

“The second tool was just growing up with my mom and learning so much by osmosis.”

Both tools, acquired so early, have become second nature. Hamish no longer takes notes on his scripts, he says, assuming his skills will guide him. Had they been acquired later, in college instead of in high school, he believes they might not be as effective: “My brain would have become the strongest muscle in my body,” he explains, “instead of my heart, which is the one an actor needs.”

**L**uke would like to have the opportunity to create his own show, but he doesn’t feel it would make or break his career. “There’s something really amazing about the collaborative nature of working in a group to make something terrific,” he says. “So I want to create my own show, but I’m much more interested in continuing to work on interesting, good shows and making money and supporting a family while not having to sacrifice and go work on something I just hate.”

According to Luke, one of the most important and elusive skills in the world of comedy writing is navigating life in writers’ rooms, where the bulk of the work of writing television scripts gets done, learning both how to be funny to the people in the room and funny in a way that makes it into the script.

Luckily, writer’s rooms feel like familiar territory. “I think about it all the time,” he says. “Writer’s rooms are often the size of a Commonwealth classroom. That’s where I ended up—in a job where it’s five people arguing about something in a room—like a Commonwealth class.”

For Luke, Commonwealth’s contribution to his creativity lies in its support of active engagement. “I never felt that my primary role as a student was to be quiet or to be lectured to,” he says. “Teachers encouraged us to question and to bicker and debate, and I think that directly translates into people who look at the world with a critical eye.”

Commonwealth was one of the great periods in my life, and what I learned there set the stage for what I get to do now, which is work in a field where I’m constantly melding my intellectual and emotional powers with my memories of history and philosophy.

**W**hen Jesse thinks about what’s next for him, he says that he, like Luke, would like to co-create a show. “TV is a writer’s medium,” he says, explaining that “it’s writers who create shows for the most part rather than directors. As a director you’re not the final word. You’re the person on set running the scene. I’ll also be psyched to make another movie.”

Thinking back, “I feel that Commonwealth was one of the great periods in my life, and what I learned there set the stage for what I get to do now, which is work in a field where I’m constantly melding my intellectual and emotional powers with my memories of history and philosophy. I feel like my life really started at Commonwealth. I can see my classmate and dear friend Emily Williams rolling her eyes if you quote that.”

**K**asi and I speak at a Harlem coffee place, near where she lives with her husband, actor Vondie Curtis-Hall, their two children, and the two daughters of her sister, Cheryl ’68, whom she adopted after Cheryl died.

Her most recent film was 2013’s *Black Nativity*, a Christmas musical for which she wrote a screenplay based on the Langston Hughes play. That movie is close to her heart. “My sister was dying. And I was working something else out that had to do with faith. Because we’re always working stuff out as artists, right? But for some reason, I kept questioning faith. How can you believe in God when so much bad has happened? It had to do with how do we go on. In a way that’s not a straight line that you can connect to the plot. The movie was also one way I went on: I went on working, and I needed to work on something uplifting.”

Today, she is buzzing with excitement over a script rewrite focusing on “a particular time in Marvin Gaye’s life,” and a pitch she plans to make this afternoon to HBO (“but I can’t discuss it!”)

**W**e asked Emily about the future of radio and sound in an ever-more-visual world. She said, “sure, it’s more visual, but it’s also more sound-rich! In more than 20 years of working in audio, there have never before been as many opportunities to create audio content. When I was in my 20s, my uncle would tell me that he worried about my working in radio... a dying industry. People may not tune into their radios the way they once did, but they certainly listen to audio – a lot. I hope to keep making stories in sound in the future – stories that move people, surprise people, and make them giggle.”

In fact, each of these alumni/ae has something to buzz about. In the limelight or behind the scenes, they all show that dauntless approach to hard work, creative adventurousness, and sometimes bemused pride in what they do—hallmarks often found on those who have been crafted at Commonwealth.





DEVLO MEDIA

## FACULTY PROFILE: SUSAN THOMPSON

# Moving Work

*The surprises of working  
with teenage actors*

by Mara Dale

Susan Thompson has, in the words of Calliope Pina-Parker '16, “a song for every situation and a story for every moment.” Commonwealth’s acting teacher and theater director since 2002, Susan has garnered experience from decades of dance, theater performance, and travel and study around the globe. Ask her what it means to work, and play, in the theater, and the anecdotes, delivered with animation, will flow. Susan’s repertoire provides a vast resource for her students, and her energies extend well beyond Commonwealth: she teaches movement and clowning; is a lecturer at Boston College; performs with the Pilgrim Theater Research and Performance Collaborative; writes and stages her own plays; and volunteers at area hospitals as a doula (birth coach) with adolescents and low-income mothers. She and husband Steve Elliott (who teaches English as a second language at Brockton High School and plays the saxophone) have two sons, Jackson '10 and Skye '12.

