Theatre and Communications Alumnus is a Two Time Golden Globe Winner
Alumnus Writes, Produces, Directs Popular Hollywood Productions
by Kristin Kemp

Ever wonder what a day in the life of a Hollywood executive producer is like?

The work associated with the title varies significantly. For Jim Parriott (BA ’72, theatre and mass communication) it means logging 14 hour days to truly produce the final outcome of his shows: he is responsible for supervising the filming, editing, scoring, budgeting and more. In fact, he prefers the title “showrunner.”

Parriott has been a writer, executive producer and director of movies and television shows that include Grey’s Anatomy, Sons of Anarchy, Ugly Betty, The Invisible Man and The Bionic Woman. He has received two Golden Globes, two Writers Guild Awards, a PGA award, a TCA award and several Emmy nominations.

“The last thing I wanted to be was a writer. I couldn’t type and hated the idea of sitting alone in a room,” he said. “But I realized that I’m a storyteller. In college, a 16mm film thesis cost about $16,000 dollars. A script thesis ran the price of a ream of typing paper. I chose the paper.”

Parriott’s opinion on writing has since changed. “Writing is daydreaming with structure and research. If I’m writing a pilot or movie, I read a lot, then stare out the window and let my mind take a walk. If I’m lucky, the muse starts whispering in my ear and I’m off and running.”

Parriott started as a theater major at DU, and then added a mass communications degree. The combination proved perfect for him. In mass communications, he took broadcasting production classes and shadowed local NBC reporters around for a day with then state-of-the-art Sony portable video recorders and cameras. They were black and white, reel to reel; he used them to make his first documentary: Before the Five O’Clock News.

“I decided I was more happy and creative behind the camera than in front of it – and it was exactly the right move for me. I’ve never had so much fun as I did in class at DU. The people in our class have been remarkably successful, so it says a great deal about the quality of the department,” said Parriott.

His on-stage experiences at DU were important, too. Parriott’s most memorable acting experience was playing Sebastian in Twelfth Night. He played opposite classmate Diane Cary … who became his wife.

“Diane is an amazing actress, who tried New York and almost stayed there. But I badgered her into marrying me, coming out to LA and trying her luck here,” he said. “We were both very lucky. She immediately got a huge national commercial. Then I signed as a writing client with William Morris. My first produced script was for The Six Million Dollar Man.”
Harve Bennett, later of Star Trek, was the executive producer of The Six Million Dollar Man and became Parriott’s mentor. They worked on many shows together, including The Invisible Man and The Bionic Woman.

Since then Parriott has been involved in numerous TV and movie projects as a showrunner. A showrunner in television is akin to the director on a feature film; they have the creative final say. Parriott has received many awards for his work.

“The lifestyle associated with the Hollywood awards scene is glamorous,” said Parriott. “But it is also a huge time commitment. There is an award event just about every weekend for a couple of months, with mandatory luncheons and parties in between. When you’re also working on a TV show, the actors – who often work 14-hour days on set and then serve as presenters at events – literally don’t have a moment to themselves.”

When he finds the time, Parriott has returned to DU to offer advice to aspiring writers and actors. “I’m a dinosaur who didn’t have the internet or cheap video or YouTube. These days, it really doesn’t matter where you live – just start working and make something,” he said. “But if you aspire to be a TV writer, I’d still recommend coming to Los Angeles. This is where the jobs are and the competition is. You’re either in it or out of it. Better to take the plunge.”

He and his family also recently decided to create an endowed scholarship fund for theater students at DU. Recipients are selected by the University’s Office of Financial Aid on the basis of academic merit and demonstrated financial need.

“We wanted to emphasize theater and felt our impact for students will be maximized there,” Parriott said. “But I also believe there needs to be a strong connection between the theatre and mass communication departments. As a film and TV maker, I work intimately with a fleet of actors, set designers, technical craftpeople, directors etc. I strongly encourage the school to move in that interdisciplinary direction.”