

# Expressions

## Volume 9

**SJSU** COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES  
AND THE ARTS

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# Sphinx Virtuosi Inspires Music and Dance Students

Sphinx Virtuosi, one of the nation's most dynamic and prestigious professional chamber orchestras, recently held a three-day residency at SJSU's School of Music and Dance. Sphinx musicians spent two days instructing and mentoring SJSU students and local high schoolers, giving students insights into what it takes to be a professional musician in the modern world of classical music. The Sphinx Virtuosi capped their residency with a packed performance on campus that brought folks from all walks of life to SJSU. Titled "Inspiring Women," the performance included works by Jennifer Higdon, Daniel Bernard Roumain, and Joan Tower.



Comprised of eighteen of the nation's top black and Latino classical soloists, the Sphinx Virtuosi is the performing wing of the Sphinx organization, a Detroit-based national group "dedicated to transforming

lives through the power of diversity in the arts." The organization was founded in 1996 by Aaron Dworkin, a black violinist at the University of Michigan who experienced the lack of diversity in classical music, both in musicians and audiences for whom they performed. Dworkin formed Sphinx to "address the stark under-representation of people of color in classical music" and "to create positive change in the arts field and in communities across the country." Dworkin went on to become Dean of the University of Michigan's School of Music, Theatre and Dance, as well as President Obama's first appointee to the National Council on the Arts. The organization he founded continues its national mission, reaching over 100,000 students and two million audience members each year.

Dr. Fred Cohen, Director of SJSU's School of Music and Dance, appreciates the impact that Sphinx Virtuosi has on students. "It's great for students to be around fine classical musicians with whom they can identify. Like the Sphinx performers, very few of our students come from privileged backgrounds, and they share many life experiences with the Sphinx musicians. When students see young people who share similar life stories performing at the



level of Sphinx Virtuosi, it's nothing short of inspirational. It makes a career as a 21st century musician seem that much more achievable."

SJSU students will continue to work with the Sphinx Organization this spring when the Catalyst Quartet, the string core of the Sphinx Virtuosi, returns to the School of Music and Dance for another residency. Dr. Cohen says that quartet members will help SJSU student musicians develop their technical proficiency while learning about professional development. The quartet's residency will culminate in a highly anticipated performance on April 20th. "The musicians in the Catalyst Quartet are profound thinkers," Dr. Cohen says. "They know how to put on a concert that matters and has meaning. It's not just replicating great programs from previous centuries. They make selections and give performances that directly relate to contemporary issues."



The School of Music and Dance is sponsoring a large number of performances in spring '16, most notably the February 13 live recording of NPR's *From the Top* with Host Christopher O'Riley, a one-hour classical music show heard by more than half a million listeners across the country. *From the Top* features high school choirs chosen in a competitive process from across California. We hope you will join us for this exciting event, either in the SJSU Music Hall, or on your local NPR station.

# LLDSA Hosts Successful Symposium



What started four years ago as a simple presentation of papers written for a sociolinguistics class has blossomed into an inclusive showcase appealing to scholars and students alike. SJSU undergraduate students, graduate students, alumni, and outside academics gathered in late October of 2015 to share ideas, present research, and expand their learning through thoughtful discussion in the LLD Student Association's Linguistics and TESOL Symposium.

Joined by speakers from Singapore, the University of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (UAJK) in Pakistan, and SFSU, the Symposium put on by the LLD Student Association was a huge success. Conference organizers Dr. Roula Svorou and graduate student Juliet Solheim hope that the growth and achievement will continue in the years to come.

"We hope to get our students involved in the idea of presenting, and to work when they do their papers with the presentations in mind, and to want to do that," Dr. Roula Svorou elaborates. "That's one of our goals -- to motivate them to do quality work so that they can be invited, and pass the scrutiny of abstract submission and conference presentation."

By taking part in the process of applying for and participating in the Symposium, students gain valuable confidence, experience, and perceptions that they can apply to their own work during their time at SJSU. "I think it's a great opportunity for them to present their work beyond the classes for which the work was written," Dr. Svorou explains. "As the years have gone by, students have become a bit more ambitious about the whole event."

