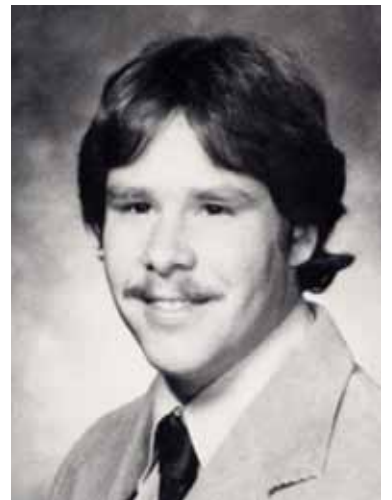
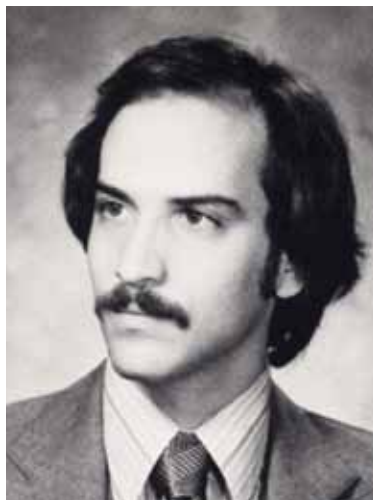


# 30

# YEARS ON

*Hofstra's theatre class of '79  
takes a look back*



## BY JOEL SAMBERG

WE REHEARSED FOR FOUR YEARS. To the drama class of 1979, Hofstra University was an exciting and viable training ground. After all, the school, in the town of Hempstead, on Long Island, New York, and its theatre program had an excellent reputation, with many successful performers having trained there before us, including Madeline Kahn, Lainie Kazan, Joe Morton, Susan Sullivan, Christopher Walken and dozens of others who appear regularly on and off Broadway, in regional theatre, and on television and film. Over the years, hundreds of students who became steadily working actors, directors, producers, and writers formulated their life plans in the classrooms, dorm rooms, and green rooms around campus, and many of them endured the same stages of hard work, hope, and anxiety that we went through between 1975 and 1979.

So we had every right to our expectations.

For eight semesters our drama class eagerly prepared to meet those expectations head on. There were only about fifteen of us. We were all friends. Sometimes more. Sometimes a little less. We reveled in the close-knit spirit of optimism we shared as we dreamed our dreams and rehearsed our plays, which we then brought to life in the John Cranford Adams Playhouse, the West End Theatre or the Black Box Theatre. Hempstead first. Broadway later.

That was three decades ago.

Although I officially switched my major to journalism in my junior year, I stayed firmly attached to the drama department, both as a minor and as an active participant in all the plays, because that world was still in my blood—as it is today, more than thirty years later. We all had

our own reasons for wanting to go into that field in the first place, some rooted deeply in personal qualities and needs, and others based simply on the fun we had acting in high school plays. It's not just the smell of the greasepaint and the roar of the crowd that's attractive and addictive. It's often something much deeper and more instinctive. But no matter what the reason, for most of us the dream was fixed, sincere, and fundamental. Why some of us never quite lived the dream—or, in some cases never really tried too hard—are also issues rooted in personality traits, as well as in some subsequent realizations or sudden circumstances beyond our control.

All of which made me wonder how my fellow student thespians looked upon the thirtieth anniversary of our graduation from Hofstra. With satisfaction? Pride? Regret?

The grapevine already provided me with information about some of my former drama classmates. There are a couple of teachers. Two or three are in sales. A few participated in the creation of the original *Tony 'n' Tina's Wedding*. There are also several in the legal profession, and at least three writers. There are less than a handful of fulltime actors.

With the social networking capabilities of today's Internet, it wasn't hard to assemble a virtual roundtable of almost half of all the graduates from Hofstra's drama class of 1979. I knew it wouldn't be all fun and games. At least two had succumbed to AIDS. A girl who played my wife in one production suffered a serious accident that altered the course of her life, while another student's wife is very ill right now, precluding him from joining us online. A few disappeared from the scene entirely.

Participating with me in the virtual roundtable were Celia Berk, chief talent officer at Young & Rubicam Brands in New York; Beverly Branum, owner of Beverly Branum Paralegal Services in Louisiana; Harley Diamond, chief of the anti-narcotics strike force of the New York City Housing Authority; Ralph Eheart, a litigation paralegal at Knott & Glazier, a law

firm in San Francisco; Marc Feingold, cofounder of a recording, reporting and transcription company called Record Solutions; Karen Primack, a trial attorney and author; and Jean Tafler, a professional actor who has appeared in more than thirty productions of Shakespeare, Off Broadway and in regional theatres throughout the country.

