



PGA Diversity Workshop mentors and participants, including George Sunga (first row, far left), Deborah Calla (first row, fourth from right), Charles Howard (back row, center), as well as Dan Halperin, Pamela Keller, Rebecca Graham Forde, Karyn Benkendorfer, Stephen Grossman and Megan Mascena.

THE POWER OF Diversity

THE STORY OF PGA'S PRODUCING WORKSHOP

by Tasha Lowe-Newsome

A successful producer is always learning, adapting and evolving. The same can be said for the PGA Diversity Workshop. Since its creation nine years ago, the workshop has grown its ambitions and honed its approach. It is ready for prime time.

Deborah Calla is chair of both the Diversity Committee and Diversity Workshop, and as one of the founders of the workshop, continues to be the hand on the rudder. Calla explains how, prior to the Diversity Workshop, the main effort of the Diversity Committee had been to organize, host and sponsor the PGA's Celebration of Diversity awards event. When it became clear that the funding was not available to continue the gala event, they wanted to do something new, and hit on the idea of a workshop to help up-and-coming producers learn to navigate the process and learn best practices. Like producing itself, it was not always smooth sailing.

Calla is brutally honest about the learning curve that came with the Workshop. She recalls, "In the first year of the Workshop, the goal was obviously to teach producers or create opportunities or to workshop projects. Producers also have to work with actors and directors, so the 'final project' was scene work. Participants auditioned actors that they were interested in working with, and the producers either brought in a director or directed the scene themselves. And it was a mess," she admits. "Just a mess. We decided very quickly that we could never do that again." Charles P. Howard, another founder of the workshop, was also a first-year participant and remains an on-going mentor. He concurs, "We realized that no one was going to get a project made based on these scenes."

Undaunted, the Committee continued to refine the process. Calla continues, "So the Workshop evolved for nine years in terms of how it was put together and the things we wanted to achieve and which sessions were most important. So there have never been two Workshops exactly alike." Howard agrees, "We've always taken on the same general themes, but explored them in different ways. Each time it gets better and more productive."

At first, the program focused on aspiring producers rather than working producers. While the intention was good, it didn't allow participants to get the most out of the program. Calla explains, "From the beginning, we always had the support of people like Bruce Cohen and Marshall Herskovitz, so we had these amazing producers with decades of experience generously giving up their time and knowledge to people who couldn't really make use of it. That was the bottom line." Megan

Mascena, another longtime mentor, adds, "I have been involved since the beginning. The classes used to be bigger and had a broader range of experience. Because the selection process has refined throughout the years, the smaller classes have more experienced participants. We now require full scripts and interview applicants."

Adding the interview component was a major improvement. Howard commented that sometimes applicants were less than honest on their applications. Other times, they looked great on paper, but it turned out that they 'did not play well with others.' But the interview process has been so successful that the PGA Mentoring Program now uses the same method. Howard observes, "Now we are able to put together a group of nice, smart people who have good projects and similar levels of experience. They are much more likely to gel."

Another improvement in the application process has been to require completed scripts for feature films, TV pilots and Web projects, or very detailed treatments for documentaries. While this lowered the application numbers slightly, it led to better results. Deb Calla remarks, "We also realized that to workshop projects that were very, very green is impossible. We started by asking for a treatment. But after two years of choosing people based on their treatments, we saw, as we started to workshop the projects, that they completely changed. There were cases of people literally trashing their project and picking up a new one in the middle of the Workshop." Most producers would be hard pressed to call that a recipe for success.

The projects are very important to the Workshop process. Without a film script, a television pilot, a strong documentary treatment or a Web series script, there is no way for participants to apply what they are learning. The 2013 Workshop featured a wide variety of interesting projects.

Participants in the 2013 Workshop. (Photo: Charles Howard)





Diversity Committee members and Workshop mentors (from left) Rebecca Graham Forde, Deborah Calla, Karyn Benkendorfer, Megan Mascena, Stephen Grossman, Charles Howard, George Sunga.

There were four TV pilots: a hospital drama set in Detroit; a historical drama set in Constantinople in 361 A.D.; a drama about swingers, set in 1920s British Colonial Kenya, and a half-hour workplace comedy about second chances. There was one ambitious multi-part documentary series on the history of marriage throughout the world. There were also four films: A comedy about the coming-out tribulations of a long-married mother of teenagers; a biopic on the life of Bahamian NFL player Devarid Darling; a psychological thriller about a classical pianist gaining control of her emotional life through submissive erotic knife-play; and a drama about a woman's choice between alcoholism and motherhood.