And with the Symposium growing to include more and more speakers every year, students have a lot to aspire to. With growing interest from parties outside of SJSU, Juliet Solheim anticipates a greater regional presence at the Symposium in the coming years, and hopes to include more speakers from nearby universities. Greater interest leads to more diverse presentations, as illustrated by October's turnout, with presenters discussing topics ranging from the language of cricket commentary to creating a digital collection of written texts using Python, a programming language. These presentations, in turn, inspire students to look at things in ways they had never considered, exposing them to topics for future study and shaping students' perspectives on their current research.

Even though some presentations branched out into territory unknown to most SJSU students, there were many similarities in the research presented, even between local students and visiting presenters from UAJK. "It's interesting to see that, in linguistics, everyone is doing the same sort of work," Juliet Solheim remarked. "Two of the guest presenters focused on TESOL, which is very much a part of LLD here."

With 2016 being the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the SJSU LLD department, there are sure to be some big plans in the works for the next Symposium. One thing is

for sure: LLD faculty and staff are proud of their highly competent, motivated students, and look forward to working with them to help foster expression and communication across the LLD community as a whole.

*To keep up with LLDSA events and news, be sure to visit their blog - <http://blogs.sjsu.edu/linguistics/>*

*By Kaitlynn Magnuson*

# SJSU Students Win Big at CSU Media Arts Festival

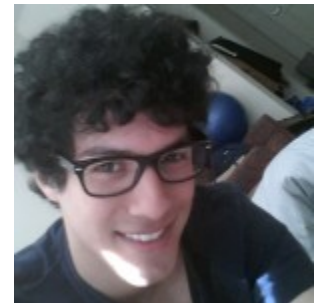
SJSU students from the Department of Radio, Television, Film, and Theatre had a strong showing at the 2015 CSU Media Arts Festival in November, bringing home a number of awards from the statewide competition.



RTVF major Mark Hertzler won 1st Place in the Short Screenplay category. His script, "Becoming the Wild," is a western about a religious man forced into violence.

Michael Quintana won 2nd Place in the Feature Screenplay category. His script, "Hare," is a modern take on an Aesop fable. Michael, who recently graduated with his MFA in Creative Writing from SJSU, took 1st Place in the same category in 2014 for his script "White Rabbit," which has been optioned by a Hollywood producer.

RTVF major Kourosh Ahari won 3rd Place in the Narrative Cinema category for his film "Malaise," a gorgeously crafted short about a modern plague. Ahari is no stranger to awards; "Malaise" was also selected for the Cannes Film Festival's prestigious Short Film Corner, where Ahari represented SJSU on the red carpet.



Department of Animation and Illustration major Natalie Corsie also brought home a win, placing 4th in Animation for "Home."

Impressively, 2015 marks the eighth year in a row that SJSU students have won a first place in a screenwriting category at the CSU Media Arts Festival. The festival, started in 1991, is a "celebration of films, videos and other new media created by students of the California State University." According to the festival's website, "The MAF is an opportunity for [students] to showcase their work before a panel of distinguished faculty and entertainment industry professionals." Held in Los Angeles, the 2015 CSU Media Arts Festival featured projects from 14 CSU campuses.

Hertzler and Quintana both wrote their screenplays in Professor Scott Sublett's RTFV 160 screenwriting class. Professor Sublett, who recently published *Screenwriting for Neurotics* through University of Iowa Press, says, "SJSU has been the dominant force in screenwriting at the festival for almost a decade. From 2008 to 2014 we placed first in Feature Length Screenwriting for seven years in a row. In fact, the last two years, 2013 and 2014, we swept the category 1-2-3, which was unprecedented in the history of the contest. This year we got second in feature screenwriting."

"We succeed because we emphasize planning and structure," he continues. "Screenwriting is hard to do when you're making up as you go along. It has to be thought through, and we give the students very specific techniques for doing that."

