

Ask most Americans what ABC's hit TV shows *Desperate Housewives*, *Lost* and the box office comedy *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* have in common, and most will shoot back a blank stare. The fact is that these productions all feature heavy hitters who went to The Putney School.



Felicity "Flicka" Huffman '81 looking content as a Putney student, years prior to her joy of becoming one of America's *Desperate Housewives*.

Think it's hype? Especially for a Vermont boarding school that bans TV and has students rise at 5:30 A.M. to shovel manure on its working dairy farm? Well, think again.

When the American Film Institute recently honored the top ten films for 2005, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* executive producer Jon Poll '76 walked over to the next table to speak with *Lost* executive producer Carlton Cuse '77.

"I went over to reintroduce myself to Carlton," said Poll. "I asked him whether he was coming to Reunion in June." Poll and Cuse are two of many Putney grads who work both in front of and behind the lens, from documentary to feature to animation.

The list of Putneyites drawn to the big and small screen is long and impressive: the late Oscar-nominated actress Barbara Bel Geddes '41, who played J.R. Ewing's mother on the '70s hit TV show *Dallas*; documentary director Errol Morris '65 who netted an Oscar in 2004; *thirtysomething* leading man Ken Olin '72 who also now directs and produces; *Jurassic Park III* actress Téa Leoni '84 who costars with Jim Carrey in *Fun with Dick & Jane*; critically-acclaimed character actor and writer Wally Shawn '61 who has starred in a slew of films, including the animated hits

Chicken Little, *The Incredibles* and *Toy Story I and II*; and *Desperate Housewives*' Felicity Huffman '81 who was recently nominated for an Oscar in her lead role in the hit movie, *Transamerica*.

But ask Huffman whether her time at Putney was what propelled her into a career in TV and film and she'll tell you "no." Never mind that she was cast in a bit part in the spring of her freshman year as a chorus girl in the 1978 Putney School stage production of *Tin Pan Alley*. "Flicka," as she was known, settled for the record that the acting bug had already bitten well before she reached West Hill during her one and only year at Putney. "I had already been going to acting camps," said Huffman. "I can't say Putney was an influence at all, but I do remember the friendships."

And they're friendships she still maintains, both personally and professionally. During a recent phone interview from her L.A.-area home, Huffman mentioned she had a house-guest, the wife of Putney schoolmate Neil Pepe '80. Pepe, serves as artistic director of the award-winning Off-Broadway Atlantic Theater Company in New York City, co-founded by Huffman's hubby, actor William H. Macy. Talk about six degrees of separation.

And Pepe is no lightweight. From the helm of the Atlantic Theater Company, the former Putney day student has worked with such playwright royalty as David Mamet, David Rabe, Woody Allen and Harold Pinter. He also has acting credits that include *Sex and the*

By Clennon L. King '78

PUTNEYWOOD

Putney Alumni Making a Difference on Both Sides of the Big Lens

City, Law & Order and *New York Undercover*. Unlike Huffman though, Pepe doesn't miss a beat in saying Putney was his launching pad.

"I think Putney's extremely unique, because it focuses on the arts," said Pepe, who studied under former acting teacher, Joyce Devlin, and mime teacher, Barry Mallis. "Given the cutbacks in public school arts funding across the country, few places offer the intensity on the arts that Putney provides."

For some Putney alums, following in the footsteps of film industry parents would seem a natural progression. Obviously not for Nell Potts Newman '78 who never returned to "the business" even after she starred in the 1968 film *Rachel, Rachel* with her mother, actress Joanne Woodward, and later in the 1972 film *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-In-The-Moon Marigolds* directed by her father, actor Paul Newman. Even though Woodward spoke about the craft of acting at a special assembly at the school in 1975, Nell, founder and head of Newman's Own Organics product line, never ventured on stage at Putney during her nine months here.

But for Emmy-nominated actor Tim Daly '74—now a school trustee—Putney became the threshold into "the family business." His father was the late James Daly, star of the '70s hit TV show *Medical Center*, and his big sister is former *Cagney & Lacy* star Tyne Daly, currently starring in the TV show *Judging Amy*.

Long before Daly emerged as one of the stars of the long-running NBC sitcom *Wings*, Tim said the Putney Experience helped him "flex his imagination muscle, and ensure it was firing on all cylinders."

Daly recalls he wasn't sure he had a future in acting until he delivered a convincing performance of Malvolio in Putney's production of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*.

"We performed it down at the old amphitheater where I got lots of laughs—including my mother and father," said Daly, now an actor and producer. "They didn't even recognize me until the end of the first act."

