Sommese's Recipe for Design As leading graphic design professors at Penn State University, Lanny and Kristin Sommese teach their students how to succeed by first, divining the fundamentals. **By Maggie Kinser Saiki** Portrait by Marc Hessel

Lanny Sommese is not bored. This is a problem because the title of his student's slide show, a how-to assignment featuring 15 slides of grass is "How to Bore an Audience." "What makes you think grass is boring?" Lanny asks. No reply. Another failure. It's early October, and Lanny Sommese is waiting, sometimes patiently, sometimes not, for his seniors to "get it."

After four years in Penn State University's graphic design program, there is a long list of things that seniors are supposed to "get," things that Professors Lanny and Kristin Sommese have been giving students here for a combined total of 41 years. For example: Design is not a noun, but a verb. Design is not inspired by other design. If you come to design not as a form of personal expression, but rather as a business, your whole attitude changes. Good designers have an idea by the time they leave the initial meeting. Design is also about trends. The great thing about graphic design is that it forces you to objectify what feels good. Every designer in the world has access to the information on the Net, so you need to go further. The computer limits lesser graphic designers. And finally, as Lanny puts it, regularly and bluntly, "Our track record speaks for itself; you know damn well that if you listen to us, and you work your asses off, I can pretty much guarantee you're going to be very good."

Like Lanny, Kristin studied graphic design with my late father, Bill Kinser. Auditing my father's courses in the '80s, I often ran into Kristin Breslin in the photostat camera room. We were about the same age, and Lanny, who taught with my father, was for both of us a powerful presence. To me, he was always the family friend who would look out for me, the uncle with a sense of humor, the colleague who would give Dad the argument he craved, and the buddy who threw great parties, the greatest of which was the annual "Film Follies."

Only now, 20 years later, can I see that even that party was a carefully considered step in the learning process. What I recall as an hour of funny shorts and slide shows is in fact a mid-term, mind-opening review, presented by the seniors on a Saturday night to the visiting design alumni and the public, followed by a Sunday afternoon of portfolio reviews by the alumni. After Penn State, Kristin Breslin went on to get an MFA in Graphic Design from Temple University's Tyler School of Art.

Eleven years into her partnership with Lanny—which operates 24 hours a day, as the Penn State Design Program and as Sommese Design—Kristin recalled that, "We both listened to the ideas that your dad [Bill Kinser] had about approaching problems, so that when we talked, we were talking the same language. We resonated." Lanny told me, "I trust Kristin's taste. I'm a less than exemplary typographer, for example. I listen to her. She took your dad's place in that regard. We talk about ideas."

Kristin and Lanny don't just talk about ideas, they demand them from students and from themselves in their Sommese Design work. This means beginning at the beginning, and acting as a human being first, and a designer second. Kristin told me how she conceptualizes true design: "I remember a conversation your dad and I had. He said, 'If you're designing a menu for this guy who does this incredible chili, and people come from all over just to have this chili, what's the first thing you do?' We're sitting there in a small group, and people are saying, 'Well, you define the functional parameters of the assignment.'— He starts smiling—'You define the problem.'—still smiling—'You find out what your budget is.' He said, 'No, you eat the goddamned chili!'" As a teacher, Kristin finds that, "right away, the students tend to want to jump into a style, or go into the professional mode and find out how to delineate everything, when really it's all about tasting the chili, getting to the root of what you're trying to say."

As designers, the Sommeses are invigorated by their students. And students, knowing that their professors are respected internationally, are inclined to believe that teacher knows best. Because Penn State is a major research institution, the Sommeses are encouraged to investi-gate the parameters of design in their professional work. Compared to what is possible for other designers, Kristin tends to spend "an inordinate amount of time" dissecting the capabilities of computer applications, and Lanny, on perfecting images and color schemes for a client which may well be a campus client. The clients, for their part, are in a dream position; they get high design at lower rates.

