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(Cover) Styling: Wouri Vice/The Montgomery Group; Hair: Nina Monique; Makeup: Marissa Vossen; Dress: Greta Constantine; Glasses: Bonnie Clyde; (This page) Dress: Christopher John Rogers; Glasses: Valentino

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Celebrating the Changemakers



EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Claudia Eller

We are thrilled to bring you the Changemakers Issue, honoring the annual Juneteenth holiday and celebrating diverse voices who have a significant impact on the culture through their art, storytelling and activism.

Our cover subject, 23-year-old singer H.E.R., enlists her incredible talents to call out inequality and the need to fight for justice. Her Grammy-winning political anthem, “I Can’t Breathe,” became a signature song for the Black Lives Matter movement in response to the murder of George Floyd. H.E.R. then took home an Oscar for best song for “Fight for You” from the film “Judas and the Black Messiah,” about the assassination of Black Panther Fred Hampton by the FBI and Chicago police.

You also must read about social impact activist Opal Lee, 94, known as the “Grandmother of Juneteenth,” who each year on June 19 makes a two-and-a-half-mile pilgrimage to commemorate the date in 1865 that marked the end of slavery in America.

When we were sent an essay for this week’s issue by Kelly Edwards titled “I’m Not Answering Your Dumb Diversity Questions,” I found it so powerful that rather than publish it as a guest column, we made it the lead story of our Biz + Buzz section. Edwards recounts a recent video interview she did that

honored a diversity event she moderated three years ago. She was appalled by the prep questions, asking her, “What does diversity mean to you?” and “Why does diversity matter?” She told the interviewer why she refused to answer: “If someone doesn’t understand what diversity is and why it matters, I said, they need to be fired immediately.”

Also related to the issue of diversity: an important story that broke this week about the uproar over the lack of Afro Latino representation in the film “In the Heights.” Rather than get defensive about the criticism, both creator Lin-Manuel Miranda and director Jon M. Chu addressed it head on. In a Twitter message, Miranda apologized for failing to include more dark-skinned Afro Latinos in the cast, particularly in the lead roles. “In trying to paint a mosaic of this community, we fell short. I’m truly sorry,” he said, vowing to “do better” in his future endeavors. Chu was asked a question in a video interview by The Root magazine about what he would say to people taking issue with the fact that “In the Heights” “privileges white-passing and light-skinned Latinx people.” His response: “I would say that’s a fair conversation to have.”

Continuing to reflect on and have meaningful conversations around issues of diversity, equity and inclusion is important for all of us. 🌱

Uncovered

“I really admire H.E.R.’s work ethic and persistence. She knew her passions at a young age, which I can relate to,” says Arielle Bobb-Willis, who shot H.E.R. for *Variety*’s inaugural Changemakers Issue. The Los

Angeles-based photographer’s work is known for its painterly touch, as well as the use of vivid colors that “speak to a desire to claim power and joy in moments of sadness, confusion or confinement,” she says.



Ben Hassett

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I'm Not Answering Your Dumb Diversity Questions



GUEST COLUMN

A couple of weeks ago, I was interviewed for a video commemorating a diversity event I moderated back in 2018. To prep me, the organization sent me a list of questions.

"What does diversity mean to you?" "Why does diversity matter?" "Have we made any progress?" "What would you like to see happen next?"

A few days later I was sitting in front of my computer, the red "recording" light blinking in the corner of the Zoom screen, and

By Kelly Edwards

Illustration by Derek Abella

“

The field is not level. The question is: How do we fix it? We can start all of the programs we want, but we still need to address the fundamental problem that lies underneath. The system is biased.”

telling the interviewer that under no circumstances was I going to answer the first two. If someone doesn't understand what diversity is and why it matters, I said, they need to be fired immediately.

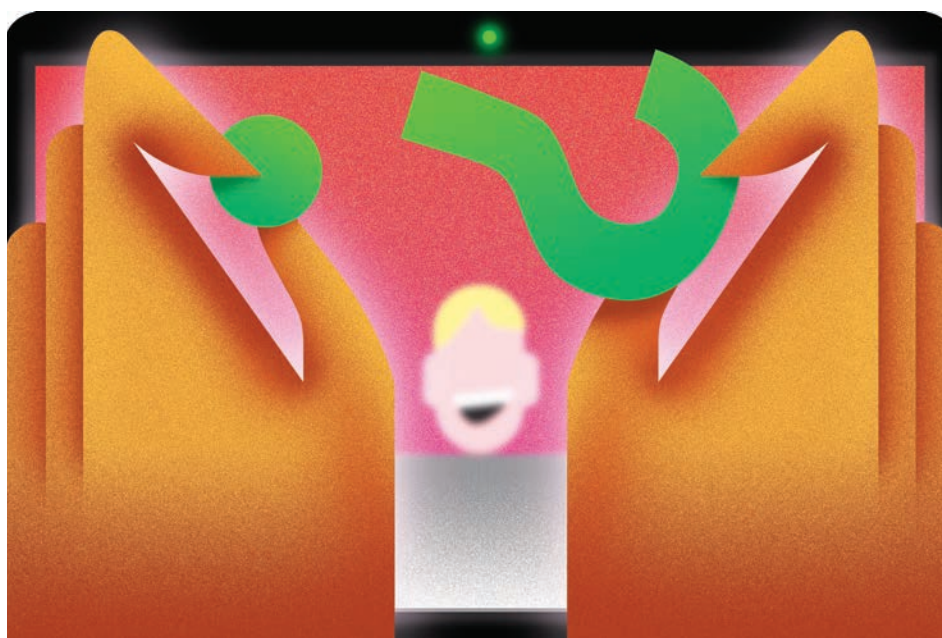
We started this latest diversity movement in TV more than 20 years ago, and so far, the progress has been slow to excruciatingly nonexistent. For every executive of color promoted, many more are held back or denied advancement. For every show developed by a writer of color, so many more are passed on. We know the acting talent is out there, but it continues to be overlooked and the ratios are still terrible. UCLA's 2020 Hollywood Diversity Report notes Latinos accounted for less than 7% of the leading roles in broadcast, cable and streaming, and Asians less than 4%.

What I want to know is “Why are we still asking remedial questions?”

And that right there is how this interview became less of a polite Q&A and more of a rant.

Suddenly I heard myself railing about Asian and Latino representation. I paraphrased a book I'd read called “This Is an Uprising” about how it takes years for a social movement to take hold. Before same-sex marriage became law in the U.S., decades of work went into “normalizing” gay relationships.

By those calculations, we're light-years behind on Asian representation. “We are kidding ourselves if we don't correlate the lack of Asians on-screen with the rise in hate crimes against the AAPI community,” I said. “When was the last time we saw an Asian lead who wasn't doing martial arts?”



The field is not level. The question is: How do we fix it? We can start all of the programs we want, but we still need to address the fundamental problem that lies underneath. The system is biased.

Diversity is still the last item discussed in a meeting. Executives of color are still harassed by their co-workers and then expertly gaslit into believing those slights weren't personal. When they advocate for a project from a BIPOC writer or an idea with a brown lead, it's still questioned much more than if it had a white one. Black male executives continue to be hired at pathetically low rates, and when they do get hired, they're eventually pushed out by a system that refuses to support them.

Here's my challenge to everyone at the executive vice president level — mandate it. If you have the power to order another mildly entertaining series starring

Oliver Hudson, you have the power to order a spectacular one starring John Cho. Better yet, for every script you bought this season, tell the showrunner you are making the lead a person of color. That will separate those executive producers who are with the program from those who just pretend to be.

If you can make 50 overall deals with co-producer-level white guys without a track record, you can surely find 20 experienced BIPOC writers just as easily. If you can't find them, you have work to do.

I finished up the video interview regarding the diversity event by saying that BIPOC culture is American culture. We're not the side dish. We are the main course.

When I finally climbed down off my soapbox, I was filled with dread. Not because I sometimes felt that my words tumbled out of my mouth inelegantly as I tried to vocalize every thought I ever had

on the topic all at once. I was 100% confident we need more execs of color in the development process, more AAPI and Latinx representation on-screen, and more BIPOC with overall deals so they can compete with well-funded white production companies.

My only trepidation was that, because I hadn't worn my glasses and couldn't see the screen clearly, my eyeline would be off.

I needn't have worried. In the end, the only part of my half-hour interview they used was two short statements — one in which I said that our content becomes more interesting when there is diversity present and the other thanking the organization for hosting the panel.

So here we are, back at the beginning. The only thing that's changed is my personal decision that, from here on out I'm ignoring your stupid questions about diversity.

Never ask me why or what again. I won't reply. But ... if you give me a when — when you will hire more execs of color, support them with promotions and shield them from bad behavior by their counterparts, make many more BIPOC producer deals, and greenlight diverse movies and series — I will absolutely help you with the how. 🍌

A veteran producer and creative executive, Kelly Edwards previously oversaw diversity for NBCUniversal's linear and digital networks and created HBO's emerging artists programs. She now runs the nonprofit Colour Entertainment and recently staffed the drama “Our Kind of People” for Fox. Her book “The Executive Chair: A Writer's Guide to TV Series Development” is due in October.

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Stepping Back Onstage, Ann Dowd Learns Where Courage Lies

By Brent Lang



In person, Ann Dowd, sweet, solicitous and ready to laugh at herself, is far removed from Gilead, the totalitarian state where Aunt Lydia, her alter ego on “The Handmaid’s Tale,” rules with an iron fist, doling out punishment for the slightest infraction. As she sips a cappuccino and raises her voice ever so slightly to compete with the whooshing sounds of a nearby subway or a fire truck’s siren, she confesses that she wonders why she agreed to tackle her next acting challenge. Dowd, you see, is about to launch a sold-out solo version of “Enemy of the People,” a production that will see the actor assume all the roles in Henrik Ibsen’s morality tale. Moreover, she’ll bring the story — about a town doctor who risks everything to expose a scandal involving contaminated water — to life in the Park Avenue Armory, a cavernous space that dwarfs even the largest Broadway venue.

“Theater was where I learned about acting. But stepping back into live theater on a regular basis

Ann Dowd



is how you find out where your courage lies,” says Dowd.

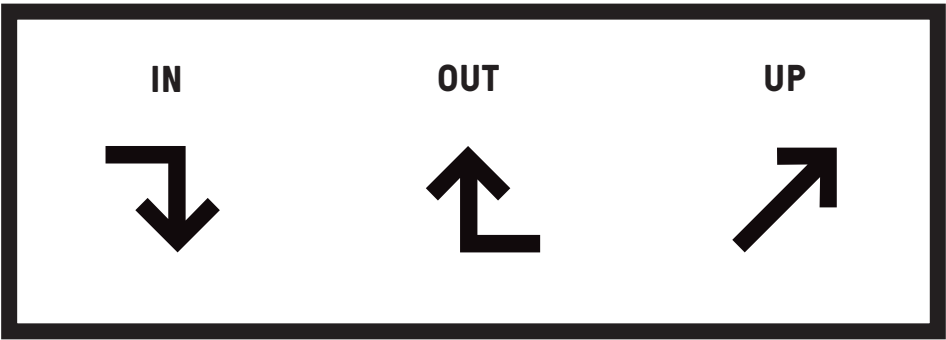
This won’t be a literal adaptation. Instead, audiences sit with friends and family in pods and are asked to vote on the action of the play at key moments. The majority opinion then determines what direction the plot takes and how the story resolves.


“We’re asking important questions about does our democracy work?” Dowd notes. “How do we decide what’s the right thing to do?”

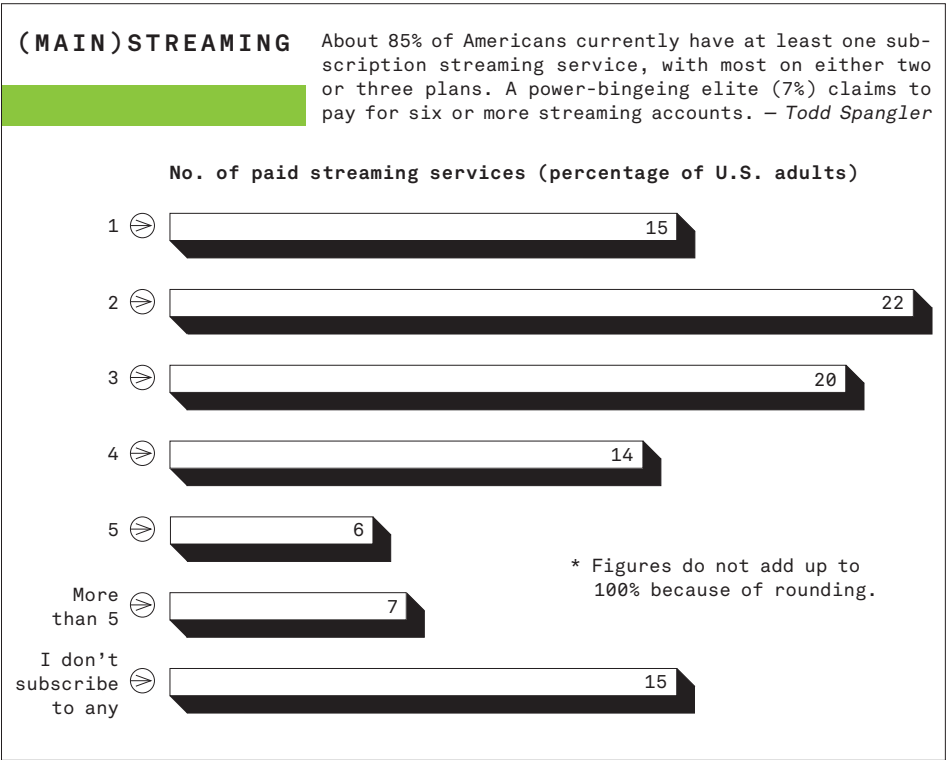
For Dowd, “Enemy of the People” is the latest project in a whirlwind series of exciting film, television and theater turns. The actor’s career has been in overdrive since she earned critical raves for the 2012 indie “Compliance.” Since then she’s appeared in “Hereditary” and “The Leftovers” and, to Emmy-winning effect, on “The Handmaid’s Tale.” She’s also earning Oscar buzz for her work in “Mass,” a drama about a meeting between the parents of the victim and the perpetrator of a mass shooting, which premiered to glowing reviews in Sundance and is scheduled for release this fall.

It must be hard to channel the all-encompassing grief required for “Mass” or the moral outrage needed for “Enemy of the People,” but Dowd says she learned an important lesson long ago.

“People always ask me about ‘Handmaid’s,’ how do you play someone so evil?” says Dowd. “It’s make-believe, babe. When I go home at night after a 16-hour day, you’re tired and you have your martini. The minute you start to suffer personally, you’ve got to stop.”



 <p>Jiwon Park has joined ABC Signature as VP of drama development. She had been head of film and TV for South Korea’s CJ ENM America/Studio Dragon Intl.</p>	 <p>Iris Knobloch, WarnerMedia’s president for France, Benelux, Germany, Austria and Switzerland, has exited the company. She joined Time Warner in 1996.</p>	 <p>Nicki Farag has been elevated to executive VP and general manager for Def Jam Recordings. She’s an 18-year veteran of its promotions department.</p>
 <p>Drew Tappon has signed with OWN as head of unscripted development, programming and specials. He reports to president Tina Perry.</p>	 <p>Brian Wright has left his role as head of overall deals for Netflix. He’d been with the streamer since 2014.</p>	 <p>Jordan Helman has been upped to head of scripted content for Hulu Originals. He’s been with Hulu since 2015.</p>
 <p>Linnea Hemenez has joined Starz as senior VP of international marketing for its international digital networks unit. She comes to the company from Spotify.</p>	 <p>Mary McColl will step down as executive director of Actors Equity Assn. when her contract expires in January. She’s led the union since 2011.</p>	 <p>Kevin Holiday has advanced to executive VP of Black music promotion for Atlantic Records. He’s been with Atlantic since 2004.</p>



Source: YouGov, May 2021, survey of 1,200 U.S. adults online



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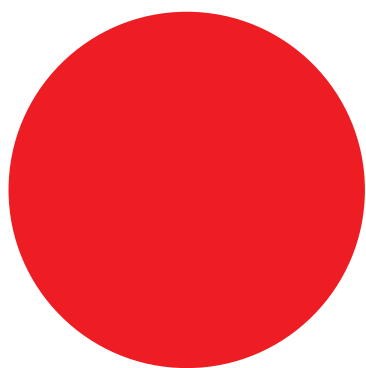
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Syria on Screen: 10 Years Later

A decade after the revolution-turned-civil war, four filmmakers who were on the front lines reflect on ongoing crisis

By Nick Vivarelli



Ten years after the Syrian revolution that rapidly turned into civil war, hundreds of thousands of people have been killed, tens of thousands have disappeared — believed to have been tortured and killed in government prisons — and an estimated 13 million, more than half of Syria's prewar population, have been forcibly displaced. Filmmakers on the front lines have played a crucial role in raising awareness beyond the din of TV news. Has it all been in vain?

"If we look at where we are now as Syrians, nobody can ignore the pain and the suffering and the death and destruction," says Waad Al-Kateab, co-director of "For Sama," the 2020 Oscar-nominated civil war diary that traveled around the world. But at the same time, she says, "For me and all the people that I know, we've never said: 'I wish it had never happened.'"

Al-Kateab mentions a friend who is still waiting to again see her father, who was kidnapped eight years ago. So "who am I to lose hope?" she says. Every day that the Syrian tragedy continues, "the regime is getting weaker. This means that we were right. We had to stand up and fight."

Veteran auteur Ossama Mohammed's poetic "Silvered Water, Syria Self-Portrait" screened at Cannes in 2014 and bore witness to the horrors of civil war using cellphone footage sent to him by hundreds of Syrians. "People were shouting, 'Freedom!' and filming the freedom," Mohammed says. "It was a revolution in cinema, images and expression." Ossama feels that, if nothing else, today the "consciousness of a multicultural Syria" has freed itself from the shackles of Bashar al-Assad, though the Syrian dictator remains firmly in place.

Hasan Kattan served as cinematographer of Oscar-winning short "The White Helmets" and assistant director for Oscar-nominated documentary "Last Men in Aleppo." "The Syrian uprising from day one led to something we had thought would be impossible: breaking silence against the dictatorship and the intelligence systems that had been ruling the country since the 1980s," he says.

As for longer-term prospects, Kattan hopes the uprising "will lead to something positive," but doesn't know what to expect because the revolution has led

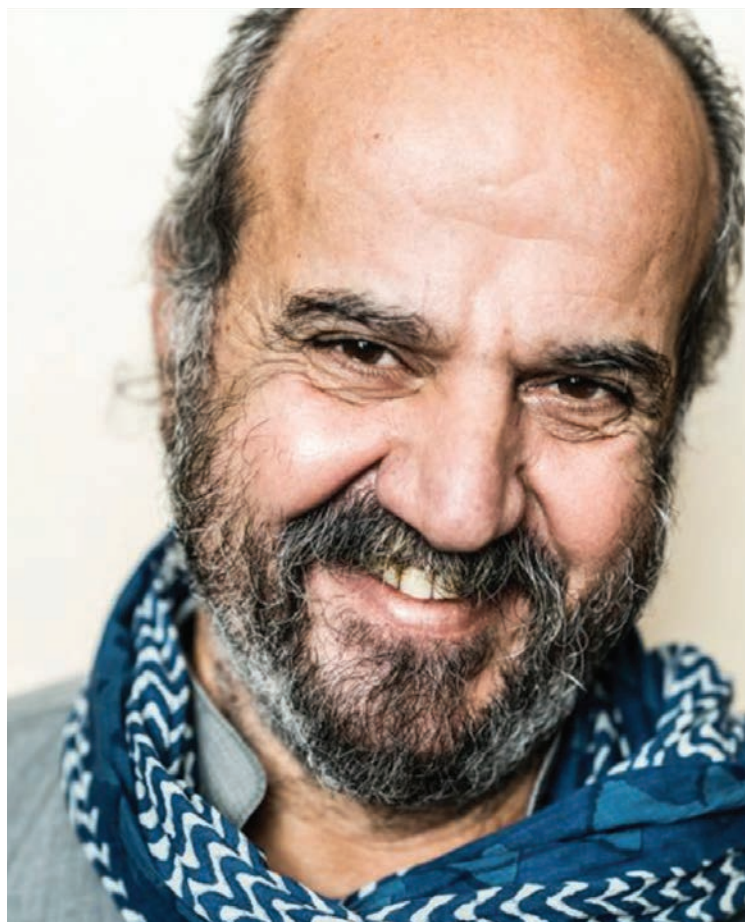
Syria to become a pawn in a complex game of geopolitical chess, where "each player is trying to obtain as much as possible, regardless of the Syrian people's interests."

Filmmaker and journalist Layla Abyad is the director of upcoming doc "5 Seasons of Revolution," which looks at four women in Damascus who were initially enthusiastic about the revolution's prospects in 2011 but whose paths soon diverged amid the ensuing conflict. "It's not the first revolution in history to turn into a war, and it's not the first not to succeed in gaining the change it was aiming for," at least not yet, Abyad says.

"I feel that we can still go anywhere from here. On the one hand, the way things look is extremely bleak — in terms of the country's economic situation, in terms of being practically occupied by a superpower [Russia] now, in terms of the regime becoming even more overtly oppressive," she adds. On the other hand, "what the next generation is going to think and do about this will pretty much determine everything, and it's too early to judge. People who were 10 years old when it all started, we still don't know what they think. Whether their families were from opposition or support, this is not a generation that will copy and paste what their fathers told them, or what the regime told them.

"Personally, I'm both curious and a bit fearful about what they will have to say, how they will see it," Abyad says. "But what I'm more interested in knowing is what they are going to do about it." 📌

Ossama Mohammed's 2014 "Silvered Water, Syria Self-Portrait" documented the war using the cellphone footage of hundreds of Syrians.





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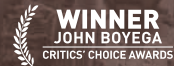
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OF IMMIGRANT DIGNITY
AND DETERMINATION"

The New York Times



'Rick and Morty' Merch Spreads Far and Wide

By Michael Schneider



As retail continues to reopen and consumers return to brick-and-mortar stores, "Rick and Morty" will be waiting for them. The Adult Swim animated series, which returns for Season 5 on June 20, has not only been a ratings juggernaut — it has turned into a merchandising machine.

"Rick and Morty" now boasts more than 150 global licensees — spanning fashion, accessories, home, toys and games — that generate hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue. Airing in more than 110 countries and dubbed in 26 languages, the show was basic cable's No. 1 comedy in 2019 and has won two Emmys for animated program, in 2018 and 2020.

"Rick and Morty" tie-dye T-shirts (that's Rick on the merch) are a popular item from Pull&Bear.



"That is surreal to see all the merch," says co-creator Justin Roiland. "That was my lifelong dream. I was like, if I can create a franchise that gets toys made, I could hang my hat up and walk off into the sunset, having accomplished my ultimate fantasy. And it happened."

Co-creator Dan Harmon credits Roiland for keeping a close eye early on in growing the show's merchandising imprint. "At the beginning stages, even when Adult Swim was saying, 'We do these things at a certain pace,' Justin brought an obsessiveness about merchandising and franchising to the table that we really benefited from, and he continued to be really hands-on."

Harmon is also pleased with how Adult Swim has handled the show's explosive popularity, which particularly took off in 2017, when characters like Pickle Rick and a joke about finding McDonald's obscure "Szechuan sauce" suddenly dominated pop culture. "The ways that they promote things and think about marketing 'Rick and Morty,' even in its success, are kind of miraculous," Harmon says.

Now the empire is too big for even Roiland to stay on top of, and he admits he'd love to be more involved than he is in the moment. Next up, he is excited to unveil a real, functional Butter Robot, which boasts sophisticated artificial intelligence just like Rick's butter-dispensing creation on the series. "When it comes out, oh boy, it's going to be one of the coolest things that we've ever made," he says. 🍷

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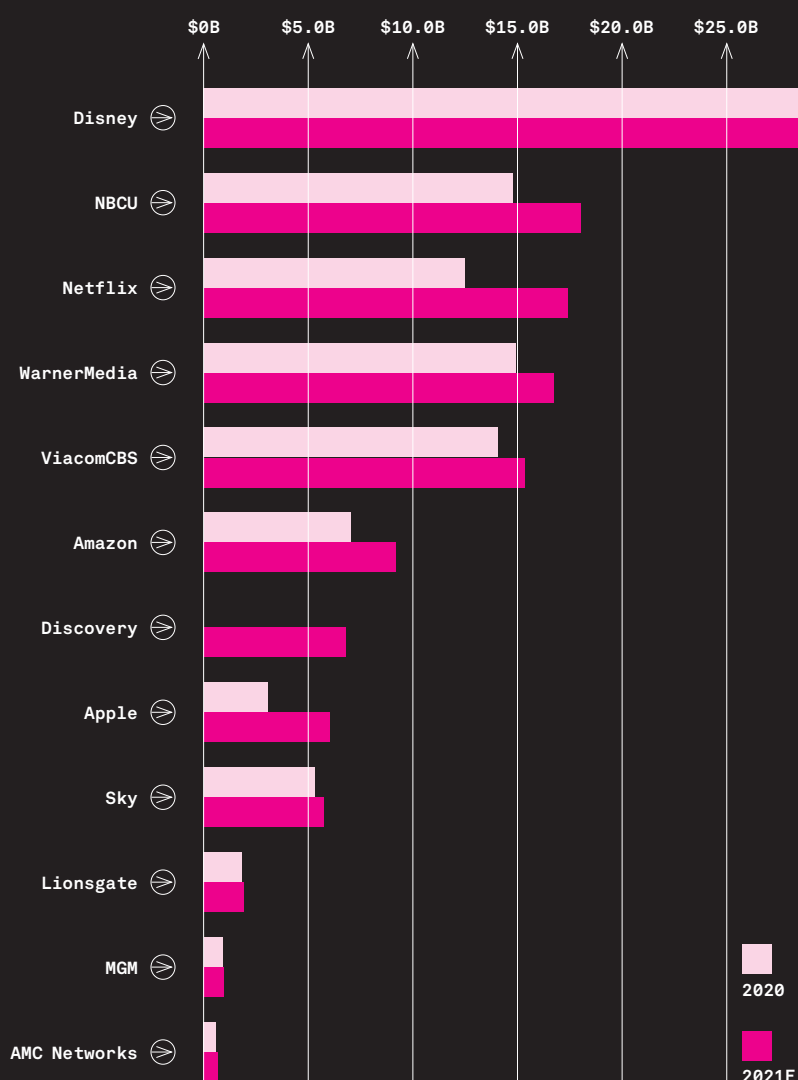
MAGIC KINGDOM REMAINS TOP SPENDER

By Kevin Tran

Disney will continue to outspend its competitors on content this year, with a budget of \$30.5 billion, Wells Fargo recently estimated. That's about 75% higher than the estimated budget of Netflix and 69% more than that of NBCU. Roughly \$13.2 billion of Disney's 2021 budget, which is estimated on a cash basis, is anticipated to go toward Disney's direct-to-consumer segment. While the rest of that money is earmarked for areas including sports rights and linear network programming, some of that spending still benefits Disney's streaming push: New linear network programming can eventually land on Disney Plus, for example. In the future, it makes sense for Disney to allocate more of its budget specifically to its streaming operations as consumers increasingly cut the cord.

For more data from VIP+, visit variety.com/vip.

Estimated Content Spending of Major Media and Tech Players



Sources: Wells Fargo, company reports

Note: Figures are on an estimated cash basis

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All Eyes on Tulsa

The centennial of one of the worst acts of domestic terrorism has inspired a slew of projects, but not without controversy

By Courtney M. Wills



"Tulsa Burning," LeBron James' "Dreamland: The Burning of Black Wall Street," PBS' "Tulsa: The Fire and the Forgotten" and NatGeo's "Rise Again: Tulsa and the Red Summer." In addition, several podcasts have drawn audiences to the story.

In the music community, Motown Records endeavored to commemorate the 100th anniversary with the May 28 release of the album "Fire in Little Africa." The brainchild of executive producer Stevie "Dr. View" Johnson of the Woody Guthrie Center and the Bob Dylan Center, the collection features dozens of Oklahoma-based artists, who came together to record over five days across six studios, several built in a mansion formerly owned by one of the massacre's masterminds, KKK leader Tate Brady.

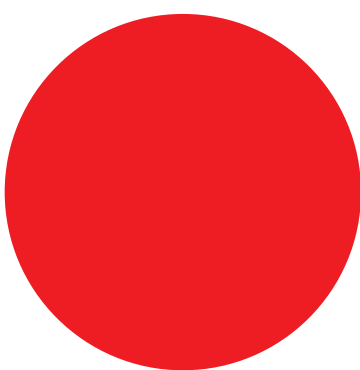
"We were undoing trauma," says Johnson. "Everybody knew it was a bigger purpose. The artists, some of whom are direct descendants of people who were massacred 100 years ago, came together and recognized this is our opportunity to tell the story authentically and truthfully."

Indeed, education takes different forms, such as the \$18 million,

7,000-square-foot Greenwood Rising History Center, which opened June 2. But not all of the commemorative events have gone smoothly: A June 4 concert headlined by John Legend and featuring a keynote by Stacey Abrams was canceled on May 29 due to "unexpected circumstances with entertainers and speakers." Sources tell *Variety* the Grammy winner backed out because of messaging with which he was not comfortable. Local reports cite a legal squabble over funds earmarked for living descendants: The commission organizing the concert purportedly pledged \$100,000 to each survivor along with a \$2 million reparations fund; attorneys for the survivors demanded that the stipend be raised to \$1 million each.

Writing on Twitter the night before the centennial, Legend remarked, "The road to restorative justice is crooked and rough — and there is space for reasonable people to disagree about the best way to heal the collective trauma of white supremacy. But one thing that is not up for debate — one fact we must hold with conviction — is that the path to reconciliation runs through truth and accountability."

The controversy, along with debates over whether white benefactors funding costly projects is more performative than substantive, has dinged Tulsa's effort to showcase its resurrection as an epicenter of music, art and entrepreneurship. Still, Johnson says, "If you come to Tulsa and see the Black people, everybody has a smile on their face right now. We have experienced the frustration, the pain, rage, but also the resilience."



"The truth about Tulsa ... was systematically ignored, perhaps because it was regarded as too honest, too painful a lesson for our young white ears," Tom Hanks wrote in a New York Times opinion piece on June 4 calling for schools to teach about the 1921 race massacre — one of the worst acts of domestic terrorism in U.S. history — to students as early as the fifth grade. "I find the

omission tragic, an opportunity missed, a teachable moment squandered," he continued.

In fact, instructing about the two-day attack, in which white mobs ravaged more than 1,500 Black-owned homes and businesses in the city's thriving Greenwood district (the area earned the moniker Black Wall Street), has largely fallen to the small screen. When HBO's "Watchmen" debuted in 2019 with an opening scene depicting the brutality of the Tulsa massacre, some viewers were shocked to learn it was based on an actual event.

Since then, series like "Lovecraft Country" have put the massacre on the national radar, and this month alone, more than 10 projects about it are airing. Among them: Stanley Nelson and Russell Westbrook's History channel doc

From top: Chrisma Jewels enjoys the music during a dedication ceremony for the Greenwood Rising Black Wall Street History Center in Tulsa on June 2; Motown marked the anniversary with the release of the album "Fire in Little Africa."



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VULTURE



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Studios Step Up Inclusion Efforts

Paramount measures DEI progress in marketing and distribution

By Matt Donnelly



Christine Benitez Torres, DeDe Brown and Jamal Salmon run the Project Action initiative.



It's been a year since the pandemic-stricken social uprising of summer 2020, a time when entertainment and media stepped forward with vows to do better in the wake of George Floyd's murder.


Though that manifested in a tidal wave of social media posts and sweeping pledges, the team at Paramount Pictures found that laser focus was the best way to immediately lift up its staff. Or, put simply, they decided to clean up their own house.

