

CALENDAR

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JOHN RUSSO

Bravo made her a star. But now ...

Bethenny Frankel has choice words about 'Housewives' boss, network, union bid.

BY MEREDITH BLAKE

Bethenny Frankel is the first to admit she's done well for herself on reality TV.

The former star of "The Real Housewives of New York City," who once struggled to pay the rent on her small Manhattan apartment, used her spot on the Bravo reality series to tirelessly promote a cocktail business she sold for a reported \$100 million.

She left the show, starred in a spinoff, then returned to the mother ship a few years later, to the delight of fans. Now a reality TV producer in her own right, Frankel has arguably gotten more out of a role on a basic cable reality TV show than anyone not named Kardashian or Jenner.

Yet Frankel has also become one of the most scathing critics of Bravo, "The Real Housewives" franchise and its executive producer, Andy Cohen. This summer, shortly after members of the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists went on strike, she began posting on social media about the need for reality TV performers to form a union and push for improved pay and working conditions.

Those initial salvos have blossomed into a movement that Frankel, ever the enthusiastic marketer, has anointed "the reality reckoning." She has teamed with powerful attorneys Mark [See Frankel, E6]



EVAN AGOSTINI Invision / AP
BETHENNY Frankel has drawn fire for stance.

That love-story feeling

Meg Ryan ponders rom-coms, her long-awaited return to the genre in 'What Happens Later'

BY LORENA O'NEIL

MEG RYAN wanted to make a movie that felt like being in love. But if you think that means sunshine and rainbows, think again. In Ryan's world, at least lately, love is about unavoidable yearning, bittersweet nostalgia and the ability to hurt — or heal — a person in a way only exes can. As a lover of rom-coms,

I didn't expect what I got with "What Happens Later." And, for that matter, my interview with Ryan wasn't what I expected either.

The actor co-wrote and directed her new film based on a 2008 play by Steven Dietz called "Shooting Star." (It's Ryan's second time behind the camera, after making her directorial debut with 2015's nonrom-com "Ithaca.") Co-starring David Duchovny, the story focuses on two college sweethearts who, decades after

their breakup, find themselves stuck together in a snowed-in airport. Ryan, 61, worked on the script during the pandemic, and the ache for connection is a palpable undercurrent.

Ryan took an eight-year hiatus from the big screen, and "What Happens Later" is being billed as her return to the genre that made her famous. But the film itself slyly subverts rom-com tropes, playing with the magical lightness of romance while delving into the pain of lingering heartbreak.

"It's a love story with rom-com elements," Ryan says. Ryan is notably averse to talking to the press and she's an absolute pro at re- [See Ryan, E3]

Play about slavery roils campus

'By the River Rivanna' splits administration, faculty and students in Santa Monica.

BY ASHLEY LEE

The new play "By the River Rivanna" is a tale of two interracial relationships. In the year 1850, a white male slave owner and an enslaved Black man, both raised on the fictional Hope Plantation, hide a secret love affair. In the present day, their descendants, an upper-middle-class Black man and his blue-collar white friend, stay overnight in a former slave cabin to reconnect with the past.

Playwright G. Bruce Smith does not recall how [See Play, E2]



AKEMI RICO The Corsair

THE CAST of "By the River Rivanna" in an Oct. 17 performance at the Santa Monica College Studio Stage. The play was canceled just before its opening night.

THE INDEPENDENTS

A stressful shoot? Beloved dog helps

A 'red ambulance' also lifts Nida Manzoor while on her TV show 'We Are Lady Parts.'

BY NIDA MANZOOR

LONDON — As part of our yearlong series on Sundance filmmakers, *The Independents*, we've asked participants to keep a diary of one day in their working life and submit an accompanying self-portrait. Today's diary is from Nida Manzoor ("Polite Society"), who is in the half-exhilarating, half-exhausting throes of shooting the TV series "We Are Lady Parts."

7 a.m. Rainy. East London. I'm in the car on the way to the studio. I am shooting Season 2 of my show "We Are Lady Parts." We are five weeks into the shoot. I ask the driver to put on Magic radio, known for its smooth '80s vibes. ABBA's "Lay All Your Love on Me" comes on. What a tune.

