The HOLLYWOOD Connection

STUDENTS LEARN THE ROBES OF THE MOVIE BUSINESS, CALLING ON A TULANE NETWORK OF ALUMNI AND FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES IN THE FILM INDUSTRY.

by Mary Sparacello
As the bus nears James Stewart Avenue, the excitement in the air is palpable. It’s the second full day in Hollywood for 14 Tulane University students and their two professors. In minutes, they’ll be getting off at Universal Studios to get a behind-the-scenes look at the contemporary film industry.

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“Who’s Carl Laemmle? What did he do here in 1915?” Constance Balides, associate professor of communication and director of film studies at Tulane, throws out the question to the entire bus. Answer: The German immigrant and motion picture visionary opened Universal Studios Hollywood on the property in 1915. On this trip, everything is a learning opportunity.

Professors Balides and Blue developed the five-week, Tulane-to-Hollywood program. Administered by the School of Liberal Arts, the week in Hollywood during the summer of 2014 is sandwiched between classes taught on the Tulane campus: two weeks on the contemporary film industry taught by Balides and a final two weeks on the purpose and practice of the movie business taught by Blue.

The first-time program was designed “to give students a realistic experience of what they can expect if they choose a career in Hollywood,” says Blue.

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—Constance Balides, film studies professor
A burgeoning Hollywood South, part of the reason Tulane's film studies major and digital media production program are flourishing. Last year, for the first time, more major-studio movies were filmed in Louisiana, with its generous tax breaks for movie production, than in California, according to nonprofit FilmLA, the film office for the city of Los Angeles.

Horowitz tells students that Universal is shooting the sequel to *Pitch Perfect* in Baton Rouge and *Jurassic World* in New Orleans, which astounds him. “It’s a giant movie. It’s a massive movie.”

### View From the Penthouse

The week in Hollywood is happening because Tulane alumni and parents who have made it big in the entertainment industry are willing to share their secrets with Tulane students hoping to follow in their footsteps.

“Our alumni have achieved great success in the entertainment industry, and I am grateful they have generously given back to our students,” says Carole Haber, dean of the School of Liberal Arts. In addition to the week in Hollywood, alumni and parents have given Tulane students internships and jobs and traveled to Tulane’s campus to speak on career panels.

In Los Angeles, the professors and students stay on the University of Southern California’s campus, where Elizabeth Daley (NC ’65, G ’66) is dean of the School of Cinematic Arts.

“I didn’t know so many Tulane alumni work in the film industry, and not only work in entertainment but in such prestigious positions,” says Rachel Varela, a sophomore majoring in theater and digital media production, who wants to be an actress or work in casting.

One highlight of the trip is meeting with Harold Sylvester (A&S ’72), an actor, producer and screenwriter. Sylvester, known for his parts in the movie *An Officer and a Gentleman* and the TV series “Married ... With Children,” talks to the students about the role of an actor in the production process. Sylvester has stayed involved with his alma mater.

He team-taught a course in 2005 with Tulane theater professor Ron Gural, in which students made a feature film, *NOLA*, which was later screened at the New Orleans Film Festival.

Another alum sharing his knowledge with students during the Hollywood trip is David Lonner (A&S ’84), a talent manager and producer who meets with students in his penthouse office on Sunset Boulevard.

Lonner worked for 25 years as a talent agent before starting Oasis Media Group, a management and production company. Energetic and down-to-earth, he tells of becoming the agent of a fresh-out-of-college J.J. Abrams (“Lost,” *Star Trek*), whom he worked with for 23 years, and nurturing the career of director Alexander Payne (*The Descendants, Nebraska*).

“We’d love our next discovery to come out of Tulane,” Lonner tells the group, a statement that is met with animated murmurs. Sitting in on the meeting is one of Lonner’s managers, Audrey Gordon (’08), who will be shadowed mid-week by Varela and senior Ben Englander.

Lonner gives students a realistic picture of the hard work they’ll have to put in, the disappointments of a sometimes cutthroat business and the not-to-be-matched rewards of life in Hollywood. “In many ways it’s the most heartbreaking thing I’ve ever done,” he says. “And the most fulfilling thing I’ve ever done.”

### Lunch in the Shirley Temple Room

After the meeting with Lonner, the USC bus lets class members off on New York Street at Twentieth Century Fox Studios, where they begin a behind-the-scenes tour. New York Street is comprised of building facades made to resemble New York City neighborhoods, complete with brownstone apartment buildings, stoops, bottom-floor storefronts and fire escapes on each story.
Students lunch in the Shirley Temple Room where they meet with School of Liberal Arts dean Haber, who is in LA at the beginning of the week to show support for the first-of-its-kind program. Temple smiles down on the students from framed photos lining the walls of the bright, airy room.

The students explain their reasons for taking the class and describe where their interests lie—everything from producing, editing, directing, sound, acting, special effects, marketing and writing.

For Tulane junior Halley Froeb, the opportunity to learn about the industry from the inside is too great to pass up. “I came here to find out if this is what I want to do with the rest of my life,” she says, adding that she believes she will move to California after graduation to work on the creative side of the entertainment industry. “I can understand how people feel a bit intimidated but then relieved by the networking connections available to us, because success in Hollywood really is about connections.”

