

BU

BOSTON U: HOLLYWOOD'S SECRET FEMALE TRAINING GROUND

Dozens of top execs and talents call BU their alma mater, as alumnae from Geena Davis and her college roommate Nina Tassler to Nancy Dubuc gather to honor the college that puts the 'B' in showbiz **BY BRYN ELISE SANDBERG**

LOS ANGELES

The women were photographed on Dec. 2 at Smashbox Studios in Culver City.



Tassler (left) and Davis met as sophomores. Says Davis: "It's amazing to be that close to somebody who has just known you from practically minute one." They were photographed on Dec. 2 at the William Turner Gallery in Santa Monica.

1 Madeline Di Nonno The CEO of the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media received her bachelor's in English in 1982.

2 Michaela Watkins The co-creator of USA's *Benched*, a member of Groundlings, got her fine arts degree in 1994.

3 Corinne Brinkerhoff The *Jane the Virgin* co-exec producer got her master's in television from BU in 2004.

4 Ashley Williams The *How I Met Your Mother* actress and 2001 grad was a year ahead of actress Uzo Aduba in the theater program.

5 Judy Smith The crisis manager, who got her communications and public relations degree in 1980, inspired *Scandal's* Olivia Pope.

6 Krista Vernoff The co-exec producer of *Shameless* and former *Grey's Anatomy* EP graduated with a theater degree in 1993.

7 Nina Tassler The CBS Entertainment chair survived the school's ultracompetitive theater program but chose an off-camera career.

8 Debbie Liebling Formerly a Universal Pictures exec, the 1981 broadcast and film major now heads Red Hour Films' TV division.

9 Lauren Shuler Donner The *X-Men* franchise producer and 1971 grad studied film and TV in the college of communication.

10 Brooke Karzen The senior vp alternative programming at Warner Horizon TV graduated with a theater degree in 1984.

11 Bonnie Arnold The *How to Train Your Dragon* and *Over the Hedge* producer got her master's in broadcast journalism in 1978.

12 Geena Davis The Academy Award-winning actress attended the college of fine arts' theater program, graduating in 1979.



1 Davis and Tassler (second and third from left) performed in the musical *Knickerbocker Holiday*, based on a Washington Irving story, in 1977. 2 Dubuc on graduation day, 1991. "There was a competitive nature to the university but in a nurturing, collegiate environment," she says. 3 Vernoff (left) with her sister Kaili, an actress and 1991 BU college of fine arts grad. 4 Marcus showed her BU Terrier pride in 1991.

SOME PEOPLE SAY that their closest friends are from high school or work, but for me, it's all about Boston University," says actress Geena Davis, 58, who met the closest of her college friends — CBS Entertainment chair Nina Tassler, 57 — as an 18-year-old sophomore. Among the early memories the two theater majors (who were roommates their senior year) share: dressing up as Siamese twins with giant baby bonnets and rattles in a dance movement class ("I

think we got an F," recalls Davis) and performing together — again bonnet-clad — in the school's 1977 production of *Knickerbocker Holiday*. The pair, who branded themselves "Neen-er and Geen-er," have remained best friends. In fact, Tassler was Davis' matron of honor (twice), and they still take vacations together with their old theater friends — "The Family," they call themselves.

Davis and Tassler are members of a larger BU family in Hollywood, too. The university estimates that more than 5,000 alums, 54 percent of them women, work in entertainment. The school has produced an army of female execs, producers, writers and actors through its rigorous communication and theater programs, the latter so competitive that Tassler entered with a class of 60 only to graduate with 20. "One of the things I learned in college is that if you're going to be late for an audition, don't go," she says of the make-or-break mentality that's



Woodard in a production of the Greek comedy *Thesmophoriazusee* in 1974.



NEW YORK
The women were photographed Dec. 1 at Milk Studios in New York.

1 Rikki Klieman
The CBS News legal analyst graduated from BU's law school in 1975 after earning a theater degree from Northwestern.

2 Kim Raver
The 1991 acting major was on *Grey's Anatomy* from 2009 to 2012, overlapping with Vernoff.

3 Laura Marcus
The vp talent relations at Fox Sports, who became friends with Di Nozno at BU, got her broadcasting and film degree in 1983.

4 Hilary Estey McLoughlin
CBS TV Distribution's president of creative affairs and former Telepictures chief is a 1984 grad.

5 Nancy Dubuc
The president and CEO of A+E Networks, a 1991 grad, majored in mass communications with a history minor.

carried over into her professional life. Adds A+E Networks' Nancy Dubuc, 46, "You had to forge your way to either create your own village or stand out in some way."

No wonder the school churns out so many women who've succeeded at Hollywood's zero-sum game — and are eager to help other BU grads do the same. "There seems to be a generosity among the alumni to want to support and give access," says Warner Horizon Television's Brooke Karzen, 54, who was a year behind Julianne Moore in the fine arts college. Among them: Nine years ago, Tassler became involved with the newly established BU in L.A. program, a "semester abroad" for undergrads that offers industry internships. She is now an honorary dean of the program with *Seinfeld* star Jason Alexander.

Before BU in L.A. was launched, some students took advantage of a spring break alumni-networking trip — that's when TV writer Corinne Brinkerhoff, 34, visited David E. Kelley Productions. She'd later become BU alum Kelley's assistant and eventually earn a seat in his *Boston Legal* writers room. On the same trip, she also met *Arrow* creator and BU alum Andrew Kreisberg, 43, who has been a mentor. "To have contacts before I even got to L.A. was priceless," says Brinkerhoff. Ashley Williams, 36, jokes there's a "BU wink" and credits it with her breakout role in the romantic comedy *Something Borrowed* — her college roommate, Ginnifer Goodwin, already was set to star. "I only needed to email Ginny and let her know that I was getting close on the job," says Williams, "and she got in touch with the director and advocated for me."

"Do I favor them?" says Tassler of the BU grads who walk into her office. "Yes, I do." (Quips Williams of her CBS role, "That must be how I got on *How I Met Your Mother*.") DreamWorks Animation's Bonnie Arnold, 58, notes that there are 35 or 40 BU grads in her office alone. BU in L.A., which started with 20 students, has more than 100 enrolled for spring 2015, and a remarkable 72 percent of the 1,300 students who've completed the program now are employed in the industry. Red Hour Films' Debbie Liebling sums



Uzo Aduba
The Emmy-winning actress, 33, studied classical voice at the fine arts college while also on an athletic scholarship — she ran track and field.



Ginnifer Goodwin
The *Once Upon a Time* actress, 36, who graduated in 2001, performed at a professional theater in Boston as an undergrad.



Yunjin Kim
The *Lost* actress, 41, earned her bachelor's in drama from BU in 1993. She also studied at the British Academy of Dramatic Arts.



Julianne Moore
The *Still Alice* star got her BU drama degree in 1983 and scored a Daytime Emmy for *As the World Turns* just five years later.



Rosie O'Donnell
The *View* co-host, 52, briefly studied drama before dropping out at 18 to pursue stand-up comedy.



Marisa Tomei
The Oscar-winning actress, 50, spent one year in the theater arts program but left for a role on *As the World Turns*.



Alfre Woodard
The Oscar-nominated actress, 62, who co-stars on *State of Affairs*, graduated in 1974 with a bachelor of fine arts in theater.

up the phenomenon in the words of her former assistant: "My father went to Harvard," the young woman told Liebling of her industry-exec dad. "But every boss he ever had was a woman who went to BU."

Additional reporting by Ashley Lee