Historically, SJSU students successfully compete nationally as well. "We also do incredibly well in the Broadcast Education Association Festival of Media Arts, the biggest student

film competition in the nation," Sublett says. "Since 2008 our feature screenplays have won Best in Festival twice, and first in the feature-length category twice, which means we've had the top-rated feature four out of eight years. Meanwhile, we have taken second in Short Screenplays once, and second in Original TV Series Pilot once. We've up to now concentrated our efforts on feature-length, the most challenging form, but we also want to dominate short screenplay categories, and we're starting to do that. Our first place this year is good news."

*To learn more about all the good news happening at the Department of Radio, Film, Television, and Theater, check out their website -- <http://www.sjsu.edu/trft/>*

## Profile: Darlene Guerrero



The Humanities and Arts Student Success Center (H&A SSC) welcomes Darlene Guerrero as its newest academic advisor. Joining the SSC from the Jack Holland Student Success Center in the College of Business, Darlene brings with her a wealth of experience, as well as a unique understanding of students and what it means to be an advisor. In addition to offering students guidance in their academic endeavors, Darlene strives to “provide a safe space for students to come as they are, to “let them be heard.” For Darlene, it is about more than GE checklists and academics -- it is about “connecting with students to provide an arena for them to grow and helping students achieve

their goals: academic, professional, and personal.”

Darlene finds deep satisfaction in helping students overcome obstacles to reach their goals. Having worked as an advisor in Business for the last ten years, she is ready for a new challenge that will allow her to continue to grow professionally and personally. Although she has not been in the Center for long, she has already enhanced advising communications and is preparing to assist with major advising in the Liberal Studies teacher prep program. She looks forward to working with Center staff as well as the entire College of Humanities and the Arts to support student learning.

“From what I’ve experienced so far, we have a very talented and passionate group of students,” Darlene observed. “I feel privileged to share this space with them.”

Darlene joins other staff members Gisela Gray-Peoples (Interim Director of the H&A SSC), Tamara Goldie (Academic Advisor), Hanh Le (Administrative Support Coordinator), Alec Giurlani (Peer Advisor), Richard Struck (Peer Advisor), and Alissa Miller (Student Assistant), who are available to assist with general education and non-major advising, and to address common student inquiries regarding the College of Humanities and the Arts. Together, the staff provide a warm and welcoming environment that promotes student success. They invite you to stop by 244 Clark Hall to say hello and to see how they can help make your experience at SJSU positive and meaningful.

*For more information about the H&A Student Success Center, or to make an appointment, please go to <http://www.sjsu.edu/ha-advising/index.html>*

*By Kaitlynn Magnuson*

## Profile: Rashel Pakbaz

Alumna Rashel Pakbaz, who holds both a *cum laude* Bachelor of Arts in Music and a Master of Arts in Music History from SJSU, has been accepted into Cambridge University's Ph.D. program in Musicology. Born and raised in Tehran, Iran, Rashel is committed to furthering her studies in order to make Assyrian music and culture accessible and understandable to a wide audience. Focusing not only on music as a performance, but also on the intersection of musical reading, playing, and orchestration with areas such as sociology, anthropology, politics, and history, she strives to achieve a greater understanding of the relationships between people and music, and the power music has to connect musicians with their audiences.



"I strongly believe that artists are not only artists, but also sociopolitical activists that play a major role in encouraging, criticizing, raising awareness, and promoting innovations through their creations," Rashel elaborated. "Music is a language. Once you learn it, you can communicate with those who speak it. It can be overwhelming at times, but it is enjoyable, always."

Rashel's interest in musicology was sparked by music history classes she took with Dr. William Meredith and Dr. Gordon Haramaki. Her master's thesis focuses on the work of William D. S. Daniel, an Assyrian author, poet, and musician. She was intrigued by Daniel's purely Mesopotamian music, free of Arabic, Persian, Turkish, or Kurdish resonance. She reports that studying Daniel's work enables her "to see and distinguish the fundamental issues concerning the Mesopotamian music, culture, and society of which [she is] a part."

Her research culminated in the publication of her master's thesis, entitled "Reviving Mesopotamia: Genocide and the Preservation of Cultural Heritage in the Nationalistic Music of William Daniel," which received the Roshan Graduate Fellowship Award in Persian Studies from San Jose State University and the Annual Assyrian American Association of San Jose's Award in *Oumanoota*, both in 2015. These awards allow Rashel to do what she wants most -- to share the knowledge of her culture and her history with others. With her thesis publication and her continuation of her studies at Cambridge, she hopes to reach even greater heights.