Graduate Chip Kidd, now at Knopf, is one man who has proven the program's success in a poignant field. Lanny told me, "Chip was one of a small group of people who changed the face of book jacket design. He got rid of the banal, gold-leaf embossing, the ugly-ass illustrations, and moved to more subtle solutions that were more appropriate to the content. And he actually reads the books." Content is a Sommese mantra. Over form, over style, over technique and technology, Lanny and Kristin emphasize content. If a student cannot defend the use of a typeface or image based on the fundamental idea, the form is refused praise of any kind. The work necessary to succeed in the real world begins with thinking through a problem until a relevant idea is struck.

My father, Bill Kinser used to tease Lanny that he taught like a coach. Lanny played basketball at the University of Florida, Gainesville, where he got his Bachelor of Design and B.F.A. in painting, before moving on to an M.F.A. at the University of Illinois at Urbana, where he first met my dad. Lanny explained his teaching style to me, "You gotta motivate the kids. You gotta do anything you can to get them to work hard, and care, and break through; that's the only way they're gonna get better. Cause if you let 'em off the hook, they're not gonna go there." The failure of one senior after another to "get it" in the fall doesn't worry Lanny. By graduation, those same kids will be ready to join the profession.

Lanny and Kristin Sommese's biological offspring are still rather young and small. Their daughter Saige has just started school, and their son Zane, 2, is still in diapers. But already the Sommeses have had a lot of practice parenting, nurturing and guiding. Kristin's packaging class for juniors has the atmosphere of a family meeting; the students don't drive the class but she encourages them to explore their own conceptions of the problem, research it using real books as well as the Internet to find out where the audience lives, how the system works, the history of the subject. Kristin also pushes her students to follow their ideas to the logical conclusions, even if it takes time and leads them down the wrong path. Lanny explained that, "It's a little different here because our curriculum does flow, and it's pretty much tied to Kristin and me." If Lanny, the dad, gets results by "getting in the students' faces," as he puts it, Kristin, the mom, gets them by showing her disappointment. Like the best parents, both of them care enough to work for the results.

Kristin and Lanny Sommese disagree just enough to make their curriculum sing and their joint work sparkle. Not least because they are a full generation apart, Kristin's being the last Penn State class to be trained in the traditional pre-computer program—one of the Sommese's most lively arguments is about not whether, but how, to use and present technology in design education. This has been a vital question to Lanny Sommese for more than 30 years.

Long before it was fashionable, Lanny's colleague at Penn State, Bill Kinser, was fascinated by the computer's potential for democratizing design. In 1979, Kinser brought the first computer terminal into Penn State's Graphic Design department, literally setting it up in a closet next to his office. Plugged into the university's mainframe with a modem, it was a dinosaur, a pre-historic card-reader. Years later, the computer issue put Lanny and Bill Kinser at odds; Lanny—who took the position of department head while my father kept his distance from authority roles—told me, "It was obvious that we needed to get on the computer train, and true to form, your dad wanted to leap on the express."

But Lanny was more cautious, wanting to work out how the computer should be integrated into the curriculum. He had seen plenty of other schools that had gone "whole hog into the computer area at the expense of everything else." The answer for Penn State was to embrace the new computer technology while keeping a tight hold on what Lanny and Kristin considered important: "stretching our heads and getting our hands dirty."

In the late '80s and early '90s, Lanny and Kristin also began to notice that too many so-called "design" conferences were really about computer hardware and software. Today, the technology issue has worked itself out in the profession in spite of belabored discussion. And in education, 20 years after that once notable day when my father brought in his card-reader, the question of how to integrate current technology is for the most part a financial one. Thanks to years of work and a considerable output of energy—getting better and faster computers, securing a comprehensive technical support system, customizing the machines with a large enough font selection and incor-

porating color printers—the Penn State Graphic Design Program has comprehensive computer facilities.

