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Brooklyn College Magazine

## Up Close

Film Veteran  
Jonathan Wacks  
Leads New  
Barry R. Feirstein  
Graduate School  
of Cinema



**At the Forefront of  
Urban Sustainability**

**The Power of Philanthropy  
to Change Lives**

Founding director Jonathan Wacks stands in the raw space that will become the Barry R. Feirstein Graduate School of Cinema at Steiner Studios.





# ***UP CLOSE***

The man behind *21 Jump Street* and *Repo Man* takes the helm as director of Brooklyn College's Barry R. Feirstein Graduate School of Cinema—the first public graduate school in the country to be housed on a working film lot.

by Ikimulisa Livingston

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More than a century ago, Brooklyn was home to a nascent, but growing, film industry, just blocks from today's Brooklyn College campus. At its center, the American Vitagraph Company, the biggest studio in the country, was prolific in its output. Then moviemaking moved west to Hollywood, taking with it what would grow to be a multibillion-dollar industry.



The entrance to Steiner Studios, located at the Brooklyn Navy Yard

Today a new, groundbreaking project for Brooklyn College is set to play a significant role in furthering the revitalization of the borough's filmmaking industry: the Barry R. Feirstein Graduate School of Cinema at Steiner Studios. It will be the only school of cinema in the country operating on the grounds of a working movie lot; and not just any movie lot, but the largest film and television production complex outside of Hollywood.

Opening in the fall of 2015, the Feirstein Graduate School of Cinema is becoming a reality thanks to the support of notable Brooklyn College alumni, the Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment, the New York City Council, the Brooklyn Borough President, and the City University of New York. To date, the college has raised over \$21 million for the project, which includes a leadership gift of \$5.5 million from Barry R. Feirstein '74; significant contributions from alumni Don Buchwald '59, Roy Furman '60, Jules Haimovitz '71, and Michael Lynne '61; \$6.7 million from Commissioner Katherine Oliver of the Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment to develop a Made in New York Center for Digital Arts in the new school; and \$3 million from the City Council and the Office of the Borough President.

"This will be the first graduate school of cinema created specifically for 21st-century study," says Jonathan Wacks, the program's founding director.

Wacks's own background combines moviemaking with film education and includes directing, producing,



In this rendering of the Barry R. Feirstein Graduate School of Cinema, a stairway leads to a student lounge that can be converted to an auditorium for film screenings.

and screenwriting. But he has also been instrumental in guiding future filmmakers, having previously led film departments at schools in Santa Fe, Vancouver, and Boston.

“Jonathan Wacks embodies two things: He brings the practical skills that we want, but he also brings the educational background,” says Maria Conelli ’80, the founding dean of the School of Visual, Media and Performing Arts at Brooklyn College. “Anytime you’re launching a graduate program, it’s truly critical that the person [heading it] has these two qualities.”

Wacks was the creative force behind the cult classics *Repo Man* and *Powwow Highway*. He directed Johnny Depp into the hearts of legions of teenage girls in *21 Jump Street* and has worked with some of the biggest names in the business: actors Jim Carrey, Ned Beatty, Ethan Hawke, and Steve Buscemi, among others. He also served as vice president of production at the Samuel Goldwyn Company.

Now the veteran movie-industry insider will lead a unique graduate school into the future on the lot where HBO’s *Boardwalk Empire* is shot. Steiner Studios is also home to *The Following* and *The Carrie Diaries*, and last year it added five new soundstages to its Brooklyn Navy Yard location, expanding to 355,000 square feet of creative space.

Created in 2004, Steiner Studios has been home to numerous big-screen productions, including *Inside*

*Man*, *Spider-Man 3*, *Enchanted*, *Sex and the City*, and *The Adjustment Bureau*, and various television shows, such as *Damages*, *In Treatment*, and *Bored to Death*. Supported by New York City Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg and by Commissioner Oliver of the Mayor’s Office of Media and Entertainment, the Barry R. Feirstein Graduate School of Cinema will also include a Made in New York Center for Digital Arts.

“The fact that Brooklyn is serving as the location for this innovative graduate program is fitting, given the borough’s rich cinematic history, going back to the beginning of the 19th century, when the first film studio in the country was established here,” says Commissioner Oliver. “Today, the borough is more popular than ever, with numerous ‘Made in New York’ films and TV shows that call Brooklyn home.”

In 2011, there were 188 movies shot in New York City and 140 television shows. The next year the number of feature films jumped to 267—a 42 percent increase in a single year.

Dean Conelli says enrollment in the cinema school will top out at about 400 graduate students, who will have a number of curricular tracks to choose from, including animation, cinematography, digital media, directing, and screenwriting.

“The facilities at Steiner Studios will be state-of-the-art,” Conelli says, adding that there will be motion capture studios along with those geared to

postproduction, recording, digital labs, and sonic arts.

Another advantage of this film school over others will be the price tag. “This is going to be a high-quality but affordable program,” says Conelli. “Our goal from the beginning was to keep [tuition] at least 50 percent lower than at any other private school out there.”

Another perk: Students will have the opportunity to do an internship that involves working on an actual television show or film.

Wacks emphasizes that the school’s focus will also cover new media because movies aren’t just for movie theaters anymore.

“Movies today have converged with new media in a remarkable way that has given new meaning to distribution,” says Wacks. “Certainly when I got out of film school nobody was watching movies on television, let alone on cell phones.”

Now an entirely new realm of devices has emerged for movie watching, he says. “The burgeoning of YouTube and live streaming have fundamentally changed the way in which the industry works at the distribution level,” says Wacks. “And because that’s the case, the way in

which you think about film production and filmmaking has an impact as well.”

Wacks is excited about the challenge of addressing these changes. Had he been offered a position in an established film program, he says, he would have likely turned it down.

“Here, there’s an opportunity to rethink everything from the ground up—from the foundation to the rooftop,” says Wacks. “The fact that it is new creates an opportunity to really rethink the way in which film education is being undertaken at the moment.”

And the fact that it is offered by Brooklyn College suggests that its students will contribute a stimulating, wide-ranging profile.

“Given the school’s history and commitment to diversity, every effort will be made to have a diverse student body,” Wacks says. “The Feirstein Graduate School of Cinema creates an amazing opportunity for new and seldom-heard voices to be heard loud and clear. That is critically important in how we reflect ourselves as a rich and diverse culture to ourselves and to the world.”



**The soundstage of the Barry R. Feirstein Graduate School of Cinema will be the largest at any film school in the United States and will provide a cutting-edge, professional production environment for students.**