"Music and the arts are an important factor in the growth of a society as well as some of the most influential means of communication with the outside world. I know that I can

acquire the necessary skills at Cambridge with its highly professional, diverse, free, and open academic environment as well as its excellent resources to help my community with its struggle to survive as a people and a culture.”

*By Kaitlynn Magnuson*

## Profile: Primo Orpilla and Verda Alexander



Relying on a fluid philosophy to create comfortable work spaces, Primo Orpilla and Verda Alexander, founders of Studio O+A, have been accepted into the Interior Designer Magazine's Hall of Fame. Both graduates of San José State University, Primo and Verda have designed workspaces for major companies such as Facebook, Yelp, Uber, Cisco, Levis, and Williams Sonoma. Incorporating elements from the fine arts and drawing inspiration from the world around them, Primo and Verda strive to design open, creative work spaces that express each company's purpose and that develop "a story that the people who work there can be a part of."

Working with this belief that the overarching story of a company is an important design element, Primo and Verda seek to understand their clients in ways that many might consider unconventional. They begin by studying the individual qualities that make a company, its workers, and their workspace unique. "We research what kind of coffee they like, how much natural light they can take, what their favorite movies are," they elaborated. "All of those things go into the design."

Being in continual contact with their clients allows Primo and Verda to create designs that express and support each company's unique culture. Letting go of preconceptions about a company's goals, practices, or philosophies is a key factor in creating a successful design plan. "The client determines the design. The client's philosophy, not ours, is the starting point, and the longer we've been doing this the more certain we are of that approach." Adhering to these principles, while still fully integrating space for creative solution-finding, working, and thriving allows Studio O+A to create truly individual workspaces that are suited to each individual company's goals.



Primo and Verda say they are both honored and humbled to be accepted into the Interior Designer Magazine's Hall of Fame. They attribute their success to SJSU's Art and Design Department, which provided them with the skills, knowledge, and values they need to succeed in a dynamic field like Interior Design. With good design now being so widely adopted into mainstream companies' workspaces, Primo and Verda believe that the need for thoughtful, creative, and unorthodox designers will only increase.

When asked what advice they would give students, Primo and Verda said: "Whichever path you choose, do it not as a job, but as a vocation. If you have trained to be a designer, you are one of those lucky people who get to make a living doing what you love to do. Not everyone is so privileged, so it's important that you bring to each day's work the passion that you started with. Make sure with everything you do it matters to you."

For more information on their studio, visit <http://www.o-plus-a.com/>

*By Kaitlynn Magnuson*

# Profile: Ellen Tara James Penny

*By Melody Grace Burdick*



Ellen Tara James Penny is the luckiest penny students can find at San José State University. Teaching English composition courses at SJSU since 2013, she is outgoing and encouraging, and works to ensure that her students are well prepared for upper-division writing courses. In the short time she has been an instructor, she has inspired many students to push through everyday obstacles in order to achieve their dreams.

Ellen's current success, however, did not come easily. A casualty of the dotcom bust of the early 2000s, she lost her job at an emerging tech company and was unable to find similar work. Struggling financially, she took a job

cleaning and painting apartments in exchange for her rent. Thirty-nine and almost homeless, Ellen felt defeated, but a good friend encouraged her to pursue her dreams of higher education. Ellen took the advice and enrolled at SJSU in 2006 to pursue a Bachelor's degree in English. By the spring of 2013, she had completed both her B.A. and her M.F.A. in English, and in fall 2013, she was teaching her first class at SJSU.

Ellen's current focus is to prepare students to write properly in a professional environment. "We need to teach students to think outside the box," she says. "How else can we teach people to communicate effectively?" By helping students critically analyze their work and the work of others, she teaches them to identify writing problems and to implement revision strategies that produce concise and compelling prose.