My dog snoozes in my arms. I am bringing him to set. He lights up the production whenever he comes with me. He is a good morale boost for a weary crew. I leave him in the assistant director truck with the production team when I head to set. I eat a pot of porridge with berries and have a black coffee [See Manzoor, E6]

The man behind key 1963 march

Colman Domingo is riveting as the little-known civil rights activist in the biopic "Rustin." Review, E3

Comics E4-5
Puzzles E4



CHARLES MARK WALKER

SANTA MONICA COLLEGE'S Theatre Arts Complex houses the community college's Main Stage theater and Studio Stage theater.

Controversy swirls at SMC

[Play, from E1] The idea first came to him — “I don’t want to sound like some ‘woo-woo’ artist, but this was a story that was talking to me,” he said — but he was encouraged by frequent collaborator Perviz Sawoski, chair of the theater arts department at Santa Monica College, who eventually slated the play for the school’s fall 2023 semester.

Sawoski herself would direct “By the River Rivanna” as part of a three-unit acting class for which students audition and receive a letter grade upon completing a two-weekend run of an assigned show.

That’s when the trouble started.

“By the River Rivanna” has since become a lightning rod of controversy, dividing SMC administrators on issues such as student wellness, campus power dynamics, academic censorship and who has the right to tell a story — bringing debates familiar from college campuses and local theaters across the country to the 25,000-student community college.

After complaints from students and faculty that the play inappropriately romanticizes the era of slavery, growing murmurs of protests at performances and an anonymous vote by student participants in the production, “By the River Rivanna” was canceled hours before its opening night last month.

“I knew it was a strong play, but it didn’t raise red flags,” Sawoski told The Times. “A lot of plays have very complex information that is sometimes not necessarily palatable, but sometimes things need to be said, especially if they happened. And theater is a really powerful venue to bring in ideas that are thought-provoking and even shocking.”

THE PLAY

Problems emerged soon after auditions for the play were held in early September. Two students quit the production before rehears-

als even began, citing the play’s content. Among the details removed in multiple rounds of script revisions over the course of the rehearsal period were the use of the N-word and lines in which an enslaved woman says she did not resist rape by the plantation overseer because she wanted a child.

At the end of the month, Sawoski received an email, reviewed by The Times, from Maria Muñoz, the school’s dean of equity, pathways and inclusion, requesting a meeting to discuss a student’s unease about the play. (Muñoz did not respond to The Times’ request for comment.) More than a week later, Smith and Sawoski reached out to Sherri Bradford, the program leader and counseling faculty for the Black Collegians Program, and invited her to read the script and attend a rehearsal. Bradford, who said she had already received a complaint about the play from a student by that point, accepted, and asked Jermaine Junius, communications studies professor and president of the Pan-African Alliance, to join her.

Bradford read the script, which raised a number of concerns, including the play ending with the white character forgiving his slave-owner ancestors. But seeing it in person “was honestly even more shocking,” she said, describing the production’s musical sequences — which include “Raise a Ruckus Tonight,” “Wade in the Water” and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” as well as a traditional Yoruba religious chant — as “minstrel show-like,” “problematic” and “disturbing.”

She and Junius were particularly taken aback by a scene in which the enslaved character is taken offstage to be beaten by the slave owner. “Though it didn’t happen right before our eyes, it was horrific hearing this student actor yelping and screaming behind the stage,” recalled Junius. “And then in the very next scene, you see this slave

justifying the love that they have and how their slave master didn’t mean it, that this benevolent master cares for me.”

When the slave owner offers to free the enslaved man and his family as a way to apologize for lashing him, the enslaved man refuses: “My purpose be to tell you that I not be a free man if you not be near me,” the character says in a copy of the script obtained by The Times. “My purpose be to stay at Hope. For as long as you and me have breath.”

“What weighed heavily on us was the students bringing this to life — who is caring for them in the process? Who is debriefing with the students about the roles they’re taking on?” said Bradford, who was in tears at the end of the first act. The pair left the rehearsal at intermission. (Sawoski said that she and the students regularly had an open dialogue about the show, and that the production hired a dialect coach to lead students through a therapeutic body movement technique known as somatic work during the rehearsal period.)