Lanny's "Time and Sequence" class, presented as the foundation of editorial design, in which Penn State's curriculum has proven particularly successful, uses the 35mm camera, the slide projector and the 16mm film projector. Lanny pointed out that the projector is not archaic, "except as a means of communication." The problem, he said, "is how to get that attitude to the next level—looking at the computer not only as a tool, but looking to see how it affects the end results." Kristin agreed, saying, "It's not about slides, it's not about
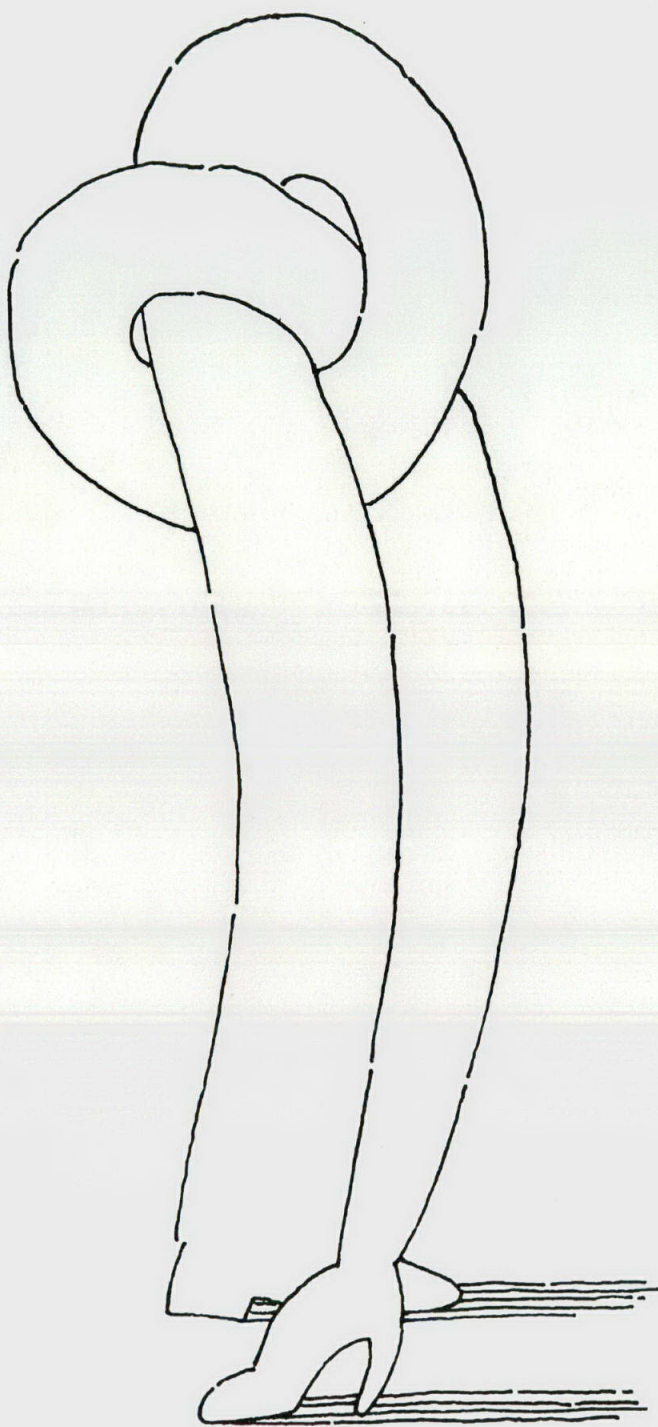
projectors. It's not about anything other than seeing and exploiting the possibilities." The fact that a web animation program like Macromedia's Flash is the kind of thing that, today, gets students jobs is the sticking point. Lanny continues to scrutinize technology and its tendency to change the humanity of what designers do. "The day after tomorrow, today's technology may be totally anachronistic. What doesn't go out of date is the students' ability to understand time and sequence and how it relates to the communication of an idea."

