Spotlight on: Jerry Thomsen

Biochemistry Professor Talks About Music, Science and Stony Brook

Chances are, you know who he is. You've probably heard him sing, watched him dance, taken his class, or played softball against him. The number of people who know or know of Jerry Thomsen far outnumber those that he might know or know of. As Associate Professor in the Biochemistry and Cell Biology Department, he comes across a fair number of graduate and undergraduate students. As lead singer for the local and yet ubiquitous Pumice, he's had scores of people shake their respective booties to his wailing voice. As utility player for an intramural softball team, he has played with or against graduate students from departments all over the University.

Jerry Thomsen grew up in a suburb outside Chicago and loves the Cubs. He received his undergraduate degree at the University of Tampa and his graduate training at Rockefeller University. He came to Stony Brook after a post-doc at Harvard University. His research program seeks to better understand the basic principles of vertebrate development. Jerry is currently engaged and his wedding is planned for this winter - so sorry ladies. Jerry gardens ("fighting the weeds" and "planting things and watching them die" are his words) and scuba dives when time allows, and he loves the ocean and aquariums. Though I kind of suspected it beforehand, this interview more clearly revealed to me that he walks to the beat of his own drummer.

We arranged to meet at the Velvet Lounge on one of the hotter days of the year. It might have been more comfortable to hold the interview inside (with air conditioning), but the music is too loud. I figure I'll find us a nice spot in the shade and let the Gin and Tonics cool us off. Plus, maybe the heat will get to him and he'll just snap. Jerry is only a couple of minutes late, but I see him rushing into the parking lot like a bat out of hell. I think this is indicative of a person who thinks that his time is as valuable as his own. Kind of refreshing considering the discrepancy of where he and I sit on the Stony Brook totem pole. He is wearing shorts, sandals, and a t-shirt with some pictures of fish on the front. We get our drinks and sit. I wondered if I had enough questions for the interview to last half an hour. It ended up taking more than an hour, and could have been even longer.

I don't know, because I guess it was.....I hadquirkiness to me then. I was a clown, kind of......a clowning guy. N&B: When did you decide to become an academic? JT: I think it was in college when I realized that the kind of research I wanted to do.....they wouldn't pay money.....in companies. And it was more or less drilled into me, or suggested that in order to do this stuff, you gotta be like us professors. It gives you freedom and what have you, at a low wage. Although it's not bad, I have to admit. It's not a bad wage. Stony Brook pays pretty well, once you're a professor.

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Arriving at Stony Brook: An International Perspective

by Amit C.J. Vas

I would like to start out by apologizing to anyone that this article might offend. I do not want to point fingers at anyone for messing up mainly because I don't have enough fingers to point.

Deciding to go to graduate school is not an easy decision to make. It is a time of high stress and anxiety for most people. For international students this time can be frightening as well. You have to move to a new country that may be far away from your comfort zone, which in my case was on the other side of the planet. But nevertheless, I was determined to move and start graduate school at Stony Brook. I do not normally embellish the truth, so all the events that I am about to narrate to you are completely true. I may be sketchy at times only because I have been in graduate school for too long now and my memory is a little fuzzy.

About a month before my imminent departure from home I sent an email to campus residences asking about the status of my housing application, and to inform them that I would be arriving when I started orientation for my graduate program. A couple of days later I finally heard back from them, just when I didn't have any nails left to chew on. I was

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On Behalf of the GSO:

Hey graduate people - welcome back to our village by the Brook! In the year ahead, you have wonderful opportunities to expand your horizons, receive one of the best educations available, and let one of the homeless newcomers into your home to make rent!

Hope this year greets you on solid footing, sun-kissed skin and a tranquil, healthy outlook. Now back to the "real" world of campus living - that is if you're one of the charmed ones who actually got a hiatus!

In order to make this a fun-filled year in which you don't burn out or lose perspective - might we suggest you use the opportunities given through various graduate clubs, committees, intramural sports, and nightlife (SPOT & Staller Center) to meet people who share interests outside of your field of study. This may enable you to make friends & allies that will hold your hand through the rougher times, give you perspective on your department melodramas - and hey, you might even get lucky!

If you have concerns, conflicts, or ideas & you want to make them known - USE the Graduate Student Organization to make the best of it. It belongs to all of us. It's our money that funds it, our ideas that fuel it. Without graduate representation, our concerns might often go unheard. So make the most of not only your academic career, but all the opportunities available - and make it a memorable year.

Good Luck!

