The interdisciplinary Goldring Arts Journalism Program cultivates writers to become savvy experts on arts and culture.

By David Marc
Kimberly Greene G’06 dances professionally, writes prodigiously, and would love to have a career writing about dance. After completing undergraduate degrees in dance and communications at Marymount Manhattan College, she reached an academic crossroads familiar to many American artists and writers. “I was having a hard time deciding which track I wanted to follow,” Greene says. “I had never heard of a program that combined writing with study of the arts, until I found this program at Syracuse.”

In 2005, inspired and funded with a gift from Trustee Lola Goldring ’51 and Allen Goldring, the University launched the Goldring Arts Journalism Program, a first-of-its-kind interdisciplinary master’s degree curriculum. Based at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications and co-sponsored by the School of Architecture, the College of Arts and Sciences, and the College of Visual and Performing Arts, the program is designed to prepare writers to set new standards in reviewing and reporting the arts for newspapers, magazines, e-zines, blogs, and whatever new platforms for written expression gain form in the pixels. “As astonishing as it may seem, before Goldring, there was not a single accredited program in the country specifically designed to train journalists to cover the arts for general circulation publications,” says print journalism professor Johanna Keller, the program’s founding director. “But I’m not astonished that it happened at Syracuse first. We have the faculty, the facilities, and the flexibility across the disciplines that are essential to providing challenging professional training in this area.”

Keller is an award-winning cultural critic and editor. Her essays, articles, and reviews appear in The New York Times, London Evening Standard, Los Angeles Times, and in special-interest magazines, including Opera News, Symphony, and Musical America. She sees the arts beat as a widening career path for journalists. With electronic media delivering breaking news at breakneck speed, dailies and periodicals are devoting more attention than ever to art and culture. One measure is the surge of column inches given to reviewing films, plays, concerts, urban design, exhibitions, and cultural events of every kind; another is the growing presence of arts-related news items. Weekly movie box office figures, once found only in Variety and other trade papers, now make news in metropolitan dailies. Reporters are sent to museums to cover culture-war skirmishes over exhibition content. The future of a region’s sole symphony orchestra may be decided in the deliberations of a city hall budget committee. “Dailies, weeklies, and magazines across the country are looking for well-trained, ready-to-work writers who can cover stories like these and produce lively, sophisticated reviews,” Keller says. “This means jobs for Goldring graduates.”

A Trustee, A Dean, A Night at the Opera

INNOVATIONS IN ARTS EDUCATION AND journalism study are among Syracuse University’s most celebrated achievements. Having conferred the nation’s first bachelor of fine arts degree during the 1870s, the University established a pioneering role, maintained today by the College of Visual and Performing Arts, its largest professional school. With the metamorphosis of the old “J school” into the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications during the 1960s, Syracuse reshaped the study of journalism to suit its expansion from print and radio to television and digital media. The launching of the Goldring Arts Journalism Program marks an interdisciplinary assertion of SU’s leadership in both fields.

University Trustee Lola Goldring ’51, for whom the program is named, is managing director of the Goldring Family Charitable Foundation. She has given support to many deserving causes, concentrating efforts in medicine, education, and the arts. Asked about the origins of the new graduate program, she credits informal conversations that led to focused, productive collaboration. It all began when Tom Walsh G’84, SU’s senior vice president for institutional advancement, introduced her to Newhouse Dean David Rubin. “David and I instantly discovered a mutual love of the arts,” Goldring says. “My husband, Allen, and I began going to the Metropolitan Opera with David and his wife, Tina.” At about that time, she remembers a lunch with some friends from the art world who were complaining how few critics there are who write well enough to make art comprehensible to general readers. “I thought, ‘Why couldn’t there be a training program to teach a new generation of critics to communicate effectively about the arts?’”

“Our evenings at the opera with the Goldrings started long before there was any talk of a program or a gift,” Rubin says. But after hearing Lola Goldring express her concerns over the dinners they shared on opera nights, Rubin found she had articulated something that had long troubled him. “Most Americans rarely get a chance to read anything about the fine arts or serious film,” he says. They agreed it was a problem worth fixing.

“When people think that critics are not important,” Goldring says. “They might argue that one should go to the theater with an open mind, despite what the critics say. But there is more to it than that. A critic can help you discover the full richness of art. If you are looking at a painting, a critic can tell you things about the history of that painting, about its relationship to the art of painting, and about its place in human experience that will intensify your enjoyment of it in more ways than you might have imagined alone.”

