

Tom Garrett: The Sequel

The new chair of the University of New Haven's Department of Communication, Film and Media Studies returns to his alma mater to expand opportunities for students and change their lives much like the program changed his a generation ago.

by Mark J. Drozdowski
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[Tom Garrett](#) is a name-dropper, but not in an obnoxious way. He mentions stars such as Spike Lee, Quentin Tarantino, John Travolta, Molly Ringwald and Rod Steiger in the normal course of a conversation about his 30-plus years as a film producer and director.

In fact, he's such a name-dropper that he dropped his own. Fellow [University of New Haven alumni](#)—Garrett graduated in 1983 with a degree in communications—would know him as Tom Gniazdowski, which doesn't roll off the tongue quite as easily. "Garrett" comes from Pat Garrett of Billy the Kid fame, "the bad guy who turns good," he said.

This fall he returned to the University as associate professor and chair of the Department of Communication, Film and Media Studies. Most recently at Sam Houston State University in Texas, Garrett came back because the area is home to family and friends. But more important, he says, he wanted the chance to build the program, engage the community, expand opportunities for students and change their lives much like the program changed his a generation ago.

Raised in North Haven, Garrett followed a circuitous route to the University of New Haven. He originally enrolled at the University of Miami. While home for the summers, he took intensive workshops here in the newly created communications department, led by M.L. McLaughlin. He studied children's

television and documentary filmmaking. After his second summer, Garrett decided to transfer "because I was getting a better experience," he said.

He did so in 1980. His arrival coincided with that of Jean Bodon, a professor who would become a mentor and lifelong friend and who would put Garrett on the path he's followed ever since.

"I noticed him right away," said Bodon, now chair of the Department of Mass Communication at Sam Houston State, who recruited Garrett to join him in Texas. "He was a great student."

'It Changed My Life'

Bodon took Garrett to the Cannes Film Festival in France, an event to which Garrett has returned almost every year, often with students in tow.

"It changed my life," said the fast-talking Garrett, who sports a lean runner's build and an '80s hair band shock of brown locks.

It wasn't just about the sexy red carpet. There was all this business taking place, underwriting the flash and dazzle. It's all about the deals being done. That planted a big seed.

Bodon also suggested Garrett apply to the film program at New York University. He did, was accepted, completed his M.F.A. and stayed on for five years to help supervise undergraduates and produce student films. While there, he was summoned back to New Haven by Bodon and Paul Falcone '83, a former classmate who's now director of instructional and institutional media at the University. They wanted to make a movie.

Garrett's directorial debut was titled *Tin Star Void* (aka *Death Collector*), a futuristic western that's become a cult classic. "One reviewer called it 'the greatest sci-fi action adventure movie no one has ever seen, heard of or celebrated,'" he quipped. They shot on campus and around West Haven and New Haven, enlisting students' help. The movie aired at film festivals in Florence and in Berlin and "got a lot of traction," Garrett said.

A Master Storyteller

For the next few years, Garrett produced films in the U.S. and in Europe, while Bodon left for Florida State's film program. The two would soon collaborate on another movie venture, this one indirectly involving Quentin Tarantino. Garrett weaves together strands of the tale like a master storyteller eagerly describing his latest flick.



Bodon, it seems, is hosting a French film festival in Sarasota and invites Tarantino, who's fresh off his debut movie, *Reservoir Dogs*, a big hit in France. He sends a Florida State theater major to pick up Tarantino at the nearby airport, and while they're driving back she tells him about a student production she's in.

Meanwhile, Bodon and Garrett are busy casting their new movie, a farce about a couple of attractive con men swindling rich women. They land John Travolta, who was "only doing talking baby movies" at the time, along with Molly Ringwald. Off they go to Cannes to seek investors and sign contracts. So far, so good. But the money gets hung up, and Travolta's agent is furious and says he won't wait and that his client is instead going to be taking a part with Tarantino, who's also making a movie.

We didn't give a S&# because, you know, he's only doing talking baby movies," Garrett said. "So we move on. Good luck. Bye.

They eventually make their movie, *Seven Sundays*, and bring it to Cannes in 1993. Also being featured that year is an indie film called *Pulp Fiction*, and there's John Travolta, who's "made the best decision of his life," Garrett said. Also appearing in the film is the Florida State theater major; she's Esmeralda the cab driver shuttling Bruce Willis and asking him what it's like to kill a man—the subject of the film she mentioned to Tarantino on the way back from the airport. Tarantino eventually produces her film, called *Curdle*, and she stars in it.

