

A selection of posters advertising student films shown at the fall 2009 short film festival.

THE WIDE WORLD OF FILM AT FIELDSTON

BY JOSHUA BALDWIN '02

SHOOTING

At the helm of Fieldston's film program is Adam Watstein; his classroom currently shares a space with the graphics communications department on the first floor of the Tate Library, and will expand next year to occupy the entire room. At their disposal students have 13 camera kits (each one includes a high-definition camera, boom, and microphone); 10 iMac computers equipped with the industry-standard software for editing and screenwriting – Final Cut Pro and Final Draft, respectively; as well as 15 laptops and laptop displays, so that students can easily transition between editing in class and at home.

Watstein, who studied film at NYU/Tisch and has directed three movies, lived in Los Angeles from 2002 to 2007, where he built the film program at John Marshall High School in the Los Feliz neighborhood, near Hollywood. After the birth of his first son, he felt New York City's pull, and he is now in his third year at Fieldston. He started at ECF working half-time in the technology department and half-time in the visual arts department.

This year he's strictly in visual arts, teaching both Introduction to Film Production and also the more advanced Film Production course. Currently, Watstein teaches three classes of Form IV-VI students (including two classes of returning students and one beginning class), and one Form III class, totaling 50 students. The film program started out with three classes: two beginning Form IV-VI classes and one Form III class, totaling 45 students. Watstein also teaches courses in broadcast journalism that produce and shoot all of the material for Eagle TV (the student-run news show, now in its third season, that covers a wide spectrum of events and daily life at ECF).

Students “encounter the stress and complexities that any filmmaker would,” says Watstein, whose teaching places an emphasis on independence, because “when students are given the freedom to create they are empowered to achieve.” After taking the intro course which covers the fundamentals of filmmaking, students in the advanced course write screenplays and then direct and edit a 10-minute short, which screens at the end-of-the-semester film festival. Watstein has many returning students, several of whom have made four films by the end of their senior year. Student Janey Feingold's short film was selected to screen at the 2009 Los Angeles Film Festival. “This is our breakout year,” says Watstein; 15 films were made in the fall and as many as 25 are in the works this spring. It's no surprise, then, that plans are underway to create a film major and include a selection of specialized courses, like one that focuses solely on the craft of screenwriting.

All of Watstein's students keep a three-ring binder that contains their production schedule up front, followed by their shooting script, and then their director's notebook. Each student's director's notebook includes notes on “the five questions” that

every director must address, pertaining to a scene's *objective*; the characters' *circumstances*; the nature of the characters' *relationships*; the emotions surrounding *place*; and the protagonist's *super-objective*, or primary goal, over the course of the entire story. Watstein likens the class to “learning a second language in a foreign country. The students pick up the craft of filmmaking by being thrown into it.” The three-ring binder anchors the students and helps them meet the high expectations of a course that requires extensive time and effort (not to mention passion) outside of class time.

Watstein encourages his students to make personal films – so naturally, some catharsis takes place each semester. He's a firm believer in the artistic freedom of his students, who clearly don't feel stifled under his instruction; at the fall 2009 festival there was comedy (*Old Methods* told the story of an elderly man struggling to complete high school) as well as romance (*Freshman* looked at the relationship between a freshman and an older student). There was also a touch of horror. *Grey* featured bodies covered in blood; while that student's desire to shock may well have played a role in the decision to cre-

Eagle TV, now in its third season, is a student-run news show that focuses on events, achievements, and daily life in all four divisions at ECF. The show, which streams from ECF's website, is entirely produced by Form III through VI broadcast journalism students, taught by Adam Watstein (also Fieldston's film production teacher). During the show's first season, Watstein handled much of the production work. Now, the students are in charge, running the cameras, conducting stand-ups and interviews, and editing the material in the upper school film lab. You can watch the latest episode – which covers public art at the upper school, middle school sports, the Thanksgiving assembly at Fieldston Lower, and more – at www.ecfs.org/multimedia/eagletv.aspx. Past segments can be streamed by going to the archives section of that page. Eagle TV is one of many instances of Fieldston students learning by doing, and showcases the school's exciting forays into new media.

ate violent imagery, what's important to Watstein is that his students embrace the meticulous work behind realizing a vision. "There was real craft behind that," Watstein explains, "and careful, hard work had to be done to create such beautifully gory images. Students are achieving things they never thought they could do, and they inspire me."