Pegine Walrad
GSO President 2001-2002
Hello and welcome to the first issue of the 2001-2002 News and Blues. To those who have finished their programs and are seeking employment, we wish you the very best. To first year students beginning their long and tiresome quest for a graduate degree, welcome. To those returning to campus to continue their program of study, I would’ve thought you knew better. To say that there are many new and interesting happenings on campus would be hackneyed at the very best. Construction continues to be an eyesore to all who spend their days on campus. Obtaining housing for graduate and undergraduate students alike is still a mess, if not deeply troublesome endeavor. Most graduate students still don’t make enough money to live reasonably without having to take out more student loans. However, it would be unfair to create a long laundry list of what’s wrong with USB without creating an appropriate complimentary list of what’s right. We have reasonable health care, opportunities for professional advancement, and a campus full of potential friendships. In short, we all chose to be here, and most of us would not trade our lives with those we know in the “regular” workforce.

We at News and Blues recognize that the graduate student population at USB is a very diverse one: students come from Australia and Armenia, Spain and Seattle, Thailand and Toms River. Some will scream at the tops of their lungs about seeking meaning through God, while others will scream at the tops of their lungs that no higher being exists. Some students have memberships at exclusive country clubs, while others have never had a television. Some prefer nothing more than shooting hoops in the gym, while others seek a quiet corner to read ancient philosophy. The goal of News and Blues is simple: to give those in our unique circumstance, as different and special we all are, a voice and a sense of community. We’re not quite sure how we will fulfill this goal, but we’ll give it our “A” effort. Over the course of the next academic year, we will attempt to cover some topic that might interest you in every single issue. In this issue, this may be the review of the Stony Brook Film Festival: the one true gem on campus during the summer. It might be Amit Vas’s article about his difficult experience as an incoming international student. Or maybe you’ll enjoy learning a little more about Jerry Thomsen in his difficult experience as an incoming international student. Or you might enjoy learning a little more about Jerry Thomsen in our Spotlight. If you find nothing of interest in this issue, instead of dismissing the paper, please let us know how we can serve you better. Or even better, write for us. This is OUR newspaper (there, I said it). What are you passionate about? Write about it and submit it for publication. It’s a wonderful opportunity to share your thoughts and opinions - to let everyone know where you stand. And chances are, with as diverse a group as we are, you probably won’t be standing alone.

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Which member was moved recently while reading “Zen for Cats”
Which member(s) have bungee jumped?
Which member would start a commune if she wasn’t in graduate school?
Which members feel that hormones are responsible for fools falling in love?
Which member’s favorite political figure is Rosa Luxemburg?
Which member is a BIG FAN of working with marijuana?

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Film Fest Lights Up Stony Brook

The Stony Brook Film Festival at the Staller Center for the Arts Brings Films, Stars, Directors and a Little Glitz to the University

For those of you who just arrived on campus the bad news is that you just missed 43 films—feature films and shorts—from the countries of Brazil, Canada, the U.S., Sweden, England, France, China, Argentina, Iran and Los Angeles that played the Stony Brook Film Festival. The good news is that some of them will open in theaters in late summer and the fall.

This year’s Stony Brook Film Festival at the Staller Center for the Arts—an annual event for the past few years—had a mix of unknown films making their local premieres (the distinctions involved in the classification of premieres have become fine: World, U.S., East Coast, New York, Regional and Long Island) and better known films that were independent in spirit if not financial backing. For a relatively tame local film culture—most students are not here in the summer and the surrounding community is a big part of the fest’s audience—this combination of the unknown and off-beat and the well crafted ‘art’ films like Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon and Memento worked very well. Many of the filmmakers were around for the eleven days of the festival to introduce their films and for question and answer sessions afterwards.

Eleven feature films and eighteen shorts were in competition for both audience choice awards and festival ‘jury’ prizes. The rest of the films were either small independents that had already played at other festivals, like The Deep End and Hedwig and the Angry Inch, or “Indie Studio Blockbusters” (no oxymoron there) like Before Night Falls, Memento, and Pollock. I was unable to get together with the festival director, Allen Inkles, (my fault for missing an appointment) and am unsure how the jury prizes were selected but I hope to have the answer to that question and others in an upcoming interview about the festival and what’s happening at Staller this coming academic year.

I did attend a good number of the film screenings, Q and A sessions, and ‘social’ events at the festival. Altogether the event is an oasis in a pretty dry cultural climate out here in Suffolk—as a film lover I think it’s the most exciting thing that happens here at Stony Brook, but I am biased towards the cinematic. The fest is very well run—no burning celluloid or torn film here—and from the filmmakers there was nothing but high praise for Mr. Inkles, his staff and the Staller Center facilities. The Staller Center has the biggest movie screen in Suffolk County and holds about a thousand people. Many of the filmmakers were awed by the mostly filled theatre, one commenting, “I never thought 750 people would see my film.”

