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From Douglas Fairbanks to George Lucas: USC's School of Cinematic Arts turns 90



A statue of Douglas Fairbanks in the center of the USC School of Cinematic Arts.
Photo/USC School of Cinematic Arts

By Susan King | April 6, 2019

ON FEB. 4, 1929, USC, IN COLLABORATION with the recently founded Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, added a new class to the curriculum: Introduction to the Photoplay.

Among the instructors were silent cinema's superstar and first academy president Douglas Fairbanks, his wife, the legendary actress, producer and academy co-founder Mary Pickford, and such noted filmmakers as Ernst Lubitsch, D.W. Griffith, Irving Thalberg and Darryl F. Zanuck.

Within three years, USC became the first U.S. school of higher learning to

introduce a course of study that would lead students to a bachelor's degree in cinema. Initially known as the department of cinematography, it was renamed the department of cinema in 1940. Thirteen years ago, it was renamed the School of Cinematic Arts.

Nine decades after "professor" Fairbanks taught Introduction to Photoplay, the USC School of Cinematic Arts has some 14,000 alumni that include a who's who of filmmaking from George Lucas to Ron Howard to current academy president John Bailey.

"We didn't become an independent school until sometime in the early 1980s," noted Dean Elizabeth M. Daley. "At one point it got folded into the department of performing arts. But from 1929 on, they never ceased to add classes all the time. They were teaching television by the 1950s."

The school is celebrating its 90th anniversary this year with talks, screenings and exhibits, including one on the 40th anniversary of the "Alien" franchise at the Hugh M. Hefner Exhibit Hall at the George Lucas Building and another

on the school's history at the Steven Spielberg Building.

On Monday, the academy is celebrating the 90th birthday at the Samuel Goldwyn Theater with clips and discussions with alumni, including producer and Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige; producer Stacey Sher (“Erin Brockovich,” “Django Unchained”) and writer-director John Singleton (“Boyz n the Hood,” “Poetic Justice”). Producer Jennifer Todd (“Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery,” “Memento”) is the moderator.

The school has about 1,800 undergraduate and graduate students.

(Of course, USC isn't the only game

in town. UCLA, Chapman University, Loyola Marymount University, California Institute of the Arts, and Cal State Los Angeles, Fullerton, Long Beach and Northridge are among the colleges and universities locally with film schools or departments.)

Daley is particularly proud of the USC film school faculty. “Just look at my department chairs right now,” she declared. “The newest department chair is Teresa Cheng, who is heading animation. She worked for Jeffrey Katzenberg [at DreamWorks Animation] for 17 years.... She ran Lucasfilm Singapore for several years.”

Singleton, the first African American to be nominated for a best director Oscar and the youngest to receive a nod — at 24 for 1991's “Boyz n the Hood” — graduated from the Filmic Writing program headed by Margaret Mehring.

“I enrolled as a writer because at that time everybody was concentrating on the production side,” he recalled in a recent interview. “Somebody told me when I was in high school that you have to have a story first.”

Mehring, Singleton said, started the program to give writers respect. One of his favorite professors was Abraham Polonsky, the blacklisted screenwriter



Harold Lloyd (*right*) filming the 1925 movie, ‘The Freshman’ on USC’s campus. *Photo/USC School of Cinematic Arts*



Robert Zemeckis (*left*) directing a student film at the USC School of Cinematic Arts. *Photo/USC School of Cinematic Arts*

of 1947's "Body and Soul," and writer-director of 1948's "Force of Evil" and 1969's "Tell Them Willie Boy is Here."

"As a student, I was in charge of picking him up in Beverly Hills from his apartment and bringing him to class," said Singleton. "We would just sit and talk. He was a great guy. I remember he embarrassed me in class one day. He said nobody else is going to make it in this class except for John Singleton."

Since then, Singleton has returned periodically to USC to teach, including in 2015 with the class The Emergence of Multicultural Cinema.

The most special thing Singleton got

from going to USC "was a love of watching films on the big screen. I still go there. I call up Dean Daley and say I need the list of what's screening in the classrooms. I go there, sit in the classroom and watch the films."

Sher graduated with a master's degree in 1985 from the Peter Stark Producing Program, which was then run by Art Murphy, who pioneered box office reporting when he was at *Daily Variety*. She remembered that Murphy envisioned the program as something of a boot camp.

"It was a way to get an overview of the business in a very condensed period of time," she said. "So you took a screening

class. You had a budgeting class and learned how to break down a budgeted script with a first A.D. Every one of your professors were working professionals."

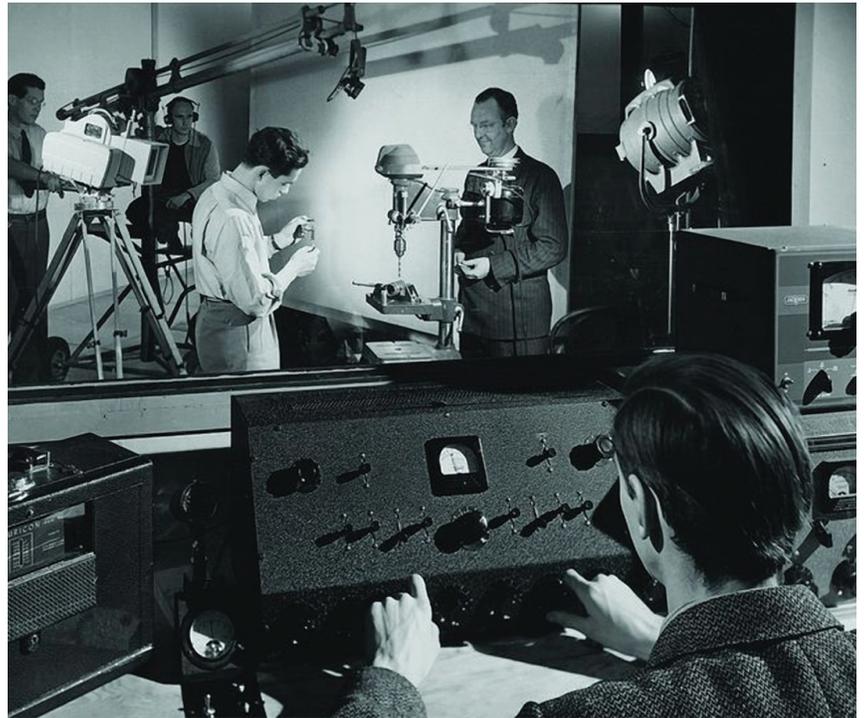
Sher keeps giving back to her *alma mater*, hiring Stark students as interns.

"Coco Francini, who was the associate producer of the 'The Hateful Eight' and is an executive producer on the series I'm about to start for FX, started 10 years ago as our Stark intern."

She also speaks to students at the school. "I always joke I am powerless to say no to anything that Dean Daley asks me to do. I'm just in awe of her and what she's done for the school."



Alum Stephen Sommers, alum Peter Segal, Dean Elizabeth M. Daley and alum John Singleton at the unveiling of the star in front of the USC School of Cinematic Arts Complex. *Photo/Steve Cohn Photography*



An early sound recording in progress. *Photo/USC School of Cinematic Arts*