SCREENING

Hugo Mahabir, schoolwide dean of faculty and Fieldston Upper English teacher, has served as a faculty judge at each film festival since the inception of the program, when just six films were screened. This past fall, the festival, which takes place in the auditorium, was very well attended, with at least 100 students, parents, and faculty members in attendance to watch the 15 shorts. The festival is now, as Mahabir notes, "a staple of the arts calendar," and when the end of the semester rolls around, the hallways of the upper school are virtually covered in posters – designed by graphics arts students – that promote each film and the festival as a whole.

A total of five judges sit in on the festival. In addition to Mahabir, the panel consists of Mark Stracke (visual arts department chair), Maura Furfey (foreign language teacher), Nancy Banks (history department chair), and Grace Yun (science teacher). They give awards for best directing, cinematography, actor, actress, and film, and there is also an audience award and a student choice award.

"The films touch on a variety of themes, reflecting the creative imagination of the students," explains Mahabir, with tones and styles ranging from the playful to the serious, the goofy to the arty. Most films are shot on campus, with some shoots taking place in locations around the city, including the streets, parks, and homes/apartments of Riverdale and Manhattan. Actors are pulled from a variety of sources: students from the drama depart-

ment, friends, teachers, and relatives.

Over the years, the technical sophistication of the films has grown, with students operating at a higher level and with increasing standards of quality each year. "Film-making was clearly a glaring omission in the curriculum," says Mahabir, "and the integration of technology, the transfer to digital, is what made it possible."

The interdisciplinary nature of the medium is what's so appealing to Fieldston students and teachers. Film, as Mahabir points out, is a synthetic art, and "there is an emerging awareness at Fieldston that all of the different arts are joined together in filmmaking." The implications of this awareness are very exciting, for the arts program and the school community as a whole.

SCORING

Some of the implications of this emerging appreciation of film's interplay with the other arts are already being put into practice at Fieldston, as proven by a visit to the electronic music studio, a major hub

of collaboration with the film department. Russell Currie, electronic music and music theory teacher (and prolific composer for opera and music theatre, orchestra, chamber music, dance, and film) started designing the state-of-the-art editing suite five years ago with film scoring in mind. The studio, built as part of the campus expansion, has been up and running for three years now, and while there is not yet a film scoring course, the goal is to have one in a year or two. In the meantime, Currie, along with Watstein, is working with students to build a stock library of music that can be used in student films (as opposed to using pre-existing music, which introduces all kinds of copyright issues and complicates wider release of the films at festivals and the like).

Even though there's not yet a film scoring class, the editing suite does give students all of the tools they need to score a film. There are 17 digital work stations, and each one is equipped with Logic 9 software, which allows users to load a film file directly into the program and to start composing along with the film with the use of a piano keyboard. Once a rough score has been created, music can be manipulated however one pleases, such as altering the instrumentation from violin to trombone, and adjusting the notes to line up with the film exactly as one wants. In other words, says Currie, "Students have complete control of the sound as it relates to the images."

So far, one upper school student has created a complete film score, whom Currie notes, "showed a natural ability to dramatize various themes, to sculpt sound; that's the advantage of this technology." Like the film program as a whole, the film-scoring component of the music department is growing, and as student interest and enthusiasm inevitably increases, the electronic music studio will be ready to accommodate student soundtrack composers. "With the film program up and running," says Currie, "the future is go-





Bill Werner

ing to be a lot easier. We're moving closer and closer to a perfect marriage between the film and music departments; this is the period of engagement, and we're moving towards the ceremony."