For Daly classmate and fellow filmmaker Lavinia Currier '74, Putney struck her as having a strong sense of theater from the moment she first rolled up the school's front drive. "I can remember seeing eight or nine boys crossing the driveway wearing only loincloths," said Currier, the director/writer/producer of the film *Passion in the Desert*. "We all had a sense of theater—whether it was at Assembly, Sing, or Sunday Night Meeting."

Even though she was making films before arriving at Putney, Currier said what attracted her to visual storytelling was a Putney English class. "Vinny," as she was known, recalled a spontaneous writing exercise in English class led by teacher and advisor John Nopper.

"I remember John telling us to close our eyes as we listened to the music of Ravel. Then he told us to reach for our pen and paper and begin writing," said Currier, the older sister of the late Michael S. Currier '79 for whom Putney's performing arts building is named, and who appeared in one of her films. "It was fantastic."

Actor/director/producer Ken Olin '72 also credits Putney's English Department with setting him on his career path. The Chicago native, who has directed episodes of *The West Wing*, *L.A. Doctors* and *Judging Amy*, said he almost certainly would have become a businessman or lawyer had it not been for an English teacher named Jeffrey Campbell.

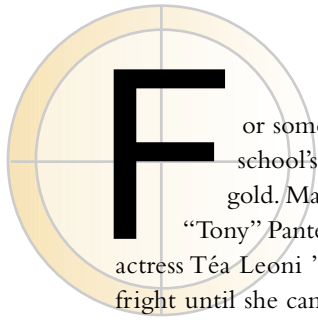
"Jeffrey showed me how Shakespeare was fun and theatrical, and not daunting or too cerebral," Olin said of Campbell, Putney's lone teacher of color for many years and the namesake of the school's theater at Lower Farm. "Jeffrey was an incredibly fun teacher."



Tim Daly '74 played in *Zoo Story* at The Putney School, long before he sprouted *Wings*.



Wally Shawn '61 worked in the KDU on the way to *My Dinner with Andre*.



For some Putney parents, the school's worth was measured in gold. Manhattan attorney Anthony "Tony" Panteleoni said his daughter, actress Téa Leoni '84, suffered from stage fright until she came to Putney.

"Putney gave Téa a tremendous sense of self confidence," said Panteleoni, whose daughter has starred on *Frasier*, and in the films *Wyatt Earp* and *Spanglish*. "Putney said to her 'Don't worry about your grades—we just want you to do your best.'"

But Putney's impact on the film industry isn't just in front of the lens. Just as many alums are earning a name for themselves behind it.

Take the cases of David Murray '76 and Jon Poll '76. Both came to Putney as freshmen from the same hometown in the fall of '72. They roomed together their junior year and—from all accounts—were from two very different worlds. Poll was a Jewish kid from the Upper East Side, while Murray was a black kid from Harlem. Still, both ended up in "the business."

As an animation illustrator, Murray has been racking up Disney screen credits on such films as *Mulan*, *Tarzan* and *Lilo & Stitch*, as well as on Universal Pictures' recently-released film, *Curious George*. Asked whether Putney had an impact on his career path to film, the Orlando-area husband and father of three didn't pause.

Lavinia Currier '74, displaying her passion for Putney (passenger side window), would one day be the director/writer/producer of the film *Passion in the Desert*.



"It had a huge influence," said Murray, crediting former art teacher Linn Bruce as his mentor. "Putney's emphasis on the arts gave me the confidence to recognize that my interest and talent didn't have to be relegated to a hobby—that I could be a serious and legitimate artist."

For Poll, it wasn't Putney's art department that thrust him toward filmmaking, but a physics teacher named Ed Shore. Poll recalls how the late Mr. Shore regularly screened 16mm shorts during assemblies.

"Ed was great," said Poll, whose film credits as an editor, producer and executive producer include *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*, *Austin Powers in Goldmember*, *Meet the Parents*, *Meet the Fockers* and *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*.

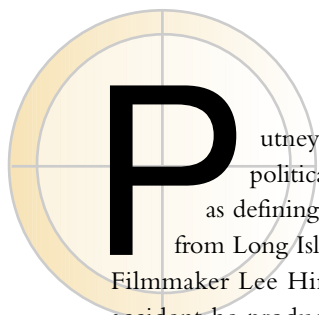
"I once did a still photography project with Ed during Project Week called 'Walk Through Brattleboro,'" said Poll, whose mother worked in film and whose father, Oscar-nominated producer Martin Poll, is widely credited as the architect of New York City's filmmaking renaissance.