Project Action, a set of task forces aimed at fast and effective equity within the studio's marketing and distribution teams, was born from that moment and marks its first anniversary this week. While those groups may not be as sexy as development or production, they are gatekeepers of millions in P&A spending and creative influence in attracting audiences to their films.

"So much of this work tends to be boiling the ocean," says Christine

Benitez Torres, senior VP of global brand strategy and multicultural marketing, who runs Project Action with colleagues DeDe Brown and Jamal Salmon. "Our leadership wanted to hold us accountable. That's rare. Each one of our task forces have gotten doors open that take years to open."

Programs include Paramount Made, an executive mentorship program that has already seen cross-department promotions thanks to junior staffers' access to top brass, vendor diversification to prioritize POC-owned businesses, a representation team that reviews all creative materials put into the market, an inclusion speakers series and a unit devoted to equitable talent and intern recruiting.

"We came at it with a heart-forward mindset and vulnerability," says Brown. "It's been a joy to watch our colleagues step into leadership roles, help guide our process and weigh in. What we really want to see is that all these things become standard business. In a few years, we hopefully won't need task forces to pay attention to some of this stuff." 

“SO MUCH OF THIS WORK TENDS TO BE BOILING THE OCEAN.”
—CHRISTINE BENITEZ TORRES, PROJECT ACTION

Amazon sets 'playbook' for diversity goals

By Cynthia Littleton



Amazon Studios has put it in writing.

The company has formally established an inclusion policy that outlines its commitments to diversity, inclusion and equity throughout its operations. It has also created a detailed "playbook" with hiring and purchasing guidelines for the studio's creative collaborators.

The policies have been in development for more than two years, shepherded by Latasha Gillespie, head of DE&I for Amazon Studios. As top stars push for inclusion riders in deals and other advocacy efforts have emerged, "it was important to pull it together to have one comprehensive policy to articulate how we think about this and what 'good' looks like," Gillespie told *Variety*.

For Amazon Studios productions, the playbook outlines specific commitments and goals, including:

- Most productions should "ideally include a minimum 30% women and 30% members of an underrepresented racial/ethnic group." The "aspirational goal" will rise to 40% in 2022 and 50% in 2023.
- Casting actors whose identity (gender, gender identity, nationality, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability) aligns with the character.
- Aim to include one character from each of the following categories in speaking roles, with minimum 50% of these to be women: "LGBTQIA+, person with


a disability, and three regionally underrepresented race/ethnic/cultural groups," which can be represented by a single character.

• On productions, seek at least three bids from vendors or suppliers, one of which must be from a female-owned business and one from a minority-owned business.

The hiring and purchasing goals are an effort to leverage Amazon Studios' clout to make a dent in the systemic obstacles to greater participation in the industry among those from underrepresented backgrounds. The content-related requirements are an effort to ensure authenticity and a diversity of perspectives in programming.

"This is not a diversity initiative," says Albert Cheng, Amazon Studios' chief operating officer and co-head of TV. "These are policies that are ingrained in how we do business. This is our intentional effort to build equity and representation into every aspect of what we do."

Gillespie credits Amazon Studios head Jennifer Salke with ensuring that diversity is top of mind for executives at the earliest stage of every project. Amazon Studios will require its creative partners to submit reports that will allow them to track long-term progress.

"This is a moment for us to really apply systemic change," Gillespie says. "This was an opportunity for us to do a deep dive and look at the systemic changes we want to see. I'm super hopeful that as an industry we are all committed to that." 

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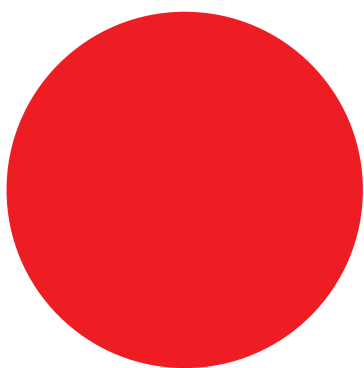
David MAKES Man

The Journey Continues
TUESDAY JUNE 22 9|8c OWN

The Kings Get 'Evil,' and So Does Paramount Plus

The show's creators worked to re-edit Season 2 when it moved to the streamer — more cursing!

By Kate Aurthur



Last month, Robert and Michelle King, creators of the supernatural thriller "Evil," were anticipating that CBS would announce at its upfront that the show's COVID-19-delayed second season would be on the network's fall schedule. Then there was a sudden change in plans: Instead, "Evil" would move to Paramount Plus, ViacomCBS' rebooted streaming service.

David Stapf, the president of CBS Television Studios, where the Kings have a production deal, told

them it was good news, Michelle King recalls: This way, "Evil" wouldn't have to wait until the fall, it was a chance to "broaden the audience," and it would allow them to put the show out "in a premier way." The Kings are no strangers to Paramount Plus, after all. When "The Good Fight" made its debut in 2017, it was the first original scripted series on what was then called CBS All Access.

"We're just the silly creatives that are like, 'OK, guide us along — tell us why this is a good idea!'" Robert King says.

Now, their two shows will premiere within days of each other, with "Evil" Season 2 coming June 20 and the fifth season of "The Good Fight" premiering on June 24.

The switch to Paramount Plus certainly makes sense to the Kings, given "Evil's" sensibilities — and considering that when the show went to Netflix in October,

there was an explosion of excitement on social media. "Everybody, including us, had been saying, 'Well, we're sort of doing a streaming show on the network. Isn't that peculiar?'" Michelle King says.

That was true budgetwise too, because of the show's visual effects, the creators say. "We were an expensive show for CBS," according to Robert King.

"Evil" revolves around Catholic Church investigator David Acosta (Mike Colter), a soon-to-be priest who's a true believer, and forensic psychologist Kristen Bouchard (Katja Herbers), who's a skeptic. They assess potentially demonic possessions, with a will-they-or-won't-they twist — and Kristen herself may be, uh, possessed. Moving to Paramount Plus means that the show's sexual undercurrents can be less subtextual, they can swear, and they're not, as Robert King puts it, "bound

into that 42-minute straitjacket."

"Creatively, it's a godsend," he says.

The Kings assembled the "Evil" writers' room over Zoom in spring 2020, after production on "The Good Fight" shut down because of COVID. With most of its episodes written because of that early start, "Evil" began shooting its 13-episode season in New York City in the fall.

Despite its plots being driven by, as Robert King puts it, "ghost stories, and stories you would tell around the campfire," the show will also be informed by current events, as is generally the case in the pair's projects — though it's sidestepping the pandemic, for the most part.

There will be a police-focused episode informed by the murder of George Floyd, and David will face racism in the church, they say. And the evil Leland (Michael Emerson) will taunt David, saying, "Why would you want to be part of this racist institution?" according to Michelle King.

The Kings were in the middle of editing Episode 5 when they got the Paramount Plus news, so they've re-added scenes they'd cut from the first episodes because of length — and also edited in things "to do with language and sexuality," Robert King says.

"We had footage that was a little like, 'Oh fuck, we'll never get this past standards and practices!'" he continues.

Michelle King says: "We are now editing with Paramount Plus in mind. So it will feel like a streaming show."

"It's been tough to do sin with network standards," she says with a laugh. 🍷

Stars of Upcoming TV Premieres



Rose Byrne
Physical
Vscore = 71
Her number is ready for a workout.



Miranda Cosgrove
iCarly
Vscore = 63
Maybe you can go home again.



Jaime King
Black Summer
Vscore = 53
With the start of Season 2, her prospects are undead.



Christine Ko
Dave
Vscore = 36
This is no rap: Her score has room to improve.



Katja Herbers stars as Kristen Bouchard on "Evil."

CAN WE TALK
ABOUT CHANGE?

CAN WE TALK
ABOUT ACTIVISM?



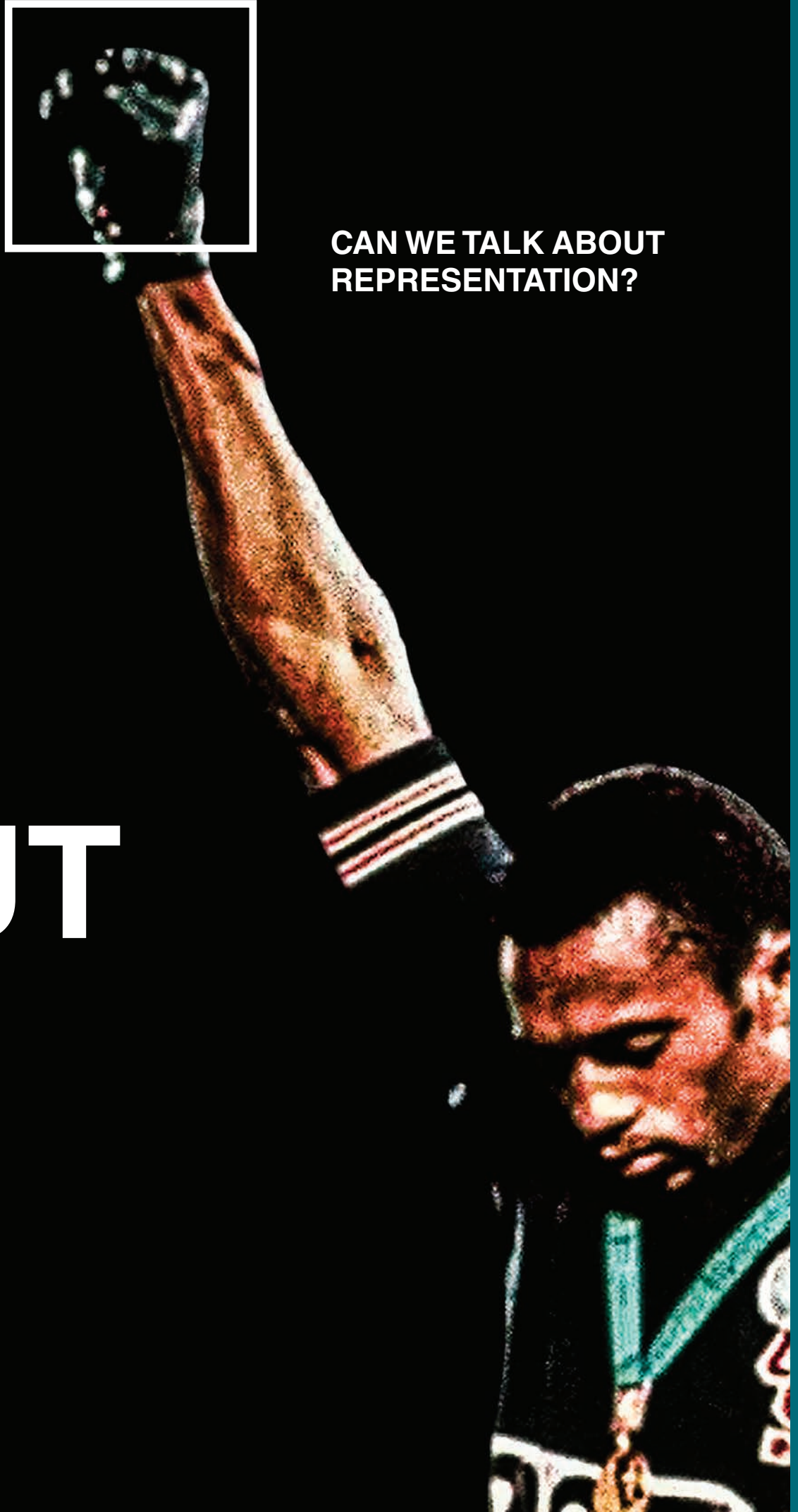
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Inclusion Doesn't Just Mean More of The Rock

The Asian American and Pacific Islander population is too diverse to be represented by one actor

By Michael Schneider



AWARDS CIRCUIT

Let me start this column off by saying, I love Dwayne Johnson. I mean, who doesn't love The Rock? We've been smelling what he's been cooking for nearly 25 years.

And yet, it was quite deflating to see the recent report "The Prevalence and Portrayal of Asian and Pacific Islanders Across 1,300 Films," which found that just 44 of those films featured an API lead or co-star. And in particular, that one-third of those 44 was just one person: You guessed it, The Rock.

I think Johnson would be the

first to tell you that he's just one person with one perspective, and that when it comes to on-screen portrayals, he can't begin to represent the mixed plate that is the Asian American and Pacific Islander population in the United States.

"I can't stress enough that Asian American Pacific Islander culture is not one size fits all; it's not a monolith," says Cashmere Agency chief marketing officer Rona Mercado. "Each culture, ethnicity has a different point of view, different life experiences, different things to celebrate. And the types of stories that each of them have are so rich and just equally as important."

Similarly, the revived "One Day at a Time" series was a snapshot of a Cuban American family in Los Angeles, and just one slice of the Latino experience. But with still so few TV shows or films exploring these communities, it had to represent something more — and that's unfair to the show and to many Latinos wait-

ing for their own story to be told. Every few years it feels like primetime has finally caught up to the population, with shows like "George Lopez" and "Ugly Betty" in the 2000s, and "Jane the Virgin," "Cristela" and "One Day at a Time" in the 2010s. And then they go away and we're back at the drawing board. This year at the Emmys, besides Rosie Perez ("The Flight Attendant") and Lin-Manuel Miranda ("Hamilton"), there aren't many top contenders of Latin descent. And that number is even smaller for API actors.

Still, I'm encouraged that we're getting there. In TV, although "Fresh off the Boat" is over, Netflix's "Never Have I Ever" and Comedy Central's "Awkwafina Is Nora From Queens" — both ineligible for Emmys this year but expected to be back in the running for 2022 — are comedies telling funny and relatable stories while faithfully depicting the unique lives of their Asian American leads.

"Young Rock" is just one of the many projects on Dwayne Johnson's plate.

Upcoming, I'm looking forward to seeing Disney Plus depict a real slice of Hawaii in the "Doogie Howser" update "Doogie Kamealoha, M.D." And I was excited to see the news that comedian Jo Koy is developing a sitcom about a Filipino American nurse and his family. The Filipino population is the second-largest Asian American community in the country, yet I can count on one hand the number of Filipino American characters we've seen on TV.

Now back to Johnson. His NBC sitcom "Young Rock" includes a personal look back at three stages of his life, including a standout performance by Stacey Leilua as his mom and a childhood in Hawaii that has been lovingly re-created by Johnson and executive producer Nahnatchka Khan (who grew up in the islands and knows exactly how to authentically depict them). I'm happy to smell what the Rock is cooking — but hoping we can get a taste of more stories in the TV kitchen. 🍷



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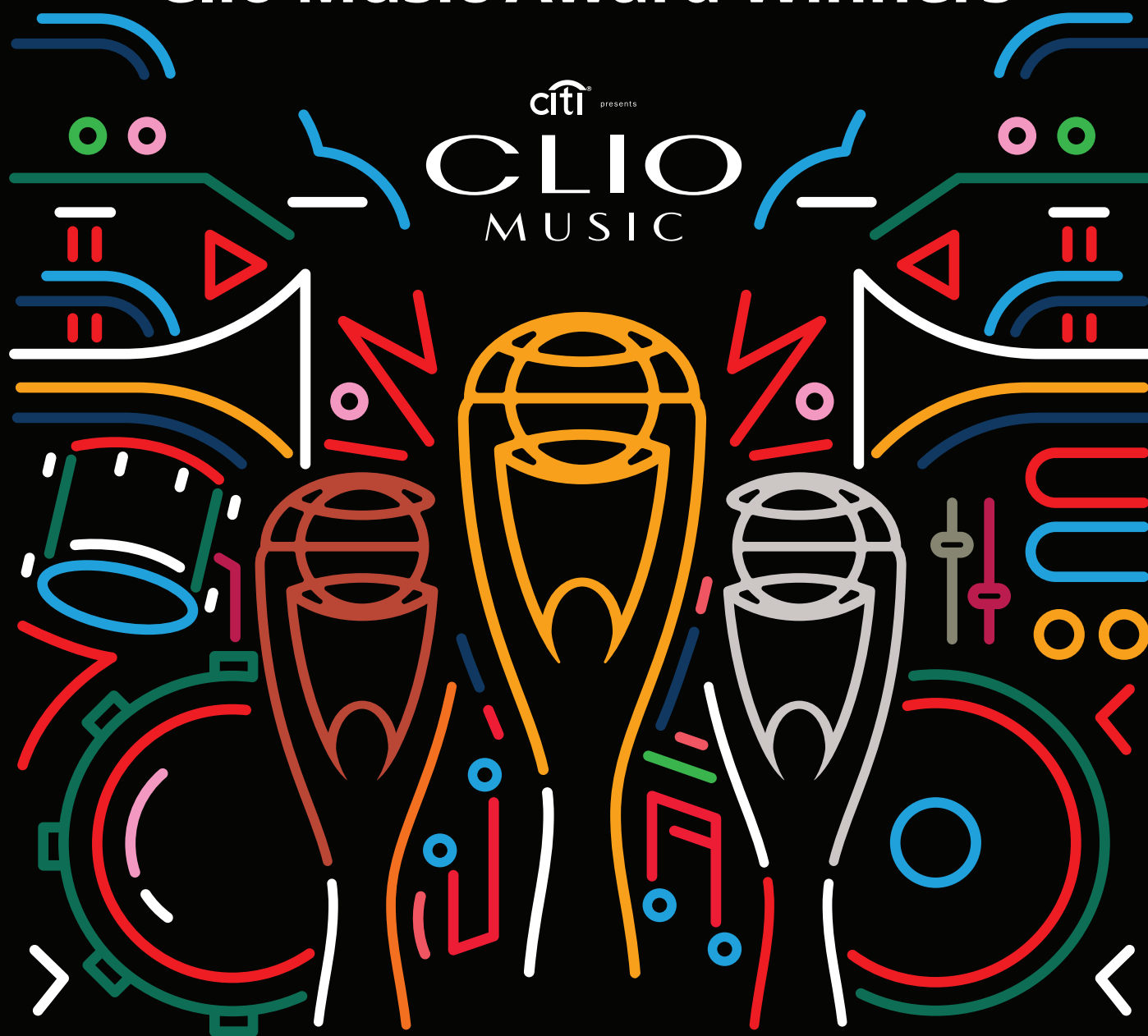


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OUR TOWN

JUST FOR VARIETY

by Marc Malkin



“Pose” star **Mj Rodriguez** (1) is weighing in on **Caitlyn Jenner** (2) after the Republican gubernatorial hopeful in California declared that she thinks allowing trans athletes to compete according to their gender identity in high school sports “just isn’t fair.” “It’s unfortunate that she’s one of our sisters saying these things,” Rodriguez tells me on the latest episode of the “Just for Variety” podcast. “But with that, I love her from a distance. I don’t want to spew any hate on her because she is human. But I do think there needs to probably be a learning curve. ... That’s something that she probably has to deal with. I think she’ll figure it out on her own when there’s a depletion of the community that probably just doesn’t want to deal with her.”

...

Vanessa Williams (3) was set to open in “City of Angels” in the West End when the world went into lockdown. After producers tried unsuccessfully to record a cast album and stage concerts during COVID, it seems the show won’t survive. “They have to come up with \$1.6 million to revamp the show,” Williams told me at the Roundabout Theatre Company gala. “It’s a big, sexy show and it’s gorgeous, but they have to get more money.”

...

EXCLUSIVE: Vice World News will launch “Transnational” on June 24. The six-episode series, available on Vice’s YouTube channel and social platforms, features trans correspondents reporting stories about the trans community from around the world. **Vivek Kemp** is the executive producer; **Courtney Brooks** is senior producer; and **Sarah Burke, Hendrik Hinz, Alyza Enriquez, Dan Ming, Trey Strange** and **Daisy Wardell** are series producers.

...

Congrats to **Lindzi Scharf**! On June 22, the veteran entertainment journalist will launch The Retaility, a lifestyle website about bold-faced names and “the things with which they surround themselves.” The debut kicks off with **Jordana Brewster**, hairstylists **Ted Gibson** and **Jason Backe**, beauty entrepreneur **Josie Maran** and painter **Alexandra Nechita**. “The site was founded with the belief that an aspirational lifestyle shouldn’t be limited to what you own — it should also relate to the life you lead and the challenges you overcame to be who and where you are today,” Scharf, who is married to *Variety* photographer **Michael Buckner**, tells me.

...

If you’re in L.A., you must check out “**Andy Warhol: Photo Factory**,” an exhibit at NeueHouse Hollywood featuring more than 120 images shot by the late artist (4). “My work for the past 15 years has been to try to elevate Warhol photography to the level that people understand it is not only on equal footing with all his other practices but also instrumental, fundamental and foundational to everything else that he did,” co-curator **James R. Hedges IV** told me during a recent exhibit tour.

...

To celebrate the reopening of New York and L.A., “Just for Variety” is asking industry leaders and marquee names to recommend their favorite restaurants. Here’s **Billy Porter** (5): “Roscoe’s House of Chicken ‘N Waffles. I’m just such a stereotype right now, [but] it’s the best fried chicken — and the waffles. There’s full-on crack in those waffles!”

(1)



(2)



(3)



(4)



(5)



Arianne Phillips Gives Back to the Academy Museum

By Lesley McKenzie



As a member of the Academy and a three-time Oscar nominee for her work in films including “Walk the Line,” “W.E.” and “Once Upon a Time in Hollywood,” costume designer **Arianne Phillips** (above) makes no secret of her excitement — and support — for the opening of the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures on Sept. 30.

“Whether you’re a film fan or a filmmaker, to be able to learn about the artistry of filmmaking and all the artists is something that’s an extension of my purpose,” says Phillips, who has donated a cache of costumes to the institution, including a prototype dress for **Reese Witherspoon** from “Walk the Line” and an array of pieces from “Hedwig and the Angry Inch.” “I actually owned all the costumes from ‘Hedwig,’ which was part of the deal I made, because it was made on a prayer and a dime,” she explains.

Phillips’ enthusiasm for the museum doesn’t stop there: As the co-founder of Red Carpet Advocacy, an organization that brings together fashion and philanthropy, the artist has teamed up with online retailer Yoox on a capsule collection of Hollywood-inspired graphic T-shirts, with 100% of proceeds benefiting the museum.

The costume designer has also been tapped to create merchandise — including a bespoke “Wizard of Oz”-themed capsule collection in collaboration with Moschino’s **Jeremy Scott** — for the museum’s store. Phillips and fellow costume designers **Ruth E. Carter**, **Sharen Davis**, **Sandy Powell** and **Arjun Bhasin** are designing a collection of T-shirts that takes cues from the film. Says Phillips: “It’s so holistic to be able to give back to the industry that inspires us.”



From top: A look from “Hedwig and the Angry Inch”; Arianne Phillips X Yoox T-shirts, \$85 each; sketch of “The Wizard of Oz” ruby slipper purse, part of a collaboration between Moschino and Phillips

Newborns & Nuptials



Frankie Grande and Hale Leon

are engaged. “I am so happy my best friend said he wanted to spend the rest of his life with me,” Grande announced on Instagram. “Playing games and making me laugh forever! Speaking of games... I proposed IN VIRTUAL REALITY! HE FREAKED OUT!” Grande is an entertainment personality; Leon is an actor.

Scott Feinstein and Kimberly LeDuc

are married. The wedding, officiated by Feinstein’s best friend **J.R. Johnson**, took place in Newport, R.I., on June 5. The couple began dating while working together at 42West, where Feinstein is now an executive vice president. LeDuc is an account manager with SourceCode Communications.

Brittany O’Grady and Ben Huyard

are engaged. “When a man’s heart is full of gold, it’s easy to say yes. I love you dearly. I love you best friend,” she announced on Instagram. O’Grady is an actor; Huyard works in marketing.

Tom Welling and wife Jessica Rose Lee

welcomed their second child on June 6. Their newborn son, **Rocklin Von**, joins 2-year-old son **Thomson Wylde**. Welling is an actor best known for starring in The CW’s “Smallville”; Lee is the founder of equestrian lifestyle brand Saddle Club.



Candice Ashton and Robert Valenziano

welcomed their first child, **Elle Marie Valenziano**, on May 18 in Santa Monica. Their daughter’s middle name honors Ashton’s mother, **Ann Marie**. Ashton is the vice president of publicity at Hulu; Valenziano is a corporate real estate executive at Rivian.

Compiled by Haley Bosselman

Mark Ronson and Grace Gummer are engaged. He confirmed their engagement on his The Fader Uncovered podcast. Ronson is a music producer; Gummer is an actor.

Post-Pandemic Pampering

By Lesley McKenzie

From cutting-edge treatments to a \$150,000 yearlong wellness extravaganza, two Hollywood-beloved spas offer lockdown antidotes.

Surya Spa, Santa Monica Proper Hotel



•→ The recently opened Santa Monica outpost of ayurvedic guru to the stars **Martha Soffer's** Surya Spa brings together ancient wellness principles and beauty treatments, cleanses, culinary classes, yoga and meditation.

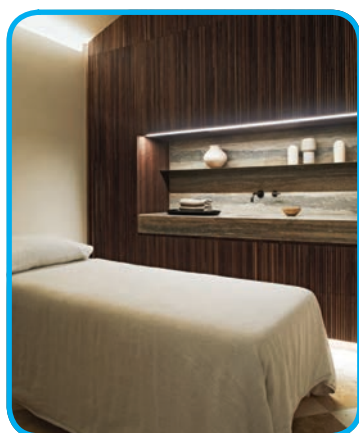
Clients: Gwyneth Paltrow, Kate Hudson, Beck

What to expect: The Kelly Wearstler-designed 3,000-square-foot flagship consists of six treatment rooms, a meditation space, patios and lounges.

Post-pandemic pick-me-up: The Abhyanga massage and Chakra Light Balancing with Shirodara (\$375), featuring a four-handed massage with herbal oils, followed by a color therapy session with illuminated crystals that match the vibrational frequencies of your chakras, balancing your body's energy points. The finishing touch: Shirodara, a calming stream of warm oils poured over the forehead.

Over-the-top: The One-Year Total Transformation private program (\$150,000), a holistic and restorative experience with four 10-day stays at the Proper, a retreat in Hawaii, and more. 700 Wilshire Blvd., suryaspa.com

Facile Dermatology + Boutique



•→ The new flagship of co-founders **Dr. Nancy Samolitis** and **Danielle Nadick Levy's** all-in-one medical practice, spa and boutique offers everything from cryofacials, Botox and fillers to state-of-the-art lasers and platelet-rich plasma therapies.

Clients: Lucy Hale, Mandy Moore, Busy Philipps

What to expect: The location — imagined by Studio Life/Style — boasts four sleek treatment rooms, two aesthetician rooms and a retail space packed with a curation of products from brands including Biologique Recherche and Augustinus Bader.

Post-pandemic pick-me-up: A laser treatment such as CoolPeel (starting at \$750), a results-oriented CO2 laser which, unlike its predecessors, requires little to no recovery time, paired with a custom facial (starting at \$175) 10 days later — a potent combination ideal for reducing sun spots and fine lines while clearing up mask acne.

Over-the-top: The skin-tightening microneedle and PRP treatment (\$4,800 for four sessions), designed to inject healing plasma from your own blood back into your skin. 8457 Melrose Pl., facileskin.com

From left: Martha Soffer at Surya Spa; inside Facile Dermatology + Spa's Melrose Place location.

MUST ATTEND

June 16

- The Paul Taylor Dance Company stages the West Coast premiere of Kyle Abraham's "Only the Lonely," along with other work, at The Music Center's Dance at Dusk at Jerry Moss Plaza in downtown Los Angeles.

June 17

- Chanel and Tribeca Festival host a 25th anniversary screening of Julian Schnabel's "Basquiat" at New York's Museum of Modern Art.

June 18

- Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon celebrate the 30th anniversary of "Thelma & Louise" with a drive-in screening and Q&A at the Greek Theatre. Benefits the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank.

June 19

- Questlove, Gladys Knight, Marilyn McCoo and Billy Davis Jr. celebrate Juneteenth at a screening of "Summer of Soul" at the Richard Rodgers Amphitheater at Marcus Garvey Park in Harlem.

June 19



- Alec Baldwin, Amy Sedaris and director Tom McGrath walk the carpet at the premiere of "The Boss Baby: Family Business" at The SVA Theatre in NYC.



Questlove

EXPOSURE

June 9
Tribeca Festival
Opening Night

United Palace, Washington Heights,
New York

Warner Bros. screened **Jon M. Chu's** "In the Heights" where it began — in the neighborhood that takes center stage in **Lin-Manuel Miranda's** musical. "I've never been to a premiere so literally close to home," Miranda told *Variety*. "It's thrilling. This movie, this musical, is a love letter to this neighborhood. You could hear the Mister Softee truck as we speak. That means the piragua guy is not far behind." The red carpet was the first major movie event since the pandemic. "I still can't believe that we're here," said **Melissa Barrera**, who plays Vanessa. WarnerMedia Studios chairman-CEO **Ann Sarnoff** said, "We're here. We've arrived, coming out of the dark and into the light. It feels like the timing is perfect. It's an amazing summer movie."



Marc Anthony and Anthony Ramos



WarnerMedia's Ann Sarnoff with Jon M. Chu



Jimmy Smits and Wanda De Jesus



Anthony Bregman, Mara Jacobs and Scott Sanders



Tribeca Festival's Jane Rosenthal



Daphne Rubin-Vega



Dr. Luz Towns-Miranda and Luis A. Miranda Jr.



Melissa Barrera



Warner Bros.' Toby Emmerich with Lin-Manuel Miranda and Kevin McCormick



Leslie Grace

Anthony/Ramos, Rosenthal, Barrera, Grace: Jamie McCarthy/Getty Images for Tribeca Festival (4); Sarnoff/Chu, Smits/De Jesus, Bregman/Jacobs/Sanders, Rubin-Vega, Miranda/Miranda Jr., Emmerich/Miranda/Miranda Jr., Emmerich/Miranda/Miranda Jr., Emmerich/Miranda/Miranda Jr.

June 7

Roundabout Theatre Company Gala

Central Park, New York City

The 56-year-old performing arts organization celebrated the return of Broadway — and raised more than \$3.1 million — with “Curtain Up, Light the Lights!,” an evening that included a concert by **Jane Krakowski** and appearances by **Tina Fey**, **Alec Baldwin**, **Tituss Burgess**, **Adrienne Warren** and **Vanessa Williams**. Fey recalled how Krakowski, in 2016, “was famously dragged across the stage in ‘She Loves Me’ while doing a split. ‘Not by Scott Rudin,’ Fey cracked. ‘It was part of the play.’” During the live auction, one patron paid \$100,000 for a dinner for 14 on the set of the upcoming play “Birthday Candles” with star **Debra Messing** and Roundabout artistic director and CEO **Todd Haimes**.

Tituss Burgess and Jane Krakowski



Tina Fey



Barry and Jill Lafer with Fiona and Eric Rudin



Jeanne-Marie Christman and Todd Haimes



Alec Baldwin



June 12

Disney & Marvel FYC Event

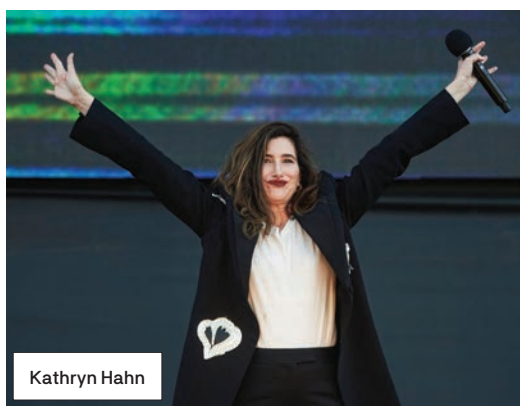
Rose Bowl, Pasadena

Drive-in screenings “WandaVision” and “The Falcon and the Winter Soldier” were followed by Q&As with the cast and creatives of the superhero series. “I’m very, very tickled and moved by it,” “WandaVision” star **Kathryn Hahn** said of fans’ love for the show. “It’s been a real, real beautiful ride. ... [The show] happened to magically arrive at a moment when we all needed a time, we needed a space, to gather in front of the family hearth, which was the television, on a weekly basis, and it kind of connected generations. It just unfolded that way.”

