

# Harvard in Hollywood

As a liberal arts college, Harvard doesn't train its students for jobs in Hollywood. But student clubs, a liaison network, and individual drive prompt some toward entertainment careers, a fact reflected in this year's Oscar nominees.

Actor John Lithgow, a 1967 Harvard College graduate, has this advice for students wanting to follow his path: Don't do it.

Success in the entertainment industry is a gambler's bet, and he said pursuing a career like his "goes against anybody's better judgment."

The College's focus on a liberal arts curriculum doesn't directly point students toward Hollywood. But that hasn't stopped some students from pointing themselves there and making full use of their broad-based undergraduate educations, as reflected in Sunday's (Feb. 27) Academy Awards.

"I basically tell all young people, 'Do not become an actor,'" Lithgow said. "But I also tell them, 'If you're going to be an actor, you're going to ignore what I say anyway.'"

Generations of graduating Harvard seniors have ignored

the career minefields ahead in the arts and made the uncertain trek to Hollywood, New York, and other industry hot spots. Once there, they've hewn their own routes to success, applying the determination and talent shown on campus in Harvard-Radcliffe Dramatic Club productions, during the Hasty Pudding's annual burlesque, in the satirical writings of the Harvard Lampoon and, increasingly, in classes on filmmaking, screenwriting, playwriting, and other performing arts.

"My most basic advice is to enjoy yourself while at Harvard. It's an extraordinary opportunity to get a wonderful education and try your wings as a young artist," said Lithgow, who helped to create Harvard's annual Arts First celebration. "It's the most protected and creative time I ever had."

Even a short list of performers with Harvard roots reads like a who's who of making people laugh, cry, and want more. Among those in front of the camera are Lithgow, Tommy Lee Jones, Conan O'Brien, and Natalie Portman.

Behind the camera are directors and producers for such popular films as "Black Swan," "The Wrestler," "Glory," "The Last Samurai," "Blood Diamond," "Jarhead," and "Memoirs of a Geisha."

In addition, Harvard's position as a top educational institution and a touchstone of American culture has made the University itself something of a film star, from dramas such as "The Social Network," "The Paper Chase," and "Love Story" to more lighthearted fare such as "Legally Blonde" and "Stealing Harvard." On television, the paranormal tales in the show "Fringe" revolve around a hidden Harvard lab. Key characters in film and television often bear Harvard pedigrees, such as Tom Hanks' role as Robert Langdon, a Harvard professor of "symbolology," in the film "The Da Vinci Code."

"It's such a center of intellect, curiosity, science," said director Lorenzo DeStefano, who is making a movie starring John Hurt that is based on the scholarship of Daniel Aaron, Harvard's Thomas Professor of English and American Literature *Emeritus*, who edited and published the 17 million-word diaries of American poet Arthur Inman.

## A NIGHT FOR OSCARS

Hollywood's Harvard involvement reached a peak at the Academy Awards, with 2003 alumna Portman taking home the best-actress award for her role in "Black Swan," in which she played a ballerina who loses her grip on reality after winning a coveted role in "Swan Lake." The film netted another Harvard graduate, 1991 alumnus Darren Aronofsky, a nomination for best director. As the birthplace of Mark Zuckerberg's Facebook, the University itself was the backdrop for best-picture nominee "The Social

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## Hollywood

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Network,” which won Oscars for best editing, music, and writing of an adapted screenplay.

Harvard understands the draw of the arts for some students. Gail Gilmore, assistant director of the Office of Career Services (OCS), described Hollywood as something of a black box that for years put OCS in a bind, limiting the advice and support the office could give to graduating seniors interested in careers there. But that has changed in recent years, with the advent of an active industry alumni network called — what else — Harvardwood.

In recent years, the University has re-emphasized the importance of the arts to a well-rounded education. The 2008 Task Force on the Arts recommended increasing support for that area, including instruction in arts practice, in the context of gaining a liberal arts education.

