

# PLAY

The  
Guildhall  
School  
Magazine  
2021



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**12** Dangerous liaisons



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**4** *Behind the Scenes*  
Leaders on  
(and off) stage

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**6** Coming to a  
screen near you



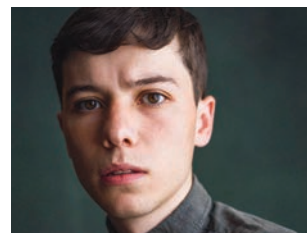
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**17** Surround sound



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**20** *The Interview*  
Prema Mehta



---

**24** Hard graft

---

**28** Friends Reunited



---

**30** *Research Works*  
Queering the  
Conservatoire

---

**32** *Creative Careers*  
Lewis Hannaby

---

**35** School news and  
stories



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# HARD GRAFT

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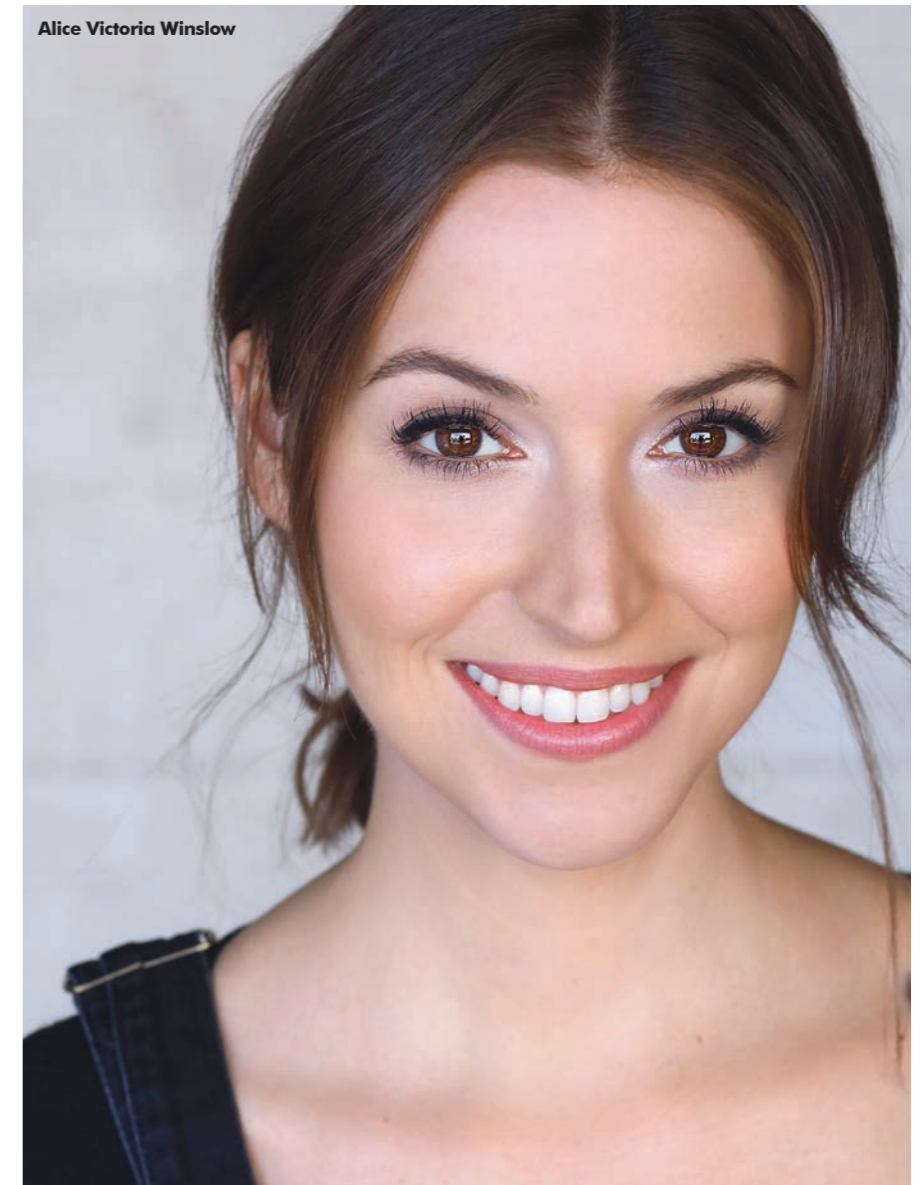
**Creation is bloody hard work. Whether recalling the old adage that creativity is “one per cent inspiration, 99 per cent perspiration”, or Roald Dahl’s injunction to “keep your bottom on the chair and stick it out”, that truth is universally acknowledged by every creative practitioner. So, is there a magic formula, or a universally successful set of routines to ensure you can face up to the prospect of sheer graft, rather than just waiting for a visit from your muse?**

“Up until recently, I had the luxury of not having to demand that the muse show up every day,” says Alice Victoria Winslow (Acting 2015), whose screenplay adaptation of Jane Austen’s *Persuasion* starring Dakota Johnson just wrapped filming for Netflix. “But now my livelihood is dependent on my creative work, I don’t have the choice of waiting around – I have to be at my desk, inviting her in.”