An important function of film festivals like this is to give play to good movies that might otherwise languish in film canisters. Even if their film never gets picked up for distribution the filmmakers have the satisfaction of a packed or almost packed house at the Staller Center, and the audience gets to see some great (and some not so great) films that wouldn’t have a chance to see in commercial theatres. Luckily some of the films are picked up for distribution, sometimes, like the festival grand prize winner, Diamond Men, during the festival. When Diamond Men writer, director and producer Dan M. Coen stood up to introduce his film he announced that it had just been picked up for distribution.

Some of these films, e.g. The Deep End, have already opened in NYC theatres, but I want to point out the festival winners and some films that I think are worth seeing.

Festival Grand Prize: Diamond Men, directed by Dan Cohen and starring Robert Forster and Donnie Wahlberg. This is a buddy movie about an older diamond salesman breaking in his younger replacement. Robert Forster’s understated performance sets the tone for this film. He has a gravity of character that steadies his younger partner and really keeps the film going. The film has a few unpredictable twists, and the final one is not altogether believable, but it’s so easy to get involved with Forster’s character that you don’t really mind the silliness of the end.

Best Feature: The Book of Stars, Directed by Michael Miner and starring Mary Stuart Masterson, Jenna Malone and Delroy Lindo. I thought this was by far the most emotionally powerful film of those in competition. Jenna Malone plays a young teenager dying of cystic fibrosis who is taken care of by her older sister (Masterson). The bond between sisters, one sick and the other driven to prostitution and drugs, is drawn vividly in this performance driven film.

Best Short: Bullet in the Brain, directed by David von Ancken and starring Tom Noonan. One of the most enjoyable things about film festivals is that we get to see shorts. These films don’t normally get out to commercial theatres and some of them, including this one, are really great. This short is based on a short story by Tobias Wolff that was published in the New Yorker a few years ago. The story is only two pages long, but I remember vividly the chill down the spine I got at the end of reading it. I was excited to see a film version and a bit scared that the short might ruin my vision of the story. It didn’t. Although von Ancken reworked the story considerably its transcendent ending still worked on film.

Scene from Bullet in the Brain, directed by David von Ancken

Audience Choice Award – Feature: Way Off Broadway, directed by Dan Kay and starring Brad Beyer, Morena Baccarin, Michael Parducci, Jordan Gelber and Forbes March. I thought that this ensemble piece about young adults after college was a journeyman effort. It was competently directed but except for a few good turns from the cast nothing really stood out.

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Scene from Bullet in the Brain, directed by David von Ancken

Goran Visnjic and Tilda Swinton in The Deep End

John Cameron Mitchell in Hedwig and the Angry Inch

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Jerry Thomsen

from page 1

N&B: What made you decide to come to Stony Brook?
JT: It was a matter of balancing what the offers were in the job market at the time. So it had the best combination. There were young colleagues coming into the department, a lot of hires were made by our chair....so that was very attractive. And the location near New York City, I knew I liked it. It's close to Boston. In the heart of it all. So given the choices I had, it was the best. And you know, you have to deal with what you're dealt with. We'd all like the perfect position, but it doesn't exist necessarily. There still a little bit of a compromise. So it was a good deal at the time.

N&B: Still a good deal?
JT: Still a good deal, for the most part. I can't complain very much. I've just moved into a new building, and a new office......the lab is growing, grant money is flowing in......it's really not too bad. We have to work a little harder to get people to come to the labs out here. I think it's easier to sell the New Yorkers on Long Island than to sell Mid-Westerners, necessarily......someone who doesn't know the east coast. So you have to, when you get people applying, and especially recruiting for post-docs and graduate students, you have to say, "What do you know about New York so far? What are the rumors? Well, here's the reality:" The thing that sells Stony Brook on a lot of people is location......the beaches. You have to show it in the summer. Winter is a drag here. That's the only thing that sells Stony Brook on a lot of people.

Jerry Thomsen singing for Pumice

N&B: What quality do you like about yourself most?
JT: I think that the quality I like the most about myself......I'm pretty friendly and......humorous. I accept a lot of situations. I like to experience a lot of different things, and I have. I think being open and friendly and humorous about stuff......you get to see more of life if you don't close out and be strongly opinionated about things.