Speaking of Poll's family, Putney was also where Poll met his future wife, Julia Haverstock Poll '77, a former Putney acting student, who's currently a screenwriter of several kids' TV shows. And make no mistake: Julia and Jon's alma mater is having a direct impact on the next generation of filmmakers as well.

Harlem native Demetria Royals '73 is director of the film program at Sarah Lawrence College and remembers the all-nighters she pulled in the Reynolds Building photo lab.

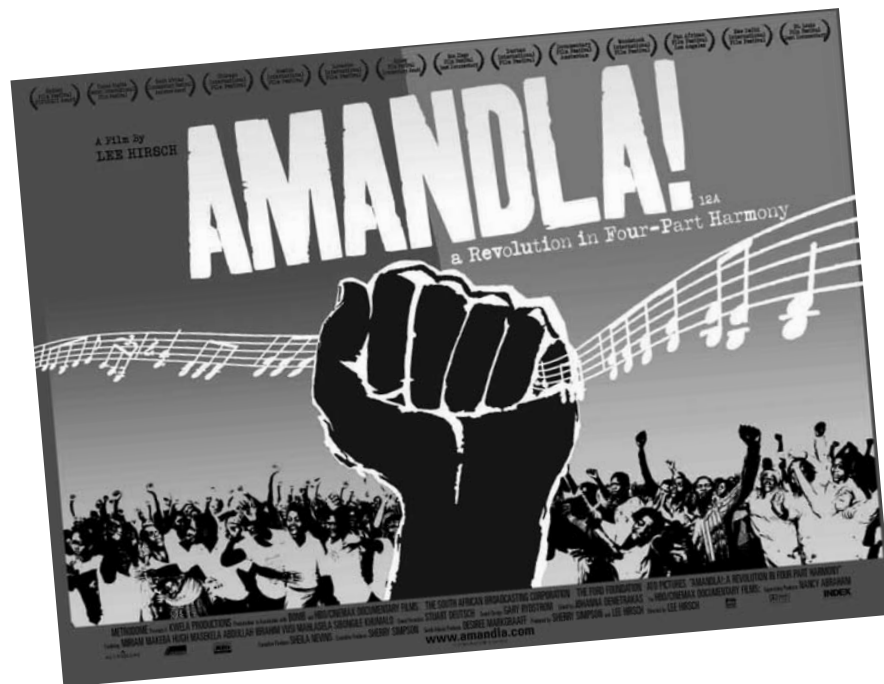
"Putney gave me the sense that I could do anything. . . . that as James Baldwin said, 'I had the right to tell my story in my own voice,'" said Royals, an independent filmmaker whose PBS documentary credits include her films *Conjure Women* and *BrotherMen*. "It was either telling my own story in my own voice, or doing twenty to life," said Royals, a former Putney graduation speaker.

Nearly a decade before Royals turned up on campus, the man who would later become one of the premier documentary filmmakers of his time was already at Putney. Oscar-winning Errol Morris '65, who directed *The Thin Blue Line*, *Gates of Heaven* and the award-winning *The Fog of War*, says his intellectual curiosity and sense of social outrage were fostered at Putney. "I think the place helped me raise my level of hostility—which was already high," said Morris, who credits Putney music director Norwood Hinkle as the reason he still plays cello. "Norwood Hinkle was a force of nature, a brilliant and extraordinary man."



Putney's emphasis on music and political responsibility was just as defining for another Jewish kid from Long Island besides Morris. Filmmaker Lee Hirsch '90 said it's no accident he produced a documentary about the power of music in the fight against South African apartheid. The fact is that as a student trustee, this plumbing contractor's son pressed fellow board members to divest their holdings in the country where Mandela was still behind bars. That kind of political intolerance, coupled with his love for Putney's all-school Sing, helped Hirsch produce his 2002 film *Amandla!: A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony*. "If there was anything that shaped me at Putney, it was the activism," said the Emmy Award-winning Hirsch, whose film was also honored at Sundance. "Putney taught me the importance of living life on my own terms."

Not every filmmaker remembers Putney as a completely nurturing place for budding performing artists. French-born actress Joanna Miles '58 remembers the time a teacher tried to get her thrown out of a school production. Still, the Emmy Award-winner and member of the Academy



of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences says Putney taught her self-reliance.

"We built buildings, planted corn, poured foundations, and we learned we could create something," said the former Putney trustee, who is currently in development on a screenplay about Putney. "Putney taught me about taking responsibility for an idea and following through with it."

While Miles may be a familiar face to TV viewers for the last 50 years, other industry insiders who went to Putney are not. Celebrity agent Jonathan Trumper '75 is one of them. The son of The Putney School's long-time physician, Jon was cast in countless plays at Putney and earned critical acclaim as a student at Kenyon College for delivering convincing performances of elderly characters.

