

Montage

Art, books, diverse creations



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avant-garde New York performance space that hosted the festival.

Tank shows include film and video, mixed media, music, theater, comedy (stand-up, improv, and sketch), dance, and public affairs (like political blogger panels), for starters. Located in downtown Manhattan, The Tank (www.thetanknyc.org) is "a place where the next generation can go for their avant-garde, alternative, and underground entertainments," says a second co-founder, Justin Krebs '00. The

The band We Are Scientists at The Tank, with Chris Cain on bass guitar and Michael Tapper on drums

place *does* have a resolutely downtown attitude—as well as T-shirts, tote bags, and, naturally, tank tops—and has done so many remarkable

things in its three years that the mainstream has taken notice, with salutes like an unsolicited \$10,000 grant from the Carnegie Corporation and funding from the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. The Tank's stature as an "absurdly irreverent, unconventional space," as Bell puts it, is drawing attention.

Eight young artists and activists, including Bell and Krebs, all age 24 or 25, launched The Tank in May 2003 in New York's theater district. It moved through three midtown spaces before settling into its Tribeca location, at 279 Church

Avant-Garde Incubator

Art works and genres seen nowhere else flourish at The Tank.

THE BLIP FESTIVAL may be unfamiliar to you, but for lovers of "low-bit music," it's the world's premier event. Late last year, 1,200 low-bit aficionados converged on Manhattan from locales as remote as Japan, Mexico,

and the Netherlands for four days to share their works, which they create using obsolete home computers and older video game consoles like Nintendos and Segas. Such devices can produce "sounds you'd never expect to hear," says Randy Bell '00, a co-founder of The Tank, the versatile

Street, a year ago: "This is the first time in our existence that we're not looking for a home," Krebs reports. The Tank stages 25 to 30 events a month and is staffed entirely by volunteers, with the exception of its full-time managing director, Mike Rosenthal. "One of the smartest things a volunteer-run organi-

zation ever did," says Krebs, "was to hire somebody."

Irony is familiar turf to Krebs, a *summa* graduate who led an improvisational comedy troupe, the Immediate Gratification Players, for two years at Harvard. He's now a political organizer, while Bell makes documentary films. They are the

curators of, respectively, The Tank's public-affairs and film/video programming (each creative area has its own curator) and, with their robust networks, have brought more than 40 Harvard-affiliated artists to their new venue.

In addition to an open-mike evening, a show called *One-Night Stands and Bad Break-*

S C R E E N

Godmothers of *The Namesake*

Mira Nair '79 met **Sooni Taraporevala '79** in the Lowell House dining room in the fall of 1976. The two women, both of Indian descent, became friends and, nine years later, began working together on the 1988 film *Salaam Bombay!*—Nair as director, Taraporevala as screenwriter. Later they collaborated on *Mississippi Masala* (1991) and *My Own Country* (1998). But none of their movies so directly mirrors their own life experiences as this year's *The Namesake*, based on Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jhumpa Lahiri's first novel. Having read the book en route, Nair arrived in Taraporevala's hometown of Mumbai (formerly Bombay) in March 2004 and bluntly told the screenwriter, "Sooni, we were born to make this film."

Sooni Taraporevala (left) and Mira Nair in Kolkata in 2005, on the rooftop where the final scene of *The Namesake* takes place

The reasons are abundantly clear. *The Namesake*'s protagonist, Gogol Ganguli, is a boy born to Indian émigrés in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1967. During the next three decades, he tries to inhabit the cultures of both the United States and India while not feeling at home in either. Nair and Taraporevala, too, have long straddled the cultures of India and America, and still have divided allegiances. Nair keeps homes in New York City and Kampala, Uganda; Taraporevala, after arriving at Harvard in 1975, spent more than half of the next 18 years in America—Cambridge, Newark, and Los An-

geles—before returning to Mumbai to live in 1993. The screenwriter could easily empathize with Ashima, a female character in *The Namesake*. "Like her, I had 20 relatives who had come to see me off at the airport," Taraporevala says, recalling her departure for Harvard in 1975. "Like her, I had wanted to immediately turn around and go back. Like her, I adjusted and then stayed."

