

Alfred University Alum Shaminda Amarakoon Named Production, Technical Design Director at Yale

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AU alum Shaminda Amarakoon says his life changed -- for the better -- at Alfred University.

When Shaminda Amarakoon enrolled in Alfred University in 2001, he was, in his own words, “heading south.”

A graduate of Alfred-Almond Central School, the son of Alfred University Ceramic Engineering Professor Vasantha Amarakoon and Savithri Amarakoon, who taught piano in the Alfred area, Shaminda had started his college career at Duke University, studying biomedical engineering. His heart wasn’t in it. After several years in Durham, he withdrew from college and took a three-year breather while he figured out his next move. When he finally re-booted his education at Alfred University, he steered clear of the hard sciences and immersed himself in the performing arts, studying acting, directing, writing and production design in the Division of Performing Arts.

“It took me eight years to get my undergraduate degree,” he says.

Some things are worth the wait. James Bundy dean and artistic director of the Yale University School of Drama, recently announced Amarakoon has been appointed chair of the Technical Design and Production Department and Director of Production at the School of Drama and Yale Repertory Theater.

In announcing Amarakoon’s appointment, Bundy noted his “outstanding leadership of large production teams, as well as his technical expertise and his dedication to maintaining and extending the Technical Design and Production Department’s extraordinary traditions of excellence and camaraderie.”

Amarakoon graduated from Alfred University in 2004 and until his recent appointment had worked as production manager at Second Stage Theater, where his responsibilities included consulting on renovations of the Helen Hayes Theater, in New York City. He also worked in production for Yale Repertory Theater, and had worked in production management for numerous Broadway, off-Broadway and national tours through Tech Production Services, and then Lincoln Center Theater.

He says his life changed, and for the better, when he began studying at Alfred University.

“It was challenging coming back to Alfred from Duke. I had mixed feelings, and it was a low part of my life. My professors at Alfred showed me so much support and love, they turned me around and gave me a ton of confidence. I think that’s what really launched me on a really blessed career.”

Amarakoon gives special credit to the efforts of Alfred University Theater Professors Becky Prophet and Steve Crosby, who both recognized Amarakoon’s talent and potential and encouraged his growth in theater and the performing arts.

“They took me under their wing and gave me all the unique attention they could offer. There were plenty of times Becky and Steve would just sit and talk with me for hours, about my work and progress. All that just helped me turn my life around, and I can’t be more grateful.”

While a student at Alfred University, Amarakoon immersed himself in the production end of theater, but he also enjoyed acting, writing and directing. “At Alfred, I was both onstage and offstage; I hadn’t really picked my particular path. I just enjoyed all aspects of theater.”

He recalls in particular working with his friend and fellow student, Omar Perez ’02, on their own production, “The Journey,” which they performed in Harder Hall in 2002. Amarakoon describes “The Journey” as a two-person show, but its overall production involved the participation of students, faculty members and administrators including former Alfred University President Charley Edmondson. Amarakoon and Perez remain in close contact, with Perez pursuing his own theater career in New York City.

As Amarakoon prepares for his new role in New Haven, he describes himself as supervisor “of all the technical elements that relate to the aesthetic design: costume, scenery, lighting... We work with the directors and the designers to translate their visions into the physical reality of the stage....We’re part of a puzzle that works together with everything else. They’re the dreamers, and we execute their dream.”

It was at Alfred University, he says, where he began to find “perfect balance” for his own talents. While he had rejected his initial trajectory toward a career in biomedical engineering, he was still the son of a scientist and a musician. “I grew up with a love for science and math from my father,” he says, “and a love for the arts from my mother. My professors at Alfred helped me put all that together. And I can’t be more grateful.”