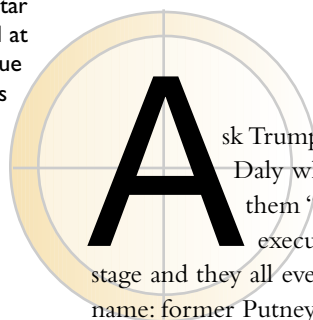
"When I was cast in elderly roles, I would draw on my Putney experiences for inspiration—like the time the elderly renowned pianist Rudolph Serkin came to play in the KDU," said Trumper. A former agent with the William Morris Talent Agency, Trumper has represented many big names including Lauren Bacall, the late Don Ameche and the late Christopher Reeve.

A fine mix of political intolerance and a love of Sing helped fuel Lee Hirsch '90 to make *Amandla!: A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony*, a documentary about the power of music in the fight against South African apartheid.



Nell Potts Newman '78 was already a film star when she arrived at Putney. But her true calling was Newman's Own Organics.

"Putney is a place where creative thinking and critical thinking are highly valued," said Trumper. "Maybe that's why I'm able to take creative things and make sense out of them. Maybe that's why I'm someone who helps creative people do what they do."



Ask Trumper, Pepe, Olin and Daly who at Putney helped them "raise their game" in the execution of their craft on stage and they all eventually utter the same name: former Putney Drama Teacher and Director Joyce Devlin. Devlin—who ironically admits she has never seen former students such as Tim Daly on TV—said any credit she was due had to be shared with Putney's administration. The top brass, she said, gave her artistic freedom and license to take risks.

"Former Academic Dean Charlie Brickley was incredibly supportive, and did not try to tie my hands," said Devlin, now a professor of theater arts at Mount Holyoke College. "As for my students, I was only trying to share my love of the craft and give them technique."

These days, Putney's academic dean and the drama teacher are one and the same: Karla Baldwin. Baldwin says that while there was no motion picture program per se at Putney in the '70s during Devlin's era, there soon will be. Later this year, Putney is slated to launch an interdisciplinary curriculum of film and acting under the direction of video production teacher Beckie Coffey, photography teacher Jason Whiton '83 and Baldwin. "The idea is to allow students to explore both disciplines based on their strengths and interests," said Baldwin. "We're very excited about that."


Still, some are quick to caution current students who have their eyes on a future in film. Tony Ganz '65 said Putney students shouldn't kid themselves. Ganz—best known

for developing and producing the film *Clean and Sober* starring Michael Keaton—said the film industry is a dog-eat-dog world. "The chances of any kid 'making it' and sustaining themselves in the film industry is infinitesimal," said Ganz, chief of development with Dick Wolfe Films. "It's a little like the odds of a kid out of Harlem making it to the NBA." Making the point, Ganz recalled a recent *New York Times* article about the short-lived success of many award-winning independent filmmakers after the trophies had been handed out and the lights had dimmed.

"If you consider the fact," Ganz continued, "that the films that have won the major awards at Sundance over the last decade have, in most instances, failed to successfully find a wide release in the American marketplace, what then should become painfully apparent is that independent filmmakers in this country who want to make serious-minded films still have a profoundly difficult journey ahead of them."

But fellow filmmaker Eli Noyes '60 isn't one for skepticism. And it's no wonder. Just five years after leaving Putney, Noyes found himself sitting at the Oscars—hosted that year by Bob Hope—after his ground-breaking 1965 clay animation film short called *Clay or the Origin of Species* had been nominated. "Putney taught me to follow your bliss, do it for yourself, and try things you have no business trying," said Noyes.

Those guiding principles prompted Noyes to shoot his first film at Putney entitled *Noon*—about the "downtime" between the end of lunch and the beginning of fifth period—and a decade later, got him hired by Putney to shoot its historic 1969 film about the school, curriculum and work program.

For Noyes, these successes, however small, are a testament to the power of The Putney Experience. "It's back to Mrs. Hinton's ideas," said Noyes, whose architect father designed Putney's dorm of the same name. "Be who you are... stand up for what you believe...and make it happen wherever you are." 

About the author:

Clennon L. King '78 (clennon@putneyschool.org) is the major gifts officer at The Putney School. He studied theater, mime and writing at Putney in the '70s, played a priest in a cameo opposite the late Carroll O'Connor in an episode of *In the Heat of the Night* in the '90s, and last May returned to Putney to screen a rough-cut of his documentary film *Slave Market Diary*, about the historic 1963–64 St. Augustine, Florida, Civil Rights campaign.