Taraporevala has been a screenwriter for 20 years, completing 20 commissioned screenplays for various directors, producers, and studios. Two of her non-Nair screenplays



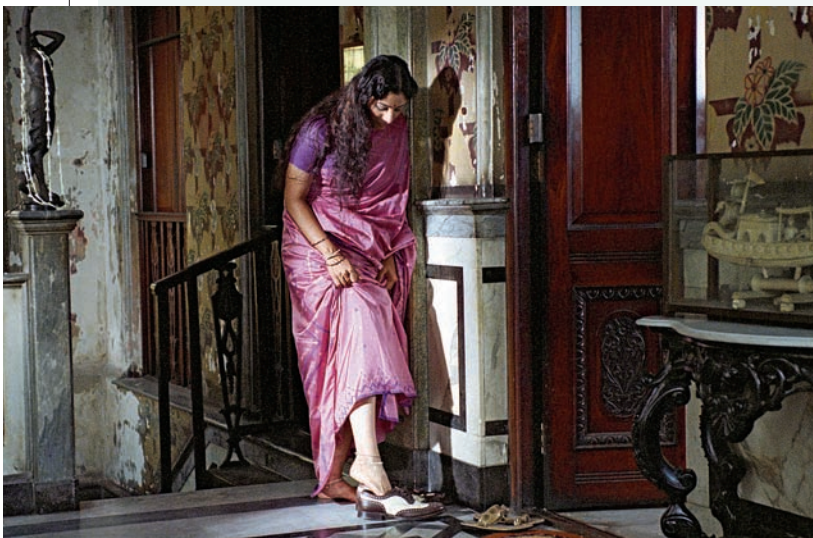
COURTESY OF MIRA NAIR

have been made into movies, both in India and both outside the mainstream. They took nine years and seven years, respectively, to complete. By contrast, her four movies with Nair each happened in a year or two. "I call it Mira magic," Taraporevala says.

Even living half a world apart, the two friends worked closely together on *The Namesake*, thanks to the Internet. "I'd

e-mail her scenes every few days," Taraporevala explains, "while she read the book and marked out her selections—which coincided with mine. We were perfectly in sync." That process produced the first draft, written in "an insane 11 days," the screenwriter says, a schedule imposed by Nair's agent, who needed to take the script to Cannes. Six more drafts followed, and

now the finished film, shot in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) and New York, will open in theaters in March, when American audiences will absorb a story of several former Cantabrigians, both fictional and real. ~CRAIG LAMBERT



ups that makes light of the romantic misadventures of young adults, and the monthly Laugh Tank, the space launched a political comedy series, *Laughing Liberally*, that went on national tour and played Town Hall, a 1,500-seat venue in Times Square. “The Tank was the first place that I felt at home onstage in New York,” says Baratunde Thurston ’99, a stand-up comedian and author of *Better Than Crying*:

“Something is always off-center at The Tank: the physical layout is off-center, and so are the performers and audiences.”

Poking Fun at Politics, the Press & Pop Culture, who has performed there many times, as well as with *Laughing Liberally*. “You see actual art happening on that stage. The audiences are into it and they want you to push it; I did 9/11 jokes there much earlier than other venues. Something is always off-center at The Tank: the physical layout is off-center, and so are the performers and audiences.”

Bell, on the cinematic side, has booked a monthly series of screenings by the New York-based Harvard Film Group, led by Barney Oldfield, A.B.E. ’79, C.A.D. ’82. One documentary filmmaker screened a film running two projectors at once with a live band improvising against the images—“something you wouldn’t be able to see elsewhere,” says Bell. Last fall, James Toback ’66 showed his 2001 feature *Harvard Man* and discussed it with the audience afterwards. “Screenings followed by talk-backs work well here, because it’s not just a performance space, but a community space and social space,” Krebs explains. “It’s part theater, part lounge.” (Indeed, The Tank sometimes takes out temporary alcohol licenses for larger events with, for example, cabaret formats.) Bell adds, “Often, noncommercial cinema will engage or challenge the audience in unfamiliar ways, so having the director here enables them to appreciate the work in ways they might not have been able to.”