The path lay clear before them. “The Goldring Arts Journalism Program is a wonderful example of what can result from the synergy that occurs when concerned, creative alumni become involved with the University,” Walsh says.
THE INAUGURAL CLASS

Did someone say jobs? The moment the word hit the ‘net, responses and applications began pouring into the Goldring program from wanna-bees, soon-to-bees, and already-ares. Working members of the fourth estate, seeking personal and career development, were admitted from far and near, including Jamie Nelson G’06, theater critic for the Anchorage Daily News, and Julie Pinsonneault G’06, music editor of the Syracuse New Times. Most came bearing recent academic credentials, anxious to learn the trade. Erin Smith ’05, G’06, like Kimberly Greene, was attracted by the opportunity to pursue twin interests. Admitted to SU as an undergraduate architecture major, Smith switched to English and textual studies as her career goals shifted toward writing. “This program offered me an unexpected opportunity to continue to study architecture as part of my journalism training,” Smith says.

Steve Kobak G’06 and Anna Reguero G’06 were both led to Goldring by passions for music. “I’ve always wanted to be a rock critic, and this program is a boon to me,” says Kobak, a Central Connecticut State graduate who reviews bands for web-based Tiny Mix Tape and, since arriving in town, for the Syracuse New Times. “I plan to start out writing for a newspaper, covering concerts and reviewing CDs, but I’d eventually like to write and edit books about popular music,” he says. “The writers I look up to—Lester Bangs, Richard Meltzer, Greil Marcus—have a literary style, good flow, and a plethora of language, though they don’t use five-dollar words like ‘plethora.’ When they write about music, it’s as if they’re channeling intellect into personal expression.”

Reguero is a clarinetist who has performed at concert halls in the United States and abroad. A graduate of the Juilliard School’s pre-college program, she managed to earn two undergraduate diplomas concurrently: a B.M. degree at the Eastman School of Music and a B.A. in brain and cognitive science at the University of Rochester. Her goals as a writer include bringing the joys of classical music to a wider audience and promoting the works of contemporary composers. Reguero feels she gained particular benefits from the Newhouse “reporter’s boot camp,” a required six-week course for all rookie journalism students, designed to make sure that no one proceeds toward a specialty without full command of basic skills. “Boot camp gave me the fundamentals that every journalist needs,” Reguero says. “Most students in the program had at least some journalism background and were familiar with ‘the art of interviewing;’ ‘how to take notes;’ ‘journalism ethics;’ and the other topics that are covered. But for me, it was important new information. I learned how to write a lead at boot camp.”

Mary Lou Marien, a professor of fine arts and a core member of the Goldring faculty, points out how rare and valuable it is for a classical musician to gain such skills. “For students like Anna, who are already accomplished artists, the program offers exceptional opportunities for personal and career development,” Marien says. “The Goldring credential assures a magazine editor that this person, whose knowledge of music is extraordinary,
also knows the difference between a feature article and a news item—and is capable of writing both.” Marien believes that mastery of journalism skills opens the door for an artist to become an influential cultural critic.

**A MISSIONARY ROLE**

Newhouse Dean David Rubin presides over a public communications school that offers the widest range of majors and programs in the field. But with journalism and the fine arts—two of his most deeply felt personal concerns—intersecting in the Goldring program, he does not attempt to hide an emotional investment in its success. “I want to see Goldring students excel as reviewers, and then get beyond those obligations to help audiences broaden their perspectives on what constitutes the arts and what roles the arts can play in their lives,” Rubin says. “I believe graduates of this program can play a missionary role in culture.”

Although actors can be less than quick with a good word for critics, drama professor Craig MacDonald of the Goldring faculty shares Rubin’s belief that the program presents an opportunity to train critics who can vitalize relationships between artists and audiences. During a 25-year career on the stage, MacDonald has observed that writers unprepared for reviewing often get the assignments. “When that happens, the writing tends to be only partially informed, and lacking in positive, constructive standards,” MacDonald says. “Good critics can do more than make ‘thumbs up’ and ‘thumbs down’ recommendations. They can help theatergoers walk into a play with a richer sense of context, and walk out with a richer experience. Playwright, performer, audience—everyone benefits.”

**IMMERSIONS**

When they arrived in Syracuse in July 2005, the 16 Goldring students were not exactly eased into the joys of summer life in upstate New York. Instead, they reported directly for duty at Newhouse boot camp and found themselves facing a September deadline for “The Mix,” a special arts tabloid pull-out section written and edited solely by them that would appear in a Sunday edition of the Syracuse Post-Standard. “We want them to use Syracuse as a testing ground for ideas, and this was a good way to get them started,” Rubin says, noting that the program recently set up student headquarters in The Warehouse, SU’s new downtown building. “Their assignments for ‘The Mix’ took them all over town,” Keller says. “They saw more of Syracuse during those first weeks than some students used to see in four years.”