N&B: What quality do you like least?
JT: I think......the least.......uh....well, I'm not smart enough (laughs). I think a little bit too nice sometimes. You know there's a fine line, but mostly I find myself not satisfied. It frustrates me. I think that is what frustrates me a lot......is that for some reason, very often not satisfied with a present situation, or even large successes sometimes don't register as they should. The self-critical and less satisfied about things I do feel satisfied about, but I feel that I am often hyper-critical of myself and situations where I should just chill out and be happier. So in one sense, I enjoy being a nice person open to a lot of things and experiencing a lot of things. But then I'm not satisfied with the things I experience......a little bit of frustration or self-critical about "oh, I didn't do that well enough" or "that didn't turn out good enough, it wasn't good enough." Logically, it doesn't make sense. I know there are plenty of things I've done really well, and continue to. But then self-doubt. That's it in a word: self-doubt. Self-criticism is what I dislike the most. But I think a lot of people in science kinda have that nagging, "it's not good enough, I gotta drive more"......I think some people are only like that and they're driven and nothing will satisfy them. And they accomplish great things, and they're not happy in the end. And I see that in me. It's not overwhelming, but it's there. I'm aware of it, which I guess is a good thing.

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Jerry and Pumice rock The Spot, the on-campus graduate student lounge
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Lizzie Grubman? drink definitely helps. pals out on the dance floor...... that's know them. Madison Square Garden. When: it's a party with your world series......probably not. a band with a sold-out gig at it. You don't have to fall into the life. You change because of professions there. You still want the same sort of when I'm a professor." It doesn't change. The same motivations are there. You still want the same sort of life. You change because of professional responsibilities, but being in academics is a really good way to stay young. It's the best thing about it. You don't have to fall into the cliches of standard life as you get older. You could fight against it and still fit in pretty well, with a good sense of independence.

N&B: Would you prefer to front a band with a sold-out gig at Madison Square Garden, be the star player in a World Series Game, or win the Nobel prize? JT:(laughs) Uh......Well, the world series.......probably not. Nobel prize is really tempting, but a sold out gig at Madison Square......Uh, I'll be a geek. I have to pick the Nobel prize. It is a real close one with Madison Square Garden. When it's a party with your friends, it's actually better than a sold-out gig at Madison Square in a sense, because you know that all those people are into you and you know them. Madison Square Garden......you may be a rock-god, but it's anonymous. You're there to just show yourself off, but with your pals out on the dance floor.....that's great. I'll go with the Nobel prize with a close second to this gig.


N&B: What do you think of Lizzie Grubman? JT: Well, she should get a job, a real job. Not just be a publicist. I think her Hampton days are over. She's got to start dealing with reality. I think the whole Hamptons have to......a bunch of rich people hating each other. She's got to lose up and,......and change the hair.

N&B: Most embarrassing thing you've ever done? JT: I think I once in college, I stood up when someone else was awarded something. I thought they said my name, and I stood, and I looked around and I went "Oh fuck! That wasn't my name." That was embarrassing.

N&B: What's a good pick-up line? JT: Never had one.

N&B: Favorite Spice Girl? JT: That catty spice......clawed one. I think it's like......Crazy Spice. As I recall just the images, it's that Crazy Spice, the one that's like a cat woman.

TEN QUESTIONS

N&B: What is your favorite word? JT: Swear word or just a word? It's probably "excellence." N&B: What's your least favorite word? JT: No


N&B: What sound or noise do you hate? JT: People yelling......annoying yelling. That grinding sound......whining. Angry and whining

N&B: What is your favorite curse word? JT: Fuck

N&B: What profession other than yours would you like to attempt? JT: Well, if it wasn't music......certainly it's music. I've attempted that but not as a profession. Honestly, I think that would be the profession if I trained, I'd probably be more successful in music than in science.

N&B: What profession would you not like to do? JT: Any kind of service......like janitorial or cleaning. Things like that.

N&B: If heaven exists, what would you like to hear God say when you arrive at the Pearly Gates? JT: You're cool!

International Perspective

informed that I would not have housing at the University until a week from the date of my arrival and even that was doubtful. Well, I'm not the kind of person that will roll over and play dead when I hear something like this. I was determined to get housing even if I had to e-mail every administrator at the University in the blink of an eye. I then sent an email to the international students office and they replied very promptly. I can't remember the exact content of the email, but I do remember that it bordered on being rude. In the e-mail was a list of hotels that I could stay at. I remember gasping at the cost of the dormitory on campus, I would have to spend to stay at any one of them for a week. Luckily, my program has an extremely good secretary that solved this problem for me. She promised that I would have housing when I arrived at Stony Brook.

