

Interview: Kristyn Jo Benedyk, Matt Irvine of DePaul University School of Cinematic Arts

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CHICAGO – Moving up the rankings like greased lightning, the DePaul University School of Cinematic Arts cracked the Top 20 of all film schools in the U.S. in 2014, after building a program that didn't exist 20 years ago. A couple reasons why are School Director Matt Irvine and Screenwriting Professor Kristyn Jo Benedyk.

One of the more successful programs in the school is “Project Blue Light,” an interactive course that places students in typical jobs on a movie set, to create short films that eventually will be festival eligible. This is done through a partnership with Cinespace, a studio facility on Chicago's west side, where DePaul University has a substantial presence. The philosophy of the school is “hands-on,” to allow the next generation of film creatives to flex their skills and find their niche.

HollywoodChicago.com got the opportunity to interview Kristyn Jo Benedyk and Matt Irvine, to get a sense of how they are building the DePaul University School of Cinematic Arts, and how Project Blue Light fits into that curriculum.



Kristyn Jo Benedyk, Screenplay Professor, DePaul University

Kristyn Jo Benedyk is currently the Chair of the Screenwriting program at the School of the Cinematic Arts at DePaul University, and holds an MFA in Film & TV writing from the University of Southern California (UCLA), as well as an MFA in Playwriting from Arizona State University. She helped to launch the Screenwriting program at DePaul in the Fall of 2011. HollywoodChicago.com interviewed Ms. Benedyk on set at Cinespace, as she directed her second short film as part of the “Project Blue Light” program.



Kristyn Jo Benedyk Directs a Scene in December for 'Project Blue Light'

Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: ‘Project Blue Light’ has been a successful and innovative program at DePaul. How does it work for the students who participate?

Kristyn Jo Benedyk: The way that we do this is that people sign up for the class, and then we send out announcements and tell those who

enrolled to send us their top five preferences for jobs on the set, and we also ask them to send us their experience levels for each job. We usually only do one film, but this time we're doing three. We designed the crews on each of the films based on their preferences and experience. There is also an opportunity to 'work their way up' if they desire experience on a particular on-set role, but don't have any prior experience doing it. All the crew positions, except the directors, are all students.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since this is your second short film, what have you learned about pre-production, and getting the right mix of students together?

Benedyk: Getting the right team together, number one. You have to make sure that whoever is heading a certain job on set are people that you can trust. This one is different, because we're shooting three films back-to-back-to-back. The first film was set in a basic loft, and wrapped a couple days ago. So I began my shoot the same day. We've been doing 12 hours days since then, because we had to strike the modern set and convert it into the setting for my film, the 1960s, and there are many set-ups, and split screen.

HollywoodChicago.com: You've described the film as a 'Pillow Talk' homage. Why did you pick that particular film and 1960s era?

Benedyk: It didn't begin as a 'Pillow Talk' homage, but as a misunderstanding film about texting - which happens more and more these days. There are ways to read texts, and sometimes it doesn't get communicated the way it was intended as written. The idea came when I was texting my husband for a day-and-a-half, and we weren't getting through to each other. That inspired the story. It's a guy asking a girl out for a first date, and he's misinterpreting all her cues.

I wanted to do split screen, with the texts as animated communications, and as I was talking about it my husband said it sounds like 'Pillow Talk.' It's one of my favorite movies, so the light bulb went off.

HollywoodChicago.com: What do you want to communicate to your student production staff, as leader of the collaborative art of filmmaking?

Benedyk: As I mentioned before, once the trust is established for your team, then it's about their creative freedom to complete the vision. For example, my production designer was challenged with the Pillow Talk look. She didn't have to show me everything she was gathering...I trusted that she would make it work, and she did. I think the only thing I consulted on was paint color. When I walked into the set for the first time, that's when I saw it, and I loved it So get together and hire the people you trust, and give them the creative freedom from there. It's about doing that one job the best that they can do.

HollywoodChicago.com: The DePaul University School of the Cinematic Arts has had a meteoric rise in the past five years, recently placing 17th overall in the nation, virtually from nowhere. To what do you attribute to that rise?



Kristyn Jo Benedyk of DePaul University
Photo credit: DePaul University

Benedyk: There are few things. One, there are certain policies in our program that are very different than other film schools. The advantage of being up and coming, is that we were able to look at other schools, and see what worked in them and what didn't...so we wanted to take what was best in those schools, both in practice and theory. We're also flexible. The first year we had an acting class for writers, which students didn't like, so we adjusted and added a class for film pitches. We look at the program every year, and make adjustments. For example, this

year we added web series, so we're always trying to keep up.