In November, an alumni show was presented at Penn State featuring the work of graduates from the Graphic Design program. Hang-

ing and projected on the walls, emanating from television and computer screens, laying on tables and displayed in products were designs for *Bazaar, Vanity Fair, Martha Stewart Living, Marie Claire* magazine, *Sports Illustrated, Oprah magazine, The New York Times Magazine*, the online magazine *Born*, Victoria's Secret, Nike, and TV spots for clients like Fila, Coca-Cola, Discover Card, McDonalds, and Northwest Airlines. The graduates of Penn State's Graphic Design program, represented in the show and around the country, justify Lanny and Kristin Sommese's first precept of design, they too have learned to taste the chili. ∎

LANNY
SOMMESE'S
POSTERS
—
YOU'RE
INVITED
TO THE
HANGING!

OPENING
RECEPTION
MARCH 17
2-4 PM
—
PENN
STATE
MUSEUM
OF ART
MARCH 17-
MAY 19
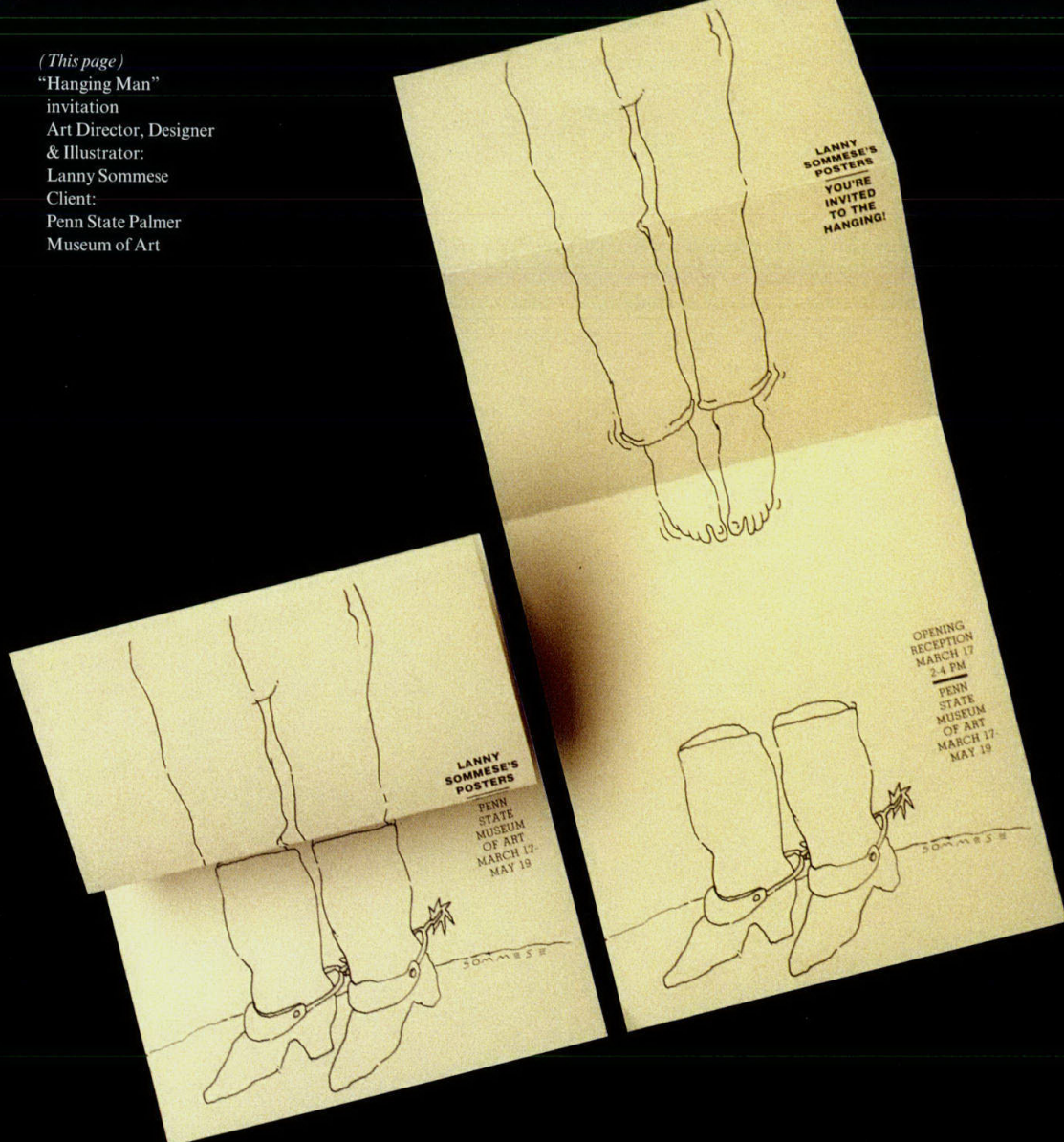
LANNY
SOMMESE'S
POSTERS
—
PENN
STATE
MUSEUM
OF ART
MARCH 17-
MAY 19