Marvel’s Kevin Feige with Malcolm Spellman, Kari Skogland and Carl Lumbly



Kathryn Hahn



June 9

Portraits of Pride

Pendry, West Hollywood

Los Angeles Confidential magazine toasted cover star **Andrew Rannells** as part of its fourth annual Pride celebration. “Last year sort of came and went without much fanfare,” the “Prom” actor told *Variety*. “This is the first event that I have been to in quite some time and there was a lot of finger-crossing about would things still fit, do I know how to speak to people, so I feel a little rusty.” “The Flight Attendant” star **Griffin Matthews** said he became a “student” during the pandemic: “I don’t like to pretend that I know everything just because I’m a part of this community. I learned a lot. I learned a lot from my trans brothers and sisters this year. I learned so much about humanity.”




Griffin Matthews



Andrew Rannells and Tuc Watkins





HER MOMENT

AFTER GRAMMYS, AN OSCAR AND A SUPER BOWL APPEARANCE, THE YOUNG SINGER IS SEEING HOW FAR HER VOICE CAN CARRY

● **BY
JEM ASWAD
AND
JAZZ TANGCAY**

● **Photographs
by
Arielle
Bobb-Willis**



In a way, it's fitting that "I Can't Breathe" — H.E.R.'s Grammy-winning song that, as much as any other, has become an anthem for the Black Lives Matter movement — was written and performed by a woman who declares that she is "equally Filipino as I am Black."

A powerful, slow and mournful hymn with a rhythm that owes more than a little to Bill Withers' classic "Ain't No Sunshine," it is an impassioned cry that begins as a lament and ends defiantly, with H.E.R.'s delivery shifting from anguished soul to stentorian speechifying. It's a sentiment of outrage, desperation and exasperation against the senselessness of racism, from an artist who is a member of three of the most oppressed groups of human beings in American history: African Americans, Asians and women.

We breathe the same and we bleed the same, but still, we don't see the same

Be thankful we are God-fearing because we do not seek revenge ...

To say all men are created equal in the eyes of God but disparage a man based on the color of his skin

Do not say you do not see color

When you see us, see us

We can't breathe.

The song, written with H.E.R.'s frequent collaborators Tiara Thomas and D'Mile (Dernst Emile II), was in response to the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin and the wrenching race-based tragedies of early last year. But the sentiment is sadly mutable and also speaks to virtually every instance of "the theft and bloodshed that made America the land of the free," as the lyrics convey.

As she accepted her first Oscar in April for "Fight for You," a song written about another human being killed by the forces of racism — Black Panther Fred Hampton, the subject of the film "Judas and the Black Messiah" — H.E.R. said during her gracious, impromptu acceptance speech, "Musicians, filmmakers: I believe we have an opportunity and a responsibility to tell the truth, and to write history the way that it was and how it connects us to today, and what we see going on in the world today.

"Knowledge is power, music is power, and as long as I'm standing, I'm always going to fight for us. I'm always going to fight for my people and fight for what's right. That's what music does, and that's what storytelling does."

Black Music Action Coalition co-chairman Binta Niambi Brown says, "I consider H.E.R. to be one of the strongest voices when it comes to Black liberation and social justice in America. Her songs and actions are so compelling and so necessary, and it's clear that they're coming from deep within her."

Yet being a spokesperson wasn't always in the cards for the woman born Gabriella Sarmiento Wilson on June 27, 1997, in Vallejo, Calif., although the issues she addresses were always part of her life. Her mother shared stories about her upbringing in the Philippines, and her father, an iron worker by day and a musician by night, spoke of growing up Black in Arkansas. But even in the polyglot Bay Area, she stood out.

"I got that a lot going to the grocery store: People would say, 'That's your mom?' [because] she has straight hair and I've got curly hair, and my skin color is tan," H.E.R. tells *Variety*. "It was tough accepting myself and understanding that you can be both things. People like to put labels and boxes on you and try to say, 'But you're Black,' or you're this or that. Why does it have to be one thing? Why can't I be all of these things?"

Those issues were thrown into dramatic relief at school. "I was too Asian for the Black kids or too Black for the Filipino kids. In middle school, kids are mean and everyone is brutal. It's about fitting in." But, she concludes, "when I got to my senior year, it became cool. I'm proud of it now — my parents are from two completely different worlds and I think it makes me more well-rounded — but there was always that difficult and awkward 'I'm a little different; I don't know how to feel.'"

At 23, the remarkably talented singer, songwriter, producer and multi-instrumentalist, who has won four Grammys and an Oscar — just an Emmy and a Tony away from an "EGOT" — is more than a little different, and hopes young women see her as an example of what is possible. "It means the world that there is another girl out there who [sees her success] and thinks, 'I can do that too,'" says H.E.R.

And her ambitions don't stop there: A former child actress, she has serious thespian goals and is also working on an unspecified Broadway score, so those Tony and Emmy Awards may not be far out of reach. "I ain't gonna put a deadline on it," she jokes. "Maybe before I'm 30. I've got seven years."

WHILE

H.E.R. stands for "Having Everything Revealed," perhaps a more accurate moniker would add "... Eventually." Mystique plays a big role in how she presents herself as an artist.

The cover artwork of "Vol. 1," her 2016 debut EP, depicted her only in silhouette; advance copies were sent to press and radio with just a song list and no supporting information. (While she soon revealed her face, she usually wears shades.) Her early releases are refreshing collections of "real" R&B with a multigenerational appeal — combining the Prince, Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, Curtis Mayfield and Bob Marley that this self-described "soul baby" was raised on, along with Lauryn Hill, Alicia Keys and the hip-hop that shaped her generation.

But guitar-slinging R&B artists are a rarity these days — let alone a female shredder — and her new album, "Back of My Mind," reveals more of the wide range of styles that her father played with his bands and she heard from friends. Like Prince (another rare guitar-slinging R&B superstar), she's been unveiling those influences gradually, after choosing to keep her sound tightly focused on her first releases.

"I didn't wanna pull out all my tricks at once," she says. "My first few [releases] were just a small piece of who I am musically, and it was a matter of time before I could reveal others. I've always been a huge fan of Coldplay and Led Zeppelin and Radiohead and alternative and rock and blues, but it wasn't until this album that I started digging into those other elements and bringing them to R&B."





Her longtime manager, Jeff Robinson, concurs. “Every time we’re in the car, I make her drive and I sit in the back seat, like she’s an Uber driver — I told her it builds character!” he laughs. “But that means she’s in control of the car radio, and every time she’s playing something different, from world music to Santana to the Grateful Dead. With [‘Back of My Mind’], she wanted to do an R&B album; next she might want to do a rock album — she was just in with [Coldplay frontman] Chris Martin. They were jamming on records together. She’s genre-less and wants to stay that way.”

Five days after he spoke those words, H.E.R. and country singer Chris Stapleton performed on the CMT awards, trading verses and guitar licks on her new song, “Hold On,” in a fiery fusion of blues and soul ... on a country awards show. “H.E.R. is without a doubt one of the greatest singer/ songwriter/ guitar players on the planet earth. Fact,” Stapleton posted on Instagram.

And while she has certainly tackled the nuances of sexual politics in songs like 2018’s “Against Me,” the sentiments in “I Can’t Breathe” and “Fight for You” were the first time she has publicly addressed social justice so explicitly in song.

“Lyrically, [the new album] is not just one thing either,” she continues. “It’s a lot of different emotions and perspectives and things I’ve felt in the past few years. Now that people have entered into my world and have a better understanding, I can give more.”

VALLEJO

has spawned multiple generations of musicians, ranging from Johnny Otis and Sly Stone to local hip-hop titans like E-40 and Mac Dre, all of whom helped shape the Bay Area’s vibrant music scene. Against that backdrop, the young H.E.R. learned piano as a toddler, sitting in her father’s lap, and her talent revealed itself unusually early.

Encouraged by her parents, she played with fellow elementary school-age musicians from the area — including a sort of proto-supergroup with R&B singer Kehlani, Dylan Wiggins (son of D’Wayne Wiggins of Tony! Toni! Toné!, who has gone on to work with the Weeknd, Logic, John Legend and many others) and, briefly and possibly apocryphally, Zendaya. In a full-circle moment, Zendaya presented H.E.R.’s Oscar in April and could be seen jumping up and down with excitement after she made the announcement.

“We were very, very young, like 7 years old,” H.E.R. recalls of that early group. “At first it was just me on bass and Dylan on keys, and then Kehlani started singing with us. We called the group Poplyfe — from Prince’s song ‘Pop Life,’ which we used to cover — and at one point Zendaya was supposed to be in the group, but I don’t remember what happened.”

She started performing with her dad’s band, and over the next couple of years opportunities began to open up, particularly in New York. As a preteen Gabi Wilson, she made her acting debut in the Nickelodeon TV movie “School Gyrls.” At around the same time, she sang at a kids’ showcase at Harlem’s legendary Apollo Theater and performed on the “Today” show, covering “No One” by Alicia Keys — who she calls her “No. 1 role model” — and showing a level of poise that would be remarkable for someone years older. Yet she says this high-profile attention never struck her as unusual.

“I don’t know if I really realized it,” she says now. “When you’re a kid, you’re just like, ‘OK, cool.’ You know, ‘I did the “Today” show, my parents were with me, and I was having fun singing.’ And the next day I was back on the playground.”

After a brief stint with Will Smith’s Overbrook Entertainment, she joined forces with Robinson’s MBK Entertainment, which launched Keys’ career and oversaw it for more than 15 years, and she’s been with MBK ever since.

“The other child prodigy I worked with was 14-year-old Alicia,

and the similarities were incredible,” Robinson recalls. “They both spoke like Rhodes scholars and were so, so talented.”

Although H.E.R. considered becoming a dentist or following her mother, a nurse, into the medical field, music eventually won out, despite some reservations from her parents. “Parents just want to know their child is OK, and to most people, education is how you get there,” she says. “But when you’re an entertainer, they don’t know what that world looks like, so there’s a fear.”

The young Gabi continued to perform and record regularly, signing with Sony Music’s RCA Records as a 14-year-old (via Robinson’s MBK imprint, reuniting her manager with RCA CEO Peter Edge, who’d played a significant role in Keys’ success). But she was allowed to develop at her own pace and tried to have as normal a childhood as circumstances would allow.

“It was tough, honestly,” H.E.R. admits. “I would leave school for a few days every month or every other month to travel to New York, and I’d be doing independent study in the studio. There were a lot of sacrifices made, especially by my parents.”

That midtown Manhattan studio was one Robinson outfitted specifically for her, and she worked like an Olympic athlete. “She was in there 24/7,” he recalls. “She must have 400 to 500 songs that the world has never heard from that period. Occasionally I’d have her appear at a showcase to develop her as a performer and keep her sharp.”

Adds longtime RCA marketing executive VP Carolyn Williams: “We joke that it’s the longest-running artist development story we’ve ever had. But as cute as she was when we first met her, she was always super focused. You could tell she knew what she wanted.”

Apart from 2014’s “Something to Prove,” a final song as Gabi Wilson that she essentially dismisses now, it would be nearly five years before H.E.R.’s first full release would emerge. She credits Robinson and former MBK exec Suzette Williams with giving her the room to grow. “They saw things in me that I didn’t even see in myself,” she says. “I was learning the business just as much as the music, and also figuring out who I was gonna become as a woman.”

“I kept her under wraps until Jody Gerson [now chairman-CEO of Universal Music Publishing Group] said — and I give her props for this — ‘Jeff, you’ve had her in that studio for years, musically lifting weights,’” Robinson recalls with a laugh. “The only way you’re gonna know if she’s as good as we think is to put out the music.’ And I said, ‘You know, you’re right.’”

Thus, H.E.R. emerged, in silhouette over a light-blue background, with the seven-track EP “Vol. 1” (which was later combined with “Vol. 2” and other songs to create her eponymous debut album) in September 2016. The music, the silhouette and her name were dramatic reinventions; in every sense, H.E.R.’s past was rendered prelude.

“Honestly, the reason I wanted to be H.E.R. is because I felt people tended to focus on the looks of things instead of music — listening with their eyes and not their ears,” she says. “It was a social media time of the *whole package*: ‘This is what an artist should be; this is what a woman should be.’ So when I first released music, I wanted to be a silhouette — these truthful stories were what I wanted to show, not me.

“It isn’t a persona; it’s not something that I think I have to turn on. It’s me: my true self.”

The initial plan was to let things build organically, “dropping the EP and then touring and kinda letting it spread by word of mouth instead of doing a major push,” she says. But before long, she had social media cosigns from Rihanna, Issa Rae, Taraji P. Henson and two Jenners.

Yet the moment H.E.R. says she knew her music was truly connecting occurred during the first show on her first major tour, opening for label mate Bryson Tiller in 2017. Despite all the years of practice and performing, “I was really nervous: ‘People aren’t gonna know who I am; this will be me getting used to touring,’” she recalls. “But at



H.E.R. performs “America the Beautiful” before Super Bowl LV in February.

the first show we did in Atlanta, a majority of the crowd was singing the lyrics to all my songs — I was so blown away. And then doing meet-and-greets on my own tour is when I realized that people are really listening, telling me their own stories about their connection to my music and taking different meanings from it.”

Williams adds: “At those shows, I could barely hear her on certain songs because the audience was singing so loud.”

The Recording Academy was also cheering. It nominated H.E.R. in five 2018 Grammy Awards categories. She won two.

EARLY

this year, after another album, several singles and tours, and countless TV and web appearances, H.E.R. was featured at three of the highest-profile events possible for any musician — in just 10 weeks, no less. In February, she performed “America the Beautiful” at Super Bowl LV (which itself was a sly commentary, coming from the woman who wrote and sang “I Can’t Breathe”), and then won two more Grammys

and an Academy Award. Even for an awards show veteran of her stature and track record, the Oscars were a new frontier.

“My mom was my date,” she recalls. “Angela Bassett was sitting next to us, and my mom was excited to meet her and Tyler Perry and all these people. I was just happy to be there. I almost forgot that I had a chance to win.”

But she’d certainly remembered by the time her moment came. “They played the clips [from the films], my heart was beating fast, and they announced my name ... and everything stopped for a hot second, and there was craziness going on in my head,” she recalls in a rush. “I’m thinking of the doubt I’d had, I’m thinking of my mom sitting next to me, I’m thinking of the movie and how important it was — everything was going through my mind at once.

“And then ... I didn’t prepare a speech,” she sighs. “So I was like, ‘Oh crap, I have to go up there and say something.’”

Even as one of the most ubiquitous faces and voices of the past few and probably the next few months — owing not only to the new album but also her starring appearance in a sunny Old Navy ad — H.E.R. is, as always, working toward the next thing to reveal.

“There is so much I want to do. People don’t really get to see my comedic and fun side, except for when I’m impersonating my aunt,” she laughs. “But I definitely want to do a lot more voice-overs, and comedy, but also some serious roles —” she says before catching herself. “I’m trying to do it all, I know. Whatever it is, one thing at a time. I’m gonna get there.”

But is it all too much too soon? What happens after all of your dreams come true? Robinson turns reflective. “Before [‘Vol. 1’] came out, I told her to make a mood board of everything she wanted to accomplish. She did all of them, so now she’s made a second mood board. One of them is acting — she wants to be a top musician *and* actress. She’s a hard worker, but there will come a time: What’s next?” he concludes. “We’re going to have to figure that one.”

But until that day, there is still plenty to reveal, and plenty to keep hidden — including, on occasion, her superpowers. When walking around her Brooklyn neighborhood, “people don’t recognize me without my glasses,” H.E.R. says. “Sometimes I feel like Clark Kent.” ●

The History on H.E.R.’s Hoodie

By Jazz Tangcay

When preparing for H.E.R.’s *Variety* cover shoot, stylist Wouri Vice was riffing ideas with photographer Arielle Bobb-Willis. As Juneteenth came into the conversation, he thought of the singer in a black hoodie with “8:46” embossed on it.

“Those who know, know — they will continue to fight,” he says. The number is the amount of time Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin kept his knee on George Floyd’s neck on May 25, 2020, killing him.

Fellow stylist David Rowan asked, “Why stop there?” and soon many more dates were added that Vice says are “pivotal for Blacks in the world.” Stylists the Griggs Brothers hand stitched and embroidered the dates on the garment, like a quilt. “It’s the way our story is told: in quilting and cooking — but you can’t show cooking on the cover,” Vice says.

The 13 red Xs stitched into the hood represent the 13th Amendment, which in 1865 guaranteed the emancipation of slaves — although the amendment,

as noted in Ava DuVernay’s documentary “13th,” has also often been used to incarcerate Black Americans. “It has been something that has enslaved us as people for many years. It’s a little deep,” Vice says.

While many of the dates commemorate violence against Blacks, there is also some optimism: 1961 is the year Barack Obama was born. “He was the first Black president, so there’s hope somewhere out there,” Vice says. “He gave a lot of people a lot of encouragement to want change to happen and wish for a better future for all of us.”

Some of the dates might be painful, Vice acknowledges. But “when you sit and hear the stories, you think of how resilient and resourceful Black people have been over time. There are so many layers to who we are. We are destined for greatness, but these things have happened. And we will continue to strive no matter what.”

The full list of significant dates and numbers follows.

1619 First African slaves arrive in Virginia	1711 New York state law passed to sell slaves on Wall Street	1739 Stono Rebellion slave revolt in South Carolina
1770 Black colonist Crispus Attucks killed by British troops during the Boston Massacre — the first American colonist to die in the revolution	1865 Juneteenth	1921 Tulsa Race Massacre
1961 Barack Obama born	1992 L.A. uprising following the acquittal of police officers who beat Rodney King	8:46 Length of time Minneapolis police officer and convicted murderer Derek Chauvin knelt on George Floyd’s neck



MATRIARCH THE MOV



MARCH OF MOVEMENT

**WHY 94-YEAR-OLD OPAL LEE
IS MARCHING TO MAKE
JUNETEENTH A NATIONAL HOLIDAY**

● BY
ANGELIQUE
JACKSON

“We know people at work, at church, in our meetings, that aren’t on the same page, and we can change their minds. I mean, if people can be taught hate, they can be taught love.” —Opal Lee



Ms. Opal Lee is on the move. The 94-year-old activist from Fort Worth, Texas, who is oft-referred to as the “Grandmother of Juneteenth,” has already begun her annual Walk to D.C., as part of her efforts to see the momentous day recognized as a federal holiday.

Each year on June 19, Lee makes a two-and-a-half-mile pilgrimage to commemorate the date in 1865, two and a half years after Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, when more than 250,000 enslaved Black people in Texas learned that they were finally free, marking the true end of slavery in America. The resulting holiday, Juneteenth — also known as Freedom Day, Jubilee Day, Liberation Day and Emancipation Day — has long been a major celebration in Texas, but not all 50 states recognize or commemorate it.

Lee has been on a mission to change those stats since 2016, when she launched Opal’s Walk 2 D.C. at the end of President Barack Obama’s second term in office. For more than 40 years, she had carried on the tradition, working with the National Juneteenth Observance Foundation and leading local Juneteenth events. But that year she was particularly inspired, coming up with a plan to walk the 1,400 miles from Fort Worth to Washington, D.C., to petition the Obama administration and Congress to grant the holiday an official position on the calendar.

“I just remember thinking, ‘Gee, I’m 89 years old and I think that there’s lots more that needs to be done,’” Lee tells *Variety*, looking back on the first time she laced up her sneakers to march. “I gathered some people at my church — my pastor, the church musicians, a county commissioner, a school board member; not acres of people, but a few — and we had a little ceremony. I walked from the church, two and a half miles, went home, and the next day I started where I left off.”

From September 2016 to January 2017, Lee traveled the country, marching the symbolic two-and-a-half-mile stretch in cities that

invited her to take part in their Juneteenth festivities. “I went to Shreveport and Texarkana, Little Rock and Fort Smith, Denver and Colorado Springs,” she recounts. “I went to Madison, Wisc., Milwaukee, Atlanta, the Carolinas. I was all over the place.”

As incredible as Lee’s achievement has been, she clarifies that she didn’t walk all the way from Texas to Washington. “I did some hundreds of them, but not 1,400,” she quips. Indeed, the nonagenarian is no *Forrest Gump*, but over the past five years, she’s become just as famous.

“It’s really humbling,” Lee says of all the people who’ve joined her campaign. “I’m just overwhelmed at the support. I’m overwhelmed at the people who didn’t know about Juneteenth and it’s just coming to their attention.”

Lee was spurred to preserve the historical significance of the holiday, having grown up in a time not far removed from racial horrors such as the Red Summer of 1919 and the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921, which many citizens have recently learned about. And with celebrities like Usher and Lupita Nyong’o sharing Lee’s story, the movement is rapidly growing.

“Recognizing Juneteenth nationally would be one more way to acknowledge the intrinsic value of Black people and their history to the wealth and prosperity of the USA,” Nyong’o tweeted to her 1.9 million followers. “We are aware that oversight of these historical events blinds and misleads both our present and our future generations. It encourages willful ignorance and the touting of revisionist history.”

Hip-hop artist Niko Brim was one of the first entertainment figures to help Lee get the word out on Juneteenth. “To see Ms. Opal, at her age, answering the call for human rights as it pertains to African Americans is inspiring beyond measure and beyond words,” Brim says. “Ms. Opal really reminded me there’s no excuse.”

Another admirer is Pharrell Williams, who last year successfully petitioned the governor of Virginia to make Juneteenth a state holiday, with workers receiving paid time off. The trailblazers will meet for the first time during *Variety*’s Changemakers summit, and Lee is eagerly anticipating the encounter. If they were attending in person, she says, “I’d hug him sure to death. I’ll be so glad to meet him and to thank him for all that he’s done.”

When Lee connected with *Variety* via Zoom in early June, she’d just completed a walk in Galveston, Texas. The occasion was the city’s May 31 dedication ceremony for a 5,000-square-foot mural titled “Absolute Equality,” unveiled at the location where Maj. Gen. Gordon Granger made the proclamation that the Civil War had ended and slavery was abolished.

For the virtual interview, Lee used as a backdrop her Juneteenth quilt, a hand-sewn family heirloom made of T-shirts from celebrations of the holiday across the country. One square shows a photo of Muhammad Ali, cut from the shirts made for Atlanta’s 2016 Juneteenth celebration. Another shirt came from a Fort Worth celebration and bears the phrase “Freedom — How long and how far?”

“Still we are saying, ‘How long?’” Lee says, pointing to the square. “How long must we put up with the atrocities? How long must we put up with people being killed in the street like that young man George Floyd? Or women, even in my town, are getting killed in their own home. How long do we put up with this kind of stuff?”

“It hasn’t been so many years that they stopped having lynchings, but it’s a different kind of lynching. We’ve got to put a stop to it.”

Lee believes that last summer’s worldwide protests against systemic racism and racial violence have helped Juneteenth go mainstream. When she began her journey, Lee’s goal was to collect 100,000 signatures on her Change.org petition to take to Congress; she’s now accrued more than 1.5 million supporters.

“I think it was enough is enough. I think losing that man’s life just pushed us over the edge. We’ve put up with so much,” Lee says of America’s awakening to its untold history. “When I think about what our ancestors had to put up with before the Emancipation — before that General Order No. 3 was declared down in Galveston — the situations aren’t that far different.”

AS

a native Texan — she was born in Marshall on Oct. 7, 1926 — Lee has been observing Juneteenth for as long as she can remember. Not all her memories of the holiday are happy ones.

Lee recalls the Juneteenth when her family’s home on Fort Worth’s Southside was burned by white neighbors. “People gathered. The papers say that it was 500 strong, and that the police couldn’t control them,” she says, evoking the decades-old memory. “My dad came home with a gun, and the police told him if he busted a cap, they’d let that mob have him.”

“If they had given us an opportunity to stay there and be their neighbors, they would have found out we didn’t want any more than what they had — a decent place to stay, jobs that paid, [to be] able to go to school in the neighborhood, even if it was a segregated school,” Lee continues. “We would have made good neighbors, but they didn’t give us an opportunity. And I felt like everybody needs an opportunity.”

Instead of living in fear, Lee has faced the brutal realities of racism head-on and has never given up her activist spirit. She says it’s just in her DNA, having learned the power of generosity and neighborly love from her parents and grandparents. The former teacher and longtime charity worker believes that if the country can find a way to come together, as opposed to pulling against one another, it can achieve the dream of equality and celebrate “freedom for all.”

Paraphrasing civil rights hero Fannie Lou Hamer, Lee says, “None of us are free until we’re all free, and I’m not just talking about Black people. There are so many disparities that could be worked on.”

Lee’s mission is to ensure that people recognize that Juneteenth isn’t just a Texas holiday, or a Black holiday, but an American holiday. “Black people weren’t free on the Fourth of July,” she adds. “I’m even advocating having the celebration from the 19th of June to the Fourth of July.”

The fight to get Juneteenth recognized federally is closer than ever to being won. Though there have been several false starts on the legislative front, with the most recent attempt falling short by just one vote — Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Wisc., objected to adding another paid day off for federal workers — Lee remains hopeful.

“We have to keep on Congress; we can’t let up. I’m going to be riding them like they are horses to get ours over. I really want the

bill to pass,” she says, adding, “The [Biden] administration already knows Opal Lee because I was at the debates. I have no doubt that they’re in our corner.”

Looking at recent developments, it’s easy to see why she’s feeling so positive. Before 2020, Hawaii, North Dakota and South Dakota were the only states that did not formally recognize Juneteenth in any capacity, while only Texas observed it as a paid state holiday. Since last summer’s widespread protests, Virginia, Massachusetts, Oregon, Pennsylvania and Washington have recognized Juneteenth with a paid day of leave for state employees.

Additionally, a growing number of corporations across industries — including Nike, Postmates, Spotify, Target, Twitter, Uber and *Variety*’s parent company, PMC — have adopted the day as a paid holiday for their employees. There is also new legislation in the Senate (S. 4019, introduced by Sen. Edward Markey, D-Mass.) and in the House of Representatives (H.R. 7232, introduced by Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, D-Texas).

IN

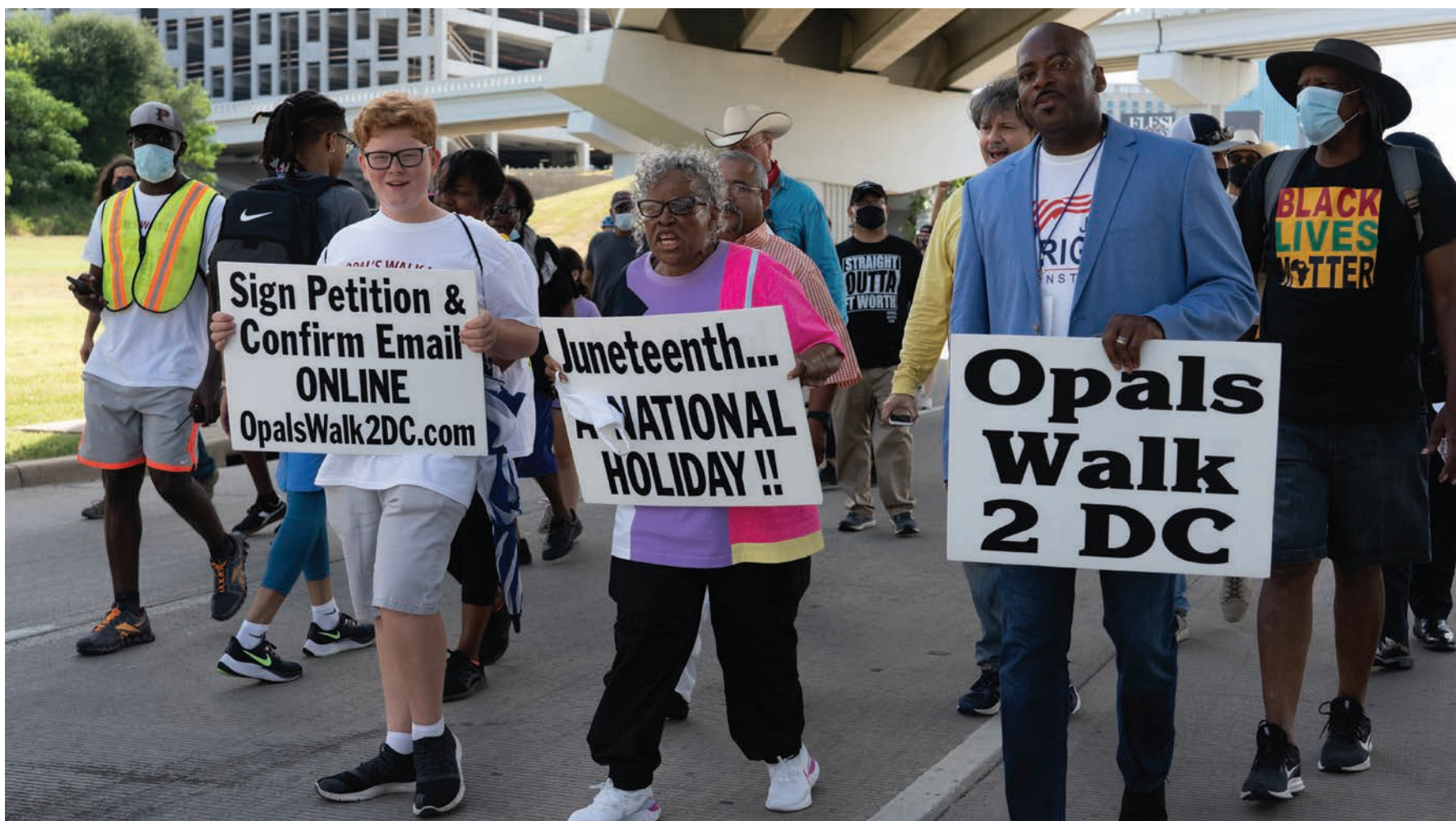
the meantime, Lee is gearing up for the grandest edition of her Juneteenth festivities to date. When the COVID-19 pandemic canceled last year’s parade, she says her crew settled for a caravan instead. “I thought I’d walk the two and a half miles from downtown Fort Worth to Will Rogers Auditorium and 10 to 15 cars would follow,” she recalls. “We had 300 cars. It was off the chain! That’s what the young people would say.”

This year, the event will expand nationally, broadcasting live exclusively on Fox Soul, with marches occurring simultaneously in major cities across the U.S., including Los Angeles; Washington, D.C.; Detroit; Atlanta; and New York City. “If we step off at 10 a.m. here in Fort Worth, they’re going to step off at 8 a.m. in L.A. and 11 a.m. in Atlanta,” she explains. “People are going to know, all over the United States and the world, that we are together.”

As much as Lee believes in the power of the community that’s helping her push the movement along, she’s grateful for the celebrities

Opal Lee at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., on Feb. 25.





Lee marches in Fort Worth's Juneteenth celebration on June 19, 2020.

who've brought awareness to the cause, like Sean "Diddy" Combs, who hosted a conversation with her on his Revolt network.

"You excite me, just everything you stand for," Combs said in their virtual meeting. "It's important as we bring this young generation together to fight and to win this war ... that it's mixed and matched with the foundation of the pioneers and of our people, our elders in the tribe that want something done while they're alive to see that."

Combs pledged to help Lee reach the new goal of 1.5 million signatures, and "when Diddy talked to his people, we didn't have a problem," she says.

Brim has been an eyewitness to the growth of Lee's campaign, saying that Lee had only 12,000 signatures when they first met in early 2020. Since then, the 24-year-old multi-hyphenate (Brim is also a producer and an actor) has marched alongside Lee in Washington, D.C., which he calls, "a powerful moment I'll forever cherish."

"She's a living national treasure, and I got to be part of history supporting her," Brim adds.