HollywoodChicago.com: What are some of the innovations that have really worked out well?

Benedyk: We have an open equipment policy, so any student can check out any piece of equipment at any time, Freshman to Graduate student. It's about hitting the ground running.

HollywoodChicago.com: Your first short film was called "Flat Chested," a story about a woman who decides to have a mastectomy, because she is genetically predisposed to breast cancer. What was the origin of that idea, and how did you want to portray this difficult subject?

Benedyk: It was personal, in that I wanted to spread awareness about BRCA [a genetic mutation that could cause breast or ovarian cancer]. It became more personal, because my sister was diagnosed with cancer, and then two weeks later my other sister was diagnosed with cancer.

While I was in pre-production. I didn't want it to seem preachy, so that's why it was pretty raunchy. And secondly, women are often viewed as the chosen, not the chooser, when it comes to their own destinies. I wanted to empower the main character, and show that they are as sexual as men. And wanted to do something about how women talk to each other in real life, as opposed to something that felt like screenplay dialogue.

HollywoodChicago.com: What are the type of screen stories out there right now that would best fit your style as writer?

Benedyk: Maybe because I'm doing a Pillow Talk piece right now, but 'Mad Men' is such a well-directed and composed show, I'd love to do something like that. I like something that is stylized, and that program fits that category. Also HBO's 'Girls,' they do a great job regarding how women actually talk to each other.

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★ **Matt Irvine, Director of the School for Cinematic Arts at DePaul University**

Matt Irvine was instrumental in actually creating the DePaul University School of Cinematic Arts, and putting the pieces in place to attain the lofty status it currently maintains. He received an MFA from Columbia University in Chicago, and came to DePaul in 1998. He began formulating the cinema dynamic at the university, and connected it to emerging technology. Irvine is also the author of eight screenplays, and is one of the principals involved with the digital transfer and Criterion Collection release of the cult classic, "Carnival of Souls."



Overview of a Set at DePaul University's Cinespace Alliance Set Up
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: You helped found the School of Cinematic Arts. What circumstances led to the development of the School, and what were the key pieces or philosophies that got it off the ground?

Matt Irvine: I started at DePaul in 1998, hired to teach Broadcast Journalism. I asked if I could make them film classes. There was no formal film department, just study classes, and one video production class through Broadcast Journalism. It was all just the half inch tape cameras and decks. But they gave me the space, and I turned them into filmmaking classes with the equipment I had. Since there hadn't been

anything like this at DePaul, the students responded positively. I came from the 'Star Wars' generation, so the mix between technology and filmmaking, it never seemed foreign to me.

HollywoodChicago.com: You've had rapid growth, and rankings that have propelled you into 17th out of all cinema schools in the nation. To what do you attribute that rapid evolution and rise?

Irvine: It was embracing the digital technology and the 'democratization of the art form.' It went back to Francis Ford Coppola, and what he said in the documentary 'Hearts of Darkness,' that 'some fat girl in Ohio was going to pick up a video camera and have a vision that will change everything.' So when I started, I gave the students the same film theory education I'd received, using these crappy video cameras. It was about the expression, and they made some cool stuff. I wanted to take the elitism and mysticism out of the tools. It was the 'film school attitude' that I wanted to change. Rightly or not, it is there. The lenses, the 'you don't understand the technology' stuff, that kind of thing. That always bothered me.

HollywoodChicago.com: Was students being able to check out equipment at will part of the equation?

I felt that everyone has something to say if they're interested in filmmaking, but oftentimes don't know how to say it. When I dug deeper into the film program, and it started to grow, I wanted to create a degree. It was in liberal arts and science at the time, and the dean there didn't want us to become Columbia University [Chicago]. So the program shifted to School of Computer Science, which was a completely different thought process.

Our first intro to film class, for political reasons, was called 'Digital Object Representation and Manipulation.' [laughs] It was the only way we could get the degree off the ground. But every student that came in initially, we gave them a camera, and beyond that having an open equipment policy. They could get to what they needed, at any age or skill level, because it's different kind of learning curve, especially now, it's more about menus than anything else. And the program was successful because of that, it respected the student.

HollywoodChicago.com: And now you've risen to the Top 20 in film schools. To what do you attribute that rise?