SEEING

In addition to all of this energetic work in and around film production, the longstanding tradition of classroom discussions and analyses of the history and language of film takes place within the English department, specifically in the Film and Literature course, these days taught by two much-loved Fieldston Upper veterans, Bob Montera and Bill Werner. Each teach their own section of the course, and bring their own unique teaching styles and points of focus to the study of the medium.

Werner has been teaching Film and Literature for six out of his 39 years as an English teacher at the school. He has his students focus on the concept of adaptation. *Streetcar Named Desire* is a centerpiece, as students discuss Tennessee Williams' role in adapting the play for the screen, examine the use of stage techniques in the film, and compare classical and method ap-

proaches to acting. They start off, though, with silent film: World War I newsreels, and *Nosferatu*, a silent vampire film from 1922. Next they watch Orson Welles' classic *Citizen Kane*, and Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (and because Graham Greene actually wrote the novel from the film treatment, they watch the movie first, and then read the book). The text *How to Read a Film* by James Monaco helps the class think through what Werner describes as the "gist of the course: What artistic successes have the American studio system produced?"

Werner thinks it "a crime to get out of Fieldston without reading *Hamlet*." So they read the play and watch clips from many of the different adaptations. They also watch Kenneth Branagh's version of Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing*, and Baz Luhrmann's version of *Romeo and Juliet* (and also parts of Franco Zeffirelli's). When they watched *The Hours*, the author of the book on which the film is based, Michael Cunningham, visited; Werner says Cunningham was "flabbergasted by the questions the kids were asking about the industry and about adaptation." At the end of the course, they watch David Lynch's *Mullholland Dr.*, which Werner shows as testament to the American film industry's capacity to produce "crazy, weird stuff."

Werner is happy to note that the course is "very student driven – it's not the teacher coming in as an expert, because the kids already have film literacy and can call on their body of knowledge to get their mind around the development of an art form that uses images to tell a story." For their final assignment, students write a reflection of their overall course experience. In addition to reviews and responses that students write about each film, some also work on their own screenplays. "Fieldston students are very good at writing dialogue," Werner notes with a smile.

This year marks the fifth time in 10 years (out of his 25 years at the school)



Bob Montera

that history, English, and journalism teacher Bob Montera has taught Film and Literature. *12 Angry Men* is the first movie he has students watch in class, as the example of "how to make a movie . . . it's motion pictures 101." In his version of the course, Montera immerses students in the technical language of film, film history, and film criticism. "International in scale, multicultural in approach" is his mantra, and the class looks at the history of cinema through the great directors, and studies the body of critical responses to film – including filmmakers on film, especially such auteurs as Martin Scorsese and François Truffaut.

This year's theme was "The road to and from *Citizen Kane* in world cinema." Students started by watching *Pirates of the Caribbean* at home, an "eyeful," as Montera puts it. Then it's on to Sidney Lumet's *12 Angry Men*, which sparks a unit on social justice that includes *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*. In discussions, they address how these three films talk to each other. Lee, "the wild card, really resonates with the students and blows up preconceptions; then they are ready to turn to history." From the

FILM AND LITERATURE CHECKLIST: TWO APPROACHES TO THE SAME ELECTIVE

BILL WERNER

“What artistic successes have the American studio system produced? With an emphasis on adaptations.”

Film List

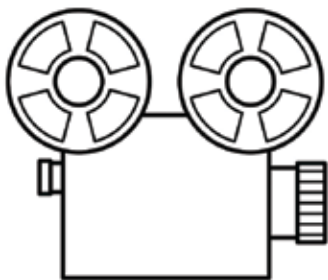
Various World War I newsreels
Nosferatu (1922), F.W. Murnau dir.
Citizen Kane (1941), Orson Welles dir.
The Third Man (1949), Carol Reed dir.
A Streetcar Named Desire (1951),
Elia Kazan dir.
Hamlet (various versions)
Romeo and Juliet (1968 and 1996),
Franco Zeffirelli dir. and
Baz Lurhmann dir.
Much Ado About Nothing (1993),
Kenneth Branagh dir.
Mullholland Dr. (2001),
David Lynch dir.
The Hours (2002), Stephen Daldry dir.