The Tank’s founders got a break at the

O P E N B O O K

He Was on to Something

Educator James O. Freedman ’57, L ’60, who died in March of last year, was president emeritus of Dartmouth College and of the University of Iowa. In his retirement in Cambridge,

he was president of Harvard Magazine Inc. One learns in the just-published memoir of his early years, *Finding the Words: The Education of James O. Freedman* (Princeton University Press, \$29.95), that when a student he competed to be this magazine’s “Undergraduate” columnist, but the editors passed him over. In a book-jacket blurb, Stanley N. Katz ’55, Ph.D. ’61, of Princeton’s Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, characterizes the Freedman of those days as “a bright and ambitious young Jew trying self-consciously to break out of small-town New England to achieve greatness.” Of this memoir, Katz writes: “This is really a book about books—how beautiful they are, and how the examined life cannot be lived without them, since they have been the mirror in which Freedman learned to see himself.”

And so, driven by ambition and a compulsive intensity, frightened by conflict, tormented by self-doubt, hindered by a sense of inferiority, afflicted by depression, imprisoned by inhibitions, shadowed by shame, longing for praise and approval, I entered Harvard hoping to find my place in the world, with each of these characteristics forever shifting as it bumped against another, at once hurtling me forward and

life I told V.S. Naipaul that I wished I had known at 20 what I knew at 60, he replied, “But then life would not be a quest. That is the very meaning of life.” Naipaul’s statement is similar to an observation made by my friend James Alan McPherson, who, in a seriously intended play on words, once wrote, “The purpose of life is to search for the purpose of life.” For Naipaul and McPherson, life is a question answering a question.

Does that imply, I wondered as a freshman, that although life may have a purpose, we may not be able to discover it? In his novel *Let Me Count the Ways* (1965), Peter De Vries has a character say, “The universe is like a safe to which there is a combination. But the combination is locked up in the safe.” Others believe, however, that life has the purpose with which we endow it by our actions—by the work we do and the love we express, by the values we follow and the dignity we confer upon others. For these people, life flowers into purpose when we achieve the fullest realization of what Milton called “that one talent which is death to hide.” I believed from the start that Harvard was about searching for the purpose of life. “To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be on to something,” I later read in *The Moviegoer* (1960) by Walker Percy. “Not to be on to something is to be in despair.” I did not appreciate, however, just how long that search would take and how consuming it would be.



FROM THE BOOK

Freedman, in his high-school yearbook

holding me back, in confusing, contradictory states of satisfaction and pain.

I was, however, sustained by my sense of destiny. To have a sense of destiny is to have a conviction about the purpose of life. Confronting that sense, forming that conviction is a part of what a liberal education is about. When in later



Political organizer Justin Krebs (left) and filmmaker Randy Bell in a performance space at The Tank

got dropped,” is how Krebs explains the name. The founders repaid their start-up loans within 10 months and began running in the black. “Every time we had to make a decision

—a commercial choice or a creative choice—we made the creative choice,” Bell says.

Performers get a cut of the door receipts; no ticket costs more than \$15 and many are much cheaper. During the day, professionals such as graphic artists and

Web designers—“people who need no more to work than a laptop and a cell phone,” as Krebs puts it—use The Tank as a workspace. A weekly e-mail and the website keep audiences apprised of what is coming up, as do pieces in the magazine *Time Out New York* and occasional *New York Times* reviews. (Extended runs are rare, but several Tank shows, some lauded by the *Times*, have had four-week stays, and one, *A Very Merry Unauthorized Children's Scientology Pageant*, later won an Obie.)