One of five children, Susan grew up an “army brat” and moved every couple of years—“the only constant was family.” Born in France, she went on to live in Georgia, Kentucky, Utah, and Hawaii before settling in Maryland, where she attended an experimental high school. The principal was a follower of the Dalai Lama. “If students got sent to his office, being ‘punished’ meant having to sit and meditate.” Susan spent most of her first year sitting in hallways with friends, playing the guitar and singing (“it was the wild ’70s”). What “saved” her, says Susan, was a demanding dance program run by a teacher who engaged students in collaborative performances. Susan graduated at 16, ran the night shift at a garage for a year, and then took classes part-time before transferring to Boston University.

Susan’s mother, a city planner, loved historic preservation; her father, after 25 years in the army, attended law school at night and became a prosecuting attorney. “Dad was an orator; between his reading aloud to us and debating with us, and our watching him in court, I learned about performance.” At BU, Susan majored in English and minored in Spanish. After college, she was a VISTA Volunteer at a Chicano cultural center in Oregon and eventually ended up in Mexico, where she auditioned for a company that was “somewhere between theater and dance,” and presto: “Suddenly I was a professional actor!” She toured for five years before the 1985 Mexico earthquake ended the actors’ contracts.

Susan returned to the U.S.—with a mission. Speaking with performers, she had repeatedly heard the name of Jacques Lecoq, a Frenchman famous for his methods in physical theater: “All roads led to Lecoq.” Susan and her husband made plans: “We had

**My first production at Commonwealth, I was extremely nervous and felt that the students were uninspired in the dress rehearsal. Opening night, I thought, might be a disaster. But after the show, I cried—the students’ work was so surprisingly beautiful and generous. I learned that students know what performance is. They know when it counts.**

a mask-stilt-juggling piece that we toured; between that and teaching we saved up enough money to go to France.” The experience proved transformative: “Lecoq changed everything I knew about theater and about myself. I have never been through an experience that was so hard, unsettling, eye-opening, confounding, and amazing.” Susan went on to write her Ph.D. dissertation on Lecoq and has recently contributed a chapter on his work to a 2013 book, *Encountering Ensemble*.

Fast-forward to Commonwealth. Coming from sustained work with adult ensembles, Susan at first found the rhythms of high school, with its “variety of students and shifting tides each year,” discombobulating. “Just when a group acted together with sensitivity and style, the students graduated!” She has come, though, to appreciate the potential in younger, untried actors and finds it gratifying that by their senior year, “they have outgrown the place and are ready for new challenges.”

Susan’s students encounter a smorgasbord of experiences and methods, including improvisation, vocal work, movement and warm-ups, and clown; they read and act Shakespeare, as well as such contemporary writers as Tom Stoppard and Suzan Lori-Parks. She appreciates “how much the careful reading that happens in English and other classes at Commonwealth serves my students.” Her colleagues value how Susan’s students find their voices, and sometimes even a new angle on other courses. She treasures those times: “Sometimes students’ passion is theater; they might be unremarkable in other classes but shine on stage. This confidence gives them something solid to hold on to that can spill into other areas. I remember casting as a scientist a student who was struggling in bio and math. The character had to explain complex theory—and the student initially had no idea what the words meant. As she prepared for her role, she asked her math tutor for help. She didn’t suddenly ace math, but she let the wall that she had built between herself and math come down a bit.”

Students characterize moments of growth under Susan’s exacting but benign direction as a sort of alchemy of self. Ellie Laabs ’17 describes a personal breakthrough while working on a Shakespeare monologue: “She gave me permission and freedom to *not* be myself (oddly enough), to be freer and louder and not to fear any consequence of taking that risk; she accepted me where I was and then pushed me to be where I wasn’t.”

Similar risk-taking and experimentation animate the school plays; audience members remark on the ambition and sophistication



EMMA BRENNAN-WYDRA '11

*The Inspector General*, 2010.



*The Metamorphoses, 2015*

of the productions. The process begins with casting, done with students' development in mind: "Who are they, and where do they need to grow? They get to try things that are a stretch." To accommodate all her eager auditioners, Susan has had to be inventive: "Everyone who wants to perform, will perform. Sometimes that means creating roles. For our upcoming production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, twenty-nine students auditioned. I rewrote the piece for four sets of twins and two Pucks!" Given the limited time in which shows must come together (rehearsals happen afternoons, nights, and weekends), priorities must be set and choices made: "I often restrict the design elements—lights over set, or music over costumes. We can't do it all. We learn to dance on our limitations."