So all that's to say that Garrett and Tarantino have crossed paths, but Garrett doesn't claim to know him very well.

'A Big Champion of Experiential Learning'

Garrett stayed in Florida because it's fertile ground for filmmakers. Some states and municipalities offer tax incentives to attract film productions, which in turn benefit the economy. The crews, often on site for many months, spend money on hotels, office space, dry cleaners and restaurants. Producers hire locals as extras, employ accountants and pay location fees. It's a big machine, Garrett said.

"What drives producers is one thing: money, and whoever is giving it away," he said. "Some states pay 40 cents on the dollar. That's why there are more movies being made in Georgia than in Hollywood, more in Louisiana than in Hollywood. I always tell students don't go to Hollywood. Go to Louisiana or New Mexico or Connecticut. Go there first, and you'll have a better chance. Find a local production company and get your foot in the door. That way, you're not a small fish in a huge pond like L.A."

While in Florida, Garrett took a faculty position at the University of Tampa, where—insert "small world" reference here—he worked with [Brian Kench](#), currently dean of the [College of Business](#) at the University of New Haven.

He stayed for seven years, building the film program and, of course, bringing kids to Cannes, which he dubs "the cathedral of cinema."

While at Cannes, his students don't simply take in movies. They work internships with production studios such as Lionsgate and Miramax and Paramount. They experience how deals get done during those two weeks in May, when, according to Garrett, "90 percent of the film business takes place."

And thanks to Garrett's relationship with Jerome Paillard, executive director of the Marche du Film, they get invited to swanky, insider-only previews where "Brad Pitt could be sitting two seats in front of them."

"It can be pretty life-changing," Garrett said. "I've seen students who want to be writers or directors come back and say they want to go to law school

because they had an internship for Lionsgate and saw CEOs doing contracts or agents brokering deals for actors. Or they want an MBA. Or they switch their major from film to public relations because they want to be a publicist. When I started seeing that, that's when the bell rang for me. I saw the outcomes happen really fast."

Garrett is planning a trip for next May as part of a larger effort to expand hands-on learning opportunities for University of New Haven students.

"I'm a big champion of experiential learning, especially study abroad," Garrett said.

'Our Students Will Most Certainly Benefit'

He'll also be bringing to campus big names from the world of entertainment to interact with students and draw in the community. Garrett already has an A-list slate of speakers lined up, including producer Christine Vachon and Martha Coolidge, the first female president of the Directors Guild of America and a New Haven native. Perhaps he'll even land Spike Lee, who worked in the equipment room at NYU when he and Garrett were students together.

"He's an acquaintance and an inspiration," said Garrett of Lee, who's now the creative director for NYU's film program.

All this activity undergirds Garrett's aim to build the Communications program substantially and attract more majors. When Bodon recruited him to Sam Houston State in 2012, that program had no students. Three years later, it had more than 200.

"What I remember about Tom, from when we first met as classmates in 1980, is what a lot of folks here are about to find out," Falcone said. "He has a lot of positive energy, is super creative and has a 'we can make things happen' attitude. Our students will most certainly benefit from his experience and impressive network of industry connections." Falcone said.

'The New Independent Cinema'



Tom Garrett with John Travolta at Sunscreen Film Festival. Image courtesy of celebrityimages.org.

Today, some 36 years after he and Falcone met in what is now the Laurel Vlock Center for Convergent Media, Garrett sits in a somewhat spartan office directly across the hall, musing about his favorite films and the future of the industry. He lists Bob Fosse's *All That Jazz*, Woody Allen's *Stardust Memories* and Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* at the top. And although he seems to prefer older movies, Garrett has deep admiration for *Pulp Fiction*, despite the imbroglio with Travolta and Tarantino.

"It changed the landscape of independent films," he explained. "It said it was okay to tell a story out of order, that you don't have to follow a traditional narrative structure."

The landscape of production and distribution is also changing, Garrett said, because of emerging industry giants such as Netflix, Amazon and Hulu and technology's democratization of movie-making opportunities.

"There's a huge emphasis on this," Garrett said, holding up an iPhone. "Whether it's webisodes or the TV series on Netflix and Hulu, that's the new independent cinema."

Garrett is busy co-producing and directing his own independent film, a documentary about John Avildsen, director of Rocky and The Karate Kid. The film is based on a book about Avildsen that Garrett co-authored. He said he appreciates Avildsen's elevation of the underdog.

Does Garrett relate to that role?

"Yeah, I guess so," he said. "I guess I do. You know, this is such a business of nepotism, and I wasn't born into it. It's just crazy how the universe works."