Audiences from the Upper West Side to the Park Slope area of Brooklyn have kept coming. The Tank has become an incubator of hip, indie, up-and-comers in the arts, and some acts, like the band We Are Scientists, now with Virgin Records, outgrow the 75-seat venue. “That only helps our reputation,” says Bell. It’s not the right space for everyone; The Tank’s lighting isn’t the best, and a theater set may have to be struck immediately after a performance because a band will be playing on the stage

start when their theatre-district landlord, who was planning to sell his building, gave them a month-to-month lease at very low rent. The place had a wall of glass that faced 42nd Street, “so someone described it as a fish tank. Then the ‘fish’

GALLERY

“The Monet of the Mountaintop”

Peter C. Liman, M.A.T. '63, spent his business career as a marketing executive in toiletries and over-the-counter pharmaceuticals—first with Clairol, then Old Spice, Brut (when he hung out with athlete endorsers Muhammad Ali and Joe Namath), Aqua Velva, and so forth. “I’ve always had a creative bent,” he says, “and I was always in charge of advertising, packaging, and the creative groups in the big companies I was with.”

He began painting landscapes in oil about a dozen years ago, and when he retired from business in 2001, he wholeheartedly embraced painting and the smell of the open air. “It was a wonderful change,” he says. He opened a studio in Maplecrest, New York, atop Windham Mountain, the locale that so inspired the Hudson River School of artists in the mid nineteenth century.



It’s Catskill territory familiar to him from boyhood, and not far from his home in Glen Rock, New Jersey.

He doesn’t suffer from painter’s block and has made about a hundred pictures. Although he has no formal art training, he takes lessons from an admired local artist and knows he is gaining in technical skill. His pictures could be called Impressionistic, textural in brush strokes, bold in color. A scribe at a local newspaper dubbed him “the Monet of the mountaintop.” “That’s the most flattering term anyone could ever have used about me,” says Liman. The marketer in him likes the fragrance of the phrase, and he uses it in his advertising. His is a simple success story: he knew what he wanted to do when he retired, and he is doing it with gusto.

—CHRISTOPHER REED



Above: Liman with his *Sunflowers*, painted last summer. Left: *Winter Sunset*, 2005, oil on canvas, 10 inches by 21 inches. Liman found both scenes in the Catskill Mountains.

in 45 minutes—"Or, the band will play in your set," says Krebs, smiling.

But work, or even genres, that are not seen elsewhere can develop successfully in the safety and affordability of The Tank: it makes artistic experimentation possible.

Shows that draw as few as 12 people "can still be worth doing," Bell asserts. "Those 12 people might walk away happy and satisfied." There is also time for the occasional party, like the one they threw in 2004 to celebrate the first anniversary of

the August 14, 2003, New York blackout. That was at their original fish-tank home, which, luckily, had a courtyard, because one of the performers was a fire twirler. Daring as they are, says Krebs, "We couldn't do that inside." ~CRAIG LAMBERT

Talented Eccentrics

On crafting software

by HARRY R. LEWIS

WITHIN living memory, computer programming was handicraft. Individual programmers strained to create works that were both useful and beautiful—the two virtues went together. In 1984, Steven Levy's book *Hackers* thrillingly documented this heroic age of computing. The last of the true hackers, in Levy's term, is Richard Stallman '74, now better known as the evangelist of free software ("Free as in freedom, not free beer").

Most software in use today is an industrial product. The resource constraints that once forced a "small is beautiful" discipline on programmers are a thing of the past. Programmers no longer need to worry about saving a byte of memory here or there, because even small computers have huge memories. Programmers don't need to scrutinize their code for erroneous syntax, any more than today's computer-assisted writers need to know how to spell. Like word-processing software, today's programming systems relieve a lot of the tedium of large-scale coding.

Freed from old constraints, programming teams can now produce software of marvelous complexity. But as any computer user knows, flawlessness is not one of the virtues of modern software. As computers appear inside devices that used to work fine without them, faulty software has also become

universal. Now even telephones re-boot themselves mysteriously. More raw materials have not produced better programs, any more than books improved in quality when paper became cheap.

