

## MS. JULIA Film Project

MS. JULIA is a short (30 minute) narrative film conceived, written, directed, and edited by Rebecca Holderness and James B. Steerman. Ms. Holderness is currently an Assistant Professor of Theater at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, and Mr. Steerman is a Professor of Drama and Film at Vassar College. The film is a non-profit production of the Vassar College Department of Film.

The project developed from discussions between Ms. Holderness and Mr. Steerman concerning the feasibility of combining the talents of film and theater academics, film professionals, and students to produce a truly professional short film. Until recently producing a professional quality film of even 30 minutes would have been financially impossible due to the high cost of film stock, processing, and printing, but the emergence of digital video and particularly high definition digital video has made such projects possible at a much lower cost.

The budget for the project was set at approximately \$45,000. A considerable portion of this money was earmarked to cover the cost of food and housing for the production team. Ms. Holderness and Mr. Steerman raised the necessary funds from a variety of sources. Ms. Holderness received grants of approximately \$14,500 from UWM (film and installation), and Mr. Steerman received a grant from the Vassar Faculty Research Committee of \$6,180. Contributions of \$1,500 came from Vassar alumnae/i. The President's Office and the Office of the Dean of the Faculty at Vassar each donated \$2,500 (\$5,000) total. And finally, the Department of Film at Vassar committed \$5,000 from the Patterson Endowment Fund to the project, and also supported it with approximately \$20,000 in in-kind contributions, which included supplying the

filmmakers with a new Panasonic high definition digital camera and a large variety of sound, lighting, and other film production equipment. In this way, the necessary \$45,000 was raised.

Ms. Holderness and Mr. Steerman then assembled a production team for MS. JULIA. Film professionals included Tony Adler, a highly successful First Assistant Director from LA, and Joe Foley, a gifted cinematographer who holds an MFA from Columbia University. Storyboard assistance came from Tim Decker, formerly employed as an animator by the Disney Studios. Professional actors included SAG members Katy Selverstone and Bill Block. All of these persons donated their time and talent to the project. The remainder of the cast was selected through an audition process from theater majors at Vassar and UWM. And a group of approximately 15 production assistants was recruited from film majors at the two schools. In many instances these students received academic credit for their work on the project. In all, the MS. JULIA production team consisted of 30 professionals, academics, and students.

After a 10-day pre-production period, shooting took place on and about the Vassar campus and in New York City from July 6 to July 28, 2006, with Ms. Holderness functioning as director on set. Editing began in late August and continued through the fall. In early January, 2007, Ms. Holderness and Mr. Steerman completed the picture editing and are now in the final stages of work on the sound and music elements. It is anticipated that MS. JULIA will be ready for public screening by mid-March, 2007.

James B. Steerman  
Professor of Drama and Film  
Vassar College

January 16, 2006

## The Department of Film at Vassar College

Film study at Vassar College began in the early 1970s with a single seminar in film history/theory offered in the Department of Drama by James Steerman, then an assistant professor. Within a few years, Mr. Steerman added a workshop class in 16mm. filmmaking. He did this not because he wanted to train filmmakers but because he felt that students could not fully understand the nature of film without some experience with the process of actually making a film. Once a class in filmmaking existed, however, the college began to attract students who wanted to become filmmakers. This led to the establishment of the Vassar Film Workshop, with Mr. Steerman as its initial director.

Over the next few years, based on student demand, additional courses in both cinema studies and filmmaking were offered, and additional part-time faculty were hired to handle the load. By the late 1970s, students majoring in drama could elect to concentrate in film. By the early 1980s, the program had grown to the point where it became necessary to hire another full-time faculty member in cinema studies, plus an additional full-time instructor to teach filmmaking exclusively and also direct the film production aspects of the program. Through the 80s the number of students concentrating in film steadily increased and additional persons were added to the faculty.

By the early 1990s, the program had become strong enough to support a formal concentration in film, and Vassar established a film major. Once the major existed, the number of students coming to Vassar to study film increased dramatically.

Although Vassar is a liberal arts college and the film major requires a balanced group of courses rather evenly divided between cinema studies and film or video production, a majority of the students majoring in film hope to find careers in the film and television industries. This means that although the program is not pre-professional by design, it must nevertheless offer its students fully professional training in film production techniques. At the same time, however, the emphasis has always been on the conceptual aspects of the filmmaking process, - helping students learn to "think film."

In 2003 the Department of Film moved into Vassar's new Center for Drama and Film. The facility offers an excellent 110-seat film theater equipped with stadium seating and surround sound, and provides 35mm., 16mm, and a variety of video projection options. In addition, the center includes a small sound stage, numerous traditional and digital editing labs, and equipment storage and maintenance facilities, as well as a number of seminar rooms and classrooms equipped with Crestron touch-screens that control videotape, DVD, and, in some cases, film projection. Filmmaking students have access to the latest in 16mm. and digital video cameras and related equipment, and learn to edit digitally on Macintosh-based Avid or Final Cut Pro stations. Each year Vassar film students produce large numbers of quite professional and engaging short narrative or documentary films, a number of which win awards in student film competitions.

On average, Vassar graduates at present more than 40 film majors per year, making film one of the top five disciplines at the college in terms of student interest. A large percentage of Vassar film graduates have found careers in film and television, and many have enjoyed great success. Among the most noteworthy are Noah Baumbach,

writer/director of such films as THE SQUID AND THE WHALE, John Gatins, writer/director of DREAMER, with Dakota Fanning, and writer of a number of other feature films.

The department faculty currently consists of six full-time positions, plus a number of part-time appointments. Full-time faculty include Kenneth M. Robinson (professor and chair, teaching film production), Sarah Kozloff (professor, teaching cinema studies), James Steerman (professor, teaching cinema studies and screenwriting), Philippe Roques (assistant professor, teaching film production, with emphasis on documentary), Mia Mask (assistant professor, teaching cinema studies), and Jamie Meltzer (assistant professor, teaching film production and cinema studies).

By general consensus Vassar College offers the strongest Department of Film and film study program of any liberal arts college in the United States, and the Vassar program is often favorably compared with far more professionally oriented programs at such institutions as NYU, USC, or UCLA.