Irvine: Because we didn't have a back story, it didn't tie up to ways of doing things. There was a lot of shooting from the hip, and evolving the degree every single year. I've been a tech nerd all my life, and so I would buy the new camera and see what the students thought. Most film programs, the simple act of buying equipment has ten committee persons associated with it. So we didn't have a bureaucracy, and I could hire like minded people.

I'm influenced by the 1970s filmmakers, the Easy Rider/Raging Bulls kind of stuff, so the people I ended up bringing on, their reading of that era would seal the deal. I did look at the digital revolution like how the 1970s filmmakers moved into the studios, with their personal vision, and that's what we wanted to do hear. Let's use the equipment as a tool, and let's make something.

HollywoodChicago.com: The first era of the film school grads came in the 1970s, with Lucas, Spielberg, Scorsese and the like. What is different about a film school grad today than in those days, and what advantages or disadvantages do you believe they have over the famous first wave?



Matt Irvine of DePaul University
Photo credit: DePaul University

Irvine: Well, most of the faculty here seems to be of the 'Star Wars' generation, we were raised on the film school generation's movies. The Spielberg, Lucas, Scorsese generation got me interested in film itself, and then I was allowed to explore other influences. The film students who are coming out now, they are influenced by the Coen Brothers, Wes Anderson, Quentin Tarantino – those type of cinephiles who watched the VHS tapes of the guys who influenced us.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is the origin of you obtaining worldwide rights to the 1962 cult classic, 'Carnival of Souls'?

Matt Irvine: I made a film in grad school in 1995, that got me an agent and took me out to Los Angeles. I had meetings with many studios that don't even exist anymore, like Avenue films and Strand Releasing. So I did the get-out-of-film-school-go-to-LA route, and started working on a remake of 'Carnival of Souls.' That didn't go anywhere, and it was a bad experience, so I worked to obtain all the rights to the original film. I made a deal with the original filmmaker.

The original negative was in my Andersonville apartment closet in Chicago for years, and recently the Academy of Arts and Sciences did a

restoration and its now part of the Criterion Collection. It was sort of like an ‘f-you’ to the experience I had with the remake.

HollywoodChicago.com: So you came back to Chicago, and started teaching at DePaul University. How did you keep developing as a filmmaker while you were doing that?

Irvine: The year after starting at DePaul, I got a feature film financed, that I wrote and directed. It was another bad experience, the title went from ‘No Tomorrow’ to ‘Bludgeoned,’ and it was marketed as a sci-fi horror film, but it had no sci-fi and very little horror. [laughs] But because of working on this film, the producers worked around my teaching schedule, and I got my class involved in the making of the film.

That is what spun off into the ‘Blue Light’ projects we do now. The attitude for that is ‘let’s build a film studio’ within the walls of an academic institution. So I hired the persons as instructors who had knowledge about putting together a professional motion picture, in order for myself and the students to actually make movies.

HollywoodChicago.com: And that morphed into your latest Blue Light project in December?

Irvine: Yes, it was about putting the financing together, and allowing students to earn credits while they worked on the films. It’s also an excuse to keep making movies, and we at DePaul University actually enjoy making movies. That’s what I want the students to get out of it – that making movies is really fun. If it’s not fun for them, there are easier and more lucrative jobs out there.

HollywoodChicago.com: Isn’t your film from December predicated on being just one shot for 14 minutes?

Irvine: Yes, I threw it out there, and here there was enthusiasm for doing it. We worked for two days to get it right, and when we got it – there was a monitor off set for a group of students to watch the process – I knew it was working, and I became aware of the time passing and was freaking out a bit. What was going to happen? But after we got it, the students on the other side of the studio erupted into applause. We all knew we got it, and there was nothing like that feeling. Again, that’s what I want the students to focus on.

HollywoodChicago.com: What specific plans, that you can reveal, will continue DePaul University’s evolution in the School of the Cinematic Arts, and provide for their potential students the best cinema education?

Irvine: Well, what I can say is I’m not done. I look at the Cinespace alliance as a step along the way, and one thing I’m looking at is the new era of online productions, with Amazon, Netflix or Redbox to create original content, and incorporate into the academic programs. That would save money for them, and provide for those companies the content they’re looking for –basically, it’s to continue to make films.

The DePaul University School of Cinematic Arts Presents “Pitch Day, Winter 2015” on Friday, March 6th at 5pm, at DePaul University downtown, 14 East Jackson, Chicago. DePaul Students or Alumni will pitch projects for industry professionals, with a networking mixer to follow.



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