“It’s not job training. It’s not film school,” said Robb Moss, nonfiction filmmaker and the Rudolf Arnheim Lecturer on Filmmaking. “It’s film-making, art-making, within a liberal arts background.”

Robert Kraft, the head of Fox Music and a 1976 Harvard grad whose scores have graced such films as “The Little Mermaid” and “The Mambo Kings,” describes his career start as marked by serendipity impossible to replicate. “I can tell you 10 stories about what happened to me, but I can’t tell you how I came to be at that nightclub at 1:30 in the morning, sitting next to a producer,” Kraft said. “How did I get in this chair? I don’t know.”

Elsewhere, graduates of Harvard’s School of Engineering and Applied Sciences have found a home at Pixar Animation Studios, which held an information session on campus last month.

Harvard writers, particularly in comedy, have tickled the nation’s funny bone for decades, penning and producing such programs as “The Tonight Show,” “The Late Show with David Letterman,” “The Simpsons,” “Seinfeld,” and “The Daily Show.”

“They’re absolutely great. To my mind, they have a lot to do with creating the tone of comedy in America ...

that swings between ironic-brainy and daffy-stupid,” Lithgow said.

“I live out in Los Angeles. You can’t spit without hitting a Harvard comedy writer.”

“You don’t even need strong lungs,” agreed 1991 graduate Jeff Schaffer, a Harvard Lampoon veteran and a writer and producer for “Seinfeld,” “Curb Your Enthusiasm,” and the Sacha Baron Cohen film “Bruno.”

Though achieving Hollywood success can be difficult, the rewards can be great, said Schaffer. “The good news is it’s really fun; you sit around all day making people laugh.”

### THE ERA BEFORE NETWORKING

Older alumni will tell you that the Harvard name didn’t help when they were starting out. Lithgow, a former Harvard overseer, struggled mightily to find work after graduating more than 40 years ago and kept his Cambridge roots to himself. Kraft, who struggled in the music business after he graduated 35 years ago, said his pedigree never came up because it wasn’t relevant.

“Saying you went to Harvard as a songwriter ... would sort of be like trying out for the New York Knicks and saying you went to Harvard. So what? You can either shoot or you can’t,” said Kraft, a director of the Harvard Alumni Association.

Hollywood remains a place so magnetic that, unlike many industries, its appearance at college job fairs is a rarity.

“Hollywood is inundated by talent. It doesn’t have to go looking for it,” said 1999 graduate Mia Riverton, an actress and producer who has appeared in such television shows as “Curb Your Enthusiasm” and “The Mentalist.”

Though Hollywood remains as gruff as ever, finding a friendly face there is a bit easier for graduates now, thanks to Riverton and the Internet age. After graduating, Riverton found herself beating her head against that familiar wall, networking like crazy to make connections, and perusing old alumni listings for access. She ultimately connected with alumni Stacy Cohen ’89 and Adam Fratto ’90. The three agreed that finding Harvard alumni shouldn’t be so difficult, so they founded a nonprofit called Harvardwood.

Now Harvardwood maintains a comprehensive website containing everything from contact information to proposed scripts to a calendar of networking events for alumni and students interested in the industry. Alumni have come flocking, 5,000 so far. Harvardwood’s growth, Riverton said, suggests the large number of alums in the industry.

“They’re everywhere. There have to be 10,000 people working in the arts, media, and entertainment,” Riverton said. “The Thursday night NBC comedy block is 80 percent [written by] Harvard Lampoon comedy writers.”

Harvardwood also seeks to help interested students through its Harvardwood 101 program. The program, conducted in collaboration with OCS, offers tours, panel discussions, and office visits with alumni in Hollywood over winter break. Interested students also can extend the experience through internships.

Senior Madeleine Bennett said her three-week internship at Management 360 turned out better than she could have expected. After bringing scripts to actor Tobey Maguire, best known for his film role as Spiderman, she wound up reading the female parts