Here's what everyone, including me, had to say.

**JOEL:** Four years went by pretty quickly. At least that's how it seems now.

My plan was to write plays and movies, and to act in as many of them as I wanted. But instead, I found myself working on dreadfully boring trade magazines for the next few years after graduation. What about your own plans? Were they as specific as mine?

**RALPH:** Mine was to get on a bus-and-truck tour of a Broadway musical and see the country.

**JOEL:** Which, from what I understand, wasn't quite the way the plan worked out. Were there circumstances you didn't count on?

**RALPH:** Yes. I had a strong desire to be economically solvent.

**JOEL:** I know several of our classmates did summer stock right after graduation and moved into Manhattan the following fall. Those were plans that many of our little group actually followed through on.

**JEAN:** Yes, I wanted to get right into the business and not fool around with grad school. In hindsight, that may not have been my smartest move. I did summer stock in New Jersey and moved into the city right after that. No union cards, no internships with an Equity theatre, no agent connections. I did everything the hard way. It took me seven years to get my Equity card.

**KAREN:** I remember meeting a lot of people who had the same plan. I was one of them. I worked summer stock, Off Off Broadway, under-fives in soap operas [a featured extra with five or fewer lines of dialogue]. I did that for about four years and didn't like the hustling aspect to the business. I needed something more steady and mentally challenging.

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*Facing page, clockwise from top left: Celia Berk, Harley Diamond, Ralph Eheart, Joel Samberg, Karen Primack, and Marc Feingold, all from the class of 1979 yearbook, and Beverly Branum's student ID photo.*

**JOEL:** And, I assume, something to help pay the bills and the rent.

**CELIA:** I found a job that kept the bills paid, and I found a place to live. I had my union cards, my picture and résumé, and a determination to start pounding the pavement.

**JOEL:** I guess pounding the pavement is a slightly euphemistic way of saying what Karen said—hustling. Was it different for you?

**CELIA:** Well, I found the prospect of spending my whole life looking for work very boring. Ironically, I decided to take a break right after I had landed a national commercial.

**MARC:** I took a break for another reason. After college I auditioned for the first national tour of *Beatlemania*, and it turned out to be a nightmare. I totally froze on stage. I forgot every lyric as I was singing “Come Together.” It was frightening. I didn’t get the job, and that was the last audition I ever went on.

**HARLEY:** My own plan, like that of so many other young actors, was to do summer stock, do some legitimate theatre, and get a job that could help me support myself while I auditioned and took acting, singing and dancing classes. I worked nights at the Post Office, and that allowed me to audition and take all those lessons.

**JOEL:** So you actually followed the plan, as well.

**HARLEY:** Yes. But after a few years of stock, Off Off Broadway and children’s theatre, I knew I’d forever be considered a character actor, yet was too young for all the character roles. Also, I felt I was wasting my mind with mindless jobs.

**JOEL:** Sounds like you had a choice to make: hang around until you aged into the parts, or start something new to save your mind.

**HARLEY:** I chose the latter. Because of my interest in politics and law, I went to law school.

**KAREN:** And so did I. As a trial attorney I use the same skills that I had learned as a drama major at Hofstra, including analysis and motivation. I am able to understand the people behind the facts.



**BEVERLY:** I guess I’m the one who really didn’t have a specific plan. I knew I was tired of doing standard musicals, didn’t care much for television, and would never even consider doing commercials. The plan was really just to take a look around and go with whatever seemed right.

**JOEL:** But you also did quite a bit of acting, right?

**BEVERLY:** As is typical for me, I went in a lot of different directions. I did some Off Broadway stuff. I got cast in a movie which I actually turned down because I thought the script sucked. I simultaneously worked in publishing, advertising, and promotions. I started my own one-woman variety entertainment company. I got married in 1990, had Jenny in 1991 and Jake in 1992. Jake was diagnosed with autism in 1994, and I became a major advocate, researching the law and interventions for autism.

**JOEL:** So life sometimes makes the plan for us.

**BEVERLY:** True. But I had a fabulous life as a young woman in New York City, trying to do everything and managing pretty well.

**JEAN:** It’s still kind of amazing to me that I’ve lived in Manhattan all these years. Well, there were those two years I lived in an attic in New Jersey...

**JOEL:** Still, it seems regrets are few among this group. Unfortunately, I have some, though many go back to my school career, not just to my after-school career. There are some things I should have tried to do that I didn’t try at all. Then again, I don’t know how proactive our professors were with regard to our own particular needs and motivations. I don’t recall if they really covered life after college.

