

## Innocence and Experience

Let me relive an innocent moment from freshman year, when my strategy was to keep quiet and not make a fool of myself.

The class was Philosophy 101, the professor Larry Schmucker (his real name). On the final day, after not saying a thing the whole semester, overwrought by the thought of taking finals in a course I knew nothing about, I walked up to him—for some reason the class had quieted down—and said a little too loudly, “Mr. Fountain, can you tell me where the water Schmucker is?” The only thing I said all semester. C-plus.

Clay Hunt was possessed and writhing as he explicated word by word and phrase by phrase T.S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland*: the tics, the growls, the maniacal breathing, the lidded eyes, his wiping himself with his handkerchief. It was as close as I’ll ever see to someone having sex with text. Just before announcing what this great poem revealed—and it was a mystery to be uncovered slowly and inevitably—he took his handkerchief and tapped around his mouth like he had just eaten a sumptuous meal. Having explained what he needed to explain, he sat back in his chair exhausted, in another world gleaming.

I am moved as I think about Fred Rudolph '42 teaching his two books for which I feel undiluted admiration. Fred’s doctoral dissertation, *Mark Hopkins and the Log*, should be read by every incoming freshman in order for them to understand the grand tradition of this wonderful school. *The American College and University* is a masterpiece that shows the commonality and many differences between the original colleges and universities. That course colored my relationship to Williams more than any other and made me feel part of a long, handsome tradition.

I got goose bumps watching Peter Grudin tell us why the ghosts in *Wuthering Heights* are real

(and if that is not exactly what Peter said, I still got goose bumps). The class was mesmerizing. Don Gifford, also mesmerizing, had this rarely found affable rigor for the transcendental poets. His was a congenial intellectuality.

I always loved Larry Graver’s novel classes. After reading half of Jane Austen’s *Emma*—and coming to class despising Emma’s interest and interference in everyone’s life—I left loving her. I learned in an hour how to create a not-immediately-likeable character (but a fascinating one) whose defects become assets as the work progresses. Every critic who wrote that Marvin in my plays *March of the Falsettos* and *Falsettoland* was “wretchedly unlikable” should know as I was writing him—and I am not comparing myself with the exquisite Jane Austen—that I felt she and Mr. Graver were looking over my shoulder saying: “Make Marvin worse. Just keep him interesting.”

John von Szeliski generously gave Charlie Rubin '72 and me his directing slot in the old AMT so we could put our first musical on the main stage, a kindness I will never forget.

John Calhoun '62 wonderfully directed the show I wrote as a senior as one of the four main shows of the year. It was the first time I hadn’t directed one of my shows; I was merciless and thought he was inept. I was wrong.

Jack Savacool '39, a French professor and a man of the theater, tutored me in playwriting. He tried to be gentle—he was a real gentleman—but one day he said, “You are not a really good playwright in prose are you? When your characters talk, very, very bad. But when they sing . . . ah.” I said, “Do you think I have to try harder at being a better playwright?” He said, “No, forget the talking and concentrate instead on the songs. Your lyrics are so much more alive than your prose.”

The extraordinary students in Jonathan Aaron’s poetry class: Jamie James '73, Mark Livingston '72, Adam LeFevre '72, Nancy Doyne '74, Craig Walker

'73 and others. It was where I realized I was a lyricist, not a poet. But possibly a poetical lyricist.

The sunniness of Bob Bell’s disposition and Lynda Bundtzen’s cranky enthusiasm always amused me. Eva Grudin I never had in class, but no one at Williams ever made me laugh harder.

Lee Hirsche, chairman of the art department, designed the sets for my first show on the main stage. A perfect demonstration of how to do a lot with very little. And I loved talking to Mary Lamb (now Mary Winston) in the office of the old AMT.

And Joy Dewey—the first dance teacher at the College. She was how I finished fulfilling my gym requirement. With her long raven hair and her leotarded body, I remember her always in furs. She brought all of these great dance companies to the College: Twyla Tharp at the beginning; the nude Ann Halpern company; the elegance of Bella Lewinsky; Alvin Ailey’s astounding *Revelations*; eight dancers from the New York City Ballet, dancing only Balanchine. And the joy she felt choreographing a piece with her student Marta Renzi. Marta choreographed the first part and Joy the second. And her acknowledgement to everyone afterward that Marta, not she, was the real choreographer. She had a great heart and a wild, feral appreciation for the arts. She had an eye. And whenever I moved on the dance floor she would laugh out loud and cry, “My God, you move like a cow,” and I would say, “Perfect for Williams.”

All of these professors were teaching me not only how to learn, but also how to teach. There is a forest of logs in Williamstown, and the legacy of these professors is the great achievement of this amazing place.

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*William Finn '74 is a Tony Award-winning lyricist and composer. This essay is excerpted from his Songs of Innocence and Experience, which premiered during the fall celebration of the '62 Center for Theatre and Dance's inaugural season.*