When she is not teaching, Ellen pursues literary ventures of her own in fiction and nonfiction. She is currently working on a novel set in the Mojave Desert that focuses on the theme of friendship. Her nonfiction writing focuses on her mother's life in Oklahoma, expanding on Steinbeck's perspectives of the Dust Bowl.

More than anything, Ellen stresses that any goal can be accomplished with hard work and perseverance. "If you find something you love, go out there and do it," she says. "Don't let anything stop you!"

# It's a Dean's Life Vol. 9

January 2016



Happy New Year and welcome to spring semester 2016!

In addition to the arrival of Super Bowl 50 to the South Bay, we have many exciting things to look forward to in the coming months.

The city of San José officially turned over the Hammer Theatre Center to SJSU at the start of the calendar year. Spring 2016 provides an opportunity for a long-awaited soft opening of the facility, beginning with [Cinequest](#). I am proud that we are opening the Hammer with our very own student film studios' latest feature-length film, *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Tickets for the premier on Wednesday, March 2, 2016, will

appear on the Cinequest site when the program goes live this week. Films will run at the Hammer throughout the festival.

The initial mission and vision statements for the Hammer will appear in the Cinequest program copy:

"The Hammer Theatre Center is a distinctive, high-quality performance venue in the heart of downtown San José. Owned by the city and newly operated by San José State University, the Hammer will serve the university and the community through artistically and educationally excellent programming expressive of the unique characteristics and diverse cultures that comprise Silicon Valley.

Together we are building a nexus between the university and the community, San José and the Bay Area, and local and global talent. We aim to produce and present innovative programming that reflects Silicon Valley's culture of creativity, diversity, and technology. We invite audiences to experience the beauty, spontaneity, and human connection made possible through live performance.

Our broader vision includes Arts, Innovation, and Technology programming on the Paseo de San Antonio, creating a vibrant pathway between SJSU and the Tech Museum, and bridging the urban spaces from Saint James Park down to the SOFA cultural district. We aim to connect SJSU's tremendous human capital—more than 37,000 faculty, students, and staff—with the downtown cultural and economic corridors."

If you are interested in potentially booking the Hammer or learning more details, please visit the [website](#). We are working hard to get this facility up and running on behalf of the university and the community. I would like to thank all interested associates and community members for your patience as we build on and solidify strong processes and parameters for programming.

In addition to the numerous upcoming events highlighted in that section of *Expressions* this month, we have two unique events scheduled for February. First, a live episode of the NPR show [From the Top](#) will air from our Music Concert Hall on February 13, 2016. *From the Top* celebrates classically trained young musicians and gives them a national platform to showcase their talents. This is a wonderful event for all who care about music education and building pipelines for the performing arts! Tickets and information [here](#).

Next, I am thrilled that civil rights icon [Ruby Bridges](#) will be on campus February 24, 2016, to accept the Steinbeck Award from our Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies. This prestigious award honors artists and activists who embody the spirit of Steinbeck's core socially progressive values. Former recipients include Bruce Springsteen, Ken Burns, Dolores Huerta, and Khaled Hosseini. Read more and buy tickets [here](#).

This semester we will be hosting an Emeritus and Retired Faculty Brunch on February 12, 2016. If you are retired faculty and would like to attend, please rsvp to [Pat Cunningham](#). We also are hosting a Donor Recognition Reception on March 4, 2016, in honor of our alumni and supporters who make it possible for us to offer more than \$100,000 in scholarships annually and who fund program excellence across the College.

On a more somber note, we recently lost an important member of our faculty community. Emeritus faculty member [Sam Smidt](#) died earlier in January. A highly accomplished artist, Sam's work is in the permanent collections of [SFMOMA](#) and [LACMA](#). He was on our faculty from 1960-1997, and is credited as the founder of our Graphic Design program. He was renowned for his dedication to teaching and his support of graphic designers all over the world.

Professor Smidt's passing provides yet another reminder of how grateful we are in the College of Humanities and the Arts to be part of a large community of dedicated faculty, students, staff, alumni, supporters, and friends who believe in the power of humanities and the arts to impact the world in positive ways.

Wishing everyone peace and health in 2016,



Lisa Vollendorf, Dean

College of Humanities and the Arts

humanities-arts@sjsu.edu