Working on shows together builds strong bonds among students, and leads, notes Susan, to gratifying growth and increased independence. "I love the moment when I don't matter any more. We once had an actor suffer a severe allergic reaction two hours before a performance. On my way to the hospital, I handed a script to a stagehand and left my student stage manager in charge. I returned as the house lights went down. Everything was calm; the space, lights, music were all on cue. I was so proud of the cast and crew."

Once the curtain falls, what is it all about? "My students work hard, and we also play a lot. There isn't much space for us in the school, but we carve it out. We make noise. We move furniture around. The classes are small; the focus is on young actors, working together. By the time they graduate, I want them to have confidence in who they are—vocally, physically, and emotionally—and to know that they have something to share."

*Mara Dale teaches English at Commonwealth.*

## Susan's Superlatives

### BEST JOB EVER

Singing waitress at the Hollywood Savoy at the Bourse in Paris.

### MOST BIZARRE JOB

Street juggling in Mexico City.

### MOST SPONTANEOUS PERFORMANCE

Doing a second show at 2 a.m. at the Malta Festival in Poland because the audience was asking for one.

### STRANGEST PERFORMANCE

When an acrobatic acting partner fell off the stage and continued acting in the audience as if he had planned it.

### STRANGEST VENUE

An unused chicken coop at an agricultural school in Mexico.

# Handmade

Encouraging a hesitant freshman to try shaping his first pot. Challenging another to build a mixed-media expression of the ideas in her head. Urging all of her students to be true to themselves. Since she arrived at Commonwealth in 1978, Jean Segaloff has been much more than an art teacher. Her wisdom and

humor have made the fifth-floor ceramics studios a favorite retreat—a place where students can relax as they try out new ways of thinking and creating. Her influence has spread far beyond the studio, too, most notably in her work as creator of and advisor to the Gay/Straight Alliance, the school's organization for LGBTQ students and their supporters.



*Tsunami*, 2011.

Etching, Rives paper, gold leaf, and watercolor, 7 x 6.5 inches.



*Fragonard, 2009.*

Watercolor and ink, on Arches paper, 9 x 4 inches.  
Two pages from the ten-page artists' book of the same name.



JOHNSON PAINT CO.



*Johnson Paint, 2014.*

Watercolor on Arches paper, 36 x 22 inches.

*Applying Lipstick*  
(after Utamaro), 1975.

Birch wood and acrylic paint, 19 x 13 inches.



Jean is retiring this spring from the Commonwealth faculty. We explored her impact on the school more fully in the Fall 2012 issue of this magazine; for this farewell, a mini-retrospective of Jean's work seemed fitting.

*Kid Culture*, 1981.

Bureau drawer, vintage family photo, toys, yardstick, cake decorations, origami paper, postcards, religious figures, inlaid wood, wall molding and acrylic paint, 18 x 16.5 x 6.5 inches.



*Alisha Elliott '01, CWSAA President*

### From the President

It's a snowy day in Boston as I write this, and Commonwealth is closed. Cue the chorus of alumni/ae: "In my day, there were never snow days!" For many of us, the list of "not in my day" Commonwealth experiences grows longer every year—warm classrooms in wintertime? An elevator?? Still, it remains the school we all know and love. Daily practices and trends may evolve, but the heart and soul of the school stand unchanged.

Last fall, the Alumni/ae Association conducted a survey. Hundreds of alums responded to our questions about the alumni/ae experience, their connections to Commonwealth, and what we can do to help them stay involved with the school and each other. Many expressed interest in joining the Alumni/ae Association board, and our periodic meetings have swelled with new participants (check [www.commschool.org/calendar](http://www.commschool.org/calendar) to see when meetings happen). Your feedback is guiding our planning and decision making for the next chapter of the Commonwealth alumni/ae program.

Earlier this year we held our last January Reunion. Alums always enjoy the opportunity to connect and catch up, but no one wants to be the *only* one from their class at a casual cocktail hour. In response to the survey feedback, we will be holding more regional and thematic alumni events in the future. We look forward to seeing you at Merrill Series panels, arts events, and regional get-togethers outside of Massachusetts. Stay tuned for details on upcoming spring and fall events!

As our graduation from Commonwealth grows more distant in the rearview mirror, the opportunities to connect and support the school grow stronger. What was your favorite Project Week experience? Can you provide a similar opportunity for a current student? Commonwealth is a community of passionate, inspired, unique individuals. I look forward to seeing you and learning your story at the next alumni gathering.

