



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

College of Letters & Science

UCSB

# Alumni Spotlight

This month's Spotlight features Michelle, a former Film and Media Studies and English double major who's now commanding cameras, scripts, and crews, shaping the world through filmmaking.



## **Michelle Musser: Graduate Student in Film and TV Production at USC**

### **What are you up to now, post-graduation?**

I'm currently at USC for a graduate program in Film and TV Production. At UCSB, Film and Media Studies is a theory and critical studies program, and now I'm doing more of a production approach, so it's nice to have that well-rounded, broad perspective of filmmaking. I just finished working as an assistant to the director on my first professional film, *Time Toys*—a kids' movie kind of like *Goonies* meets *Mimzy* that should be released next summer, 2016. In my program, I've been focusing mostly on writing and directing and a little bit of producing too. I'm interested in independent film, so I'll always be doing some aspect of producing—it just takes that to get your projects made—but the storytelling is what is most fulfilling for me. I find it fascinating to try and identify with someone who comes from a completely different background or culture or ideology

than you. Through stories, we can relate to other people. That part comes with writing and directing, and that's where my passion really comes out.

Filmmaking is one of those careers where there is no right path, as in if you do this and this and this, you'll get a job as a director. You just have to do as much as you can and hope you get lucky, get the right projects, know the right people, and find that open door. But I feel like what I'm learning in grad school is helping me focus beyond all that to what makes a good story. How you structure something and the importance of understanding how form affects content. I'm also meeting great people. My fellow students are amazing. They're so talented. And they're who's going to be working in the industry in the next couple

**"Get involved with as many projects as you can [...] because that's how you learn."**



years. As for what will happen next for me, career-wise, we'll just have to wait and see!

### **How did you get to where you are?**

I didn't start out in film at Santa Barbara, that's something I discovered in undergrad. I was always interested in film and I always wanted to be part of that industry, but I never understood how to get involved. I didn't think I was someone who could learn how to make films. I came in as Theater, which was the closest thing to that field that I felt I could be a part of. It wasn't until I started taking film classes at the recommendation of a theater professor, that I realized it was accessible. I also was fishing into English courses and found I was a lot more interested in the storytelling and writing side of things than in performance. I loved the collaborative nature of film. It was what I'd been looking for all along.

So I declared a double major in Film and Media Studies and English.

I worked on a bunch of film projects at UCSB. Joe Palladino, the advisor for the film program, has a listserv and any time you need crew or you're working on a project or you want to get friends together and make something, you can email Joe and he'll send it out to all the Film and Media Studies majors. It was pretty much how we crewed our projects and got people together. And I volunteered for every project, whether they needed crew or helping out in another way. That helped a lot because I got to meet different people, make some really good friends in the program, and had a great time working on films. I directed two projects and was a cinematographer for one of the films for the 106 class, which is the upper division production course. But I also helped as an assistant director, script supervisor, and a bunch of other roles. Rotating through all

positions gave me a better understanding of what it takes for every department. I think that was a big thing that grad school was looking for—people who were collaborative and interested in every aspect of filmmaking, not just one discipline. At USC, they teach you a little bit of everything—producing, directing, cinematography, editing, sound—and because at Santa Barbara I helped wherever I could, my understanding of film was already well-rounded and that was appealing when applying to the next level.

### **What was the best thing you did as an undergrad to help you get to where you are?**

I think it goes back to changing majors. I came in with a really definite plan, thinking I knew exactly what college was going to look like. So changing direction halfway through felt really scary. I thought, "Okay, I'm going to be

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**“But the way you study astronomy is through light and the principles it taught about the spectrum and light waves made a difference in my cinematography classes.”**

really behind in this. This is something I’ve never done before.” And it ended up being the best decision I made in school. It showed me how going outside of my comfort zone was really rewarding and was something worthwhile. Because I felt nervous about catching up after my major change, I jumped into it immediately. I sat in the film building and introduced myself to everyone that walked by. I volunteered for all their projects—a lot of things that felt really outside my comfort zone. And it worked out so well that I’m still doing it and still loving it.