That’s a feeling recognised by Oliver Leith (Composition 2013). “I work to commission because I need to live, and that necessity provides the drive needed to meet deadlines,” he says.

Crucially, for both, the deadline-driven life of a professional creative doesn’t dilute the inherent artistry of their work – it simply requires that artistry shows up when needed, whatever the circumstances. “I’m lucky that I’ve never been given a brief with any serious limitations, so I can always find something,” says Leith, who has taken on commissions from the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the LSO and Festival Aix-en-Provence, and who won a prestigious Ivor Novello award in 2020. “I make sure I love my material – which can take a lot of smashing about and being messy – and then I make a piece.”

“The hardest part is getting myself to sit down,” says Winslow, “and then my next step is to set a kitchen timer for 20



Alice Victoria Winslow

minutes. I say to myself: ‘You just have to put your head in that creative space for a short amount of time, then you can take a break.’ Some days, if I’m feeling resistant, I’ll need to set it a few times. Usually, after a period, I’ve sunk into a creative space.”

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Both headspace and physical space are important. “My studio becomes more and more chaotic as I finish pieces,” says

Leith, “until I can’t see my desk or floor anymore. It’s separate from my living space, so that I am bearable to live with – hopefully.” Leith admits that, on occasion, he feels the need to tidy up the chaos: “Sometimes I wonder if I should find a healthier process, but I’m sure I won’t – and, anyway, I’d always worry that it might be a little sterile.”

Fellow composer Christina Athinodorou (Composition 2005), who has just completed a new solo violin piece for the Code Modern festival and a substantial work for voices and orchestra for the Royal Theatre of La Monnaie, Brussels, likewise has a studio used only for composing and to study scores. “Nothing else, so I associate this room with ‘going to work’,” she says.

Christina Athinodorou



During the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic, Winslow wasn't so fortunate. "I was locked in a studio apartment in LA, in one room, writing every day. It was the biggest career pressure I'd ever faced in my life and we had notes meetings on Zoom, with rewrites on and off all year. It was such strange times and I'm grateful I had projects to focus on."

Having to relocate his space during the pandemic was itself inspiration for Ellis Howard (Acting 2018). "I went home to Liverpool to isolate," he explains. "I was inside all the time, but my family are frontline workers – my two sisters and my mum are all nurses. I felt I had nothing to give, so thought about how I could be of service. My skillset is writing and performance, so I set out to give a voice to unplatformed people, the thousands of kids in the north who have no access to the internet, the people working three jobs, the young people whose access to education was rubbish and whose football clubs had shut."

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From that experience sprang Howard's latest short film, *We Are Not In The Same Boat*, which is now being used

by the Marcus Rashford and Church Action Against Poverty campaign to end child hunger in Britain. "I was knackered and pissed off and angry that working class people were being blamed for defying lockdown, and frontline workers weren't being given the recognition they deserved," says Howard. "But volatile emotions are always good for art, and I started to write with a clear purpose, which is good for productivity." Now he is exploring those emotions and perspectives in a TV series, *LOUIS*, currently in development with Sid Gentle, producers of *Killing Eve* and *The Durrells*. "*LOUIS* grew out of that working class world which people do not see. One that's not peopled with drug dealers and violence, the clichés of *Benefits Street* and ITV crime dramas, but one that has real and magnetic characters, and celebrates their intelligence."

While volatile emotions may be good for productivity, they can exact a toll on the producer. Managing this requires a creative to be as disciplined at self-care as he or she is with deadlines. "Everything I do is politically minded," says Howard. "It's art that has a social lens. It's a lot, and it's stressful. If I'm dealing with topics that can cause anxiety, like climate change, I can cocoon myself in dread. My best practice is to try and make myself laugh and enjoy myself; to treat my work like self-love, to try and

surprise myself. If I'm not writing from a place of joy and resonance, I'm not going to punish myself by trying to keep at it."

"I need to feel free," says Athinodorou. "I seek quietness and tranquility of mind before I start working, because if for some reason I happen to be upset, my creative flow will very likely be disturbed. Walking is a good habit during breaks from work and at the end of a day. In the city streets, or on the beach. Seaside living is a blessing."

For Winslow, it's not serenity but playfulness that best supports her productivity. "I like to make my space feel playful," she explains. "I'll light a candle or get down on the floor. I've been known to work from my closet. I have little plastic dinosaurs I'll put on my computer. Anything to invite that spirit of play into my environment, to remind myself to be 10 per cent closer to play than to homework."

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All creatives have their routines. For Howard, that's browsing TikTok – "the genius of it, making people the main character in their own lives for one minute, moves me and blows my mind" – while for Athinodorou, it is her cup of specialty coffee and spurning her computer mouse in favour of a pencil to capture ideas: "Especially those pushing to be born," she says, "because my hand runs faster on paper. I try to keep to a working day, but I make sure I embrace periods when I write more intensely, all day and all night. It can be painstaking, but this is when I become more aware of what creation means and what it takes to maintain flow in my process."

However diverse the practices of these successful artists, Winslow pinpoints two traits they all share. "Creativity is about being relaxed and playful enough to be open, but having the discipline to keep showing up regularly," she says. "Of course, some days are easier, and some are harder."

Ellis Howard