Smith defended his creative choices, saying he did “lots and lots and lots of research to make it authentic as possible,” including obtaining materials from a friend who works as a reference librarian at Syracuse University and specializes in African and African American studies and anthropology. Asked if he visited libraries himself or spoke with additional scholars of the era depicted in the play, Smith told The Times his research was “mostly looking online” at videos, Reddit discussion boards and movies like “12 Years a Slave.”

As for the decision to depict a love story between slave owner and slave, given that enslaved people could not meaningfully consent to romantic or sexual relationships with their owners, Smith said he “was aware that there was coercion” on plantations but suggested

that the dynamic portrayed in “By the River Rivanna,” which he described as “this Romeo and Juliet thing,” likely existed in real life.

“Where would a gay plantation owner and a slave look for a love relationship?” he said. “People can say what they like, but I cannot believe that in all the years of slavery, gay men, whether white or Black or whatever the power relationship, [they] might have sought out love in whatever avenue that they could have. ... As a gay man who is 68 years old, it was difficult enough for me to find a love relationship in the late ‘60s or early-mid ‘70s when I was a young adult, much less back then.”

THE VOTE

As the threat of demonstrations against the production loomed, SMC student newspaper the Corsair broke the story about the controversy surrounding the show, publishing an article titled “Playwright or Wrong?” Sawoski and Smith suggested limiting the performance to an audience of the cast’s family and friends — an idea that ultimately was turned down by the administration.

“I hope reasonable voices may prevail and we can have nuanced discussions on the topic at some other time,” Sawoski wrote in a faculty-wide email reviewed by The Times after the Corsair article appeared. “I suggest that you might want to actually see the play and make up your own mind.”

One of the production’s final rehearsals was spent with SMC superintendent and President Kathryn Jeffery and two members of the board of trustees, who spent nearly three hours interviewing the student actors individually and in small groups about their experiences, according to Smith and Sawoski.

Jeffery returned the following night, when the student cast met with Johnnie Adams, chief of campus police, about “how we can keep everybody safe” during planned protests against the production, Adams told The Times. Adams assured students and staff that he had scheduled extra officers for the protests and outlined the protocol should there be a disruption from an audience member during a performance.

After rehearsing the play for a final time, interim vice president of academic affairs Jason Beardsley set down a cardboard box, along with three stacks of papers: Yes, continue the run as planned; no, cancel the run entirely; or delay performances by a week for additional conversations, according to Smith and Sawoski. “I thought it would be no big deal because nothing in the actors’ behavior had ever suggested to me that they were not interested in being in the show,” Sawoski said of the vote. “If they were not interested, they could easily just leave the show.” (Jeffery and Beardsley did not respond to The Times’ request for comment.)

One by one, the cast and the two stage managers went backstage to drop their votes in the box. Votes then were counted anonymously

by a faculty member and a staff member, according to Sawoski, whose account was corroborated by a student involved in the production who asked not to be named out of fear of reprisal. Nine of the 21 students voted not to perform.

After an emotional group discussion, Sawoski and the student involved in the production said, the students cast their votes again. This time, eight voted to cancel the run.

“We don’t know who the eight were, and I’m not going to make my actors uncomfortable and ask them or go any further,” said Sawoski. “I can’t replace them overnight, I couldn’t do the show with eight missing. I didn’t want to force anybody.” (Other students involved in the production did

not respond to multiple requests for comment.)

“My belief is that the college administration did not want to pull the plug itself on the play because they would face lawsuits,” said Smith, who has sought additional support from groups dedicated to the protection of academic freedom and freedom of speech. “There was an intimidation campaign to get the students to make this decision, so they can say, ‘Well, students don’t want to do it.’”

Sawoski, who claims the eight students who voted not to perform were “pressured,” defended the shuttered play. “This is not meant to insult the Black community by any means. I wouldn’t even have done it if it wasn’t where I felt like this really gives the enslaved people from long ago a voice.”