The Workshop continues to evolve but in its current state it provides an amazing array of opportunities for the participants. The session starts with participants introducing themselves and pitching their project to the mentors and the rest of the class. This year, the guest speakers were stellar. Noted script doctor and development consultant Jeff Lyons talked about the importance of the script and working with writers. Transmedia guru Philip Hodgetts helped the students understand the need for a multi-platform approach to their projects. Participants got a chance to practice their pitches to such noted luminaries as Ali LeRoi and Marshall Herskovitz. The newly-elected President of the Directors Guild of America

(DGA) Paris Barclay talked about working with directors and understanding credits. Pat Quinn gave the hard facts about fundraising. PGA National Executive Director Vance Van Petten took the participants through his extraordinary one-night workshop on negotiation. Adam Chapnick, head of Film and New Media at Indiegogo, discussed alternative fundraising options. John Heinsen followed up with a talk on creating and distributing on multi-platforms. Dan Abrams presented the basics of sizzle reels and ripomatics. Each year the guests change, based on availability. Past guest speakers have included Bruce Cohen, Damon Lindelof, Steve Grossman, George Sunga and Yvonne Russo.

Today, instead of presenting scenes, the class presents their improved pitches. By the final class of 2013, one participant had already had his pilot optioned. Since then, one of the film projects has secured overseas funding. Another participant was staffed on a new show and her pilot was a contender at the Austin Film Festival. Another participant has recently wrapped shooting Helen Hunt's latest film and will be getting the project she took through the Workshop off the ground.

Another essential element of producing is networking. When questioned about the Workshop, all of the participants, past and current, commented on the value of the networking opportunities. Roman Wyden (2013) praises "The group dynamic, the networking, the openness of everyone involved to help and support. I felt that it was like one big family cheering each other on to get our projects made."

Celeste Wolfe (2010) advises: "Make friends with your cohort. Keep in touch. Build your relationships."

Spiros Skentoz (2013) recalls: "Meeting all the fellow mentees and hearing their amazing projects. It was like a TV writers room, only with women and people of color," he pointedly jokes. "Everyone brought such unique projects and personalities to the Workshop, which really helped you see your own project in a new light and reinvigorate you."

Miles Maker (2013) observes, "It was inspiring to fellowship with passionate creatives at every session. You don't feel so alone on your seemingly impossible journey when you have colleagues to accompany you along the way."

Marie Rose (2009) "I'm very happy and proud to have been part of the PGA Diversity Workshop, not only for the industry access and knowledge I received from it, but also because I made so many lifelong friends and potential collaborators among my classmates and my mentors. The mentors continue to inspire me to this day and they often come out in support of their mentees, past and current."

Charles P. Howard sums it up best when he says that the Workshop provides "priceless relationships that pay dividends over time."

One hundred and sixty people have been through the Workshop in nine years. Many are inspired to give back by becoming mentors themselves. Mentors attend most of the

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QUITE SIMPLY, A FILM FOR THE AGES."

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classes, as well as give feedback and advice to the students. They often meet with students outside of the Workshop and many continue to be there for students years down the road. Lisa Kors, a 2012 alum, came back this year as a mentor. She says, "I felt that I gained so much from the program and wanted to give back. I recognized how much time the mentors had devoted to helping our 'class' and that really inspired me to want to do the same." Dan Halperin expressed a similar sentiment. "I found the information I got in the Workshop immensely helpful. As I was a member of the PGA, and I felt 'the call' to give back to the Workshop, and to the community, I asked to join the Committee and be a mentor."