**BEVERLY:** There certainly could have been more emphasis on how to make it in the business. On the other hand,





*Alone among the classmates Joel Samberg spoke to, Jean Tafler, at left in the 2008 production of Kiss Me, Kate at the Orlando Shakespeare Festival, has worked consistently in the theatre since graduating from college. Tafler, incidentally, paid part of the cost of her education at Hofstra with a Thespian Society scholarship. Above, left to right: Samberg, a writer; businessman Marc Feingold; Ralph Etheart, paralegal.*

it was also appropriate for the drama department to focus on the art.

**JEAN:** I think the college programs are much better today at preparing students for the business side of theatre.

**HARLEY:** What I was really unhappy with at school was the typecasting. I knew we'd face enough of that in the real world. College should have been the time to reach beyond type, to be able to expand our capabilities rather than have them be limited. I, too, don't recall much discussion about life as an actor in New York: the business, agents, selling yourself, the audition process. More on that would have been helpful.

**JOEL:** We might not have listened. We were too optimistic. And too busy having fun.

**BEVERLY:** Not me, necessarily. Sometimes I think I should have been more socially active and less studious. But with a double major [drama and English] I really couldn't have done it differently.

**MARC:** Speaking of being socially active, I had a feeling of not really fitting in too well with the people in the

department. At least not right away. I didn't find my crowd or my rhythm, and I actually switched my major.

**JOEL:** So did I, but not for that reason. I basically enjoyed everyone in the department, although I wonder in retrospect if that's more a reflection of my role as a writer—a collector of characters—than anything else. I have to admit, though, that some of our classmates were, well, really characters! Weren't they?

**CELIA:** I think we all reflected the age we were at. We were all very intense—and dramatic!

**KAREN:** I remember returning after the summer for our sophomore year and being struck at how we had changed physically. We were becoming grownups, and we looked the part. Everyone was blooming and becoming their own person. And of course everyone had their own quirky personalities.

**RALPH:** I recall some with arrogant, know-it-all attitudes. But in looking back, they plugged me into my own lack of self-esteem.

**JOEL:** So they served a purpose for you.

**RALPH:** Sure—I guess I envied their nerve and bravado

**JOEL:** I remember one classmate in particular who made me squirm when I heard him not once, but several times boast in a pseudo-humble way about a professional showcase he was appearing in which, in his words, “will allow me to get my [union] card so that I can start to do soap operas and

commercials.” Yet, of all our classmates, he's the only one that nobody knows anything about. He disappeared.

**MARC:** I think to be an actor you have to be self-centered. You have to absolutely believe that you have real God-given talent, or your ego will shatter into a thousand pieces the first time you get rejected.

**JOEL:** And then there was a girl who seemed to me, at the time, to be rather homely, and kind of awkward on stage when compared to the skills of the other actors in class. But when I started my research for this piece, her name came up more than most with regard to the professional productions she's been in.

**KAREN:** People end up where they need to be. My view is that life is a continuum. A person's situation is based on a snapshot in time, based on the facts.

**JOEL:** You sound like a lawyer!

**JEAN:** I never would have guessed that Karen and Harley would end up as lawyers.

**JOEL:** I tend to think that a person's situation is a combination of luck and persistence, almost more than anything else. But no matter what happens, there are certain needs and desires that will never go away. Like a need to do theatre every once in a while.

**HARLEY:** I still do it to satisfy my urge. It fulfills me, even if it isn't Broadway.

**RALPH:** I'm over it.

**CELIA:** I still love it.

**JOEL:** I know you must love it, Jean. You've been doing it pretty consistently for thirty years.

**JEAN:** I try to keep challenging myself. I originally thought I'd be able to support myself just with acting. That hasn't quite happened, but I did find a parallel career that still allows the flexibility to do theatre. And I'm married and raised a child. I wanted a whole life—not just an acting career. I never thought of myself as star material. Just a solid working actress. I guess that's what I have become.

**JOEL:** Since we graduated there's been generation after generation of kids who love theatre as much as we do, and one class about to graduate that will start to chase the dream like some of us did back then. What advice should we give to them?

**RALPH:** I'd ask them to ask themselves, "Am I serious about the craft, or do I just want to be famous?" I'd also tell them to be okay with themselves if they find out that it's not for them. It's not for everyone.

**HARLEY:** My advice would be to throw themselves into it. Audition, audition, and then audition some more.

**CELIA:** I'd tell them to go into acting if they can't bear the thought of doing anything else. Or at least get it out of their systems while they can. ▼