The duo also collaborated to design a pair of custom-painted Nike Air Force 1 sneakers in honor of the Juneteenth campaign. The collectors' item fetched a cool \$6,000 at Sotheby's, with the proceeds split evenly between Hip Hop Public Health and Lee's social impact organization Unity Unlimited. "I told them they can give me a shoe any day to put my name on if it's going to help," Lee says. "I don't know how to express how thankful I am that the young people are joining in and being a part of what's going on."

Lee also earned a special thanks in the credits for "Miss Juneteenth," the award-winning independent film from writer-director Channing Godfrey Peoples (another Fort Worth native) that honors the holiday. "I've got a bit part that might last a half a second ... I'm not Miss Juneteenth," Lee quips, detailing her trip to visit the film's set. "I thought, Hollywood can't be any better than this."

Just as "Watchmen" and "Lovecraft Country" enlightened audiences about the Tulsa Race Massacre, there's power in the media interpretations of Juneteenth, Lee explains, pointing to former Dallas Cowboys lineman Greg Ellis' "Juneteenth the Stage Play," as another must-see homage.

"All of these things rolled into one are making people aware that we need each other," Lee says. "I keep advocating that 'Each one of us teach one of us,' because we know people at work, at church, in our meetings, that aren't on the same page, and we can change their minds. I mean, if people can be taught to hate, they can be taught to love."

"I'm hopeful because I think that we are getting the attention that we need," Lee adds, sharing that she aims to connect with celebrities like Oprah Winfrey and Steve Harvey to bring more attention to the cause. "I've got some 900 people that follow me on Facebook, and if you got that many people and you tell them to give us their signature, oh, we would overwhelm those [politicians]."

Speaking of politicians, Lee considers Stacey Abrams to be one of her biggest idols. "When I grow up, I want to be just like her. I think that girl is really somebody," Lee coos. "Somebody who could turn a whole state blue. Somebody who worked with people, and they understood what she was about. Oh, I wish I could just do that in my little city, if I had that much power."

Based on the number of signatures alone that this grandmother has accrued, it's safe to say that Lee is selling her own impact quite short.

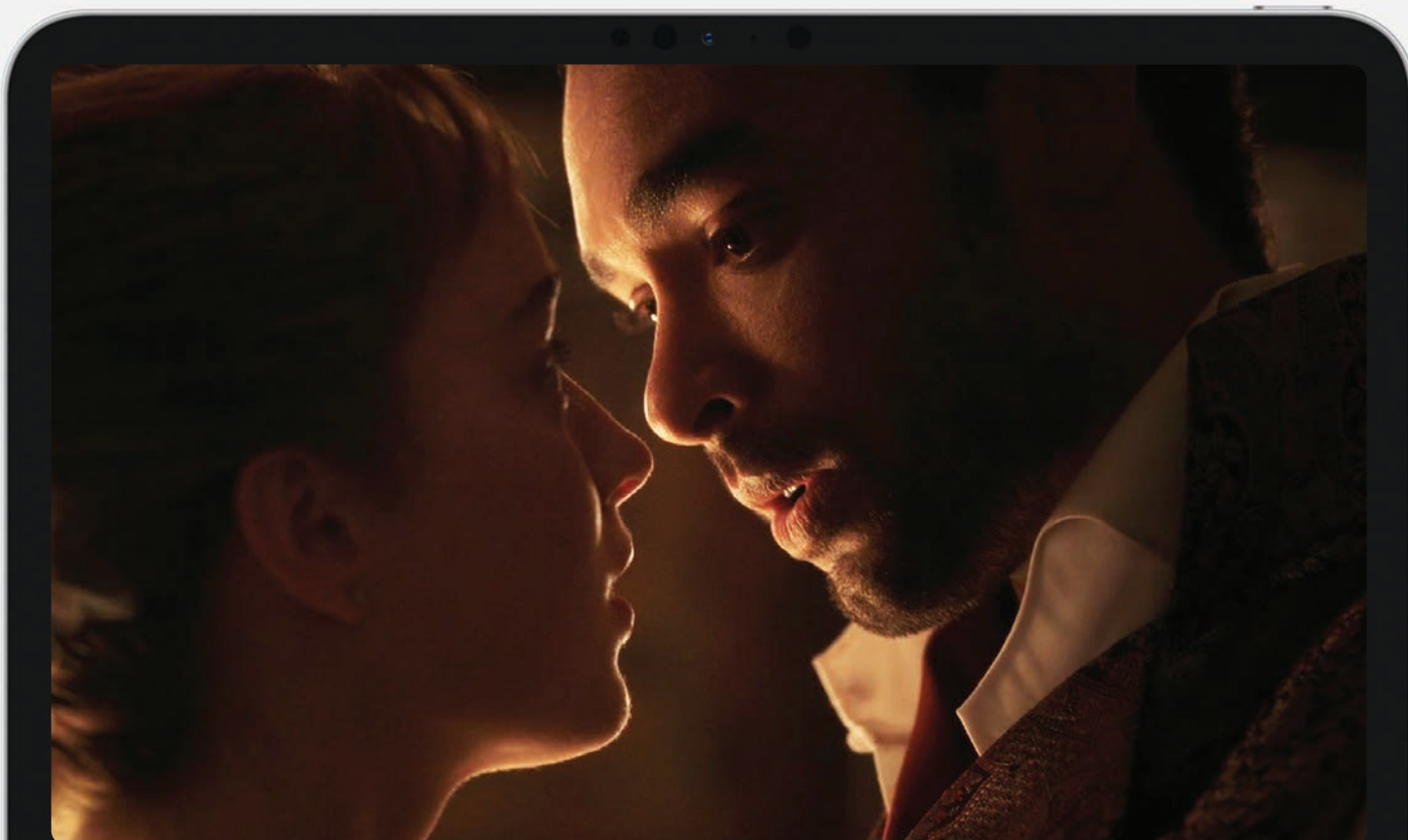
In any case, like Abrams, who didn't give up public service after losing a gubernatorial race, Lee has no plans to stop fighting until she reaches the finish line. "There's not a day that passes that I'm not somewhere doing something, but I'm happy doing it. I get a big kick out of it," she says. "I'm going to keep walking, and keep on talking, until Juneteenth is a national holiday." ●

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INDIGENOUS VOICES RING PROUD

NATIVE AMERICAN
STORYTELLERS
FINALLY FIND THEIR
PLACE IN HOLLYWOOD

● BY JOELY PROUDFIT (LUISEÑO)

For decades, Indigenous filmmakers and content creators have been chipping away at a wall of obstacles that for too long has silenced them. But at the intersection of COVID-19 lockdowns, streaming technology and diversity initiatives, a variety of Native productions have emerged and made their way to audiences.

Recent social movements have highlighted a lack of diversity and representation in Hollywood. While those movements have gained traction for some in recent years, inclusion for most Native creatives had yet to be realized. Inclusion—whose stories are told and who gets to tell them—is more than just entertainment and job creation for Native Americans. It is the path to reclaiming their narratives.

Native creatives have embraced the current opportunities and have found a way to finally tell their stories with their unique voices. Showrunners, writers and actors are now positioned to control content and offer realistic depictions of Native lives and experiences. After decades of Hollywood initiatives, Indigenous film festivals and successful media labs (notably Sundance's), Native led stories are finally finding visibility and acceptance with both studios and audiences.

The novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie reminds us that storytelling is about power: who has it and who doesn't. Traditional Hollywood has had the power to shape Native narratives for decades, but Native storytellers have pushed their way through, finally making space for Native voices and experiences. As Seminole and Creek filmmaker Sterlin Harjo ("Mekko," "Four Sheets to the Wind") says, "Indigenous people are the perfect people to change Hollywood. We have been exploited from the beginning and now we are the last people to tell our own stories."

Harjo is co-creator of the new FX TV series "Reservation Dogs" along with Maori filmmaker Taika Waititi ("JoJo Rabbit," "Thor

Ragnarok," "What We Do in the Shadows"). This comedy series about four Native teens growing up on a reservation in Oklahoma is a dream project for Harjo. Filmed in his home community of Tulsa, it features a Native cast and all Native writers.

"It's a celebration of community showcasing our humanity—how we approach issues and come together through loss, beauty, humor, and laughter," says Harjo. "Every project does not have to include an all-Native writers' room, but Reservation Dogs does. An all-Native writers' room provided the group of Native writers the confidence to be bold in telling stories and addressing them with humor."

Setting the story and the production location in Tulsa was critical to the project.

"Place is the most important aspect for telling stories," Harjo says. "We are the descendants of the people who died for us to be able to tell stories in this place at this time."

Harjo also recognized that COVID-19 provided an opportunity "to show Hollywood that we don't have to live in Hollywood to tell these stories."

In short, the timing is right for Indigenous-led productions.

"Taika Waititi winning an Oscar and talking about Indigenous communities amplified our voices. Waititi's influence made 'Reservation Dogs' possible," says Harjo.

Waititi is producing several other projects, a clear demonstration of Indigenous communities supporting one another to tell their stories. There are currently numerous Native-led projects happening in publishing, television, and film, hitting audiences from all angles, points of view and experiences.

Peacock's "Rutherford Falls" is one clear example of true cross-cultural collaboration. Sierra Teller Ornelas (Navajo/Mexican) is one of three co-creators of the show, along with Ed Helms and Mike



Michael Greyeyes toplines director-writer Lyle Mitchell Corbine Jr.'s thriller "Wild Indian," which had its world premiere at this year's Sundance Film Festival.

Schur. In the writer's room with Ornelas were relatively new Native TV writers Tazbah Chavez (Nüümü/Diné/San Carlos Apache); Tai Leclair (Kanien'kehá:ka/Mi'kmaq); Jana Schmieding (Cheyenne River Lakota), and Bobby Wilson (Sisseton-Wahpeton Dakota). These writers represent several different tribal communities, and their voices showcase the complexity and diversity of Native peoples.

For years, Ornelas was the only Native person in the writers' room. She is immensely grateful for what she's learned from seasoned writers and showrunners and is eager to share her knowledge.

"We stand on the shoulders of the many who came before us," she says. "We are building community, providing skills and opportunities and support one another."

"Rutherford Falls" provided Sydney Freeland, who is Navajo, her comedic directorial debut. It also provided Jana Schmieding's first lead acting role and showcased Michael Greyeyes' comedic acting chops. Tazbah Chavez's writing credits include "Reservation Dogs" and "Resident Alien," but she also recently directed her first television episode on "Reservation Dogs."

Harjo was thrilled to be the one to provide Tazbah with her first TV directing opportunity.

"Everything I have ever done is because someone gave me the opportunity and a chance and I was happy to provide this to Tazbah," said Harjo.

"Harjo and Waititi have been mentors to me. They gave me confidence and believed in my capabilities before I did," says Chavez.

Freeland is currently directing "Star Trek: Strange New Worlds" for CBS. She has been working steadily for the past several years, having directed, written and produced both film and TV, including episodes of "Drunktown's Finest," "Rutherford Falls," "Grey's Anatomy" and "The Wilds." Freeland and Harjo have now teamed

up for the new Netflix film "Rez Ball."

"This is only the beginning," Freeland says. "In the past six months I have been privileged to direct on two TV series with Native showrunners. I am blown away at the new talent both in front of and behind the camera. Financiers understand that audiences want more Native stories, told by Native people."

Tribal nations and Native businesses are also interested in elevating and telling a more representative and accurate story of Native American life -- past, present, and future.

Significant investments have been made by several tribal nations in recent years to help produce content and establish inroads for film, television, film festivals, and media. California's American Indian and Indigenous Film Festival, a premier Native festival, is held on tribal lands at the Pechanga Resort and Casino in Temecula, Calif. Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma has established the Cherokee Nation Film Office to create opportunities for economic development and increase the presence of Native Americans at every level of the entertainment industry. Tribal enterprises are embracing new opportunities to change narratives and help their communities become more visible.

Oneida Nation Enterprises CEO Ray Halbritter has independently formed Standing Arrow Productions, a film and television production company aimed at increasing the stories and representation of Native American people on screen.

"Knowing the truth about Native people will make a better world for both Native and non-Native communities," Halbritter says.

Some tribes are now in the position to shape the narrative and are willing to use the visual medium to do so. As a leading proponent of accurate media portrayals, Halbritter understands the power of the visual medium.

“Representation on the movie screen and throughout popular culture is tremendously important for marginalized communities, and it’s especially important for young people to see images of themselves on screen,” Halbritter says. “That’s the biggest single factor in my decision to launch Standing Arrow Productions.”

Recently, Standing Arrow Productions signed Angelo Pizzo, the award-winning screenwriter/producer of the iconic sports-based movies “Hoosiers” and “Rudy,” to adapt Sally Jenkins’ best-selling book “The Real All Americans: The Team That Changed a Game, a People, a Nation.” The book chronicles the remarkable true-life exploits of the Carlisle Indian School football team, which in the early 20th century was the most innovative and successful football program in the United States. Halbritter will produce and guide this project, but he notes that bringing this narrative to life will take much collaboration.

“We must all work together to make Hollywood work for us,” he stresses.

It’s also important to note that the styles and media Native creators are working in are as diverse as the tribal voices and places they come from. Creating realistic stories for children will impact the systemic erasure and racism that has afflicted Indigenous peoples. Santa Ynez Chumash showrunner and “Spirit Rangers” creator Karissa Valencia hopes to celebrate what it means to be Indigenous through a kid’s perspective. “Spirit Rangers” is a fantasy-adventure animated series for preschoolers currently in production at Netflix.

“Animation is also the perfect medium to show off our unique and timeless Indigenous art styles—I hope ‘Spirit Rangers’ inspires young viewers to fall in love with the Earth, nature, and wildlife and to seek ways to protect it as Indigenous people always have,” says Valencia.

“Spirit Rangers” is unique in having a first-ever California Indian showrunner and touts an all-Native writing and development team

that includes composers, actors, musicians and artists.

“Thanks to Netflix Animation and Laughing Wild, my writing team gets to honor our traditional stories from all over the country with a modern twist,” says Valencia.”

Like other Indigenous storytellers, for Valencia the focus on place is central: the series is set on the traditional homelands of the Chumash in Santa Barbara’s Santa Ynez Valley.

And a flurry of other projects will soon follow.

“Firekeeper’s Daughter,” the debut novel by Angeline Boulley (Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians), will soon be adapted at Netflix by the Obama’s production company, Higher Ground Productions. Pitched as an Indigenous Nancy Drew, the young adult thriller follows an 18-year-old Ojibwe girl as she goes undercover in a police investigation on her reservation, claiming her place in the community. The novel explores themes of belonging, justice, community and identity.

Like Hollywood, publishing has also lacked diverse voices. Believing she was at the right place at the right time, Boulley says that “publishing was ready for a story about a strong Native protagonist.”

Boulley’s story is also specific to place. These recent productions counter false narratives that there isn’t enough Native talent in Hollywood. Clearly there is an abundance of Native people who are ready to collaborate and lead.

“It’s a beautiful time, and we are all sharing in the telling of diverse Native stories,” says Ornelas.

As the collaborations between Native and non-Native creators continue, the real excitement centers on the collaboration between Native content creators supporting each other in telling diverse Native stories. Maintaining good relations with one another is a universal Indigenous concept that has found its way into Hollywood.

The nation’s oldest storytellers are finally having their turn telling their stories, using the modern medium for all to experience. ●

Film Fests Fete Native Talent

By
Joely
Proudfit
(Luiseño)

The ImagineNative Film + Media Arts Festival

The world’s largest Indigenous film and media arts festival is held annually in October in Toronto. The festival focuses on the film, video, radio and new media work of Indigenous, Aboriginal and First Peoples from around the world. The festival includes screenings, parties, panel discussions and cultural events. imagenative.org/

Sundance Institute Indigenous Shorts Program

The Sundance Institute’s commitment and support of Indigenous filmmakers continues through exhibition. The Indigenous Shorts Tour features works directed by Indigenous filmmakers at the Sundance Film Festival. sundance.org/programs/indigenous-program

California’s American Indian & Indigenous Film Festival (CAIFF)

This premier Indigenous film and

media arts festival is held annually at the Pechanga Resort and Casino in Temecula, Calif. CAIFF is an initiative of the California Indian Culture and Sovereignty Center and aims to showcase the finest work in American Indian and Indigenous film and media. The festival includes screenings, panel discussions, parties and workshops. caiff.com/

Vision Maker Media Film Festival

American Indian, Alaska Native and worldwide Indigenous films are celebrated through the Vision Maker Film Festival held biennially in-person in Lincoln, Neb., and also online. The festival features a gathering of inspiring filmmakers’ engaging conversations that create a space for both healing and learning. visionmakermedia.org/films/

The L.A. Skins Fest

Running as part of the city of Los Angeles Celebration of Native American Heritage Month, the fest showcases

works by independent Native American filmmakers. laskinsfest.com/

Chickasaw Cultural Center’s Holba’ Pisachi’ Native Film Festival

Although currently closed, the fest exhibits new films by American Indian content creators and is held in Sulphur, Okla., each year. chickasawculturalcenter.com/

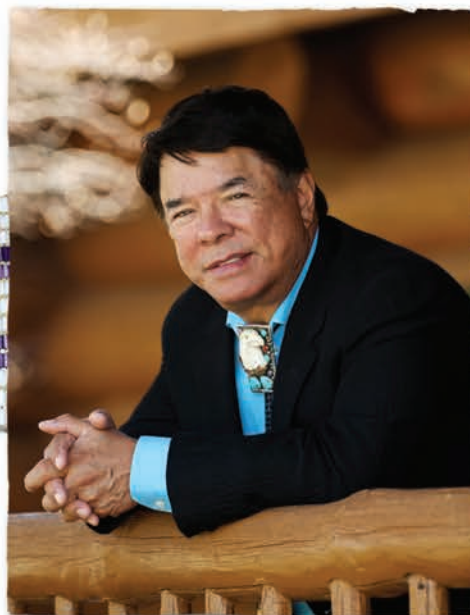
Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio is featured in Ciara Lacy’s docu short “This Is the Way We Rise,” which played at the 2021 Sundance Film Festival.





"It's never been more important to nurture respect and self-love in the hearts and minds of Native American and Indigenous children throughout this country and around the world. Seeing oneself on screen can start that process. Thanks to all those in and outside of Hollywood who have fought for fair representation both in front of and behind the camera. Let's tell more stories that bring understanding and connection rather than division. That's the true power of Film."

*Ray Halbritter, Founder, Standing Arrow Productions
and Academy Museum Trustee
Variety 2021 Inclusion Impact Report Honoree*



TOO JEWISH FOR HOLLYWOOD

AS ANTISEMITISM SOARS, THE INDUSTRY SHOULD ADDRESS ITS ENDURING HYPOCRISY IN HYPERBOLIC CARICATURES OF JEWS

● BY MALINA SAVAL

Several years ago, a non-Jewish film producer turned to me and announced, casually and with an air of arrogance and ignorance reserved particularly for bigots, “Jews control Hollywood.”

He assured me this was a compliment, as many antisemites are wont, trotting out Neal Gabler’s seminal text on the subject, “An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood,” as evidence. But it was clear that said producer had either never read Gabler’s book, or missed one of its key points entirely: the founding producers of the film biz were Jewish, most of them Eastern European immigrants, excluded and ostracized from virtually every other industry in America.

William Fox, Carle Laemmle, Louis B. Mayer — they created Hollywood out of collective necessity, a decidedly human desire to realize the American Dream. They were not wanted anywhere else. But if these pioneering studio heads were Jewish, the majority of directors, writers and actors were not. Preston Sturges, Frank Capra, John Ford, Howard Hawkes — these were the artists largely shaping early 20th century cinema in the U.S.

In short, there is a core etymological difference between invent and control.

This was not, of course, the first time I’d heard uttered the weary and delusional trope that Jews, who comprise roughly 0.2 % of the world’s total population, are somehow at the totalitarian helm of an industry that, per the U.S. Dept. of Labor, supports some 2.6 million jobs. Growing up Jewish in post-Holocaust America, I’ve experienced antisemitism in all its various nefarious forms, from violent physical assaults to passive microaggressions shrouded in the guise of woke intellectualism.

Israeli drama “Shtisel” paints an accurate portrayal of Haredi Jews.



But, for whatever reason — aside from the well-documented epigenetic trauma, antisemitism can breed introspection in its objects of hatred — said producer’s assertion that Jews dominate decision-making in Hollywood prompted me to examine the years working in the film industry in which I, a Jew, had zero decision-making power.

In 1997, after graduating from USC with an MFA in screenwriting, I spent that summer penning a semi-autobiographical script that would ultimately land me a deal at a major motion picture studio. Before sending it out, however, my then-agent advised me to make the storyline “less Jewish.” Could we change the Jewish characters

to Irish-Catholic ones? she asked. We could, so I did. Because I was new to the biz and assumed that is what one needed to do in order to work as a screenwriter.

In truth, it wasn't difficult. I grew up in Boston, a city with the highest percentage of Irish ancestry in the United States. I wore green on St. Patrick's Day and sat through annual elementary school screenings of "Darby O'Gill and the Little People." So, I changed the bat mitzvah scene in my script to a First Communion and switched the Cohen family to the McConnells. The essence of the script felt lost, but at least I'd scored a job.

From that moment on, the message was clear: you can be Jewish in Hollywood, but not too Jewish.

For decades the watering-down of Jewish representation in TV and film, namely in terms of casting, struck me as an annoying but not necessarily harmful casualty of Jewish life in America, one in which assimilation — not just for Jews, but for every ethnic group — has always come at the expense of subverting one's cultural identity. But amidst a surge of antisemitism in the United States — per the FBI, 63% of all reported religion-based hate crimes in 2019 were directed at Jews, making it the single-largest category — and the fact that scant few individuals are speaking out against these crimes, it bears reminding those in the industry that, as with any other ethnic minority (Asians, Blacks, Indigenous peoples), the perception of Jews onscreen does matter. In a day and age in which a focus on diversity and inclusion is front and center, it's a hypocrisy to affirm it doesn't.

Are there Jewish characters on screen? Of course. From Jerry Seinfeld to Fran Drescher's nanny and Debra Messing's "Grace," there are Jewish protagonists that are writ large in the American pop cultural canon. But for every Larry David, there's a Cheryl Hines, a non-Jewish spouse, friend — foil, if you will — to offset the Jewishness. To make it more "accessible" for American society at large. (Unless the storyline is about the Holocaust; then Hollywood seems to be OK with an entire family being Jewish, especially if they die at the end.) When there is a Jewish actor playing a Jew, Hollywood effectively demands said actor to express at least slight moral disdain and psychological discomfort with one's Jewishness. The edgy, neurotic misfit Jew has become synonymous with Jews in film and TV, from Woody Allen in every movie he's made to every actor playing Woody Allen's surrogate to Seth Rogen's nebbish-y pothead slacker in "Knocked Up." Because, God forbid, Jews like being Jewish. Far more fashionable to be a little self-hating.

Actors ignoring or nonchalantly brushing off antisemitic comments — statements further perpetuating the damaging mythical assertion that Jews imagine the hatred directed their way — can be cast as Jews. And they are. Hollywood has no issue with this at all. Take "Mank," for example, David Fincher's biopic about "Citizen Kane" screenwriter Herman J. Mankiewicz. Gary Oldman, who netted an Oscar nom for his portrayal of Mank, told *Playboy* magazine in 2014 that people should "get over" Mel Gibson's infamous 2006 antisemitic rant. And they did, of course. Despite Gibson's antisemitic (and misogynistic and racist) slurs, he's continued to work as a director and actor. His status in the biz has thrived; in 2017, Gibson earned an Oscar nom for directing "Hacksaw Ridge."

The messaging here, too, is clear: You can say and do things that are antisemitic, and still go on to have a flourishing career.

With rare exception in the way of Barbra Streisand — perhaps the singular Jewish superstar whose cultural identity, not to mention her unrelenting support of Israel, is allowed free rein across music, television and film — Hollywood seems to find an almost obsessive, near-pathological need to dilute female Jewish characters. Or erase. The examples are vast, and they are also maddening. In "The

Marvelous Mrs. Maisel," Jewish heroine Midge is played by non-Jew Rachel Brosnahan. In "On the Basis of Sex," Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the modern-day thinking Jewish woman's pin-up for her groundbreaking contributions to constitutional law, is played by non-Jewish British actor Felicity Jones. And in Hulu's "Mrs. America," Jewish second-wave feminists Betty Friedan, Bella Abzug and Gloria Steinem are played by Tracy Ullman, Margo Martindale and Rose Byrne — none of whom are Jewish. Julianne Moore (not Jewish), also played Steinem in Julie Taymor's "The Glorias." And in ABC's long-running sitcom "The Goldbergs," shopaholic balabusta Beverly Goldberg is played by non-Jewish comedian Wendy McClendon-Covey. Even Elsa, the adolescent "Jew in the Wall" in Taika Waititi's Oscar-winning "Jojo Rabbit," is played by non-Jewish actor Thomasin McKenzie.

My current favorite: in Guy Nattiv's upcoming Golda Meir biopic, Helen Mirren (and, yes, the Oscar-winner is an inarguably gifted actor), will play Israel's lone female prime minister, an iron-fisted global leader who commandeered Israel to victory during the Six-Day War. Because nothing says Kiev-born, Milwaukee-raised kibbutznik-turned-"gray-bunned grandmother of the Jewish people" — a political figure who embraced her "ugliness" as a political asset and whom David Ben Gurion was fond of calling "the best man in the government" — than a regal British Dame with ancestral ties to Russian nobility.

As Sarah Silverman, who speaks freely of oft being considered "too Jewish" to play certain roles, noted on her podcast and on "The Howard Stern Show" last November: "Lately it's been happening — if that role is a Jewish woman, but [if] she is courageous, or she deserves love, or has bravery, or is altruistic in any way, she's played by a non-Jew."

If Jews controlled Hollywood, it's fair to say this would not be happening.

There are anomalies, and those, too, deserve mention. Israeli actor Shira Haas, who earned an Emmy nom for her role in "Unorthodox," will play Golda Meir in the upcoming small-screen drama "Lioness," which Streisand is set to executive produce. And then, there is "Shtisel," the Israeli TV series so meticulous in its nuanced, understated, realistic portrayal of Jewish life — that it revolves around a Haredi family living in an ultra-Orthodox Jerusalem neighborhood detracts none from its universality; it's a commercial hit in places ranging from Stockholm to Paris — it's of near-miraculous proportions. Why? Because "Shtisel" never panders to Jewish stereotypes. Its characters are Jewish, they are played by Jews (albeit secular ones, which goes even further to prove my point) and its plotlines unfold in ways that, while adhering to the laws and traditions of ultra-Orthodox Jewry, never once undercut the impenetrable humanity of its protagonists. They are Jews, but they are people.

The Jews just are.

Hollywood has a social responsibility to reflect with unflinching accuracy the experience of being an ethnic minority in America, whether Asian or Black or Muslim or Indigenous, and that same social imperative holds true for the Jewish community. Because being Jewish is not about a wig or an accent or talking really loud. It's not about bagels. Being Jewish is about a shared history, a soul, a spirit — in Hebrew we call it a neshama. Amidst the terrifying rise of antisemitism, Jews in America do not feel safe. And in truth, we never have. The ways in which we are portrayed on screen yields significant real-life consequences — some positive, but far too many dangerous. The last thing the Jewish community needs right now is hyperbolic misrepresentation of who we actually are.

The simple, boring truth:

Jews are human. ●

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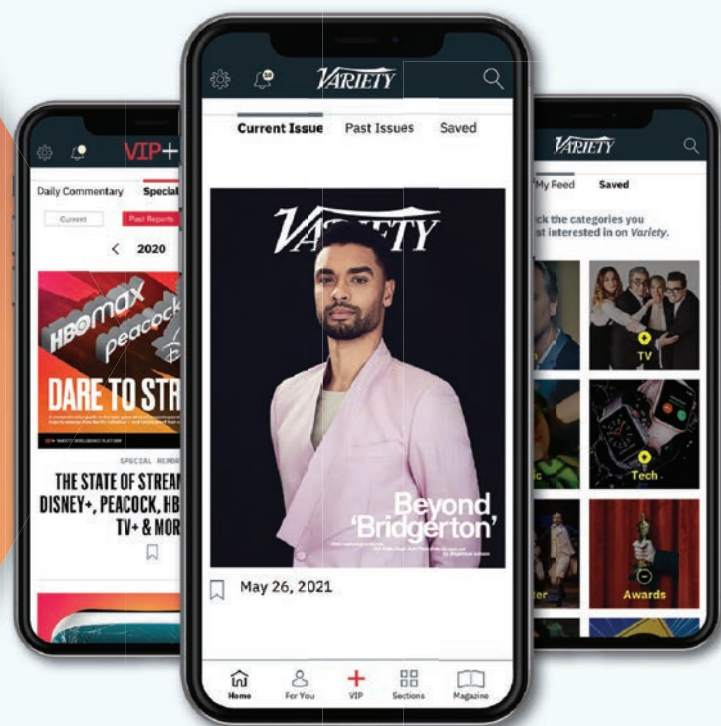
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AMPLIFYING DIVERSE VOICES

VARIETY'S CHANGEMAKERS SUMMIT PRESENTS BRIDGE-BUILDING CONVERSATIONS

● BY MALINA SAVAL

Variety's Changemakers Summit, which runs online June 17-18, will feature a series of keynote speakers and panel discussions that will highlight individuals advancing on behalf of equality and elevating underrepresented voices within the entertainment industry.

Notable industry players such as H.E.R., whose song "Fight for You" from Shaka King's "Judas and the Black Messiah" won best original song earlier this year at the Academy Awards, will reveal how their diverse experiences have shaped their creative direction.

Social impact leader Opal Lee, who is known as the Grandmother of Juneteenth, will appear in conversation with Pharrell Williams to discuss her campaign to make Juneteenth a national holiday in the United States.

Other conversations during the two-day event will celebrate the accomplishments of communities whose voices are just starting to be heard in Hollywood. For instance, the Elevating Diverse Abilities in Entertainment Production panel will highlight the resources that are helping disabled and neurodiverse community members succeed in the entertainment industry.

Two speakers on this panel, Kate Jorgensen and Xavier Romo, are graduates from Exceptional Minds, a Los Angeles-based school that prepares individuals with autism for careers in animation and visual effects. Jorgensen is a production coordinator at Nickelodeon, while Romo is now a plate lab technician at Marvel Studios.

Although both industry professionals have full-time positions, they will discuss the long road they travelled to get where they are today. Jorgensen says she wasn't diagnosed until age 17 because the doctors assumed that "girls don't get autism."

"Unfortunately, the truth was that we didn't have very much knowledge and not a lot of people wanted to talk about it," says Jorgensen.

Even with progress, she notes, there are a lot of subcategories within the disability community that need to be spoken for.

"Right now it's just the kind of people that can talk well, the ones that are verbal or the ones that are white," she says.

But thanks to organizations including Exceptional Minds and others that are addressing these inequalities, the tides are turning.

"It's rapidly changing for the better, but there's still a long way to go," says Jorgensen.

Romo is a Mexican American who believes anyone with a disability can accomplish goals by putting in the hard work.

"You have to want to do it yourself," Romo says. "You can't be pushed to do it by other people, it just doesn't work that way. If you're not putting in the will and the energy, it's not going to happen."

While discussions about diversity and inclusion have taken center stage in recent years, they aren't new.

Sterlin Harjo, the executive producer and creator of FX's upcoming comedy series "Reservation Dogs," says he and other Native American storytellers have been advocating for change on diversity panels for a long time.

"We are just now getting the attention of Hollywood and people in this industry," Harjo says. "There's this feeling in the industry that they're discovering it for the first time, but we've all been doing it for many years. We're just doing it outside of the system, and we're all coming from independent backgrounds."