### 3 Ways to Connect



#### 1. Facebook.

We're at [www.facebook.com/commschoolalums](http://www.facebook.com/commschoolalums).



#### 2. Instagram.

Follow us at @commschool or tag us with #commonwealthschool.



#### 3. Evertrue.

Download the app and follow the instructions at [www.commschool.org/alumapp](http://www.commschool.org/alumapp).



*Friends old and new gathered at the January reunion.*



# Where Science Meets Gender

By Gabe Murchison '10

Art by Javier Diaz '17



A colleague has an email tacked to his cubicle wall, a thank-you note from the father of elementary-age twins: one girl and one transgender boy. In closing, it reads, “I have realized that these small people do not belong to me. It is not my job to tell them who they are; it is my job to help them grow into the people they know themselves to be.”

As a transgender person who “came out” in my teens, I know how challenging it can be to find that affirmation. Children who express their gender identity at a young age are told they are too young to know for sure. Those who come out when they’re older are told, as I was, that their identity must not be deep-seated or authentic. We now know that transgender people come to recognize their gender identity at a range of ages, but that information wasn’t widely available when I was a teenager. My peers accepted the change easily, but most of the adults in my life took several years to understand that my gender was not a phase. During this time, simple issues—even the name and pronouns I went by—became painful points of contention.

My current job is to conduct and interpret research on issues that affect LGBTQ people, but I’m a newcomer to empiricism. In college I studied the history of LGBTQ people and medicine, exploring the ways science can do more to reflect a researcher’s cultural biases than to reveal underlying truth. Slowly, I realized that while pointing out bias is interesting and sometimes productive, the most difficult and valuable work lies between noticing a social problem and fixing it. There are many areas—in LGBTQ health

and beyond—where we simply don’t know which policies and practices will make people’s lives better. Inspired by epidemiologists, psychologists, and other researchers tackling these questions, I became convinced that science is our best tool for answering them. After earning a Master’s degree in public health, and discovering a surprising enthusiasm for statistics in the process, I find myself the token “scientist” (a term I don’t yet use for myself) at an LGBTQ advocacy organization filled with writers and lawyers.

Combining advocacy and science can be challenging. Science demands that we present evidence without regard to our opinions—but on controversial issues, opponents pounce on any hint of uncertainty. Right now, as I write a series of guides for caregivers and other adults, I’m struggling over how to include information that too often gets spun against trans kids. For instance, parents need to know that many kids

with mild gender dysphoria don’t grow up to be transgender—but anti-trans campaigns twist this fact to claim that letting kids explore gender options leads to unnecessary transitions.

Fortunately, over the past ten years, the research and medical communities have come to understand that, with support and affirmation, transgender kids can become thriving young adults. This year, I had the opportunity to moderate an advisory group of pediatricians who run clinics for transgender youth. Our guests eagerly traded tips on everything from insurance billing to gender-neutral swimwear. These doctors help child, family, and community understand that a young person seeking to transition is neither confused nor broken, but simply in need of affirmation and support. While transgender people have higher rates of depression, anxiety, and related problems, evidence is emerging that transgender kids whose families affirm their gender identity are just as psychologically healthy as other kids.

With children’s well-being on the line, it’s scary to admit what we don’t know. But I’ve decided to let science guide my advocacy, not the other way around. In part that’s because young people deserve adults who will steer them where the evidence points, not toward what the adults prefer. And, in part, it’s a question of pride. When I know enough to call myself a scientist, I don’t want to subordinate that identity to my experience with gender. Young people need to see that they can be more than one thing at once: researchers *and* advocates, transgender *and* whatever they aspire to become.

Your support fuels the intellectual life  
of our students and teachers every day.



*"I am thankful to teach at a school  
that so strongly supports its faculty's  
intellectual passions and where  
students respond to them with such  
intelligence, energy, and affection."*

— DON CONOLLY,  
HISTORY AND CLASSICS TEACHER

*"I love that Commonwealth's small  
class sizes create an atmosphere  
that is both collaborative and  
discussion-based."*

— TARANG SALUJA '18

*Above: History Teacher Don Conolly.  
David Encarnacion '18, left, and  
Tarang Saluja '18 in class with Mr. Conolly.*

PHOTOS BY DEVLO MEDIA



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Sarah Curtis '16 and Julia Talbot '18 performed in this winter's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; director and theater teacher Susan Thompson is profiled beginning on page 20. Taking a turn on the Commonwealth stage usually does not lead to a career in entertainment—but sometimes it does! Meet several showbiz alumni/ae in the article by Jonathan Sapers '79 beginning on page 10.