For her part, Bradford said it was a good thing that the choice was ultimately made by students. “I’m so glad that they were heard,” she said. “They are the most important part of all of this, and I hope that everybody continues to center the students in this dialogue.”

A representative for Santa Monica College declined to answer specific questions about the cancellation of “By the River Rivanna,” citing “the threat of litigation.” The representative pointed to SMC’s statement on the cancellation issued Oct. 20: “The Santa Monica College Theatre Arts Department’s production of the play ‘By the River Rivanna,’ originally scheduled to run Oct. 20-29, 2023, has been halted following a collective decision made by the faculty and student actors involved.”

“By the River Rivanna” was canceled on Oct. 20, the morning of what would’ve been the opening performance. But the controversy it sparked is not limited to the play’s content. Critics say it has exposed flaws in the process of selecting shows

for students to perform. “This is not a private theater company that would hire actors that are doing this on their own volition. This is a community college and a public institution,” Junius said. “It’s a controversial production and there are clearly concerns. So why is this production here? Is it fair to put this burden on our students? And how do we mitigate harm for our students?”

“By the River Rivanna,” partly inspired by Sawoski’s visit to South Carolina’s Magnolia Plantation and her fascination with tour guide Joseph McGill Jr.’s Slave Dwelling Project, is the fifth play Smith has penned for Sawoski to direct at SMC over a 15-year period; he wrote the first four for free. The college currently lists Smith as an artist-in-residence because, this summer, Smith asked Sawoski that he receive the position and any available funds in exchange for this fifth script and for leading various master classes in the theater arts and English departments. “To be honest, it’s because I’m retired and I wanted to do something,” he said. “I said, ‘I’m happy to do it for free, but if you can find some funding for me, that would be great.’”

Sawoski agreed, and secured \$2,000 via the Santa Monica College Associates, a nonprofit organization that underwrites exhibits, performances and speaker events “that serve to enrich student and community life and promote excellence,” according to its website. Sawoski described the payment as “extra, in the sense that he didn’t care whether he got it or not, but I was able to get it for him.” Meanwhile, the artist-in-residence arrangement was “more like a title to honor his work over all of these years that he’s collaborated with us. It meant nothing more than that.” (Santa Monica College Associates did not respond to multiple requests for comment.)

And yet, Bradford said, “There is a responsibility with this being an educational institution,” with which Smith is now affiliated by dint of his title. “Yes, we understand creative freedom. But there should be productions that are rooted in historical fact and doing due diligence in terms of researching before you write a play for our students to then act in.”

Amid the fallout, SMC “will be providing a forum — to be facilitated by an objective, empathetic, and skilled voice — for our internal community to have the necessary conversations about the complex issues that arose around this play,” said Grace Smith, the college’s public information officer, in a statement to The Times. “We will seek to have many such conversations to find mutual understanding and common ground in the days to come, knowing that the transformative work of providing accessible, high-quality, equitable education is perhaps the most crucial means towards achieving racial equity. In doing so, the college will center the values of academic freedom, open dialogue, and the free exchange of ideas.”

Though the SMC production may have been canceled, Smith isn’t done with “By the River Rivanna.” He hopes the play will be recognized by the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival, a program that honors outstanding college-level productions via national awards and invitations to perform at its regional conferences. (Smith and Sawoski’s 2012 collaboration “Heart Mountain,” set in the Japanese incarceration camp in Wyoming, previously earned this prestigious honor.) Smith said he also has reached out to the Theater Producers of Southern California and is considering putting up his own money to have the play produced.

The playwright believes that his work became the subject of attention because it was written by someone who is white. When asked if he ever considered whether he should be writing the piece, he replied, “No, not at all,” as “there are so many examples of people who have written outside their experience.” He cited “The Help” and “Green Book,” both of which have been subject to vociferous criticism for their depictions of racial reconciliation in the Jim Crow South.

“I think — I could be wrong — that many people were moved by those particular movies and books,” he said. “I don’t know. I didn’t read the books. I saw both the movies. I thought they had value.”