Harjo will speak on the Anti-Stereotyping Indigenous Cultures in Media & Entertainment panel alongside Sierra Teller Ornelas, a Navajo Native who serves as an executive producer on Peacock's "Rutherford Falls."

While the two Native American storytellers work for different networks, the pair has supported each other throughout the highs and lows of their careers.

"The spirit of this community is that we support each other and lift each other up," Harjo says. "Sometimes this industry doesn't encourage that. It encourages hierarchies and competition. Sierra and I have two very different shows, but both are very important to amplifying and changing perspectives on Native people in Hollywood."

Other panels include Amplifying Underrepresented Voices in Entertainment Storytelling, which will explore the ways creators are advocating for new voices in film and TV; Journalists of Color and Allies Covering Racial Inequality and Violence, which will probe how journalists feel invested in covering hate crimes, systemic racism, police brutality and other social justice issues; and Entrepreneurship Roundtable, a look at experiences entrepreneurs of color and their allies are having in founding and building their own companies. ●

Sierra Teller Ornelas' "Rutherford Falls" (Peacock) showcases Native American talent.



CASTING SHOWBIZ

VARIETY CELEBRATES THE TOP CREATIVES PUSHING FORWARD ON DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

BY
HALEY BOSSELMAN,
NICK CLEMENT,
SHALINI DORE,
ANTONIO FERME,
TODD GILCHRIST,
CAROLE HORST,
ANGELIQUE JACKSON,
JASMIN ROSEMBERG,
MALINA SAVAL,
ETHAN SHANFELD,
JAZZ TANGCAY



Emmanuel Acho

Author, "Uncomfortable Conversations With a Black Man"

● Building on his YouTube interview series of the same name, Acho, a former NFL linebacker, literally wrote the book on the entertainment industry's commitment to inclusion and diversity with his November bestseller "Uncomfortable Conversations With a Black Man." Filled with honest reflections and actionable conclusions, his work makes sure that intention and actions align to create a community whose members can understand one another. "If everyone in your circle of friends looks like you, then you're not doing a good enough job taking responsibility upon yourself as diversifying your life," Acho says. "Each individual has to mandate integration and diversity in their own lives."



Brianna Agyemang

Senior Artist Campaign Manager, Platoon

Jamila Thomas

Senior Director of Marketing, Atlantic Records

● On June 2, 2020, two friends and industry colleagues, exasperated by reports of police abuse and racial injustice, turned a shared day off for healing into a convocation for revolution: #TheShowMustBePaused, a black square on social media — shared more than 700,000 times — calling out the music industry for its historic profit from Black artists while reinforcing systemic biases. Discussion groups with invitees from the Black music community led to conversations and corporate task forces to address diversity, inclusion and equity issues and, eventually, millions of dollars in donations in support of racial justice.



Riz Ahmed and Paul Raci

Actors, "Sound of Metal"

● Ahmed, who starred in Oscar-winning "Sound of Metal," about a rock drummer coming to terms with his deafness, told *Variety* in an earlier interview that he went on a journey of learning that he hopes the industry and audience members alike will experience. More recently, he launched a multi-layered initiative for better representation of Muslims in media. Raised by two deaf parents, co-star Raci learned American Sign Language before speaking English. The actor is also a certified court sign language interpreter who strives to break down the misconceptions of the deaf community. "When you do not provide access to a venue, be it sign language interpreters, or visual aids, or wheelchair ramps, you are practicing exclusivity. Period," Raci told *Variety*.



Byron Allen

Founder, Chairman and CEO, Entertainment Studios

● With the Black Owned Media Matters movement, Allen started doing webinars over a year ago to make the industry focus on the systemic racism in the advertising industry. With too little of the billions of dollars every year committed to media going to Black-owned media, he asked ad agencies for 5% to 10% of that money, amounting to as much as \$25 billion a year. "It's not a black and a white issue. It's always been a green issue," Allen says. "We must achieve the four Es: A great education, equal justice, economic inclusion and environmental protection for everyone."



Jillian Apfelbaum

Exec VP, Feature Film, Village Roadshow

● Despite the financial footholds lost during the pandemic, Village Roadshow wrapped shooting on the first tentpole film directed by a trans person, "Matrix 4," and continued to support an incubator program in partnership with Loyola Marymount University focusing on diverse and underrepresented talent and stories. Unprecedented access to talent and resources made the program a proof of concept for similar initiatives with new partners across a variety of platforms. Apfelbaum says, "Village Roadshow Pictures has an inclusive standpoint when it comes to identifying and developing projects and that includes amplifying emerging BIPOC voices in filmmaking — including writers, directors, actors, cinematographers and musicians."



Jonathan Azu

Founder and CEO, Culture Collective

● Working as a music executive at Red Light Management, Azu had a seat at the table. But when he noticed not enough of his colleagues looked like him, he decided to leave and start Culture Collective, a management firm with diversity and inclusion ingrained in its mission. At Culture Collective, Azu helps develop trailblazing artists, including Cory Henry and Emily King, while emphasizing diversity in leadership. In February, Azu launched Diversity in Music, an online directory that connects hiring managers with executives of color and women, and on June 14, Azu announced Coalition of Festival Producers, a cohort designed to educate current festival producers and promote diverse leadership in live music events.

A WIDER NET



Betsy Beers and Shonda Rhimes
Exec Producers, "Bridgerton"

● "Bridgerton" became Netflix's biggest series ever within a month of hitting the streamer last Christmas. Already renewed for Seasons 3 and 4, the Regency-era tale is Shondaland's first project as part of its deal with Netflix. Filled to the brim with hot-and-cold romances and drama, the series also notably included Black characters in its portrayal of high-class London (not to mention orchestral renditions of pop's biggest hits). "What we attempted to do in a lot of different ways with this show was to make sure that there were enough modern elements that a modern audience can relate to, but that it still felt organically like the escapist world of Regency England," Beers says.



Bryony Bouyer
Senior VP, Diversity & Inclusion and Multicultural Strategy, Hasbro

● To Bouyer, diversity and inclusion is about more than just giving people money and representation. As senior vice president of diversity and inclusion & multi-cultural strategies at Hasbro, Bouyer works at building community. A firm believer in hiring people for capability rather than experience, Bouyer's goal is to lend people skills and equip them for the workforce. Bouyer's work includes increasing diversity both inside Hasbro's boardrooms and driving inclusive storytelling in Hasbro's brands. "Diversity is a force for good and a force for growth," Bouyer says. "The more we start to recognize it that way, the more empowered people will be."



Tarana J. Burke and Mervyn Marciano
Producers, Field/House Prods.

● #MeToo movement founder Burke and communications strategist Marciano have long collaborated on narrative work for racial justice. "We felt there's a gap in nuanced stories featuring characters of color from marginalized communities that are full and complex," says Marciano. Partnering with CBS Studios, the duo's Field/House Prods. will develop scripted, unscripted and documentary television and streaming content. Marciano, who's producing an HBO civil rights docuseries, is interested in "queer, trans characters of color" and "fresh ensemble comedies and dramas that showcase the diversity of everyday life." Following her anthology on the Black experience, Burke's memoir "Unbound" publishes in September. In February, #MeToo helped launched We, as Ourselves for Black survivors. "We want to bring the work we've done in the field into the mainstream," Burke says.



Albert Cheng
COO & Co-Head of Television

Vernon Sanders
Co-Head of Television, Amazon Studios

● Working with studio head Jen Salke, Cheng and Sanders spent 2020 bringing more storytellers to the Amazon Studios fold than ever, releasing and putting into production a number of Amazon Originals from Tracy Oliver, Gloria Calderón Kellett, Jason Katims, Jenny Han and others that celebrate and elevate stories from and about underrepresented communities, reflecting their humanity and diversity. "Material progress can only be made with intention and with decision-makers," Cheng says. "We have a responsibility to drive equity in having a seat at the table." Adds Sanders: "It's about being intentional about inclusive, representative storytelling."

Michaela Coel created, wrote and starred in the subversive, cutting-edge TV series "I May Destroy You."



RuPaul Charles
Host, Executive Producer, "RuPaul's Drag Race"

● Considered the most commercially successful drag queen in the United States and quite possibly the most famous in the world, RuPaul has spent decades elevating and amplifying positive queer representation of queens from all backgrounds through the art of drag, and is tireless in his advocacy for more representation in mainstream media for individuals without a voice. Despite the challenges of producing Season 13 of "RuPaul's Drag Race" mid-pandemic, the host and executive producer welcomed another diverse and fierce cast, including the series' first trans male contestant, as he competed against queens of African American, Mexican and Scottish descent.



Michaela Coel
Writer, Producer, Actor "I May Destroy You"

● With "I May Destroy You," Coel turned the story of her sexual assault into a deep exploration of trauma, resilience and catharsis, all within the framework of a comedy. Coel reinforced her unique voice as she works to bring viewers into the world as she's experienced it, similar to her earlier project "Chewing Gum." "I feel very lucky to be able to make the kind of work that I make to stimulate myself and, in turn, hopefully stimulate other people," Coel says. Her first book, "Misfits: A Personal Manifesto," is set to debut in September, while the BBC also teased a new collaboration.

“THE THING I TAKE FROM BILLIE [HOLIDAY], MORE THAN ANYTHING, IS THE STRENGTH OF A BLACK WOMAN.” ANDRA DAY



Cesar Conde

Chairman, NBCU News Group

● Nearly a year ago, NBCUniversal News Group launched the 50 Percent Challenge, an ambitious goal for its workforce to be 50% women and 50% people of color, in concert with a new race, equality and justice editorial unit to build a stronger, more inclusive news organization. Additionally, under Conde's leadership, NBCU presented the first-ever bilingual collaboration between NBC News and Noticias Telemundo, and launched NBCU Academy, a multiplatform journalism scholarship program. “By doing our part to close the historic gaps that still separate too many people from equal opportunity, we can transform the dialogue about diversity, equity, and inclusion into sustainable action to drive long-term systemic change,” he says.



Ryan Coogler, Charles D. King, Shaka King

Producers, “Judas and the Black Messiah”

● Becoming the first all-Black producing team to be nominated for best picture at the Oscars is an honor that's indicative of the trailblazing spirit the two Kings, who are not related, and Coogler have exhibited throughout their respective careers. In the case of “Judas and the Black Messiah,” Coogler's Proximity Media developed the project, with Charles D. King's Macro media label putting up half the financing, which laid the foundation for filmmaker Shaka King to fearlessly execute his vision for Fred Hampton's story on the way to six Oscar nods, with two wins. It's a new wave of Black cinema and this trio is at the forefront. “I'd been wanting to make movies like this my entire career,” Shaka King says. “I just had a little bit more access to it now.”



Andra Day

Actor, “The United States vs. Billie Holiday”

● Earlier this year, Day wowed audiences with her performance as the famed singer in Lee Daniels' “The United States vs. Billie Holiday.” Then she made headlines at the 78th annual Golden Globes Awards ceremony as only the second Black star to win lead actress in a drama. In the press room, Day said, “The thing I take from Billie, more than anything, is the strength of a Black woman. To know that the last person who won this award was Whoopi Goldberg in ‘The Color Purple’ is so not representative of how many Black women's stories have been told sensationally and need to be told by the amazing talented actresses who do this.” While the method acting approach she adopted made her want to quit acting, the win changed her mind. On reflection, she says, “It's difficult to get these stories funded and to get off the ground, so I want to tell stories in movies and music.”



Nyle DiMarco

Exec Producer, “Deaf U”

● After winning “America's Next Top Model” on the CW in 2015, DiMarco segued from a career of modeling to acting. “I think it was quite tricky — not necessarily shifting careers because I was excited about the challenge — but I wasn't met with a similar intrepid attitude at the time,” he says. “Deaf roles were not being written and no one seemed willing to switch characters from hearing to deaf for a new narrative.” Undeterred, he executive produced the unscripted “Deaf U” on Netflix. “For the first time, I was listened to and was part of this bigger thing, bringing my culture to the screen.” With deaf stories such as “Sound of Metal” and “Feeling Through” being told, DiMarco says, “This isn't a trend that will fade out in a year, people want to see stories that reflect their neighbors, teachers, favorite barista, extended family, etc. As a culture, we're not one thing, and the variety of content coming out that celebrates inclusion across the spectrum is monumental.”



Sheila Duckworth

President, CBS Studios/NAACP Production Partnership

● Duckworth became president of CBS Studios' production partnership with NAACP in October, seeking to establish a presence in the Black community and create a pipeline to tell fresh and entertaining stories with strong points of view. With a slate of more than 20 projects packaged with high-level attachments already in the works, she's now expanding her time zones to seek out distinct international voices and deliver intriguing content for global consumption. “True inclusivity is full representation,” Duckworth says. “Continuous and renewed exposure to a full spectrum of people, places and things is critical for growth in all of us individually and collectively.”



Tara Duncan

President, Freeform

● Working under the Disney umbrella, Duncan will lead Hulu's Onyx Collective: a collection of projects from creators of color and underrepresented voices that will include projects from Ryan Coogler and Natasha Rothwell. As Freeform's lead, she also has shows including “Good Trouble,” “The Bold Type” and “Grown-ish” under her belt. “We're also just at the beginning of creating a more inclusive environment that will foster more creativity for more people,” Duncan says. “I think it's just even bigger than simply the conversation around diversity and inclusion. It's really about innovation and how are we moving the entire medium forward?”



Yara Shahidi and Francia Raisa in “Grown-ish”



Ava DuVernay

Producer, Director, Founder, ArrayNow

● For multihyphenate DuVernay it was not enough to direct and produce her own films and TV shows, she is also helping other voices tell their stories via distributor/arts and advocacy collective Array. Her advice to Hollywood's talk of changes for better representation: “Stop talking about it and actually do something meaningful and durable.” She is following her own advice. Array recently teamed with Google for a \$500,000 feature film grant. Array will also staff the project with below-the-line crew. “Inclusive storytelling is at the heart of Array's mission and we're proud to also provide access to Array Crew in order to further ensure that the set of the grantee's film reflects the full array of the world around us,” she said in a statement when announcing the initiative. For herself, DuVernay has “a busy and beautiful summer” with Array's 10th anniversary celebration, distribution of “Cousins” from New Zealand, shooting “Naomi” for the CW, “Home Sweet Home” for NBC, “Cherish the Day” for OWN, along with DMZ, and “One Perfect Shot” for HBO Max, among other projects.



Carla Farmer

Hairstylist, “Coming 2 America”

● Farmer's hairstyles added to the authenticity of Amazon's “Coming 2 America,” which drew a large audience. She looked to Afro-centric and Afro-punk aesthetics when creating the hair designs for Amazon's “Coming 2 America.” Inspired by the traditional Amasunzu hairstyle worn by Rwanda's Tutsis, which often indicates a certain social status among the tribe, she folded this traditional style into the characters' hair. She also drew inspiration from Ruth E. Carter's wardrobe designs. For Jermaine Fowler, who plays Lavelle, the royal heir to the throne and son of King Akeem (Eddie Murphy), Farmer added a regal touch. “Lavelle sports two different hairstyles,” she says. “When we first meet him, he's got this high-top hairstyle, and then he goes to Zamunda where he has a haircut and has a long royal braid.”

AMAZON STUDIOS
PROUDLY CONGRATULATES

Riz Ahmed

Sound of Metal

Albert Cheng

COO & Co-Head of Television,
Amazon Studios

Carla Farmer

Hair Department Head,
Coming 2 America; Sylvie's Love

Latasha Gillespie

Global Head of Diversity,
Equity and Inclusion, Amazon Studios

Paul Raci

Sound of Metal

Vernon Sanders

Co-Head of Television, Amazon Studios

AND ALL OF VARIETY'S INCLUSION
IMPACT REPORT HONOREES



AMAZON
STUDIOS

"YOU HAVE TO MAKE SURE THAT ALL THE SYSTEMS WITHIN YOUR ORGANIZATION ARE SET UP TO ALLOW FOR INCLUSIVITY." KAREN GRAY



Howard Gertner
Co-Director, Co-Writer

Jim LeBrecht
Co-Director, Co-Writer, Star

Nicole Newham
Co-Director, Co-Writer, "Crip Camp"

● "Crip Camp" took the documentary world by storm after it premiered at Sundance last year. It received the Audience Award and was later nominated for an Oscar. American pop culture lore certifies Woodstock '69 as a generation-defining moment, but this documentary finally captures that Camp Jened — just up the road — was equally as revolutionary. The summer camp for teens with disabilities fostered a sense of belonging and rebellion that would help ignite the Disability Rights Movement that fought for the successful passage of the American Disabilities Act in 1990. "This is an educated audience," said Judy Heumann, a leading activist, at Sundance 2020. "If you don't know, maybe you weren't listening."



Latasha Gillespie
Executive Head of Global Diversity, Equity & Inclusion
Amazon Studios

● For the past 2½ years, Gillespie has "been digging into our data to ensure we are telling really representative stories." That process has given the Amazon team "an opportunity to inspect our systems and implement mechanisms that help us make better decisions," per Gillespie. To that end, the company's global greenlight process features a diversity, equity and inclusion assessment that examines how each project contributes to Amazon's core mission: making content that reflects its customers.



Karen Gray
Exec VP, Human Resources, A+E

● Over the past year, Gray led A+E to "supercharge" its equity and inclusion effort with the Voices Magnified programming initiative to create content with people making positive change for the community. It also simultaneously gets more women in internal spaces with thriving executive advisory councils, multiple subcommittees and regular cultural town halls to discuss a variety of intersectional topics. "You have to make sure that all the systems and processes within your organization are set up to allow for inclusivity," Gray says. "It's making sure that it becomes so much part of the fabric that people don't even think about it."



Ray Halbritter
Founder, Standing Arrow Prods.

● A representative of the Oneida Indian Nation since 1975 and CEO of its enterprises since 1990, Halbritter has steered the Oneida people to a pop cultural and economic renaissance. He has created health and social welfare programs, constructed new housing and established language and cultural programs. A trustee of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts & Sciences Museum, Halbritter is also executive producer of "Rumble: The Indians Who Rocked the World." This year, Halbritter founded Standing Arrow Prods., a privately funded independent film and television production company that will champion the narratives of Native Americans and Indigenous peoples. His first project: adapting "The Real All Americans: The Team That Changed a Game, a People, a Nation" by award-winning sports journalist and Washington Post columnist Sally Jenkins. "Representation on the movie screen and throughout popular culture is tremendously important for marginalized communities, and especially important for young people to see images of themselves on screen," Halbritter told *Variety*. "That's the biggest single factor in my decision to launch Standing Arrow Prods."

Paulina Alexis, Devery Jacobs, D'Pharaoh Woon-A-Tai and Lane Factor head FX's "Reservation Dogs."



Sterlin Harjo
Director and Writer, "Reservation Dogs"

● Set to debut on FX later this summer, "Reservation Dogs" is a comedy series about four Native American teens growing up on a reservation in eastern Oklahoma. The storyline came out of the friendship between Harjo and Taika Waititi, who had always been telling one another stories about "the quirky, beautiful communities that we came from," Harjo says. "One of the byproducts of the show, I think, is that it will amplify Native voices. We've been really represented as stoic for so long that we finally get to shake the frost off of all of that and show people that we laugh and make them laugh, as well."



Tilane Jones
President, Array

● Jones wants to share Hollywood's secrets. As president of Array, the independent film distribution company founded by Ava DuVernay, Jones helms Array Releasing, which has put out more than 20 films by women and people of color. Jones' goal of making the entertainment industry more accessible is even more evident in Array Crew, a hiring platform connecting women and POC staffers with studio executives, and Array Creative Campus, where independent filmmakers can hone their craft and build community. Above all, Jones, who recently joined Peabody's board of directors, emphasizes the importance of letting people tell their own stories and shape the industry so that no one enters a room and feels alone.



Janine Jones-Clark
Exec VP of Inclusion — Talent & Content, Film, TV & Streaming, NBCUniversal

● Jones-Clark's enthusiasm for her professional calling is palpable, and in a way, the rest of the world has caught up to what NBCU has been doing with diversity and inclusion for 20 years. Jones-Clark started out in the film division but now her remit includes TV and streaming. "We also get into the culture within NBC Universal, because we really believe that if you're truly building an inclusive culture where all voices and perspectives are embraced, that's going to inform our content," she says. "So where we may be looking at writers and directors, we also are tapping into composers, we're looking now to expand to below the line and what are we doing with talent in front of the camera as well." Clark-Jones and her team of 20 look at leadership and aim to "demystify" the biz for fresh talent outside the L.A.-NYC bubble. Notable talent that has emerged from the NBCU pipeline includes composer Amie Doherty ("Spirit Untamed"), writer Leon Hendrix III ("Cointelpro" for Peacock), showrunner Jenny Hagel ("The Amber Ruffin Show") and director Katie Locke O'Brien ("Kenan"). "And even though I've been working in this space for 15 years, I am so excited with the talent wins," says Jones-Clark.



Daniel Kaluuya
Actor, "Judas and the Black Messiah"

● In April, Kaluuya won the Oscar for supporting actor for his portrayal of Fred Hampton in "Judas and the Black Messiah," embodying the former Black Panther party leader, who was assassinated in 1969 at only 21 years old. "How blessed we are that we lived in a lifetime where he existed," Kaluuya said onstage at the ceremony, after thanking Hampton's widow, Mama Akua, and son Fred Hampton Jr. for their support. Next, Kaluuya is set to reunite with Jordan Peele for a top-secret film, after the pair earned four Oscar nominations (and an original screenplay win) for 2017's "Get Out."

The Walt Disney Company

The Walt Disney Company congratulates the honorees of the 2021 *Variety* Inclusion Impact Report whose work and leadership everyday are helping to create a world where everyone belongs.

Immanuel Acho Brianna Agyemang **DMA** Riz Ahmed Byron Allen Jillian Apfelbaum
Jonathan Azu Bryony Bouyer **Betsy Beers** Tarana J. Burke RuPaul Charles Alberto Cheng
Cesar Conde Deniese Davis **Ryan Coogler** Nyle DiMarco Sheila Ducksworth
Ava DuVernay Howard Gertler **Andra Day** Latasha Gillespie Karen Gray Ray Halbritter
Tilane Jones Janine Jones-Clark **Tara Duncan** Daniel Kaluuya Robert Kessel Shaka
King Charles King Niija Kuykendall **Carla Farmer** Jim LeBrecht Abel M. Lezcano
Dr. Sharoni Littlem Mervyn Marciano **Sterlin Harjo** Paul Martin Jeanne Mau Audra
McDonald Anikah McLaren **Tim McNeal** Travis Merriweather Scott Mills Ramsey
Naito Nicole Newnham Paul Raci **Qui Nguyen** Issa Rae Royce Reeves-Darby Shonda
Rhimes Millicent Simmonds **Ilana Peña** Jamila Thomas Diane Weyermann Alicin
Reidy Williamson Michelynn Woodard **Simran Sethi** Charles YuJean-Rene Zetrenne Emmet
Zetrenne Immanuel Acho Brianna Agyemang **Chloé Zhao** Riz Ahmed Byron Allen Jillian Apfelbaum
Jonathan Azu Bryony Bouyer Tarana J. Burke RuPaul Charles Alberto Cheng Cesar Conde
Deniese Davis Nyle DiMarco Sheila Ducksworth Ava DuVernay Howard Gertler Latasha
Gillespie Karen Gray Ray Halbritter Tilane Jones Janine Jones-Clark Daniel Kaluuya
Robert Kessel Shaka King Charles King Niija Kuykendall Jim LeBrecht Abel M. Lezcano
Dr. Sharoni Littlem Mervyn Marciano Paul Martin Jeanne Mau Audra McDonald Anikah
McLaren Travis Merriweather Scott Mills Ramsey Naito Nicole Newnham Paul Raci
Issa Rae Royce Reeves-Darby Shonda Rhimes Millicent Simmonds Jamila Thomas
Diane Weyermann Alicin Reidy Williamson Michelynn Woodard Charles YuJean-Rene Zetrenne
Immanuel Acho Brianna Agyemang Riz Ahmed Byron Allen Jillian Apfelbaum Jonathan

“BY HAVING A SEAT AT THE TABLE, I AM ABLE TO ADVOCATE FOR PEOPLE AND STORIES THAT WOULD NOT TRADITIONALLY HAVE A PLATFORM.” NIIJA KUYKENDALL



Robert Kessel
Exec VP, Narrative Film

Anikah McLaren
Exec VP, Narrative Film

Diane Weyermann
Chief Content Officer, Participant Media

Weyermann is responsible for Participant's documentary, feature film and TV slate, and oversaw production of docs "Final Account" and "My Name Is Pauli Murray," as well as recent Oscar-winner "American Factory" and double-nominee "Collective." "People are suffering, even dying, because we don't see each other as human beings," she says. McLaren co-heads the busy development and production arm of narrative film for Participant, having spearheaded the Oscar-winner "Judas and the Black Messiah," as well as recently announced projects "Shirley," starring Regina King and directed by John Ridley, and "Sea Fog," produced by Bong Joon Ho. "The first project I championed at Participant was 'Judas and the Black Messiah.' Films like this are crucial to cinema," McLaren says. Kessel has overseen such recent films as "Stillwater," starring Matt Damon, from director Tom McCarthy, as well as the upcoming "White Bird: A Wonder Story," the follow-up to "Wonder," which Kessel executive produced. He's currently in development on a variety of upcoming films, including "Silver Seas," from director Nicole Kassell. "What stories we tell, who tells them, and who we portray on screen has a major impact on the culture," Kessel says.



"American Factory" won a doc Oscar.



Niija Kuykendall
EVP of Film Production, Warner Bros.

Kuykendall uses her role at Warner Bros. to mentor and hire those who inspire her. "By having a seat at the table, I am able to advocate for people and stories that would not traditionally have a platform but that I believe are just as resonant, universal and commercial as any other story," she says. Transformative change, says Kuykendall, has often come from the top. Therefore, she believes the industry needs more diversity in all positions of leadership that help make content successful on a global platform — including marketing, distribution, legal and physical production.



Abel M. Lezcano
Partner, Del Shaw Moonves
Tanaka Finkelstein & Lezcano

With such high-profile clients as Wise Entertainment ("East Los High") and Daniel Krauze, showrunner on Netflix's hit series "Luis Miguel: The Series," entertainment attorney Lezcano is at the forefront of representing showbiz talent in the Latino space. In an industry in which "so much is about relationships formed and nepotism," his aim is to "open the door for more people." Lezcano, who's been at Del Shaw for more than 20 years, cites foundation partner Nina Shaw as an inspiration. "I'm most proud of the fact that the rest of the business has caught up to our firm," says Lezcano, who also serves as a board member of the National Hispanic Media Coalition. "Fifty percent of our attorneys are people of color, and 50% of our attorneys are women — and that was intentional from the start."



Sharoni Little
Head of Global Inclusion Strategy, CAA

"Our work begins and ends with people, and inclusion is not a part of that, it is the business," says Little, a PhD, scholar, author and former vice dean and diversity officer at USC Marshall School of Business. Since joining CAA last November, she's championed inclusive hiring, a Full Story Initiative to shape more representative content and community Amplify events. Virtual town halls on anti-Blackness, civic engagement and education featured leaders and clients including U.N. ambassador Susan Rice, Time's Up CEO Tina Tchen, BLM co-founder Patrisse Cullors, America Ferrera and Yara Shahidi. "The goal was to have a thoughtful — not only conversation — but call to action."



Paul Martin
Chief Diversity Officer, Sony Pictures
Entertainment

Keith Weaver
Exec VP, Global Policy and Government
Affairs and Corporate Responsibility; Co-Chair,
Sony Pictures Action

As co-chairs of Sony's racial equity and inclusion initiative program, Martin and Weaver have pulled together an array of committed individuals, from executives to entry-level folks leveraging their respective experiences to devise a strategy around inclusion and diversity and come up with solutions that help the external community. "The people making important business decisions for our company and leaders within the industry are people of color and women, and there was a degree of intentionality around that," Weaver says. "I like to look at inclusion more of like, instead of counting heads, how do we make every head count," adds Martin. "We want to make sure that we're really leveraging the benefits diversity can bring, and creating a platform where people feel like they have a voice."



Audra McDonald
Co-founder, Black Theatre United

Following George Floyd's murder, Tony winners McDonald and LaChanze sought to address the systemic racism in the country and theater community. "We gathered our friends and colleagues to see what we could do to raise our voices," says McDonald, who founded Black Theatre United with 21 artists including Brian Stokes Mitchell, Billy Porter and Vanessa Williams. The coalition hosted sessions on activism with Sherrilyn Ifill, Viola Davis and Stacey Abrams. Currently, they're creating mentorships, fighting voter suppression and ensuring that as the theater reopens, "the space we come back to is safe and anti-racist, and we do not go back to the status quo of before."



Travis Merriweather
Senior Political Strategist, ICM

Since joining ICM Politics at the start of 2020, Merriweather focused heavily on issues of racial equality, voter mobilization and education, and political engagement for ICM's clients and employees, coordinating multiple mandatory anti-racism/anti-hate/unconscious bias and LGBTQ-plus training seminars, as well as AAPI and Juneteenth Town Halls, organized by affinity groups. "Education is the foundation for growth," Merriweather says. "The lessons we learn from a diverse, inclusive workplace have the power to transform how we think in our communities and across our country. We start by setting real goals for numbers on diversity, practicing empathy and committing to learning from each other's points of view to achieve winning solutions."



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TARANA BURKE



RUPAUL CHARLES



DENIESE DAVIS



AVA DUVERNAY



DANIEL KALUUYA*



MICHELYNN WOODARD

and colleague

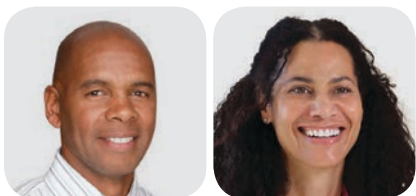


DR. SHARONI LITTLE

Variety's 2021 Inclusion Impact Report Honorees

*Shared representation with B-Side Management
Tarana Burke photo: VH1
Deniese Davis photo: Sydney Lowe
Ava DuVernay photo: Koury Angelo, Getty Images
Michelynn Woodard photo: Ricky Middlesworth

"FIFTY-ONE PERCENT OF KIDS UNDER THE AGE OF 12 YEARS OLD ARE NON-WHITE." RAMSEY NAITO



Tim McNeal

VP, Creative Talent Development & Inclusion,
Disney General Entertainment

Donna Michelle Anderson (DMA)

Director, SVP, Disney General Entertainment

● "There was so much credentialed talent already out in the marketplace that we weren't taking advantage of," says McNeal, a former development executive at The WB who joined Walt Disney Television in 2006. Since recruiting DMA — a strategic consultant, entertainment executive and tech entrepreneur — in 2017, the Creative Talent Development & Inclusion team has connected thousands of diverse above and below-the-line creatives with DGE executives. "We had become this very concierge service," says DMA, who as the company expanded, employed data-driven approaches to widen their reach. Through networking events, talent programs, community partnerships, self-service technology and professional development, they've championed underrepresented voices. "There is this incorrect belief that there was a scarcity out there," says DMA, "when really, working professionals were not being given the same beacon of a pipeline and access."



Scott Mills

President, BET

● BET mobilized aid to address the disproportionate impact of COVID on the Black community, raising close to \$20 million for critical needs. Additionally, the network's Content for Change initiative utilized the power of the creative community to combat racist narratives and beliefs that perpetuate racial violence and inequality. "To ensure diversity and inclusion is not compromised when important business decisions are being made requires fortitude," Mills says. "Generally, as we expand our interactions with a diverse array of people, we become more comfortable with our differences, and recognize our shared experiences."