But that was only the first problem, there was going to have to tackle. If I only knew what lay ahead of me, I might have decided to stay home. I arrived at Stony Brook about an hour before I was supposed to be at orientation. I went straight to the campus residence office, and after filling in some paperwork, was given a key to my room. I would like to remind you at this point that I was joining a graduate program and would be a graduate student for the next five or more years. I was under the impression that graduate students were housed separately from the undergraduates. The key was given fit a door to a two person room in one of the dormitories on campus. I remember walking down the corridor to my room and being appalled at the toilet paper and the crude graffiti that decorated the walls. It was only a couple of weeks later that I learned that the dorms at the northern end of campus were not so lovingly referred to as the projects. But I got housing.

A week later I lost that. I was told that I had to move to another dorm on the other campus until they could find space in Chapan (the graduate apartment complex). I understood that these things happen and so I accepted my fate and was willing to move. I was also told that there would be a van that would take my bags to the new place for me. When I went to check out of my room and check into the new room, I was told that I had to move myself and was given the yellow pages and told to call a cab, take the infrequent campus bus, or walk. My two bags at this point had become three and the thought of taking the bus or walking didn't appeal to my out of shape body. So I called a cab and moved to the new room. But that wasn't the end.

I knew that this housing was temporary and I would eventually have to move to Chapan, though when that was supposed to happen, I did not know. On checking into my new room, I found out that this housing was temporary and I would have to move to another dorm before I move to Chapa. At this point, I didn't care. A couple of weeks later I was moved again, and this time had my own room in one of the nicer dorms on campus. I stayed there for a coupl...
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Is “Reality T.V.” So Bad?

by Sue Denim

Ten years from now as we review the passing of the first decade of the 21st century, “reality television” will be remembered as one of the most overused phrases of the G.W. Bush era (otherwise known as the “celebration of mediocrity”). All too often television is criticized as a medium that provides programming purely for commercial exploitation that has little or no redeeming educational or intellectual value. Far be it for me to attempt to prove otherwise, but it does strike me as extraordinary that the latest network bandwagon of churning out so-called “reality T.V.” in favor of more expensive scripted dramas and comedies has been so widely castigated. Surely it’s just good business sense to give the people what they want? Isn’t the religious adherence to the Nielsen Ratings proving that despite the networks’ reliance on corporate advertising revenues, the hard-sell is really in persuading the masses that what they want to see is idiots just like themselves living out their own pathetic “reality”, vicariously and voyeuristically, for the chance at a brief taste of fame and fortune? Who am I really mad at? The suits who create these shows, or the people who watch them? No, I’m mad at myself because I’m ashamed to say, I’m helplessly addicted to reality T.V.

Being a graduate student is, I’ve decided, a perilous position to occupy in contemporary American life. We’re meant to be incredibly smart and sophisticated, rising above the plebs via the internet, digital television and cellular phones, where watching is only one element of entertainment? Blurring the lines between reality and fiction serves to involve millions of Americans in the lives of these reality T.V. characters.

Take a break from the books and see for yourselves. Aside from the game show powerhouses Who Wants to Be A Millionaire? and Weakest Link, CBS, NBC, ABC, and Fox are currently dueling over a whole slew of these (virtual) reality series. Already on our screens we have the Candid Camera-influenced Spy TV, while Murder in Small Town X and Fear Factor seem to work with the premise that it’s fun to watch people being very scared. Then there is the action / military genre that will soon include Boot Camp, Amazing Race, Jailbreak, Destination Mir, Lost, The Runner, Spy Wars, Lost in the USA, Manhunt, Combat Missions, Cannonball Run, Break In, Worst Case Scenario, and Reality Run. (I predict a real drain on my welding contract. Of course, fans in competition for a professional wrestling contract.

Big Brother 2 is the current CBS flagship while Survivor 3 prepares itself for the Fall season. Here the format, taken from the successful Dutch and British shows, is to incarcerate 12 people in a house for 3 months, surrounding them with cameras and microphones, offering them no privacy and hoping that sparks will fly. I find this strangely compelling, and I think it’s because I’m convinced Big Brother offers the perfect analogy to grad school. (Ok, it would be nice if grad programs also lasted 3 months, but stay with me on this one.) Big Brother is obviously the University, and our selection to enter a Ph.D. program is predicated on persuasive application forms and suitability to the “format” (i.e. tortuous repetition of the same tasks). The contestants in the Big Brother house are all extremely conscious that they are competing, despite the need for alliances and friendships along the way. As with Grad school, random individuals are brought together with a common goal – claiming a bundle of cash or a doctoral degree. As the pressure builds in this isolated environment (the Big Brother house or your academic department), it is the gossip, politicking and undercurrent about “who belongs” and “who should go” that motivate action and behavior.

So television can connect us to real life! Experience for yourself a dose of “reality T.V.”. Get used to it – you’re being watched right now.