Hansa Bergwall G’06, who had recently earned a B.A. degree in English at the University of Seattle, headed downtown to the Everson Museum of Art to review *Aftermarket*, a three-gallery installation by John D. Freyer. Bergwall focused on “Walmart-Art,” a museum gift shop created by the artist, stocked exclusively with items from discount retailer Wal-Mart, but offered at boutique-like museum-store prices. Research for the piece took Bergwall to the East Syracuse Walmart, where he examined Freyer’s found works in their native context. “The exhibit isn’t about objects at all; it is about people’s relationship to money,” he wrote in his review, “Can I Get a Price Check on That?”

Jennifer Polland G’06, who came to the program from Colgate University with bachelor’s degrees in English and classical studies, ventured to the old right-of-way of the New York Central Railroad, currently occupied by Interstate Highway 690, for a critical rehabilitation of *Waiting for the Night Train* (1982) by sculptors Duke Epolito and Larry Zankowski. Life-size figures made of plaster and polyresin stand on the surviving platform of the
old Syracuse train station and, Polland tells readers, the statues speak to her. One of them says, “Years have passed, and our train has still not arrived. Sometimes...I can't help but wonder, what are we waiting for?” In “Ghosts Waiting for a Train,” Polland writes, “Successful public art brings a community together and stimulates the imagination.”

The students did manage to spend quality time out of town—way out of town. For spring break they traveled to Ireland for a mini-course, Modern Drama/Irish Theater and Community together and stimulates the imagination. They took them to storied theaters across the country, from the Druid in Galway to the Abbey and the Gate in Dublin, reviewing plays and visiting historic sites along the way. Several published travel articles in The Post-Standard.

Closer to campus, in Cooperstown, New York, they attended a performance by the Glimmerglass Opera Company of Benjamin Britten’s Death in Venice, an adaptation of Thomas Mann’s 1912 German novel of unrequited homosexual love among the gondolas during a cholera epidemic. Preparations for the daytrip included more than sensible shoes. They read the Mann novel and discussed Luchino Visconti’s 1971 screen adaptation with Newhouse film professor Peter Moller ’65. Upon arrival in Cooperstown, they toured the Glimmerglass facility and met with conductor Stewart Robertson and artistic director Nick Russell. Rebecca Ritzel G’06, a musical theater critic who, before enrolling in Goldring, wrote for the Intelligencer Journal, a Lancaster, Pennsylvania, daily newspaper, was enthralled by Glimmerglass. “I’ve been on many backstage tours, but nothing rivals seeing the four massive sets the company keeps in rotation,” she says. Kobak, admitting that this night at the opera was his first, surprised himself by having a good time. “Glimmerglass made me drop my Homer Simpson-esque notions about opera,” he says. Kobak will bring his broadening musical sensibility to the Kansas City Star this summer as winner of a national competition for the newspaper’s internship in arts journalism.

The “New York City immersion,” a 10-day January intercession nonstop trek through the city’s art worlds, was, for many students, the highlight of the Goldring program. “We lined up an amazing array of things for them to do,” Keller says, “We attended a taping of The Daily Show with Jon Stewart and a new Broadway production of Sweeney Todd. We went downtown to the New Museum, a wonderful contemporary art museum. The students had meals and workshop sessions with some of the best critics in the country.”

The lineup included Richard Pena, director of the Film Society of Lincoln Center; David Sterritt, chair of the National Film Critics Association; James Oestreich, music and dance editor of The New York Times; Michael Feingold, theater critic of The Village Voice; and Alex Ross, who covers music for The New Yorker. At a networking party at Lubin House, the students mingled with Joyce Tudryn ’81, president of the International Radio and Television Society Foundation, Peabody Award-winning documentary and author Jack Meyers, and the arts journalism program’s patrons, Lola and Allen Goldring.

“The New York City immersion was just amazing—and exhausting,” says Erin Smith. “We met with editors from Vanity Fair, Entertainment Weekly, The New Yorker, Spin, The New York Review of Books, Architectural Record…. I know I must be missing some! We had lunches with industry professionals who reviewed pieces we wrote during the trip.” Smith particularly enjoyed the task of reviewing Turks and Frogs, a wine bar in the West Village. She will likely have the opportunity to compare it with other such establishments, having accepted a position with Spotlight Communications, a public relations firm at the nexus of the entertainment industry. Anna Reguero agrees with Smith that the meetings and workshops were unforgettable—and invaluable. “This field is all about connections,” Reguero says, “and we had multiple opportunities to make connections with the big dogs in arts journalism.”

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