Ramsey Naito

President, Animation, Nickelodeon

● Animation has always been at the forefront of inclusivity, and Naito sees that as a necessary foundation of Nickelodeon. "Fifty-one percent of kids under the age of 12 years old are non-white," she says, "and this defines our audience and underscores the importance for the culture of inclusivity." Naito is excited about "Star Trek Prodigy," among other Nick shows, noting that the original series "was the first time I saw an Asian-American character on screen that was not a villain." Fostering acceptance and inclusion onscreen is also a great business model, as the kids that comprise Nick's audience want to see themselves reflected in their shows. "When I started at Nickelodeon, I focused on three pillars: culture, leadership and content. We built a team focused on representation in leadership. And that is key — I believe that real change in the area of inclusivity and diversity starts with leadership."



Qui Nguyen

Co-Screenwriter, "Raya and the Last Dragon"

● Nguyen says he is "always writing a love letter to the 16-year-old in me who never got to see themselves in any Hollywood blockbuster." Those are the stories he is seeking to tell through his work. His latest outing follows Raya (voiced by Kelly Marie Tran), a lone warrior who seeks the last dragon. "Raya and the Last Dragon" incorporates the cultures of Southeast Asia, a first for Disney. "I know what that hunger feels like, my passion is to cook meals for anyone who's starving for that kind of attention," says Nguyen, who co-wrote the screenplay with Adele Lim. "Everyone deserves to have a pop culture hero that looks like them." Nguyen understands the importance of the script serving as a blueprint for inspiration. "It's both my honor and my responsibility to make sure that diversity is part of the foundation of my films and not just some last-minute addition that can easily be painted over. The better my blueprint, the better it is for everyone who either gets to make or see the final product."



Ilana Peña

Creator, Executive Producer, Co-Showrunner,
"Diary of a Future President"

● Shooting Season 2 of "Diary of a Future President" in the thick of a pandemic, Peña worked with her cast and crew to practice genuine empathy and compassion while telling a nuanced story about a Latino family. With a few other projects in development — some her own and some collaborations — she's committed to supporting and empowering emerging writers to ensure they have the same opportunities she did. "I strive to create an inclusive environment that values all voices," she says. "Knowing that every single voice is valuable doesn't just create a generous work environment, it legitimately makes every facet of a production stronger."



Issa Rae and Deniese Davis

Founders, ColorCreative

● When Rae and Davis founded ColorCreative in 2014, diversity and inclusion were not the hot-button topics in Hollywood that they are today. "It really started because of my and Issa's passions to see something different," Davis says. "We thought, 'Why is it so hard to bring amazing creatives and talent that we knew mostly from the digital space and find a way to get into traditional mainstream opportunities?'" What began with funding three independent TV pilots has turned into a full-fledged management company, led by president Talitha Watkins and adjacent to Rae's Hoorae media label. A perfect example of ColorCreative's pipeline to success — Syreeta Singleton, who crafted one of those three pilots, is now the showrunner for Hoorae's upcoming HBO Max series "Rap Sh*t."

Ilana Peña drew inspiration from her childhood for "Diary of a Future President," starring Sanai Victoria.





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"IT'S IMMORAL NOT TO HAVE DIVERSITY IN ALL MOVIES AND SHOWS. THE WORLD'S A DIVERSE PLACE." ROYCE REEVES-DARBY



Royce Reeves-Darby

Director of Production, Picturestart

● Reeves-Darby shepherds Picture Lift, Picturestart's joint venture with Get Lifted Film Co. that seeks to identify diverse filmmakers with strong voices who have commercial and genre appeal. Recent projects include "Am I OK?" from directors Tig Notaro and Stephanie Allynne, starring Dakota Johnson, and Eli Roth-directed video-game adaptation "Borderlands," starring Cate Blanchett and Jack Black. "It's immoral not to have diversity and inclusion in all movies and shows. The world's a diverse place and it's our responsibility to reflect that by elevating voices of color that haven't had their chance to speak and create," says Reeves-Darby.



Simran S. Sethi

Exec VP, Development and Content Strategy, ABC Entertainment

● Working at a "female-forward network" featuring LGBTQ and BIPOC characters in hit series such as "Modern Family" and "How to Get Away With Murder," Sethi, and ABC as a whole, "are thinking a lot about intersectionality," she says. "We'll want to continue that tradition with a new wave of characters to tell BIPOC stories and explore the joy and truth of the human experience through a lens of race, gender, disability and sexuality. We just passed our first deadline with the inclusion standards we announced last fall. Working with our creative partners to have the most inclusive series in front of and behind the camera."



The "Scandal"/"How to Get Away With Murder" crossover stars Kerry Washington and Viola Davis.



Millicent Simmonds

Actor, "A Quiet Place Part II"

● During the filming of 2018's "A Quiet Place," Simmonds contributed an invaluable level of authenticity, not just as star, director and co-screenwriter John Krasinski's onscreen daughter, but as daily consultant for the tone of each character's sign language. In the sequel, she assumes the lead role, expanding representation for disabled characters and actors — and paving the way for others. "This year alone we'll have three deaf female leads in blockbuster movies," says Simmonds, who partnered in 2020 with fashion brand Rafi Nova to design a clear COVID mask for the deaf and hard of hearing community. "I feel a big responsibility to help educate more people in this industry that it's really no big deal to hire or work with people with disabilities," she says.



Tiffany Smith-Anoa'i

Exec VP, Entertainment Diversity & Inclusion, West Coast

Jeanne Mau

SVP, Global Inclusion, ViacomCBS

● As shepherds for ViacomCBS to expand access for diverse talent, Smith-Anoa'i and Mau prioritized innovation and intentionality across the entire company, with writers' room and alternative commitments, heritage month events and more. This responsibility includes recruiting, retaining and nurturing talent from diverse backgrounds by hosting and expanding initiatives and programs that will help foster and break emerging talent into industry to elevate a sense of ownership and responsibility to create change for audiences and employees alike. "When all perspectives are brought to the table, we cultivate an inclusive environment as well as introduce new and innovative ideas," Smith-Anoa'i says. Mau adds: "We'll continue fighting the good fight and focus on getting into good trouble and necessary trouble, to create authentic storytelling that is representative of our ever-changing landscape."



Millicent Simmonds, who is deaf, reprises her role in the tension-filled horror film "A Quiet Place Part II."



Alicin Williamson

Senior VP and Chief Inclusion Officer, Endeavor

● During her 13 years at MTV Networks, Williamson learned to ask a question that would continue to guide her public affairs work at the Raben Group and now, Endeavor: "Who should be here and is not?" Since joining in June 2019, she's introduced employee resource groups, diversity working groups to advise business decisions and more inclusive employee engagement and recruiting practices. This year, she prioritized education. "That meant engaging in conversation around books about white fragility or anti-racism and deciding that we were moving into being an anti-racist, ally-oriented company," she says. "This work is about having everyone understand and lead through this lens."



Michelynn Woodard

Head of Good Robot, Bad Robot

● Woodard leads with the belief Good Robot, Bad Robot will be most successful if all team members feel safe and empowered. This starts with the Bad Robot Rule, which makes recruiting in proportion to the U.S. population an intentional practice, and in the summer of 2020, Bad Robot announced a \$10 million commitment over the next five years to organizations and efforts committed anti-racist agendas. "True inclusivity and diversity is doing the hard work to dismantle the systems and structures designed to exclude people of color," Woodard says. "We must continue to find ways to recognize our common humanity."



Charles Yu

Author, "Interior Chinatown"

● In the '90s and early '00s, L.A. native Yu saw little Asian representation on police procedurals and hospital dramas. "That invisibility, it struck me as this weird parallel dimension," says Yu. "What are these hospitals where there are no Asian doctors whatsoever?" Written as a teleplay, his National Book Award-winning novel "Interior Chinatown" examines stereotypical Asian-American roles on a "Law & Order"-inspired show. Yu recently created student writing prizes with TaiwaneseAmerican.org, and the "Westworld" and "Legion" writer is adapting his novel for Hulu. "Someone like Willis who's usually relegated to the background, I really wanted to share the perspective from his eyes."



Jean-Rene Zetrenne

Partner & Chief People Officer, UTA

● Not only does Zetrenne lead UTA's global human resource ops, he also drives the agency's diversity, equality and inclusion commitments, bringing years of experience from ad giant Ogilvy North America. Zetrenne has also formed a partnership with Icon Mann, an organization committed to positively transforming the dialogue and imaging of Black men within the African diaspora through content and community engagement, and works with the Alvin Ailey Theater. "I've always believed in order to drive things forward, my role is to help colleagues stay connected to the 'why' we are doing something, which energizes them into action."



Dancers from Alvin Ailey Theater perform.

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“THE ONE THING I LEARNED REALLY EARLY ON IS YOU’VE GOT TO SURROUND YOURSELF WITH THE RIGHT PEOPLE.” CHLOÉ ZHAO



Oscar-winner Chloé Zhao (right) directs Frances McDormand on location for “Nomadland.”



Chloé Zhao
Director, “Nomadland”

- Oscar-winning director Zhao leaped from “Nomadland” to Marvel’s “Eternals,” for which she is now in post-production. The adaptation of Jack Kirby’s comic book features an ensemble cast that includes Gemma Chan, Salma Hayak, Kumail Nanjiani and Angelina Jolie. Only the second woman to win the Oscar for director and the

first Asian woman, she told *Variety*’s Kate Aurthur: “The one thing that I learned really early on is that you’ve got to surround yourself with the right people. Because you can’t change how people think — you can’t control how they’re going to think, how they’re going to behave. But what you can do is make sure the people that are around you not only protect you but want to be with you because of who you are as an individual.”

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This year, series across drama, comedy and limited/anthology contended with updating beloved stories for a new medium and also brought present-day concerns into their stories and production processes



Addressing Racial Bias

Social movements brought conversations in writers' rooms to the screen • *By Whitney Friedlander*

Television producers have long used their medium as a tool to push progressive thinking on such nuanced topics as interracial dating, queer acceptance and abortion into everyday American households. But what about storytelling that makes these creators and their supporters point the finger inward at their own shortcomings and failures to act?

This year, as a result of increased publicity for Black Lives

↑
The fifth season of "This Is Us" sees Randall (Sterling K. Brown) confront his family about how his outlook and upbringing were different, being an adopted by white parents.

Matter and other similar movements, several Emmy contenders have had honest conversations about race in their writers' rooms and on screen. These depictions include the obvious outward kind, as well as the internal biases that live within us all.

Christina M. Kim, co-showrunner for the CW's martial-arts drama "Kung Fu," says her program had an added layer of need to cover the matter because

"our show, is about a Chinese American family and a lot of it takes place within the Chinese-American community."

As co-showrunner Robert Berens reminds, last year also saw "a president in office who was stirring up anti-Asian sentiment around COVID — and very specifically anti-Chinese sentiment."

"Kung Fu's" fifth episode, "Sanctuary," which is written by A.C. Allen, discusses police brutality,

racial profiling, attacks on immigrants and the struggle between generations over whether it's worth risking your own safety to speak out or if it's your duty to do so. This may seem timely given headline-grabbing news stories, including March's shooting deaths of eight people, six of them women of Asian descent, at an Atlanta-area spa. But these types of events have been happening for years and many, knowingly or not, are culpable.

As the world watched a real-time reckoning for the inherent misogyny and racism in the tech industry, they could also see fictional depictions of it on the NBC musical comedy "Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist" and Freeform's 20-something-skewing drama "Good Trouble," which also addressed BLM activism.

"A lot of these employees have felt this way for years," says Zora

Bikangaga, story editor on “Zoey’s.” “And it’s intersectional. It’s not just anti-Black racism. It’s across the board.”

Since the premise of “Zoey’s” is that Jane Levy’s titular lead learns “empathy by hearing people’s musical numbers,” he says, “we just felt that there was a giant opportunity for her to learn empathy by hearing the struggles of her Black friends or Black colleagues and see her blind spots in the process.”

In “Zoey’s Extraordinary Reckoning,” an episode Bikangaga wrote, she begins to understand the problems in her workplace — not just for her friend Simon (John Clarence Stewart), a Black man tasked with hiding the company’s lack of diversity, but also for Kapil Talwalkar’s Tobin, a first-generation Indian American he has learned that shrugging off commentary about his heritage is a lot easier than calling others out for it. The episode culminates with Stewart performing Michael Kiwanuka’s “Black Man in a White World” as he takes his employers to task during a press conference.

Still other series made these topics part of a conversation their characters were already having. The fifth season premiere of NBC’s family drama “This Is Us” sees the mostly white members of the series’ central, extended family reeling from actual news stories of police brutality against Black people and eagerly looking for ways to help, while the Black family members are experiencing states of trauma and fear.

“Whether it’s subtly or overtly, we’ve never been shy about the fact that our story is largely about a very lovely white family in Pittsburgh in the 1980s who have a Black son. And so, it’s one of those things where it would be quite shocking and disturbing if that was not very obviously addressed,” says Kay Oyegun, “This Is Us” co-executive producer. She wrote the two-part season premiere, entitled “Forty,” with Jake Schnesel and creator Dan Fogelman.

The footage of George Floyd’s May 2020 killing was something

that “forced, in a lot of ways, real introspective conversations across the racial line,” she says.

In the first part of the “This Is Us” season premiere, Sterling K. Brown’s Randall reminds his well-meaning sister, Kate (Chrissy Metz), that “this isn’t the first Black person to be killed on camera” and that “we grew up in the same house. Things like this have been happening to Black people for years and we’ve never talked about it.”

ABC’s “Black-ish” has long-filtered the concept of white liberal guilt through the prism of comedy. In its seventh season’s “What About Gary?,” written by story editor Edgar Momplaisir, Rob Huebel guest stars as a cousin of Tracee Ellis Ross’ Rainbow. Gary is a favorite of her husband, Dre (Anthony Anderson), but recent events have made Gary question his own prejudices and he asks Dre to show him how to be an ally. Conversations range from knowing how to differentiate among celebrities named “Regina” to the societal impact of putting white kids in private school.

Momplaisir says the idea came about after “every single Black person in the writers’ room had an experience where a white person texted them and was just like, ‘Give me the lowdown on what’s happening.’”

“It’s funny that you have people texting a single person, and being like, ‘Hey, can you give me everything about your entire people, your entire race?’ and expecting that person to be a spirit guide, or an encyclopedia, or [reflect] an experience of millions of people.”

Ironically, writing an episode such as this mirrored what so many people of color were already feeling. “We almost felt like we had a responsibility to address it,” Momplaisir says. But he admits “that responsibility is exhausting. That need to say something gets old after a while.”

And yet, these stories can serve as time capsules for different points in history — exactly what Steve McQueen did when creating and helming the five-part anthology “Small Axe” for Amazon

Prime Video. Each installment looks at the lives and pressures put upon various West Indian immigrants living in London during the latter half of the previous century. Unfortunately, the films make it abundantly clear how little has changed.

The “Mangrove” installment, which he co-wrote with Alastair Siddons, is about the arrest and trial of Black activists, the Mangrove Nine. This was an influential court case in England that became London’s first judicial acknowledgement of racially motivated attacks from its police. “Red, White, and Blue,” written by McQueen and Courttia Newland, follows London Metropolitan Police officer Leroy Logan (John Boyega), who attempted to reform the organization from the inside after his father was beaten by officers. “Lover’s Rock,” also

co-written with Newland, isn’t about any specific historical event, but rather about a couple that meets at a house party. The writer-director says he wanted a story that was “just about love, and romance, and music and all the things as we all know as young people.”

McQueen says these stories resonate despite oceanic divides because “local is global” and that “it’s about humanity and it’s about how you tell a story.”

“I think, as a human being, everyone can relate to each other’s stories,” he says. “Sometimes, pivotal moments in our lives actually touch all of our lives, or there’s an understanding of what those stories are.”

And, through television, versions of some of these stories have now been documented for posterity. 7



The second season of “Zoey’s Extraordinary Playlist” exposes microaggressions and larger diversity issues in its fictitious workplace.



“Kung Fu,” which centers around a Chinese American family, includes stories about racial profiling and attacks on immigrants in its first season.



Toxic Workspaces Taint Youth

Writers draw on personal experience for stories on entry-level employees

facing harassment and hierarchy • By Will Thorne



← On HBO's "Industry," Myha'la Herrold plays a young woman entering the cutthroat world of finance.

Few shows have captured the experience of being a young person in a cutthroat workplace quite like "Industry."

The HBO drama centers on a group of bright-eyed graduates entering the shark-infested waters of investment banking and is one of several Emmy contenders, including HBO Max's "It's a Sin" and Netflix's "Emily in Paris," that explore the boundaries between the personal and the professional, as well as between a playful work environment and a deeply toxic one.

Mickey Down and Konrad Kay, the creators of "Industry," admit they struggled to capture the naivety and excitement of the main characters in early drafts. It wasn't until a "great note" from Casey Bloys, chief content officer at HBO and HBO Max, that the pair realized what was wrong.

"He said, 'You guys are writing characters in their third act. You might be in the third act of your life comparatively to them, but you need to remember the excitement of what it felt like for you at the time,'" recalls Kay.

That note made the writers delve deeper into their own experiences of being chewed up and spat out by the banking world when they were in their 20s in order to fuel the struggles of Harper (Myha'la Herrold), Yasmin (Marisa Abela), Rob (Harry Lawtey) and Gus (David Jonsson).

"I think what we ended up with was a balance between the youthful exuberance and anticipation of starting a job, and the crushing realization that this job is going to cost a lot more than you bargained for," says Down.

In "Emily in Paris," the titular character played by Lily Collins

seizes on what she believes is the opportunity of a lifetime in the form of a job at a venerable Parisian marketing firm. However, she also moves to a less-than-friendly environment. Her boss gives her the coldest of shoulders and doubts her abilities, and one of her colleagues makes sexually inappropriate comments almost every time he comes across her.

But both Emily and the characters of "It's a Sin," Russell T. Davies'

↓ Colin (Callum Scott Howells, center) experiences unwanted sexual attention from his boss on HBO Max's "It's a Sin."



limited series about the AIDS crisis, are able to make the best of their potentially exploitative work surroundings.

Davies reveals that the story of Colin (Callum Scott Howells), who is sexually harassed by his elderly boss, is based on a real person who experienced something similar and was meant to showcase the kind of workplace that was rife with "a repression, a darkness, an old-fashioned closetedness."

"But even though there's problems in that workplace, Colin loves it. There's real expertise, there's real knowledge. I loved researching that place and the idiosyncrasies."

Davies adds that he wanted Colin's seedy boss to juxtapose the positive relationship he develops with colleague Henry (Neil Patrick Harris).

"I wanted his boss to be a way into seeing that lovely system, that informal mentorship of older gay men caring for younger gay men," he says. "That was even more important back then than it is now because we weren't as out. There was no internet to help you and fewer clubs and less of a social life if you were as closeted as Colin."

There are moments in the first season of "Industry" in which similarly positive mentor relationships threaten to emerge. However, as with so many other young people entering the workplace, the bright young things at Pierpoint & Co. soon realize success can come at a terrible cost.

"Seeing them climb the ladder obviously has the salacious, backstabbing stuff, but it's also the more grounded experience of the way hierarchies work," Kay says. "It's something that's so built into these institutions."

Down adds: "There is a cost to success in this world. The cost is that you cannot show vulnerability, which is what allows you to basically form a basic human relationship with someone. If you're not allowed to do that, you become an isolated shell. The question we're asking is, is it worth becoming an isolated shell of hardness to be successful?"

Reimagining Popular Properties

Pilot directors on continuation projects had to infuse both nostalgia and newness into their frames • By Will Thorne

Delivering series follow-ups to Jonathan Demme's iconic "The Silence of the Lambs," beloved kids projects "The Mighty Ducks" and "Saved by the Bell," and Marvel Cinematic Universe characters all seem like daunting, if not impossible, challenges on the face of it.

Yet, in the burgeoning era of franchising, studios are digging deeper than ever into their IP mines. This results in old favorites needing to feel both familiar and new again, to captivate a broad audience. Much of that task fell to those who created the visual landscapes of series, including CBS' "Clarice," Peacock's "Saved by the Bell" and Disney Plus' "WandaVision."

According to Maja Vrvilo, helming the pilot episode of "Clarice" was the most intimidating challenge of her career to date. "Being a fan of 'Silence of the Lambs,' it was incredibly exciting and incredibly terrifying at the same time," she says.

That pilot episode picks up only a year after the events of Demme's Academy Award-winning film but utilizes flashbacks to recreate some of the most memorable moments Clarice (then played by Jodie Foster, now played by Rebecca Breeds) has with serial killer Buffalo Bill. But because time has passed, Vrvilo knew the pilot had to provide insight into all of the issues, such as PTSD and being in a glaring national spotlight, that Clarice has been dealing with between the film and where the audience is reintroduced to her.

"She's still defined by what some would consider to be her greatest weakness: the ability to empathize with killers and their victims," Vrvilo says. "Those are actually her greatest strengths. She's

forced to look into her past and see how it shaped her as a person and how to learn and grow from that."

In a similar fashion, "WandaVision" draws on the very recent trauma that Wanda Maximoff (Elizabeth Olsen) experienced in "Avengers: Endgame" as the catalyst for events in the series. Unable to handle the loss of her love, Vision (Paul Bettany), Wanda reverts to her youthful coping mechanism of sitcoms. But because she is so powerful, she drags an entire town into the show-within-a-show with her.

"At the heart of it, we took Wanda Maximoff, a character who has suffered a great deal of loss, and explored how she comes to terms with that loss [and] can she come to terms with that loss?" says director Matt Shakman. "It's a larger exploration of grief and also a love story, because the flip side of grief is love, and she's lost all the people that she loved so much."

Each episode changes style as the sitcoms move through the ages, paying homage to shifting story tropes and being shot in different aspect ratios. When it came

to the scenes outside of Wanda's idyllic suburban creation, Shakman says they used the same lenses and camera packages as on "Avengers: Infinity War" and "Endgame" so that fans would feel the same epic scope to which they have grown accustomed.

With Disney Plus' "The Falcon and the Winter Soldier," director Kari Skogland faced very similar complexities as Shakman, and she, too, relied on "Endgame" as a guide. But such an action-heavy show required a bit more research, which led her to a lot of

↓
Disney Plus' "The Mighty Ducks: Game Changers" continues the world of "The Mighty Ducks" film franchise.



extreme sports videos to find new angles to capture the soaring fight sequences involving Anthony Mackie's eponymous Falcon.

"I wanted those to feel really different because we hadn't spent that much time with Falcon in the air before. We needed to take them to a whole new level," she says. "Watching those videos inspired the squirrel suits, and we hired a team to actually jump out of a plane and do the landings and I put cameras all over them so we could capture what that new aesthetic is where you are really with the characters."

Both of these series centered around characters who had been somewhat on the periphery of the bigger MCU films, with "The Falcon and the Winter Soldier" exploring the leads' back stories in much greater detail.

"If you look at Sam, we wanted to capture the history of that family, of the Black community



to tell this time. Now, we're very much showing that those kids lived in an insanely privileged world. The new Douglas High kids are our entryway this time, which was a wonderful way to approach it."

Although the show does pay tribute to the original (from the fourth wall breaks, to countless subtle Easter eggs directors, including O'Donnell, had to capture), he says the goal was to only "nod to the visual language and the feel" of the original.

Similarly, "The Mighty Ducks: Game Changers" flipped the premise of the original series on its head, making the famed Ducks into an arrogant team that takes kids' hockey far too seriously while former coach Gordon Bombay (Emilio Estevez) is a reclusive rink owner who claims he wants nothing to do with the sport any longer.

"I thought that was a fun thing to satirize," says director James Griffiths.

Even when making deliberate choices to differ from the original films, at its heart "Game Changers" always aims to retain the spirit that led those Ducks and their coach to become so mighty, adds Griffiths.

"What I loved about the original movies, the first one specifically, was how the kids interacted with each other," he explains. "We found those real characters in casting kids like Brady Noon and Maxwell Simkins — kids who have this adult energy, this banter, this comedic muscle at a young age. I just wanted to be truthful and authentic to them — to let the kids be the heroes." 🦋



↑
Rebecca Breeds steps into the titular role of "Clarice," which sets events a year after "The Silence of the Lambs."

←
Peacock's version of "Saved by the Bell" re-enrolls the audience in Bayside High, but with a new modern-day teen class.



←
The titular characters on "WandaVision" (played by Paul Bettany and Elizabeth Olsen) take their superhero skills from the big screen to streamer Disney Plus.

which has been dealing with the same story again and again, with the same financial strife, the same racism," Skogland says.

Instead of focusing entirely on key characters from their original inspirations, both "Saved by the Bell" and Disney Plus' "The Mighty Ducks: Game Changers" brought a whole cast of fresh new faces to the party.

"You watch the original today and it feels like it's from a different time," says Trent O'Donnell, director of "Saved by the Bell." "Some of the original storylines, the stuff the characters did just wouldn't fly today. The world of the affluent kids in this affluent suburb is not the story we wanted

“

You watch the original today and it feels like it's from a different time. Some of the original storylines, the stuff the characters did just wouldn't fly today.” — Trent O'Donnell



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← “The Conners” worked the pandemic into its third season storyline, in addition to altering plans for how to produce the ABC series.

Multicam Mayhem

Sitcoms usually follow specific shooting styles and schedules,

but the pandemic upended that • *By Marisa Roffman*

After the television industry shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic, multicam productions had an extra barrier when considering an eventual return: what to do about the live studio audience.

Traditionally, each episode would have a table read, followed by rehearsals and a day of pre-taped material before filming the bulk of the installment in front of a couple hundred people. But with no crowds allowed on set, how each show could approach filming changed.

“It was very much a logistical challenge, where I had to be working on [following the safety protocols] and at the same time make sure that the creative was getting serviced, as we are used to doing,” says James Widdoes, “Mom” director. “We didn’t want to present a worse version of the show because of COVID.”

An early speedbump? The discovery of how PPE, a necessity, im-

pacted rehearsals. In addition to table reads being bumped to Zoom (where everyone was at the mercy of potential technological snafus and internet delays), regulations required masks and/or shields for all pre-filmed practice runs.

“Not only was it difficult to hear each other, but [also] for the actors to hear the other actors [in the scene],” says Jody Margolin

Hahn, director of “The Conners.”

Hahn’s long history with the franchise — going back 30 years to when she was a script supervisor on “Roseanne” — made her a natural choice for the ABC comedy’s first episodes back. But even though she had a shorthand with some of the team, the required social distancing made it hard to give discreet notes to performers.



← Netflix’s new family sitcom, “The Upshaws,” filmed a few episodes in front of a live audience before new pandemic protocols were put in place.

Early on, “The Conners” tried to change things up by bringing in clear masks. “These actors need to see each other’s faces. Without seeing them, there are going to be moments that are missed,” Hahn recalls the team reasoning. But it was short-lived. “They fogged up, they were sweaty, they were uncomfortable and were not as safe, so we ended up not using them.”

With no in-studio audience to cater to, the directors also shook up when, and for how long, they filmed.

“I didn’t know how this was going to work in terms of how fast we could do things,” Widdoes admits. “I suggested [adding] a third camera day just to cover ourselves, just in case.”

In the new environment, “we had no pressure that we were going to have a show ready and perfect for an audience,” he continues. “But what we did have, all of a sudden, [was] plenty of time to shoot. We had plenty of time to fix a line, a piece of blocking, the performance if it’s not working. And so we actually wound up with — in an odd way — a very calm, peaceful, creative environment to shoot the show, that we got to by accident.”

Netflix’s new sitcom “The Upshaws” filmed a few of its early season episodes with an audience before having to shift strategy for the new safety protocols. When that happened, director Sheldon Epps says, it fell on him “to help supply and motivate that energy that normally would come from an audience.”

“That is the value of having a live audience there: the actors are constantly backed by them, even between takes,” he continues. “I certainly had to do more reminders to keep the energy up and hold for laughs. I had to do a lot more laughing myself.”

Although that was an unexpected added responsibility for Epps, in the end he feels it worked out in the best possible way: “Honestly, I don’t think we could tell the difference between the episodes that we shot at the beginning of the season with an audience and those that we shot without the audience.”



A Stretch to Find Short Form Nominees?

Quibi nabbed most of the comedy or drama series noms in 2020 but no longer

exists to submit • By Michael Schneider

Now that Quibi ended up lasting, well, a Quibi, the Emmy Awards' short form categories seem further destined to become more of a curiosity than a major part of the competition. Roku picked up Quibi's scraps, but doesn't appear interested in launching new originals in the short-form space. And elsewhere, outlets including YouTube are bulking up in unscripted, but are less keen on adding more scripted, short form or not, to an already crowded marketplace.

The Television Academy first expanded the short form categories in 2016, buoyed by the promise of original fare from Maker Studios, Fullscreen, AwesomenessTV, YouTube Red, Adult Swim

and others. Maker and Fullscreen basically don't exist anymore, and the excitement of the short form races has perhaps further cooled after the Quibi debacle.

But although the Quibi business model was questionable, its programming wasn't. The service premiered quite a bit of quality fare in its short life, which is why last year it at least dominated the Emmy races for short form comedy or drama series actor and actress. Quibi landed four of the five nominations in both categories and also won both: Laurence Fishburne and Jasmine Cephas Jones for "#FreeRayshawn." It also landed two noms in short form comedy or drama series, for "Reno 911" and "Most Dangerous Game."

That category, however, went to AMC.com's "Better Call Saul Employee Training: Legal Ethics With Kim Wexler." And that's the real rub with these short form categories: Most of the nominations, and wins, end up going to digital extensions of regular prime-time series from major networks and streamers.

In the short form variety series field, Apple's "Carpool Karaoke: The Series" has won the past three years. "Being at Home With Samantha Bee" and "Jimmy Kimmel's Quarantine Minilogues" made the nominations-round ballot last year, as did "Between Two Ferns With Zach Galifianakis: The Movie, Sorta Uncut Interviews," which was basi-

cally bonus footage from a film.

This year, with the realization that there just aren't enough entries to go around, the TV Academy merged the short form comedy/drama series and variety series into one. Perhaps that's for the best, as neither category has managed to stir up much originality. (And it started so promising in 2016, with Adult Swim's "Childrens Hospital" winning the short form drama or comedy. Sundance's "State of the Union," which won in 2019, was another original, well-produced victor.)

Meanwhile, the short form non-fiction or reality series category has become a repository for what are little more than electronic press kits: Last year, "National Geographic Presents Cosmos: Creating Possible Worlds" beat out nominees including "Pose: Identity, Family, Community" and extensions of "The Daily Show," "Full Frontal With Samantha Bee" and "RuPaul's Drag Race."

Ideally, the short form categories would find room for the plenty of original, independently produced shorts that are regularly found on social media platforms. But the TV Academy, still stung by Megan Amram's parody series "An Emmy for Megan," which earned short form comedy or drama nods in 2018 and 2019, has added a vetting process that has presumably kept out more low-budget entries.

Adult Swim is still in the mix with "Dream Corp LLC," while BBC America has "CripTales." FX's "Cake" banner has "9 Films About Technology" and "Dr. Brown, Naturally." Netflix is submitting the BDSM comedy "Bonding" and the alternative comedy sketch series "Aunty Donna's Big Ol' House of Fun."

"I think that there's something really exciting about freeing up and allowing comedy to exist at exactly the length that it remains funny," says Broden Kelly, one of the three members of the Aunty Donna comedy troupe. "So, it's a really exciting category and representation of a cool shift that's happened in the last 10 years." 🍷

↑
Broden Kelly is one of the stars, writers and executive producers of "Aunty Donna's Big Ol' House of Fun" on Netflix.

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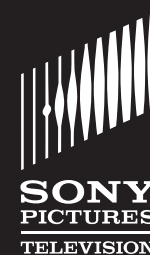
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CELEBRATING TALENT



Sony Pictures Television's shows include, clockwise from top left: "The Boys," "Them," "Cobra Kai," "Shark Tank," "Coyote," "Crossing Swords" and "Woke."

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NO NEED TO FEAR THESE SHARKS

Education has become a key mission of "Shark Tank"; that became even more urgent when the pandemic put many viewers under painful financial stress.