(Top, left) Poster for
Seymour Chwast lecture
Art Director, Designer &
Illustrator: Lanny Sommese

Client: Penn State
School of Visual Arts
(Top, right)
Jazz poster w/ red devil

Art Director &
Illustrator: Lanny Sommese
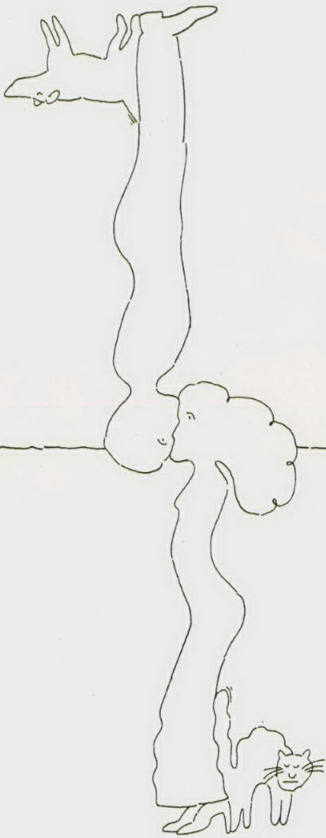Designer: Kristin Sommese
Client: Penn State Jazz Club
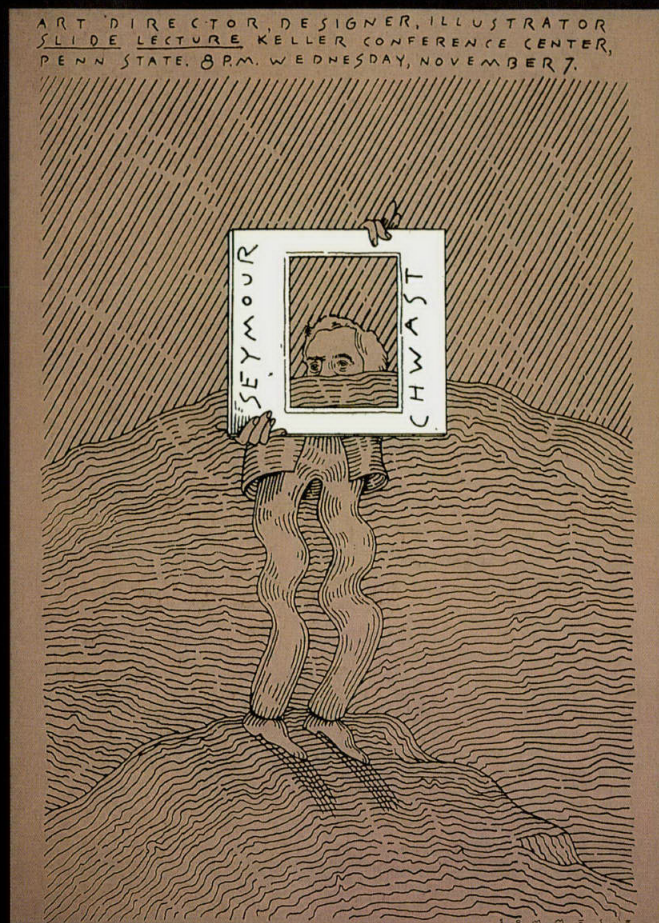
(Bottom, left) "Stop the Violence"
theme poster for a competition
Art Director, Designer
& Illustrator:

Lanny Sommese
Client: Sommese Design
(Bottom, right) "Turandot"
theater poster

Art Director, Designer &
Illustrator: Lanny Sommese
Client: Volks Theatre,
Rostock, Germany
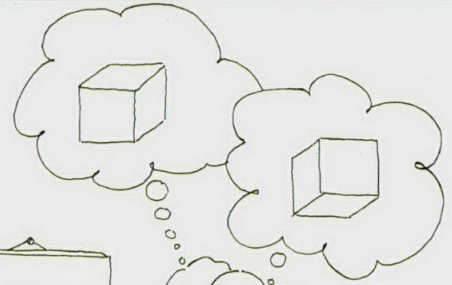
SOMMESE DESIGN

LANNY & KRISTIN SOMMESE DISCUSS
THE FOIBLES, TRIALS, TRIBULATIONS &
TRIUMPHS OF A MARRIED COUPLE
WORKING TOGETHER · WALKER HALL
WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 20, EIGHT P.M.
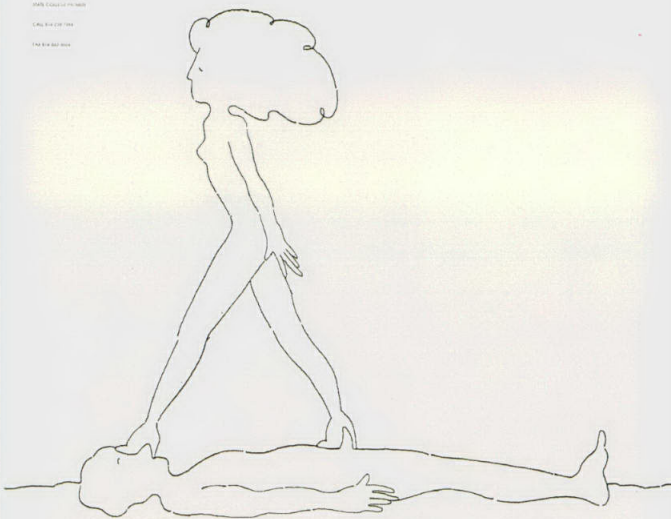
SOMMESE DESIGN

Opposite page, top)
Logo for P.L.A.N.
(the Pennsylvania
Local Arts Network)
Art Director
& Designer:
Kristin Sommese

Illustrator:
Lanny Sommese
Client: Pennsylvania
Local Arts Network
(*Opposite page,*
2nd from top)
Logo for 100

Years of Grace
Art Director,
Designer
& Illustrator:
Kristin Sommese
Client: Grace Lutheran
Church of State College

(Opposite page, middle)
Logo for P.L.A.N.
Sommese Design
Art Director, Designer
& Illustrator:
Kristin Sommese
Client: Sommese Design
(Opposite page, 2nd from bottom)
Logo for The Historic

Bellefonte Brewery
Art Director: Kristin
and Lanny Sommese
Designer:
Kristin Sommese
Illustrator:
Lanny Sommese
Client: The Historic
Bellefonte Brewery

(Opposite page, bottom)
Logo for "Saloon"
Art Director and
Designer:
Kristin Sommese
Illustrator:
Lanny Sommese
Client:
Dante's Restaurants, Inc.

(This page)
AquaPenn Packaging
Art Director
& Designer:
Kristin Sommese
Illustrator:
Lanny Sommese
Client: AquaPenn
Spring Water Company