Info Line 310.478.3836

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<p>ROYAL 11523 Santa Monica Blvd. West L.A.</p> <p>BELLA 7:00 PM</p> <p>GOING TO MARS: THE NIKKI GIOVANNI PROJECT 1:00 4:45 7:20</p> <p>FOUR DAUGHTERS 1:30 4:20 7:30</p> <p>THE DELINQUENTS 1:00 3:30</p> <p>MONICA 1332 Second Street Santa Monica</p> <p>FINGERNAILS 1:20 4:20 7:30</p> <p>EXHIBITION ON SCREEN: KLIMT AND THE KISS 7:00 PM</p> <p>THE KILLER 1:00 4:00 7:10</p> <p>BEYOND UTOPIA PG-13 1:10 4:10</p> <p>KILLERS OF THE FLOWER MOON 1:30 6:30</p> <p>ANATOMY OF A FALL 1:00 4:10 7:20</p> <p>THE PERSIAN VERSION 1:10 4:00 7:00</p> <p>SEMAFORO ROSSO 10:30 AM</p>	<p>TOWN CENTER 17200 Ventura Blvd. Encino</p> <p>HELEN'S DEAD 1:30 PM</p> <p>THE MARSH KING'S DAUGHTER 1:10 4:10 7:00</p> <p>WHAT HAPPENS LATER 1:20 4:30 7:10</p> <p>BEYOND UTOPIA PG-13 4:00 PM</p> <p>KILLERS OF THE FLOWER MOON 1:20 6:30</p> <p>THE PERSIAN VERSION 3:10 PM</p> <p>POLARIS 3:10 PM</p> <p>TWICE COLONIZED 1:00 5:20 7:30</p> <p>NEWHALL 22500 Lyons Ave. Santa Clarita</p> <p>THE MARSH KING'S DAUGHTER 1:10 4:20 7:30</p> <p>PRISCILLA 1:10 4:10 7:10</p> <p>WHAT HAPPENS LATER 1:00 4:00 7:00</p> <p>AFTER DEATH PG-13 1:00 4:00</p> <p>FIVE NIGHTS AT FREDDY'S PG-13 1:30 4:20 7:20</p> <p>FREELANCE 4:10 PM</p> <p>KILLERS OF THE FLOWER MOON 1:30 6:30</p> <p>THE PERSIAN VERSION 7:10 PM</p> <p>PAW PATROL: THE MIGHTY MOVIE PG 1:20 PM</p>	<p>GLENDALE 207 N. Maryland Ave. Glendale</p> <p>DEATH ON THE BORDER 1:30 PM</p> <p>PRISCILLA 1:10 4:00 7:20</p> <p>SUBJECT 1:20 4:10 7:00</p> <p>EXHIBITION ON SCREEN: KLIMT AND THE KISS 7:00 PM</p> <p>THE KILLER 4:20 PM</p> <p>KILLERS OF THE FLOWER MOON 1:30 6:30</p> <p>THE DELINQUENTS 1:00 7:00</p> <p>DIVINITY 4:50 PM</p>	<p>NoHo 7 7240 Lantershim Blvd. No. Hollywood</p> <p>PRISCILLA 1:20 4:10 7:10</p> <p>RUSTIN PG-13 1:30 4:20 7:20</p> <p>DEEP RISING 4:30 PM</p> <p>THE KILLER 1:00 4:00 7:00</p> <p>BEYOND UTOPIA PG-13 1:10 4:10 7:10</p> <p>KILLERS OF THE FLOWER MOON 1:30 6:30</p> <p>ANATOMY OF A FALL 1:00 7:00</p> <p>THE PERSIAN VERSION 1:20 PM</p> <p>FOUR 7:00 PM</p> <p>CLAREMONT 450 W. 2nd Street Claremont</p> <p>THE MARSH KING'S DAUGHTER 1:20 4:20 7:30</p> <p>PRISCILLA 1:10 4:10 7:10</p> <p>WHAT HAPPENS LATER 1:10 4:30 7:20</p> <p>EXHIBITION ON SCREEN: KLIMT AND THE KISS 7:00 PM</p> <p>KILLERS OF THE FLOWER MOON 1:30 6:30</p> <p>THE PERSIAN VERSION 1:00 4:00</p>
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