In *Dreaming in Code*, Scott Rosenberg '81 chronicles the production of a computer program in the twenty-first century—as the subtitle has it, "one quest for transcendent software." He tries to recapture the spirit of programming's heroic age, and the group he tracks is small enough—two dozen programmers, led by Lotus 1-2-3 creator Mitch Kapor—to keep the story personal. He sen-

sitively documents fluctuations in the group's social structure and its shifts between individualism and teamwork. Rosenberg, a writer and founder of the website salon.com, is not a programmer himself. His perspective is that of an "embedded journalist," as a fellow writer, James Fallows '70, described him in the July-August 2006 *Atlantic Monthly*. To produce the book, Rosenberg lived in the trenches with the programming troops for three years, observing the daily vicissitudes of their spirits.

But being an embedded journalist is dangerous work. A journalist of engineering runs no risk of personal injury, but the project he is documenting may not have an inspiring denouement. The classic of the genre is *The Soul of a New Machine*, by Tracy Kidder '67, a brilliant narrative of computer engineering. But Rosenberg's story has no conclusion—at the end of the book, the software is not ready.

And that is fitting. The real subject of the book is not "Chandler," the particular piece of software that Rosenberg

watched under development, but the question of why producing software is hard. We are about 50 years into the computer age now, and even the most professional programming organizations still miss deadlines, abandon huge projects after tens of

millions of dollars have been invested in them, and ship code that fails straight out of the box.

Why does software engineering seem to be so much harder than building bridges? Why is it, as the late Tom Cheatham [former Gordon McKay professor of computer science] explained so well in the many software courses he taught at Harvard, that you cannot look at a software project, as you

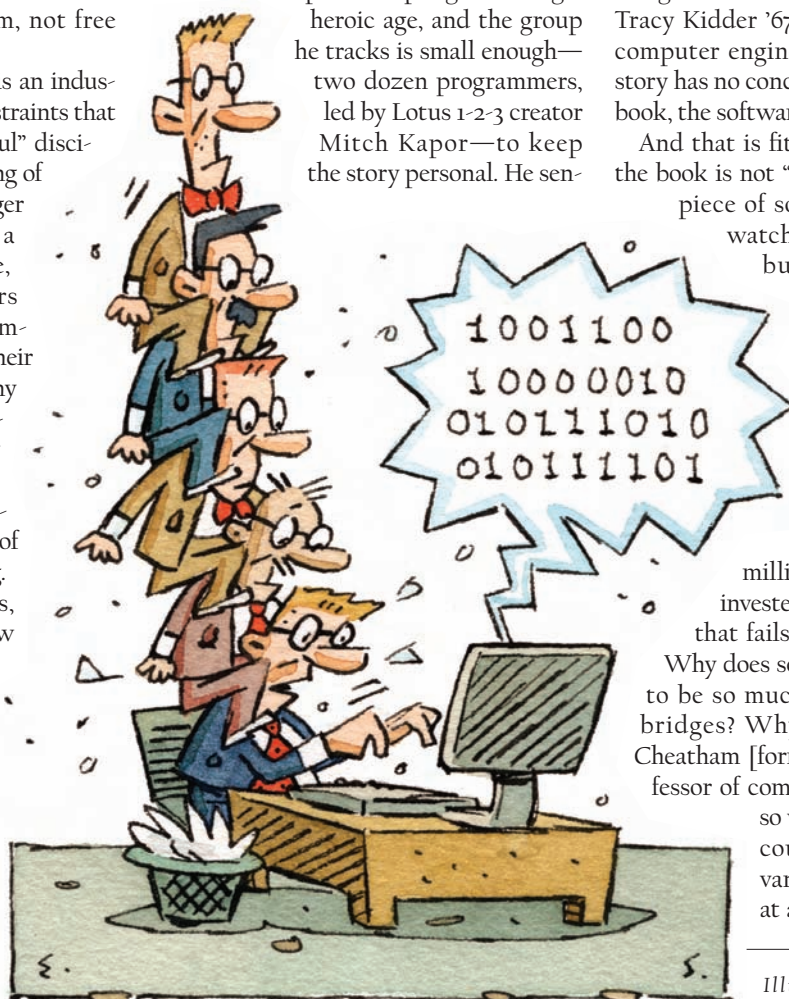


Illustration by Elwood Smith