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BUILDING WORLDS FOR EAGER AUDS

From stunts to visual effects to production design, "For All Mankind," "Them," "S.W.A.T." and "The Boys" all thrive on the mastery and creativity of their artisans.

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A BLOCK SCARIER THAN GHOSTS

The anthology series "Them" presents a traumatized Black family whose new tract house may be haunted — but in 1950s America, the next-door neighbors are worse.

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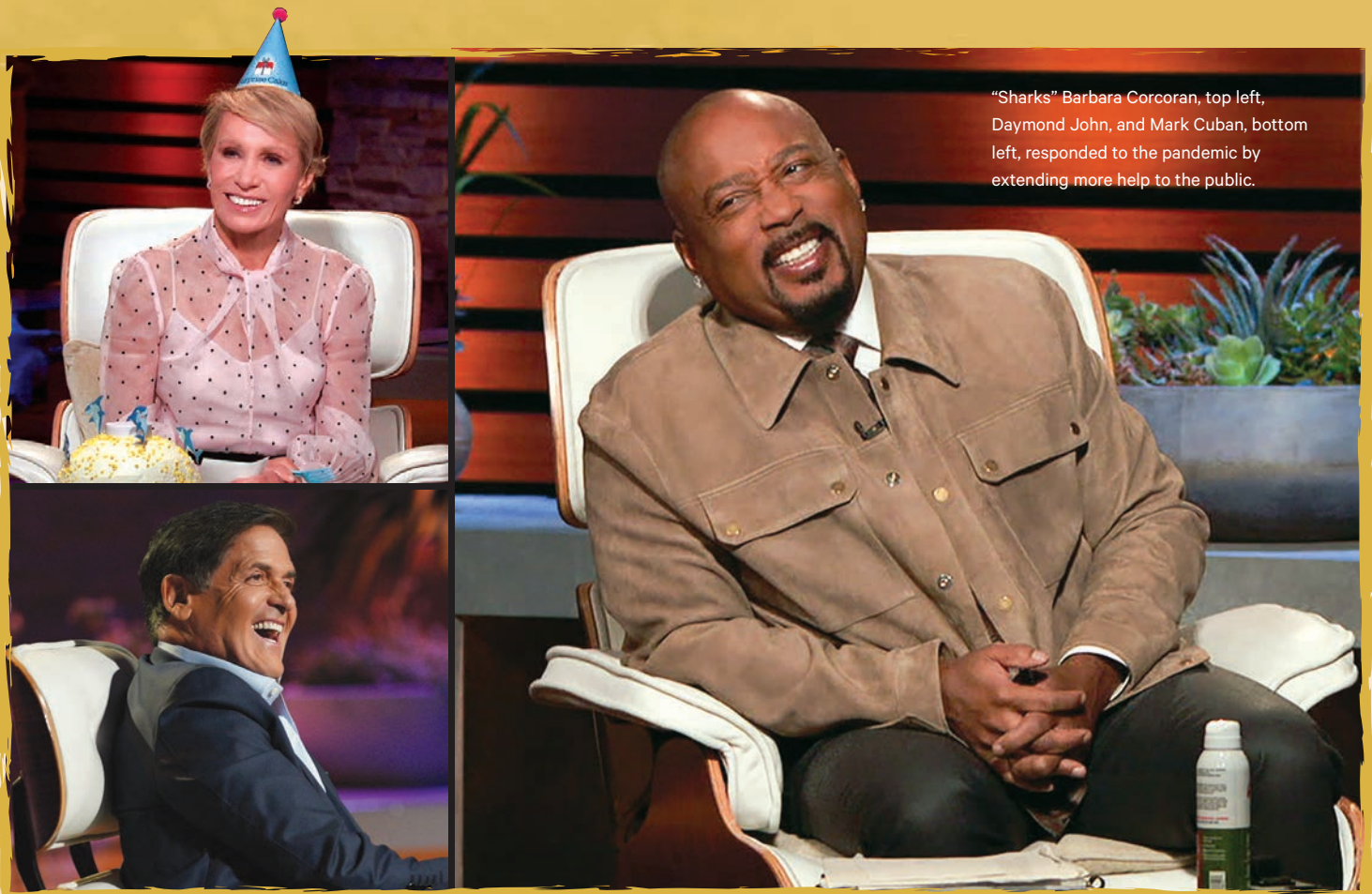
ANIMATORS SMASH THE MOLD

Animators could always create images that cameras can't capture; now they're exploding boundaries to tell new stories — or old stories in exciting new ways.

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SEDUCED BY A LAND HE HATED

In "Coyote," Michael Chiklis plays a former border patrol agent who learns to love the country and people he has long despised when he's forced into smuggling immigrants.



"Sharks" Barbara Corcoran, top left, Daymond John, and Mark Cuban, bottom left, responded to the pandemic by extending more help to the public.

SCARY SHARKS

Hide Their Teeth

*How
COVID-19
prodded
"Shark
Tank's"
investors
to be even
more
helpful.*

BY BOB VERINI

Sharks aren't just the most feared man-eaters of the sea. They're pretty terrifying on land as well. Take the investor predators in TV's "Shark Tank," who over the past 12 years on ABC have been known to devour underprepared entrepreneurs in a single gulp.

Yet, once the pandemic hit, the investor stars of Sony Pictures Television and MGM Television's reality hit stepped up to become helpers rather than hunters. Considering the advice and inspiration they have volunteered to hundreds of thousands with at-risk livelihoods, you'd swear the Sharks had morphed into friendly dolphins.

Billionaire and owner of the Dallas Mavericks Mark Cuban immediately committed to keeping his staff on payroll as if nothing has changed, and countless employers follow his

example. Real estate mogul Barbara Corcoran devotes six to eight hours per week to reviewing public queries and recording replies in her regular podcasts.

Fashion and branding expert Daymond John entered partnerships to purvey wisdom to Black-owned small businesses, a sector disproportionately damaged by the pandemic. Even venture capitalist Kevin O'Leary, aka "Mr. Wonderful," continues to offer advice to prospective Tank presenters ("Tell your story. Have a mission. Have a strategy to distribute your product!"), and now is creating video content for a sixth-grade class putting together a "Shark Tank" of their own.

How did the superrich moguls manage to connect so well with the public and with small-business people in particular?

"They trust us," Cuban suggests, a trust born of years

of "seeing us" on the show. "It feels really, really good." But, he is careful to add, it's also an obligation and a responsibility.

Social media sites were fertile sources of inquiries about Paycheck Protection Program loans: eligibility, the application process, and banks that might

production while strictly following quarantine protocols in Las Vegas last summer, the usual bare-knuckle brawling for deals and one-upmanship (for which the show is famous) was certainly in evidence. Happily, everyone stayed healthy. Although COVID-19 was kept out, the emotions of the day could not be.

"We had our hungriest entrepreneurs by far this year," Corcoran says. "We also had the most heart-wrenching stories by far. People had mortgaged homes, they had left their kids behind, their wives — they were alone."

Such real-world contacts fueled Shark determination to make a difference outside of the Tank. Corcoran is so often asked on the street for advice that she figured "it was easier to let everybody call into my 888-BARBARA hotline ... and for me to choose questions that would apply to the greatest number of people." John was

"I think we are part of financial literacy now in America."

Kevin O'Leary,
venture capitalist

be approachable. The Sharks also recommended sources of information on dealing with employees — a constant source of stress in the workplace.

"I think the best thing we did," Cuban concludes, "was get on social media and answer questions."

When the show went into



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struck by the can-do spirit that kept striding through the double doors during the entire lockdown season.

"You either were able to survive a massive speed bump in your own business, or you were working on somebody else's dream and you decided that it's time to work on your own," John says. Either way, everyone realized, the pandemic made for "a great situation for creating business, jobs and opportunity."

"Shark Tank" sees teaching as integral to its mission.

"From kids 8 years old to kids 90 years old," says Cuban, "we teach America that anybody can be an entrepreneur."

"I think we are part of financial literacy now in America," O'Leary agrees. "People learn about different finance structures, royalty deals, venture debt, convertible ventures. ... Thanks to 'Shark Tank,' several generations now understand these terms."

John says that as early as Season 2, the Sharks understood that "we're educating the next generation of American kids who are going to be industry leaders. ... The goal of the show is empowerment."

Empowerment, of course, was in desperately short supply in 2020. The nation was crippled, says Corcoran, by "a lack of optimism, number one. And number two, helplessness. Feeling like whatever you wanted to do with your life and the people around you, you couldn't do it. It was taken out of your hands."

The Sharks sought to restore some measure of that control.

"You can't solve every problem," Cuban concedes. "But you can at least be empathetic. The greatest message that I think I was able to provide is that everybody's afraid. This is not easy on anybody," and he lists employees, customers, vendors and families as those equally affected. "If you're honest, if you're authentic, if you listen, then people recognize that you want the best for them."

To continue the ocean analogy: When people are going under for the third time, it helps to have a fleet of confident swimmers who are willing to serve as lifeguards.

CRAFT MASTERS CONJURE IMMERSIVE WORLDS

"For All Mankind," "Them," "S.W.A.T." and "The Boys" all thrive on the creativity and skill of below-the-line teams

BY KAREN IDELSON

Each time you feel transported into the world of your favorite shows, you can bet a brilliant below-the-line team helped make it happen. Whether it's the makeup, hair, production design, visual effects or stunts, these talents bring the showrunner's vision to life.

In "For All Mankind," a look at the 20th century space race in an alternate world, head makeup artist Erin Koplow carefully ushered the show's characters into the 1980s.

"For Middle America, the '80s were much more muted, so what I did was more subdued," says Koplow. "With the eyebrows, we combed them up and made them fuller but not too much because they're in this conservative environment in Houston."

Hair stylist Tena Parker, knowing the stereotypical hair of the decade was extreme, took the same approach.

"We did a lot of shaking hair upside down to get the volume that you have in that decade, but these are conservative characters in a conservative town," says Parker. "Some of the actors got perms (for volume)

and with some we curled their hair to make it look like they had a perm."

Tom Hammock, production designer for "Them," an anthology series told in the style of a haunted house story, also traveled backward in time but, in this case, to the 1950s.

"I think we're just trying to serve the needs of horror, and the boxy rooms of 1950s tract house construction is not really conducive to horror, so we chose to adjust the layout to make them more unsettling, while remaining with the appropriate architectural language," says Hammock. "The windows are larger, giving it more of a fishbowl situation where the neighbors could constantly spy on them and harass them. We always worked toward enhancing even the slightest amount of camera creep, so you're lengthening the hallways and we'd used more doors than they normally would have in the house so you never knew when a door would open."

Stunt coordinators rely on surprise to keep craft fresh for an audience, too. Austen Brewer of the action drama "S.W.A.T." is always looking for a way to give something a fresh twist.

"I would say one of the more difficult stunts was from the end of the first season where we took a bigger version of our armored truck that the S.W.A.T. guys drive and drove that through a semitruck trailer, while it was exploding," says Brewer. "Trying to figure out the timing and speed was a little difficult, but it all lined up great. On 'S.W.A.T.,' we try to do things as real as possible, because it gives things that gritty look."

Visual effects often come in where a stunt team or production design team end their work, or they can create something completely new. Stephan Fleet, visual effects supervisor for "The Boys," went after a more "real" look for this superhero story.

"From the beginning, we wanted to make a 'grounded' world," says Fleet. "Whereas a show like this might normally consider doing battles and such with heavy green screen work, we're always pushing to do the opposite. We go the distance and use real locations as much as possible. Oftentimes, we let the VFX just be part of a scene instead of the focus, which, in a weird way, actually makes them seem more cool."

"S.W.A.T.," below left, relies on its stunt team to give action a gritty look; "The Boys," below right, keeps most of its VFX subtle, especially for a superhero story.



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MODERN HORROR, *Served Up '50s Style*

Sony Pictures Television's anthology series "Them" connects midcentury cruelty with the racial traumas of today

BY BREANNA BELL

There's more than terror lurking beneath the surface of 1950s suburbia in "Them."

At the center of the Sony Pictures Television anthology series, which airs on Amazon Prime Video, is the Emory family who tries to escape Southern racism by moving to Los Angeles but are forced to confront their inner demons as well as the hatred that follows them to their new neighborhood.

While attempting to escape their own prisons of the mind, each of the Emorys discovers their own newfound strength that brings them through their own traumas to a place of personal redemption.

The Emorys face the internal struggles that Black people have passed



down through generations, plus "monsters" — both the suggestion of a supernatural menace and the larger horrors that continue to plague people in 2021, including racism and police brutality. The series reminds viewers how little progress has been made in the U.S.

in the last 70 years — something creator Little Marvin recognizes.

"The unfortunate and sobering and exhausting fact is that we're always facing these problems," he says. "Our series could have been released four years ago when it was first conceived and, sadly,

would have been just as relevant. The terror of violence — psychic, emotional or physical — has been a constant in Black lives since the dawn of this country."

For parents Henry (Ashley Thomas) and Lucky (Deborah Ayorinde), protecting their

EXPLOSIONS OF IMAGINATION

These animators are telling stories in startling new ways

BY ELLEN WOLFF

"CROSSING SWORDS"

When Sony Pictures Television partnered with Stoopid Buddy Stoodios to produce the series "Crossing Swords," they took adult animation to an unexpected place. In this stop-motion realm, medieval knights are more potty-mouthed than gallant, and maidens are rarely fair.

That their raucous adventures are acted out by small wooden peg toys makes the irony irresistible. Shortly after the 10-episode series debuted on Hulu in 2020, it was renewed for a second season.

Executive producer Tom Root says "Crossing Swords," which he co-created with John "Harv" Harvatine IV, had been

germinating all that time. "Harv is a toy fanatic who has had peg people that he made himself," says Root. "We thought it would be funny to make an R-rated show with little peg bodies doing really adult things."

Dysfunctional family animation is the style of "Crossing Swords," which is lit and photographed to highlight the characters' tactile wooden surfaces. Filming on 15 to 25 stages simultaneously, the animators indulge in physical effects whenever possible — like setting steel wool on fire to create sparks. As Root admits, "So many of us are doing this type of animation because we never wanted to stop playing with toys."



"ONE DAY AT A TIME" — THE POLITICS EPISODE

When "One Day at a Time" showrunners Gloria Calderón Kellett and Mike Royce co-wrote "The Politics Episode" ahead of the 2020 election, they never imagined their multi-cam sitcom would wind up animated. But once the pandemic closed soundstages, animation suddenly seemed viable. "When I brought it up, Sony Pictures Television could have laughed at me," says Calderón Kellett. "But they didn't. They were committed to making a splash."

The logistics were daunting. Engineers rigged recording equipment in each actor's home, and operated from vans parked outside. Everyone else participated via Zoom. Only Rita Moreno and Justina Machado had voice-over acting experience, but they made it work. Guest stars Lin-Manuel





children (Shahadi Wright Joseph and Melody Hurd) is their main priority. Lucky is the victim of a traumatic experience that results in the loss of a child, which leaves her in an almost catatonic state. Her dedication to her family becomes the impetus that pulls Lucky out of that condition, allowing her to rescue her household by finding her courage.

Ayorinde says her characterization is based on those around her. “I took inspiration from my mother, sisters and the plethora of

“The terror of violence ... has been a constant in Black lives.”

Little Marvin, series creator

women I know who continue to show up, in spite of anything they’ve been through or might be presently going through,” she explains. “For me, Lucky was a love letter from me to them to say, ‘I see you and I appreciate you.’”

In Henry’s journey, viewers watch the father’s mental state deteriorate due to a perceived inability to protect his family from the horrors of Jim Crow. White neighbors threaten the Emorys with lynched dolls wearing blackface, burn slurs onto their lawn, and send police officers to their door more than once. However, in his most vulnerable state, Henry realizes his restraint could be what saves his family after all.

Thomas had no trouble understanding what drives Henry. “I believe any real father

wants to protect his family from harm and give them the best opportunities he can give and beyond. I believe many fathers will do absolutely anything, work their fingers to the bone, kill or be killed to make sure their families are safe and secure — like my own father and the men I know in my personal life,” he says.

But the actor had another beast to conquer: coming to grips with the power and the necessity of holding back.

“In the 1950s, there was a different level of restraint entirely

In “Them,” Henry Emory, far left, struggles against racism to have a middle-class life. Left, Henry and wife Lucky want to protect their children, who must learn to navigate among neighborhood bigots, recover from a past trauma and face down a threat that may be supernatural.

that I had to get an understanding of,” explains Thomas. “That was difficult to play. Any sense of the slightest provocation literally meant the difference between life and death. ... To play that level of nuance I had to dig deep, concentrate and work extremely hard.”

Perhaps the grimmest aspect of the series is that it uses the horror genre to show that race relations today are scarily similar to those in Jim Crow America. Decades later, according to “Them,” we have made too little progress.



Miranda, Melissa Fumero and Gloria Estefan joined remotely. Then, animators at Canada’s Smiley Guy Studios and Big Jump Entertainment collaborated online around the clock. Artwork and animatics were circulated for approvals, and the episode was completed in eight weeks. As Calderón Kellett remarks, “Considering all

the chaos of that time, it was mind-boggling that it came together.”

“The Politics Episode,” which aired on PopTV in June 2020, became what Calderón Kellett calls “the last hurrah” for the venerable sitcom. “It was made at such a hopeless moment, so going out with a bang was a saving grace for us all.”

“WOKE”

At first glance, “Woke” appears to be a live-action series, but key comedic highlights hinge upon ingenious puppet animation.

Ordinary objects, such as trash cans, bottles, and artist markers, unexpectedly come alive and make wisecracks (with attitude voiced by Cedric the Entertainer and J.B. Smoove). Inspired by the experiences of cartoonist Keith Knight, the show chronicles what happens when a chance encounter with police upends an artist’s life and leaves him “woke.”

Puppeteering realistic-looking objects — whose hand-drawn faces evoke the style of Knight’s comics — was a mix-and-match challenge. “We have visual effects, 2D and 3D animation and puppets blended together,” explains Ben Bayouth, creative director at Buddy Builds. Working with Mike Spitzmiller, VFX supervisor at Stoopid Buddy Stoodios, they grounded

the puppets in physical space to achieve a kind of magic realism, even if Bayouth had to climb inside a trash can to puppeteer it.

Response to the show’s eight-episode debut in 2020 prompted Hulu to order a second season,

and Bayouth thinks “Woke” can rebrand what audiences think of as puppet animation.

“We’re waiting to see how the character’s experience talking to inanimate objects will further his story. I’m sure they’ll throw some curveballs at us.”





A 100-MILE JOURNEY to Understanding

Michael Chiklis, right, with Juan Pablo Raba in “Coyote,” the story of a hostile former border patrol agent forced to smuggle immigrants into the U.S.

“Coyote” turns assumptions about immigration at the U.S.-Mexico border upside down

BY ADDIE MORFOOT

In 2018, Michelle MacLaren was looking for a project that addressed the U.S.-Mexico border dilemma.

“I had watched ‘Fauda,’ which is, on the surface, an entertaining drama, but underneath it’s really about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,” the producer-director recalls. “I thought, ‘Wow. What’s the Mexico-U.S. version of that?’”

The answer was “Coyote.”

Created by Michael Carnes, Josh Gilbert and showrunner David Graziano, “Coyote” (a term used for human smugglers) is about a retired U.S. border patrol agent whose black-and-white worldviews take on shades of gray when he’s forced to work for a Mexican drug cartel.

While the six-part series, starring Michael Chiklis as former border agent Ben Clemens, revolves around a polarizing topic, it’s not a political show; it’s a character-driven action drama.

“The series has political undertones, but we didn’t want to preach,” explains MacLaren. “We don’t have answers to the challenges of immigration, but we can put our

characters into shoes that they haven’t worn before.”

Before production began, MacLaren, Chiklis and Graziano (who all served as “Coyote” executive producers) knew they wanted Mexican partners; that would help them tell both sides of the story accurately. This led to five months of shooting entirely in Mexico, a cast that was 71% Latino, a crew that was 88% Latino, and a writers room equally split between scribes from Mexico City and Los Angeles.

Mexico itself became a key character.

“The story becomes one of seduction,” explains Graziano. “(Clemens) goes down (to Mexico) and through him the audience goes down there too. We see the sights and the sounds and the smells as Ben does, which at first turns him off a little. Then he gets past the noise of the city and is caught by this magical coastline. It’s a story of a reverse migration, a man who falls in love with a country that he used to vilify.”

Locations helped. The series was shot mainly in small, rural towns in Baja California, Mexico, as well as the western portion of the inhospitable Sonoran Desert.

“It was a magical experience because the (Latino) cast and crew were so excited about telling this story from the other side of the border and putting our lead character into the shoes of a migrant whose choices have been taken away,” says MacLaren.

The universal story of transformation and walking a mile — or in Clemens’ case,

“The story becomes one of ... a reverse migration.”

David Graziano, showrunner

100 miles across a desert — in someone else’s shoes is what makes the show humanistic. Clemens puts aside his prejudices and stereotypes to see people he once despised as fully human.

“This show is about authenticity and about nuance,” says Chiklis. “That’s why we had tremendous representation from all sides of the equation so that we had multiple voices talking about the same topic.”

Several key characters are Mexican or Central American, and each plays a role in Clemens’

moral evolution. All are played by Latino actors, including Juan Pablo Raba as El Cartin, the head of a Mexican family cartel.

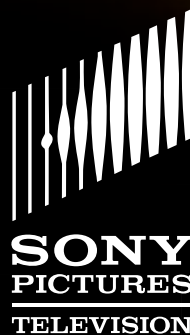
“Shows like ‘Coyote’ have the power to take our culture to the world,” says Raba. “With ‘Coyote’ the audience has a chance to dig deep into several aspects of Latino culture. [The team didn’t want to] embrace the white savior complex. It was the complete opposite.”

Graziano says the characters’ varying perspectives, including Clemens’ attitudes, are like a mosaic. “They all have very different attitudes, very different points of view, very different upbringings. We are using them to ask questions and not try to answer them for anybody.”

MacLaren concurs. “Storytelling is the most interesting when you put your audience into a character’s head,” she says. “What one character sees one way, another character sees that same thing in another way. That’s really exciting and can make you think, ‘Wow, I hadn’t thought about it like that,’ or ‘What would I do in that situation?’”

“And for a long moment, you get to imagine what it might be like for people in this situation in real life.”

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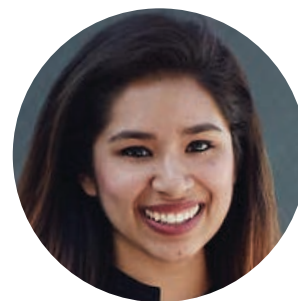
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Fact-Finding Mission

AFI Docs returns to a changed Washington, D.C. • *By Andrew Barker*



→ Morgan Neville's "Roadrunner: A Film About Anthony Bourdain" is one of the highlights of the AFI Docs program.

FOCUS

Running June 22-27, the AFI Docs festival will bring a smorgasbord of nonfiction offerings to the greater Washington, D.C., area, screening 77 features in both the nation's capital and nearby Silver Spring, Md. As with almost every festival making a provisional return to in-person events this summer, AFI Docs is approaching its 19th edition as a hybrid fest, with online components making up for the limitations on physical capacity.

But as AFI's senior programmer Sarah Harris points out, the American Film Institute, which puts on the event, finds itself in the unusual position of organizing its third virtual festival since the start of the pandemic. AFI Docs was one of the first to go fully virtual last summer, and then the organization also put on its flagship namesake festival online in the fall, so "we knew we could build on that experience and make this one great, and then the in-person elements were just icing on the cake," she says.

"We're still not quite at full-capacity, but we have 77 films in the festival, and we really wanted to make it as full and immersive and engaging as a real event. We're striving to get back to that place, but we're in a transitional time in exhibition, and we're all trying to figure it out as we go. So with this festival, we really wanted to make a curatorial mark."

With emphasis on the word "curatorial," AFI Docs will present a multidisciplinary selection of documentaries that have played earlier festivals — most notably centerpiece screening "Roadrunner: A Film About Anthony Bourdain," a closing night screening of Sundance hit "Cusp," and films including Angelo Madsen Minax's "North by Current" and Mary Wharton's "Tom Petty, Somewhere You Feel Free" — in addition to a few notable world premieres.

Arguably the most newsworthy of the premieres is opening night film "Naomi Osaka," director Garrett Bradley's follow-up to

↓
Isabel
Bethencourt
and Parker Hill's
"Cusp" will
play AFI Docs
as the closing
night film.

“

We're in a transitional time in exhibition, and we're all trying to figure it out as we go. So with this festival, we really wanted to make a curatorial mark." — Sarah Harris

her Oscar-nominated 2020 mainstream breakthrough, "Time." Here her subject is the titular tennis phenom, who recently made headlines when she opted to withdraw from the French Open in order to prioritize her mental health, sparking a wide range of discussions.

Also making bows at the festival are Sonja Sohn's "The Slow Hustle," about a corruption case in the Baltimore police depart-

ment; Greg Barker's Big Pharma expose "White Coat Rebels"; and a pair of projects related to former President Barack Obama: two episodes of Peter Kunhardt's "Obama: In Pursuit of a More Perfect Union" will be screened, as will three episodes of the upcoming Netflix series "We the People," produced by Obama's Higher Ground shingle.

The D.C. connection has always been an important one to AFI Docs, and Harris notes that it became especially so after the Jan. 6 storming of the Capitol: "Things in D.C. are different," she says, "and so what it feels like to hold a joyful event changes."

Harris notes that while the festival lineup has plenty of politically engaged films, the primary focus has tended to be "stories of individuals, not movements."

Pointing to Andre Gaines' "The One and Only Dick Gregory," Questlove's "Summer of Soul" and Dawn Porter's "Rise Again: Tulsa and the Red Summer," she says: "That's just something that's happening with documentary films right now, and I'm not sure how much of that is a straight trend, but I do think it's an effect of quarantine and shut-down, and the social justice and racial justice movements over the last several years. I think people are looking to be connected, and they really are looking to the leaders who have been lost in these greater movements; they want to find out more about who's a part of these things, and they want to be connected to each other." 🍷



Monte-Carlo Television Festival Places Bet on Quality

Event celebrates its 60th anniversary with an in-person gathering • *By Tim Dams*



← The world premiere of "Reyka" from South Africa will open the fest.

A year later than expected, the Monte-Carlo Television Festival (June 18-22) is about to celebrate its 60th anniversary. The pandemic halted the celebrations last year, but Monte-Carlo is pressing ahead with plans for an in-person event on the Mediterranean coast this month — making it the first major European TV fest to take place in-person since COVID-19 took hold.

"We are proud of that," says chief exec Laurent Puons, who adds the festival will be 80% in-person in Monte-Carlo and 20% digital. "The festival is a celebration, so it's better to have guests on site rather than at home."

Guests will require COVID-19 tests, while measures such as distancing and mask wearing will be in place, Puons says.

Known for its glamorous location, red carpets and press junkets, Monte-Carlo has in recent years carved out an important role as a European platform for

American studios to promote shows and talent. Series such as "Grey's Anatomy," "Lost," "Desperate Housewives" and "Game of Thrones" have all launched at Monte-Carlo.

This year, of course, will be slightly different. With the U.S. government currently advising against travel to France, there will be few American guests so the festival will necessarily have a stronger focus on European projects. "Thankfully, a lot of European production is of a very high level," Puons says.

The festival opens June 18 with the world premiere of South African crime thriller "Reyka," produced for M-Net and distributed by Fremantle, with stars Kim Engelbrecht, Iain Glen, Thando Thabethe and Zee Ntuli due to attend. Politically, this could prove an astute move by the festival as Prince Albert II's wife, Princess Charlene, hails from South Africa.

The heart of the festival remains the competition, which is split into fiction and news categories, as well as the Prince Rainier III Special Prize.

The fiction category has been tightened up this year so that nine dramas are competing compared with around 25 in previous years. Three of the dramas vying for one of the festival's Golden Nymph Awards are world premieres: Spanish co-prod "Ana. All.In.," Israeli thriller "Line in the Sand," and Czech drama "The Defender."

Two U.S. titles also feature in competition: Miramax and Amazon Studios' "Uncle Frank" and Paramount Television Studios' "Made for Love." The competition is rounded out by the U.K.'s Channel 4 hit "It's a Sin" and Sky original "Roald & Beatrix: The Tail of the Curious Mouse," Finland's "Piece of My Heart" and Germany's "The Unbearable Lightness of the Revolution."

For Puons, this focus on fewer titles is about emphasizing quality over quantity: "The quality of the competition was very good in the past, but with this new format we are sure it will be better."

The fiction jury is led by Swedish writer, director and producer Måns Mårild ("Borgen," "The Bridge"), whose drama "Shadowplay" was to open last year's festival.

Mårild will journey to Monte-Carlo along with fellow jurors including "The Syndicate" writer and director Kay Mellor and "Das Boot" producer Moritz Polter.

"It will be nice, travelling to Monte-Carlo, and being in a room with other people talking about drama," Mårild says.

He notes that Monte-Carlo "really takes itself seriously" as a TV festival and wants to compete with the standing and stature of film festivals.

Meanwhile, 15 titles will compete in the news category across three sections — documentary film, news documentary and news coverage. Many of the titles focus on key issues of the past year, notably COVID-19, the U.S. Capitol invasion and climate change. News provider ITN Prods., for example, has both a documentary and a news report in competition for its lauded coverage of the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol.

New for 2021 is an expanded business program for industry executives at Monte-Carlo, with panel discussions and keynote conversations both in person and virtually.

Puons says it will be a different kind of event compared with many industry conferences, with 90-100 attendees meeting in a "relaxed" and "comfortable" environment.

The idea, he says, is to provide the producers, directors, writers and executives who attend the festival with their work a place to do business and to network.

Meanwhile, one of France's most popular actors, Tchéry Karyo — who is about to reprise the title role in a new series of "Baptiste" — is being awarded the festival's Crystal Nymph. 🎬

Forest Whitaker's Fruitful Calling

The acclaimed actor, producer and director is the second recipient of Newport Beach Film Festival's

Lifetime Achievement Award • By Scott Huver

As **Forest Whitaker** prepares to receive the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Newport Beach Film Festival, the prolific Academy Award- and Emmy-winning actor with a career spanning four decades says he finds himself increasingly reconnecting with the way he approached the work when he was just starting out.

There's a "joy when I'm working on a part in the discovery of looking at it and trying to figure out the people," he says.

For example, he notes that by focusing more deeply on the needs of his "Godfather of Harlem" character, real-life crime boss Bumpy Johnson, the character itself leads the way to his performance.

"That's the way I was working before," he says. "I started to go back to basics sometimes, and it's making things more exciting for me again."

Whitaker admits he feels fortunate to have been allowed to play an astonishingly diverse array of roles across practically every imaginable genre. His acting resume includes such disparate projects as "Bird," "The Crying Game," "Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai," "The Last King of Scotland," "The Great Debaters," "Lee Daniels' The Butler," "Rogue One: A Star Wars Story," "Black Panther" and "Jingle Jangle: A Christmas Journey."

An avid researcher who intensely immerses himself in a character's world, Whitaker says he believes he's grown and evolved personally as a result.

"It helps me because as I start to explore these people and their different circumstances, I start to see more of the universal. I call it just 'oneness,'" he says. "You start to see how these things relate to



“

It's a luxury to get a chance on TV to really, really go deep into a character and to watch them change slowly.” — Forest Whitaker

you because you're searching for a way to understand them. So that means you're searching inside of your own belief system — an awakening of a sort. And that is a great gift to be able to recognize.”

He was also an early adopter of the opportunities that prestige television presented to film actors, embracing extended stints on "ER" and "The Shield."

"It's a luxury to get a chance on TV to really, really go deep into a character and to watch them change slowly," he says. He recalls his "Shield" character's gradual transformation over the course of

a season, which included slimming down 10 suit sizes and shaving his head to externally reflect his spiritual annihilation in his clash with Michael Chiklis' Vic Mackey.