### **What do you wish you had known while you were in undergrad?**

How fast it goes. It goes by *really* fast. I think I knew that when I was in undergrad but I wish I’d better understood that even if you’re stressed out, even if you’re in the middle of finals and it feels like that week’s never going to end, this is such a short time in your life and there’s so many positive things about it, just enjoy every second. And if you’re not enjoying it as much as you could be, maybe you haven’t found the perfect fit. Don’t be afraid

to change your plans to something that makes you happier.

To those who want to go into filmmaking, I would say two things. Get involved in as many projects as you can and make as many films as you can because that’s how you learn. You just have to make things. That’s how you make mistakes and work through it and get better at it. And also, take classes that are completely outside your major in things that interest you, because that always turns around and works back into what you’re doing. It’s really important to expand your horizons and explore everything that makes you curious. Doing so makes you more interesting as a filmmaker and as a person. For me, the two fields outside my major that helped me most were art history—I took a couple art history courses that helped me see visual style in a different way than I did previously. Studying the classical artists helped develop my understanding of composition and light. And then astronomy, which is random. But the way you study astronomy is through light and the principles it taught about the spectrum and light waves made a difference in my cinematography classes. I

never would have thought that would relate.

### **What was the best thing about being a Gaucho?**

The people. At UCSB, there’s this real passion for life that just rubs off. It feels like everyone wants to be there and is trying to be the best version of themselves. In general, I found that UCSB students have a really positive attitude and a real “we can do any-



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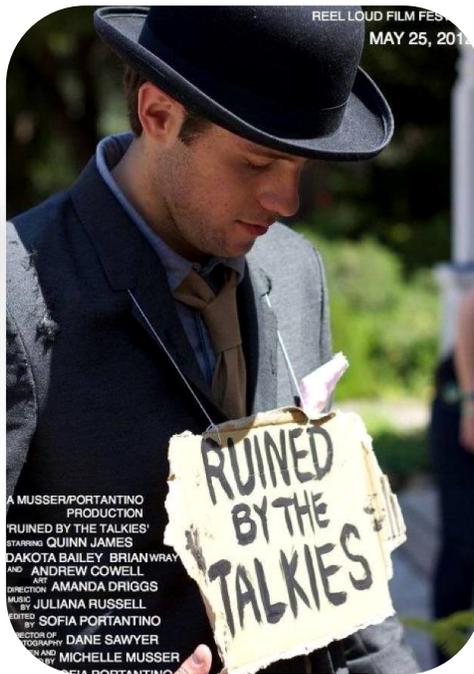
Next month's Spotlight features Nick, a former English major who's now shaping television entertainment as a casting producer for the MTV show, Catfish.

thing we want to" attitude. So much of the production we did was done without permits and without the equipment that we needed, but we found a way to make it happen. We figured out how to make a film when we didn't necessarily know how to make a film, and that was a really good lesson to learn. It taught me that anything can be done if you have passionate people working together. As you get into the real world of filmmaking, you're always dealing with budget constraints or time issues and you're thinking there's no way this is going to happen, but my experience at UCSB taught me that even with less money and less time and less resources than you need, you can get it done and

you can make it successful. That environment is what I miss the most about UCSB.

**Any final words of wisdom for the current Gaucho generation?**

Make friends and keep in touch with those friends. Those connections might be what you carry into your career afterward. I still see people I knew in undergrad, so I'm glad I built good relationships around me. You never know who's going to come back into your life, whether it's someone you find yourself working with, can help connect you with a job, or just someone to catch up with. These friends may just be your friends for life.



*Michelle welcomes UCSB students to contact her via email or Facebook with questions about the film industry and for mentorship on how to use your time at UCSB to become competitive in that field. Requests to look over student resumes or inquiries about job opportunities will not be responded to.*

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