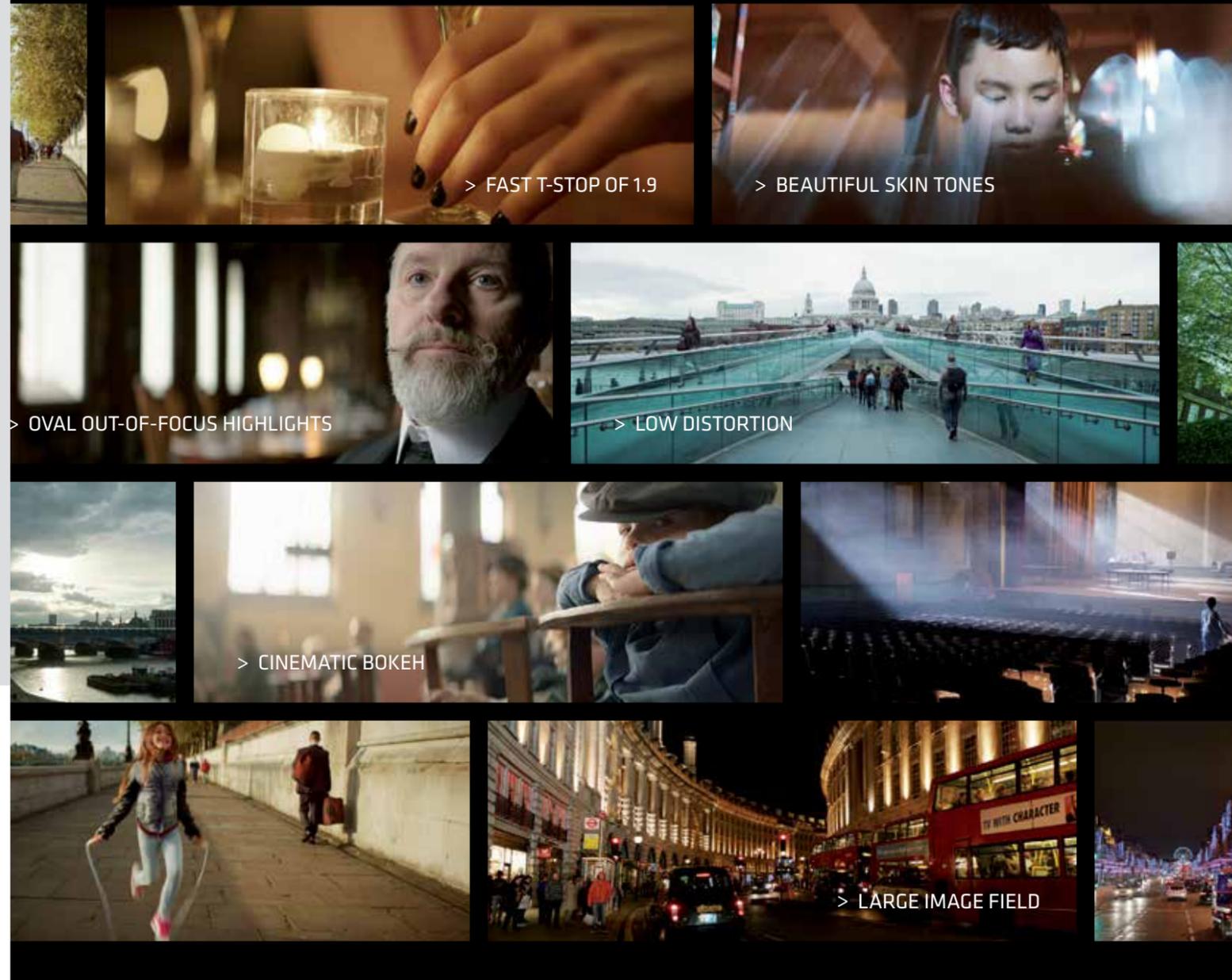
Calla and Howard are both looking forward to the program becoming a more integral part of the PGA. Rather than being completely reliant on volunteers, Howard suggests it can follow the model of the Sundance Labs, "more of an institution with an established curriculum that can be run by anyone stepping in. That way, it continues 10 or 15 years down the road, beyond Deb and me. It needs paid staff members, like the Produced By Conference and the PGA Awards. It needs to be a legacy program."

Steps are being taken to make it the legacy program it deserves to be. The application process is now handled through

the PGA website. Calla was able to hire someone to assist with some of the clerical work at the beginning, but that is only a small start; there remains much to be done before it reaches its full potential. One way it may broaden its efforts is by taking greater advantage of mobile technology.

As the Diversity Workshop evolves, it is finding new niches beyond Los Angeles. Calla elaborates, "I'd like to see the program become an entity that can be taken on the road to different schools or different festivals. We do have a relationship with the Jordan Royal Film Commission. Last year, Karyn Benkendorfer and myself went to Jordan and we taught a week-long workshop there. It was incredible. It was an intense week. It was from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. for five days. And we went through a lot of the stuff that we do go through in the workshop. But all day, everybody sitting around a table, discussing projects, coming up with a way to finance, to market, you know, all of that. It was great experience." Howard has continued the relationship in Jordan, teaching the Workshop there for a week in October of this year.

Like our industry, the PGA Diversity Workshop continues to expand and evolve. It is training new generations of producers to navigate an ever-changing landscape, while providing a source of creative integrity and best practices. 



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