After lunch, the tour resumes, and the group sees small buildings once used as bungalows for Fox’s brightest stars: Temple, Marilyn Monroe, Cary Grant. Students ogle costumes in a small wardrobe museum where they see the colorful sweater Robin Williams wore in Mrs. Doubtfire, Drew Barrymore’s slippers from Ever After, and Reese Witherspoon’s slinky black gown from Water for Elephants. In the wardrobe department stand long racks of costumes of every type.

“This is so cool,” one student says.

“I want to stay here forever,” says another.

“I want to get my next Mardi Gras costume here.”

Students tour a television set next door to Stage 22, where “How I Met Your Mother” was filmed. They learn how two or three New York taxicabs drive around the block again and again to simulate heavy traffic and how snow machines are used in the summer to create cold weather.

The tour was arranged by Sanford Panitch (A&S ’89), president of Fox International Productions, who has stayed involved with his alma mater since graduation. In 2007, he taught a weekly creative writing class on Tulane’s campus, paying his own travel costs from LA to New Orleans each week and even bringing in several high-powered Hollywood colleagues as guest speakers.

Like Jimmy Horowitz and David Lonner, Panitch serves on the Dean’s Advisory Committee of the School of Liberal Arts.

At Fox, Panitch meets students in a conference room and talks to them about what a studio executive does: analytically discover material and ideas for movies and then manage and sell the films. Entertaining and amusing, Panitch educates the students on what makes a script amateurish: too long, too much exposition, no narrative drive.

Fox International Productions, which Panitch currently heads, is the division of Twentieth Century Fox Film Corp. that oversees international acquisitions and all local language film production for Fox worldwide. Panitch talks of making Hollywood movies appeal to people in other countries who may not idolize American stars. For the animated hit Rio 2, the original version starred Jesse Eisenberg and Anne Hathaway, but for the Hindi-language version Fox hired top Bollywood stars to voice the animated parts. “Good storytelling is true anywhere in the world,” Panitch says.
It is standing room only at the posh private Skybar Hut on the roof of the Mondrian Hotel where a Tulane networking reception, organized by Byron Kantrow (TC ’00), an adviser for Tulane undergraduate employer relations, is in full swing.

The Tulane students are mingling with established Tulane alumni, answering questions about their futures and giving their impression of Los Angeles.

Their enthusiasm impresses attendee Charles W. Hamilton (L ’97), senior director for business and legal affairs at Warner Bros. “These Tulane students have a point of view and know who they are. They’re already ahead of the game,” he says, explaining the importance of navigating the Tulane network. “I’ve never gotten a job by responding to a job posting; I’ve gotten jobs because I know someone. Knowing how to network effectively gives students a real advantage.”

Melissa Solomon (B ’03), a literary agent at Verve Talent and Literary Agency, and Ryan Cunningham (TC ’04), a literary manager/producer at Madhouse Entertainment, have witnessed the Tulane presence in Hollywood expand. “The Tulane network is growing,” Cunningham says. “We’re interested in helping out students. Everybody’s receptive, you just have to put yourself on their radar.”

Jeffrey Godsick (A&S ’83), president of Fox Consumer Products at Twentieth Century Fox, oversees the worldwide licensing of Fox’s portfolio of film and television properties, which includes everything from sneakers to theme parks. Because so much film production has moved to the South, Godsick has more reason to be in New Orleans. “Because of that, I started to reconnect with Tulane,” he says.

For Tulane senior Ben Englander, the scale of the crowded networking reception is a surprise. “I didn’t know Tulane has such an influence in Hollywood,” he says.

The day after the reception, students shadow people in various entertainment careers. And on Thursday, at USC, a string of people working in Hollywood in different capacities comes to address the group. On Friday, students meet with recent Tulane grads working in entertainment and tour landmarks of Hollywood history, such as Grauman’s Chinese Theatre.

Film studies professor Balides says, “I am amazed at the success and goodwill of many of our former students, some of whom just went out to LA and figured it out once they got there. This program has an enormous potential to open up future career paths for our current students by connecting with alums who can serve as mentors.”

Englander, who’s majoring in film studies and digital media production, says that he most enjoys meeting with a group of about eight television writers on Thursday night, including Balides’ former student, Zac Schwartz (TC ’03). “They’re funny and creative,” says Englander, “and I could relate to them more than people on the business or production side.”

The trip shows him what Hollywood is really like, as time and again people have stressed the importance of making connections and putting himself out there. After meeting so many people on the trip and seeing so many facets of life in LA, he feels he might be too reserved for Hollywood’s fast pace. He still wants to work in the entertainment industry, likely writing for movies or television, but he might settle outside Hollywood to do it.

For Allison Margolis, a Tulane senior majoring in communication, the trip is just as life-defining. Before the Michigan resident came to California, she couldn’t picture living here. But the whirlwind week is changing her perspective. At the networking event, she gathers numerous business cards and makes contacts who ask her to let them know when she moves to LA. On the day students shadow industry insiders, she has an exhilarating day following Manny Coto, executive producer and writer for the Fox television show “24.”

Inspired, Margolis is likely to pursue a career working in event planning or marketing in the movie industry. “I am so thankful for this opportunity,” she says. “It has been an unbelievable experience that will probably shape my future.”