Reading List

Hamlet by William Shakespeare
The Third Man by Graham Greene
How to Read a Film by James Monaco

Writing Assignments

Reviews and reviews of reviews
In-class responses to films
Reflective essay on overall class experience



BOB MONTERA

“International in scale, multicultural in approach . . . The road to and from *Citizen Kane* in world cinema.”

Film List

Early Thomas Edison and
Charlie Chaplin
Trip to the Moon (1902),
Georges Méliès dir.
The Great Train Robbery (1903),
Edwin S. Porter dir.
The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920),
Robert Wiene dir.
Battleship Potemkin (1925),
Sergei Eisenstein dir.
Citizen Kane (1941), Orson Welles dir.
Casablanca (1942), Michael Curtiz dir.
The Bicycle Thief (1948),
Vittorio De Sica dir.
Gun Crazy (1949), Joseph H. Lewis dir.
12 Angry Men (1957),
Sidney Lumet dir.
To Kill a Mockingbird (1962),
Robert Mulligan dir.
Do the Right Thing (1989), Spike Lee dir.
City of God (2002), Fernando Meirelles
and Kátia Lund dir.
Pirates of the Caribbean (2003),
Gore Verbinski dir.

Reading List

Reviews and criticism by the *New York Times*' Mahnola Darghis and others
New Biographical Dictionary of Film
by David Thomson

Writing Assignments

Essay on “Why do We Laugh?”
Essay on an Oeuvre & “Why does this
Director Matter?”

silent era, they watch *The Great Train Robbery*, *Trip to the Moon*, and early Thomas Edison and Charlie Chaplin. They study the political aspects of film through *Battleship Potemkin* and *Casablanca*; and next, student choice demanded *V for Vendetta*, and they noted scenes that visually quote *Potemkin*. (Student choice number two was *The Dark Knight*; they “oohed and aahed and they also oohed and aahed at *Kane* and *City of God*; developing that immediate response is a major goal of the course,” Montera said.) After watching the silent film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, a product of the early studio system, they move on to *Citizen Kane*, and discuss the difference between that A-level film and the B-level *Gun Crazy*, and students come to appreciate that “one is art, the other a bit of a knockoff.” After *Kane* comes a realism and magic unit, featuring *The Bicycle Thief* and *City of God*.

The primary text in the course is David Thomson's *New Biographical Dictionary of Film*, and Montera also recommends pieces of film criticism to students on a case-by-case basis. Writing assignments include an essay that addresses the question “Why do we laugh?” in which students explore the mechanism of comedy. For the final paper, students watch five movies by one director on their own and, in a long-form essay, address the question: “Why does this director matter?” Through this assignment, “students inhabit the role of film critic, cultural critic, and cultural historian” all at once. Examples of directors studied include Akira Kurosawa, Clint Eastwood, François Truffaut, Alfred Hitchcock, Wes Anderson, and Stanley Kubrick. Montera's enthusiasm for the material is highly contagious; a conversation about Lauren Bacall and Humphrey Bogart will turn to William Faulkner's work as a screenwriter on *The Big Sleep*, followed by a recommendation to watch *Dark Passage*, another film noir starring Bacall and Bogart. It's just one set in an ever-growing series of connections being made in the world of film at Fieldston. ■



Fieldston students taking the Film and Literature elective see a wide variety of movies, from silent films to contemporary foreign and American films, as well as these Hollywood landmarks. In the pre-television, pre-internet era, posters were the principal marketing tools to alert the public to upcoming releases. These are just a few of the stunning images that appear in Starstruck: Vintage Movie Posters from Classic Hollywood by Ira Resnick '67. For more, turn to page 22.