Today Whitaker finds similar long-term creativity in playing Bumpy Johnson — more specifically, in expressing "the depth of him being a family man, a poet, a chess master [all while] trying to strive for quality with the Italian mob."

Whitaker says in exploring the choices that fueled the real-life Johnson's conflicts and partnerships with New York's Five Families, the key is to "look at why he did it, what opportunities he wasn't being allowed and then ultimately decisions that he made."

When Whitaker talks about exploring choices, he's not just doing so with a performer's eye: He also serves as an executive producer on "Godfather of Harlem" and the docuseries it spun off ("By Whatever Means Necessary: The Times of Godfather of Harlem"). Previously, he produced film projects including Ryan Coogler's "Fruitvale Station" and Boots Riley's "Sorry to Bother You." And in the 1990s and early aughts, he helmed such modern classic films as "Strapped," "Waiting to Exhale," "Hope Floats" and "First Daughter." Now, after a nearly two-decade hiatus, he's eyeing a return to the director's chair.

"I was just discussing it with my representatives the other day, that I might direct another film," he says. "In the next five years I'll probably step behind the camera again — maybe even the next two years."

In the meantime, though, "I think I'll keep acting for a little bit," he says with characteristic understatement. 🍷



Cannes Lions Roars, Albeit Remotely

Virtual advertising and marketing event to air daily live sessions • By Leo Barraclough

Cannes Lions, the annual gathering for the advertising and marketing community, will take place online again this year, running June 21-25, but every effort is being made to make it as live an event as possible.

The show will be broadcast live every day, although the sessions will also be available on demand. There are “Daily Award Shows” hosted by Juan Señor in Cannes, during which the winner of each awards category will be revealed. Five 90-minute shows will cover the 28 award categories. The Lions Awards did not take place last year so jurors have been assessing two years of creative output.

In addition, there will be one-hour specials, known as “The Debrief” sessions, on the awards with the jury president of each

section hosting a deep dive into the work and chatting with winners. Plus, there’s a daily presentation and a wrap up, during which the day’s 10 Hot Stories will be picked out, and there will be a few surprises as well.

Added to that there will be live meet-ups and performances at the “Virtual Experience,” where visitors can explore the show — including spaces built by brands — with their avatars interacting with other guests.

These networking sessions, hosted by “industry heroes,” Cannes Lions says, have been “designed to ignite collaboration and inspire you to aim higher and push for better.” Visitors can catch headline talent for performances, keynote speeches and off-the-cuff Q&A sessions.

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Microsoft’s campaign for the Xbox Adaptive Controller has won it plaudits at Cannes Lions.

Lions Live, as the virtual version of the show is called, was launched in June 2020, when about 70,000 individuals registered from 145 countries. Another edition was held in October. Access to Lions Live is free for those with annual membership, which costs €249 (\$303).

The talent lined up to take part this year reflects the breadth of the areas that the Lions covers, and the crossover between its world and the showbiz universe. They include actor and Pilot Wave executive producer Gal Gadot; actor, director and Nine Muses Entertainment founder Bryce Dallas Howard; musician and president and chief strategy officer at Carnival World Music Group, Wyclef Jean; musician Ed Sheeran; and Formula One racing driver Fernando Alonso.

The range of media companies with executives speaking — such as Netflix, Twitter, Amazon, Google, Disney Plus, Facebook and YouTube — also points to the many areas of common interest.

One honoree that was already announced is Microsoft, which has been named Creative Marketer of the Year. The accolade is presented to an advertiser that has “amassed a body of creative and Lion-winning work over a sustained period of time, and has established a reputation for producing brave creative and innovative marketing solutions.”

Although the event is mainly forward-looking there will be opportunities to reflect on the trials of the pandemic.

Philippa Brown, worldwide CEO at PHD, and the Media Lions jury president, says: “I’ve heard many people quote Dickens’ novel, ‘A Tale of Two Cities,’ ‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.’ And you know what? It’s so true. Whilst the pandemic and lockdown have impacted teams’ spontaneous creative thinking, it has allowed for different ways to generate ideas and created a breeding ground for creativity.”

As well as the pandemic, social movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter have rocked the world of advertising and marketing, and have shaken Cannes Lions itself.

In late May the org had to apologize and reaffirm its commitment to diversity, equality and inclusion in response to a furor sparked when Abraham Abbi Asefaw, chairman at LW in London, was dropped as dean of the Lions’ Roger Hatchuel Academy learning academy, leaving its leadership devoid of people of color.

In other ways, Cannes Lions has risen to the challenge in support of diversity and inclusion. In April, for example, it announced that for the first time ever a higher percentage of women, 52%, were represented on the shortlist juries.

The jurors were also geographically diverse, being drawn from 55 countries. 🌐



Oasis Keen to Lure Productions

Saudi film commission plans to hit Cannes while its AlUla is busy with shoot • By Nick Vivarelli

Since Saudi Arabia lifted its 35-year-old religion-related ban on cinema in 2017, the kingdom has experienced a boom in all aspects of film industry activity. It's the Middle East's top-grossing territory in terms of theatrical box office returns while its locations are drawing international film and TV shoots.

At the upcoming Cannes Film Festival, Saudi Arabia will be out in full force promoting its locations, the most notable being the region of AlUla in the northwest, a sprawling area the size of Belgium comprising rocky outcrops and giant boulders, home to the ancient city of Hegra, the country's first Unesco World Heritage Site, still largely intact after almost 2,000 years. Featuring constructions beautifully carved in stone and classical-style columns poking out of the sand, Hegra provides stunning ancient backdrops. On top of those, AlUla also offers

volcanic craters, verdant oases, lots of wildlife, and, of course, year-round sunshine.

In February, the Film AlUla commission launched to promote the region as an ideal destination for shoots spanning a wide range of genres, from historical epics and fantasy and science-fi pics to war movies. The first U.S. production it attracted is Anthony and Joe Russo's drama "Cherry" starring Tom Holland as an Iraq War veteran turned opioid addict, an Apple Original film for which the Saudi desert stood in for Iraq.

Gerard Butler action thriller "Kandahar," in which he will star as an undercover CIA operative working in the Middle East, is reportedly expected to shoot later this year in AlUla, which will stand for Afghanistan. Pic is partly financed by Saudi media giant MBC.

"We are very excited to open AlUla's doors to film production and share with the world the

↑
Film AlUla offers unusual locations in hopes of drawing international productions as Saudi Arabia looks to diversify its economy.

wealth of beauty, history, and diversity on display here," said AlUla film commissioner Stephen Strachan at its launch. Strachan is an experienced producer whose credits include Saudi director Shahad Ameen's feminist fable "Scales," which was Saudi Arabia's official candidate for the Oscar in the international feature film category last year.

In terms of financial incentives and professional support the Saudi Film Council at Cannes in 2018 announced a 35% cash rebate for international productions though it's still unclear how it works and production companies are encouraged to contact the council and the Film AlUla team directly to discuss specific arrangements and incentives and also for assistance with location scouting and in sourcing equipment and professional crew locally and regionally. Plans are also underway to build sound stages in AlUla and additional

hotels to accommodate international productions while preserving the authenticity of its heritage sites and landscapes.

In terms of studio space, though several facilities are in the works, the only full-service studio that is up and running is Nebras Films, which boasts a 42,000-sq.-ft. backlot outside Riyadh, the Saudi capital.

It opened in 2018 and has hosted Spanish director Agustí Villaronga's coming-of-age costumer "Born a King." Pic is about King Faisal, who as a 13-year-old prince in 1919 was dispatched by his father from the desert to London where he navigated complex diplomacy, ushered in a process of modernization upon becoming king and is now regarded as a Saudi hero. The pic, which has been a local hit, is a Spain-U.K. co-production between Spain's Andrés Vicente Gómez' Latido Films and London-based Celtic Films.

Celtic Films' Stuart Sutherland ("Killing Eve") has described the experience of shooting the roughly \$21 million feature as "the beginning of an evolution."

Sutherland subsequently went back to Saudi to shoot a Saudi Arabian remake of Spanish blockbuster "Campeones" ("Champions"), also with Latido on board as a co-producer. That pic, about about a soccer team of boys with special needs, wrapped in February in Jeddah, Saudi's second-largest city, which has an ancient historic center that, like AlUla, is also a Unesco World Heritage site.

Jeddah, which is looking to become a key movie industry hub, will host the upcoming Red Sea Intl. Film Festival, Saudi's first major film event, set to hold its inaugural edition in November.

Much has changed since 1991, when Spike Lee had to go through Saudi Arabia's King Fahd to get the go-ahead for an all-Muslim second unit to bring cameras into Mecca for "Malcolm X," though Mecca still remains off-limits for non-documentary productions. 🎬

Brits Take Aim at Void

ScreenSkills aims to train up newbies and give mid-career professionals a boost to fill biz jobs • *By Leo Barraclough*

The boom in bigger-budget U.K. movies and series — funded mostly by the global streamers and Hollywood studios — has created shortages in skilled labor at a time when there is also a desire to improve diversity in the workforce. Both issues have been made more challenging due to the pandemic.

Research released recently by ScreenSkills, an organization that helps address the training needs of the British industry, highlighted a host of issues including a rise in remote working, the need for more staff in production management roles, the need for better interpersonal and communication skills, and the difficulties of providing on-the-job training when faced with COVID restrictions, staff shortages and budgetary restraints in a sector that is overwhelmingly freelance, and in which staff jump from project to project with little continuity.

“The challenge is: How do you keep pace with what the industry needs, particularly given the specialization, and the scale and ambition of shows?” says

Seetha Kumar, chief executive of ScreenSkills. “I think it’s just scaling up what we already do, and doing much more of it.”

One of her priorities is to cater to the training needs of mid-career professionals. “The key pinch point, I would say, is less at the new entrant level, and more in specialized job roles, given the scale and ambition of shows are increasing.” The aim is to help staff broaden their experience and strengthen their credits by honing skills.

One thing that can be done to address skills shortages, she says, is to encourage people from other professions, whose skills are transferable, such as accountancy and production management, to join the industry.

Flexibility is crucial when adjusting to the changing needs of the industry, such as the adoption of more remote work in the past year. “When things happen, as during the pandemic, and there was significant change, the industry adapted flexibly and imaginatively to the needs,” she says.

The widespread sharing of information about safe ways of

→ ScreenSkills is helping address diversity in entertainment jobs.



working during COVID should be replicated when addressing other issues, such as skills shortages and increasing diversity.

Despite the sector’s largely freelance and project-based model, ScreenSkills is working with other industry players to develop common approaches to recruitment and onboarding processes, as well as other priorities such as developing anti-bullying and harassment policies, and improving mental health, including achieving a better work-life balance. “We have to constantly evolve and change,” Kumar says.

There is a need to develop better leadership skills at all levels within the workforce “so we create a culture that is much more respectful, thoughtful, even under pressure,” she says. Although “bad behavior” exists within the industry, “there’s a real desire and willingness, cer-

tainly with the practitioners we work with, to challenge it, and to change it,” she says. “A good leader is somebody who — no matter what happens — can stay calm. You can be polite, you can be respectful, and get the job done.”

There is a willingness to improve diversity in the industry, Kumar says, but further work needs to be done. Although programs for getting a foot in the door exist, maintaining momentum is more difficult in an industry in which clear pathways rarely exist, and zig-zagging is the norm. “If you come from a disadvantaged background, or you feel the other, you lose confidence quite quickly,” she says. One way to assist career progression is to “help them build connections; so mentoring becomes really important,” she says. “We also help them build networks.”

“

The challenge is: How do you keep pace with what the industry needs, particularly given the specialization, and the scale and ambition of shows?” — Seetha Kumar

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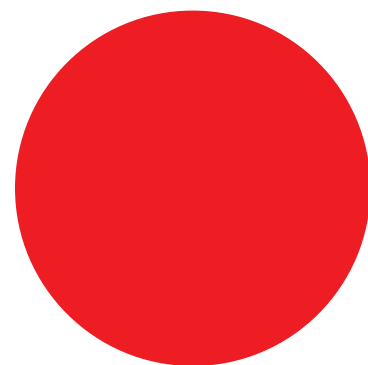
ARTISANS

Scoring Monster Fun on the Italian Riviera

Composer Dan Romer brought his own accordion to Pixar adventure 'Luca'

Alberto (voiced by Jack Dylan Grazer) and Luca (Jacob Tremblay) have their own theme music.

By Jon Burlingame



It took composer Dan Romer a while to find the right Italian touch for the music of “Luca,” Disney-Pixar’s animated fantasy (opening June 18) about young sea monsters masquerading as humans on the Italian Riviera.

“Not quite Italian enough” was director Enrico Casarosa’s response to his first try. “Too Italian!” was the response to his second. Eventually Romer discovered the correct instrumental seasoning: a bit of accordion, a little mandolin, a lot of acoustic guitar and pizzicato strings — just

“

I was looking for something off the beaten path, a little bit independent.”
— Enrico Casarosa, ‘Luca’ director

enough to hint at the locale and the period (late ’50s, early ’60s).

“I was looking for something off the beaten path, a little bit independent,” Casarosa tells *Variety* about his choice for composer. The director had been a fan of Romer’s music for the Benh Zeitlin films “Beasts of the Southern Wild” and “Wendy,” and says “there was something about his scores that said ‘kids on an adventure ride,’” which nicely describes “Luca.”

Romer has no Italian lineage, but, he says, “I grew up in Brooklyn, so Italian Americans have been a huge part of my life.”

The composer took inspiration from a playlist Casarosa gave him that consisted of classic Italian film music as well as folk and pop music from the era. “There’s no doubt those songs influenced my writing,” he says. “When I score a film that invokes the music of another culture, I like to dig in very deep and live and breathe that music so that it becomes second nature.”

Italian colors were only a part of Romer’s assignment. The story follows Luca and Alberto — who discover that they appear human when out of the water — and their summertime adventures in a seaside town, where they befriend a girl, Giulia; are plagued by an obnoxious older teen; and must avoid not only water but also Luca’s parents, who have come onshore looking for their missing son.

“Each kid has their own theme,” notes Romer. Luca’s conveyed “a sense of longing and wonder,” Alberto’s had “a rousing ‘let’s go!’ kind of feeling, and Giulia’s was



“the most Italian, with a more homespun regional feel.” Because the youngsters dominate the story, he made sure that all three themes were harmonically compatible and could work in counterpoint during scenes that involved two or three at once.

Luca’s meddlesome parents are voiced by a bass clarinet and tuba. “We thought it would be fun to have two low instruments that kind of bumbled back and forth,” Romer explains. “I ended up writing this rhythmic, melodic figure that was a call and response between the two instruments.”

The town of Portorosso, where most of the action takes place, is “where we wanted to lean into the romantic Italian-score side,” reports director Casarosa.

Romer first saw a “rough animated” of the film, “all drawings, no animation,” in late 2019, prior to the pandemic, and he began

composing in July 2020. Recording took place in mid-March under strict COVID guidelines: Strings, brass, woodwind and percussion sections — a total of 82 musicians — were all recorded separately and mixed together later.

“I wanted a slightly smaller sound than a lot of other big movies,” he points out. “A lot of string sections for those classical Italian scores were fairly small.” And he wanted to replicate the sound of such legendary Italian composers as Nino Rota (“La Dolce Vita”), Nicola Piovani (“Life Is Beautiful”) and Luis Bacalov (“Il Postino”).

There’s also a smattering of Puccini, Rossini and several popular Italian tunes of the period scattered throughout. Casarosa decided to conclude the film with “Città vuota” by the hugely popular Italian singer Mina. The song is a cover of Gene McDaniels’ 1963 “It’s a Lonely Town (Lonely

Without You).” Mina’s recording, released the same year, appealed to the director as “a wonderfully melancholic song that felt right” for the moments after the characters’ goodbyes.

Romer managed to score “Luca,” his biggest feature to date, while maintaining weekly scoring chores on several TV series including “Superman and Lois,” “The Good Doctor” and “Atypical.”

The composer, an old-school rock ’n’ roller, had never owned a nylon-stringed classical guitar but bought one for “Luca.” He plays all the guitar, mandolin and accordion parts in the score. “I’ve been playing accordion for 20 years now, which is a shock to me because I’m still pretty bad at it,” he says with a laugh. “But it was such a pleasure to sit in front of a pair of microphones and just play accordion every single day while working on the film.”

Composer Dan Romer and mixer Greg Hayes at a scoring session for “Luca”

For Those on the Spectrum, an Exceptional Connection to Hollywood

By Jazz Tangcay



Exceptional Minds, a not-for-profit professional training academy and studio designed to prepare individuals on the autism spectrum for careers in the digital arts, hosted its eighth annual graduation ceremony June 11. As part of the ceremony, a new honor, the Exceptional Alumni Award, sponsored by *Variety*, was bestowed on Ryan Oldis, a 2020 graduate.

Oldis, 32, who recently joined Nickelodeon as a production assistant, recalls her mother first heard about the academy through NBC when Oldis was trying to find an artistic outlet. Oldis started on the academy's two-week course — and ended up in its three-year program.

Oldis had been interested in drawing and graphics, but says she has a love for animation as well. Her time at the academy allowed her to flex those creative muscles.

But the boost from the academy didn't stop there. "They have connections with various studios, and I thought if I can apply to those, I can network and take what I've learned at Exceptional Minds and apply it to the real world," she says.

Oldis is working on the series "Santiago of the Seas," where she joins another Exceptional Minds alum, Kate Jorgensen, who is the production coordinator on the show. Jorgensen traveled the same route to the animation studio as Oldis — interning and making connections. "She was the one who told me about this open position that came up, and she recommended that I apply for it," Oldis says.

While Oldis spends much of her time managing schedules, files and emails, she still finds time to dedicate to art. "I still practice it outside of work," she says. "I'm still doing like everything I was doing at Exceptional Minds, except I'm now doing it on my time, keeping my skills sharp and ready for when they will be needed next." 🎨

Current artwork by Exceptional Alumni Award recipient Ryan Oldis



Sketches: Ryan Oldis; Grey's Anatomy: Richard Cartwright/ABC

Production Supervision Has Rx for 'Grey's Anatomy' Team

By Zoe Hewitt



Production supervisor Jennifer De la Rosa spent Season 17 of "Grey's Anatomy" helping keep cast and crew safe during the COVID-19 pandemic. With "Grey's" one of the earliest shows back in production, De la Rosa calls the team's efforts a bit like building a plane while flying as they brainstormed and implemented safety protocols.

The production had to determine not just how often to test, but which tests to use and how often to clean the stages. De la Rosa began researching air filters, learning which were best, and then worked to ensure those were the ones installed.

Writers included more exteriors during the season and production built outside when possible, as opposed to inside on soundstages. A favored location was a private beach in Palos Verdes.

The writers also included a continuing storyline about a safety device — a powered air-purifying respirator — that actors wore on-screen. (All who wore one were required to pass a pulmonary test and go through a training process on the device.) Since the PAPR uses an internal AC system that hums, extensive sound tests were required to get everything right.

De la Rosa, who has worked on "Station 19" and "The Catch," credits Shondaland senior director of production Val Cheung and head of production Sara Fischer for their support. She says that sometimes just having permission to add their names to the cc line of an email produced results. On hiatus now, "Grey's Anatomy" is planning for a mid-July return to production amid a pandemic that is lessening in severity but is by no means over — which means making decisions about health and safety teams and other protocols must begin again soon. 🎧

Respirators were part of the storyline for Season 17 of "Grey's Anatomy."



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KALINA IVANOV

Production Designer

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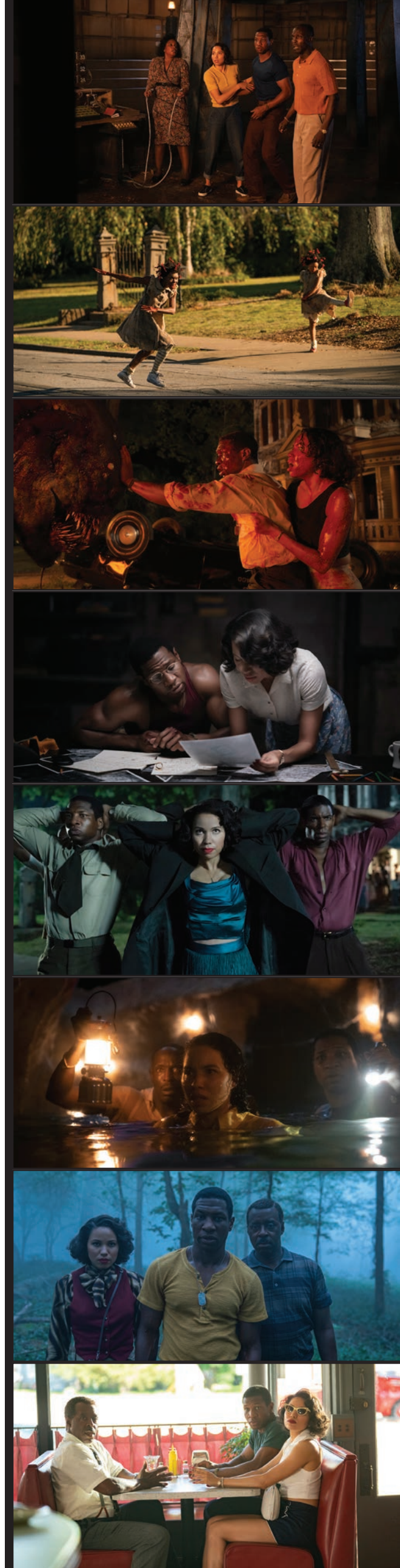
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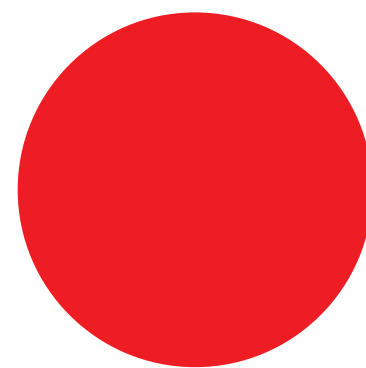


REVIEWS

Kevin Can F***k Himself

By Caroline Framke

Annie Murphy and Eric Petersen star as a married couple in "Kevin Can F*** Himself."



TV REVIEW

Dramedy: AMC (8 episodes; 4 reviewed); June 20

Starring: Annie Murphy, Mary Hollis Inboden, Eric Petersen, Alex Bonifer

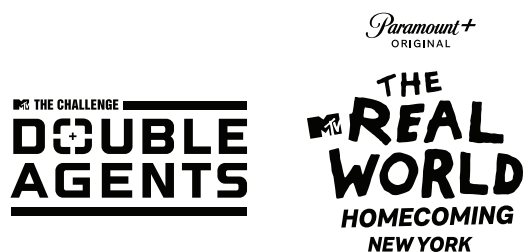


This show opens, like countless others you might've seen before, on a brightly lit living room set as a group of loud friends playfully argue among themselves to uproarious laughter. Kevin (Eric Petersen) is the sloppy husband who loves sports and getting into trouble; his wife, Allison (Annie Murphy), is a hot stick-in-the-mud who shrugs off his harebrained schemes with a tight smile. His dumb best friend Neil (Alex Bonifer) eggs him on while his dad, Pete (Brian Howe), gives him grief. Wash, rinse, repeat.

The jokes aren't necessarily funny so much as they are expected. The Allison character might typically have some sharper comebacks for her dolt of a spouse, but there's otherwise an easy familiarity in the well-worn rhythms of their exhausting banter, the canned laughs reliably punctuating every other line whether it deserves the reaction

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Executive Producer, “The Real World” & former “Road Rules / The Challenge: Battle of the Sexes” contestant

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“The Challenge: Double Agents” & “The Real World Las Vegas”

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Senior Features Editor, TV, *Variety*

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The AMC dramedy follows Murphy's character on a pursuit to reclaim her life.



or not. And as far as multi-cam sitcoms go, the cadence of “Kevin Can F**k Himself” — presumably named after Kevin James’ 2016 sitcom “Kevin Can Wait,” which unceremoniously killed off Erinn Hayes’ wife character to make way for a new one — is perfectly, uncomfortably spot-on.

The instant Allison leaves the room, however, the show makes a hard cut to a much grimmer reality. As she takes a deep breath and looks around the dingy kitchen her oblivious husband never helps her clean, the bright lights and laugh track of a sitcom studio are nowhere to be found. As the title indicates, Valerie Armstrong’s show isn’t laughing along with Kevin, or the slovenly sitcom husbands he represents, at all. Instead, “Kevin Can F**k Himself” follows the long-suffering wife off-screen into her actual life to find something more grounded, depressing and perversely compelling.

Swerving between such disparate styles and stories is a big risk. No matter how good the writing, the show might fall apart without a strong cast and directing team who understand exactly the tones they need to hit in any given scene. So it’s a credit to those tasked with bringing Armstrong’s vision to life that the first half of the season screened for critics nails it more often than not — especially once Allison starts finding ways, whether small or significant, to push back against her restrictive narrative.

Fresh off her success as an ex-heiress with a heart of gold on “Schitt’s Creek,” Murphy embraces a much different kind of challenge on this series with Allison, a woman who buried her own heart underneath her husband’s pile of needs and grievances so long ago she can barely remember why she gave it to him in the first place. Ten years into

this dead-end marriage, Allison is desperate for a shred of understanding or consideration, whether from Kevin, her far more mature ex, Sam (Raymond Lee), or her deadpan neighbor, Patty (Mary Hollis Inboden), the only woman Allison interacts with outside her boring job at a local corner store (or “packie,” since the show takes place in Massachusetts). Murphy can’t completely tamp down her natural effervescence, but nonetheless sells Allison’s overwhelming misery as lurking just beneath the surface.

Two other performances keep “Kevin Can F**k Himself” afloat, though they couldn’t be more different from each other. On one end of the spectrum is Petersen, who at least in the first four episodes rarely steps foot outside the sitcom world in which Kevin lives. He therefore has to play Kevin as a straight-up slapstick buffoon, but also make clear just how much his imperviousness to Allison’s needs can curdle into cruelty. On the other end is Inboden, who joins Murphy in straddling the line between the sitcom fantasy and the real world and turns in the sharpest performance overall as Patty, whose cynicism is rooted in pervasive hopelessness that anything could ever change.

Though the show is ostensibly about Allison reclaiming her life — or having a nervous breakdown, depending on how

you look at it — it’s also about the audience’s complicity in finding men like Kevin funny. In the fourth episode, after going to extreme lengths to change her fortunes, Allison unleashes a furious run of grievances to Patty, listing all the ways in which her selfish husband sabotaged her life just to keep his the same. “Right when I felt like I was worth something, he ruined it,” Allison says, “and you just watched him and laughed.”

Patty, stunned, tries to say that Kevin’s antics “seemed harmless,” but it’s evident that even she doesn’t believe it when faced with Allison’s visceral pain. When someone is relegated to the role of spineless punching bag for years and years, it’s no wonder they might crumple. What “Kevin Can F**k Himself” imagines, then, is a world in which that character finally decides she’s had enough.

The first half of the season shifts Allison’s mission for independence into a purposefully shocking direction; without seeing the second half, it’s hard to say how successful it might be. But if nothing else, it should be interesting to see just how far she’ll go to keep Kevin’s carelessness from ruining her life again, even (especially?) if it blows up in everyone’s face. **V**

CREDITS: Executive producers: Valerie Armstrong, Rashida Jones, Will McCormack, Craig DiGregorio. 60 MIN. **Cast:** Annie Murphy, Mary Hollis Inboden, Eric Petersen, Alex Bonifer, Brian Howe, Raymond Lee

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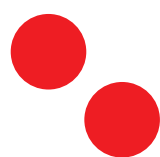
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Fatherhood

By Owen Gleiberman



FILM REVIEW

Director: Paul Weitz

Starring: Kevin Hart, Melody Hurd, DeWanda Wise

It used to be that when you called a movie a glorified sitcom, it was an insult. But when you watch “Fatherhood,” an unabashedly formulaic, undeniably sweet Netflix dramedy that casts Kevin Hart as a devoted but desperate single dad, it’s easy to imagine the sitcom version as richer, deeper, more layered. That said, on its own terms the film accomplishes what it sets out to do. It transitions Hart from playfully scowling cutup to earnest heartfelt actor, and it does so in a way that, at times, is genuinely touching, even as the audience can see every sanded-down conflict and market-tested beat falling into place.

Directed and co-written by Paul Weitz (“Little Fockers”), adapting Matthew Longelin’s 2011 memoir, “Fatherhood” is grounded in its opening tragedy. Matt (Hart), a Boston tech engineer, and his wife, Liz (Deborah Ayorinde), are about to have their first child. In the hospital, Liz gives birth to a beautiful girl named Maddy ... and then dies, suddenly, of a pulmonary embolism.

Movies going back to “Kramer vs. Kramer” have used single fatherhood to show men growing into their humanity. But Matt, raising Maddy from day one as



an infant, faces an unusually steep climb. Still, he’s committed to doing it all on his own. He turns down an offer made by his doting mother (Thedra Porter) and his high-maintenance mother-in-law (Alfre Woodard) to move in with him for six months, even though millions of folks who are raising a baby with two parents have in-laws on the scene. But the film needs its one-man-and-a-baby high-concept situation: the jokes about poopie diapers, car seats and collapsible strollers, the inevitable snippet of Salt-N-Pepa’s “Push It” (“Baby, baby!”).

This is a movie in which Kevin Hart hugs, cries and learns how

to grieve. And as he relaxes out of prickly comedy mode, you begin to notice how expressive his face can be — in “Fatherhood,” Hart uses his moodiness to tug at the underlying emotions of a good man warding off despair.

After 45 minutes, the movie cuts ahead to when Maddy is 5 years old. As played by Melody Hurd, she’s the complete adorable and well-adjusted child. Matt sends her to the same Catholic school her mother went to and develops a whim of iron about balking the dress code, so that Maddy can wear pants to kindergarten instead of a parochial-school skirt. This creates a whiff of dramatic friction, as does Matt’s reen-

try into the dating world when he meets the saucy, gorgeous, so-supportive-she’s-saintly Swan (DeWanda Wise). Does it all work out well? Actually, it rarely *stops* working out well. But Hart gives a true performance. The most moving thing in the film is how, for the sake of his daughter, Matt keeps his late wife alive as a presence. She’s gone, but she’s the reason his glass is full. 🍷

CREDITS: A Netflix release of a Higher Ground Prods., Sony/Columbia Pictures production, in association with Bron Creative. **Producers:** Marty Bowen, Kevin Hart, David Beaubaire, Peter Kiernan. **Executive producers:** Betsy Danbury, Aaron L. Gilbert, Jason Cloth, Bryan Smiley, Carli Haney, Jaclyn Huntling Swatt, Isaac Klausner, Channing Tatum, Reid Carolin. **Director:** Paul Weitz. **Screenplay:** Dana Stevens, Paul Weitz. **Camera:** Tobias Datum. **Editor:** Jonathan Corn. **Music:** Rupert Gregson-Williams. Reviewed online, New York, June 7, 2021. **MPAA Rating:** PG-13. **Running time:** 110 MIN. **Cast:** Kevin Hart, Alfre Woodard, Melody Hurd, Lil Rel Howery, DeWanda Wise, Frankie R. Faison, Paul Reiser, Deborah Ayorinde, Thedra Porter

Melody Hurd (left foreground), Kevin Hart and DeWanda Wise star in “Fatherhood.”

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Taylor Paige

"This is that collective Black voice that I know."

By Jenelle Riley



Things you didn't know about Taylor Paige:



Age: 30

Hometown: Inglewood, Calif.

Also seen in: "White Boy Rick," "Boogie," VH1's "Hit the Floor"

Dance chops: Toured with Debbie Allen at age 12

Next up: "Sharp Stick" from Lena Dunham, "Mack & Rita" with Diane Keaton

about it and did it in such a way that there were distinct characters and imagery. It's funny, but it's also sad. Because of her experience and the mind that went with it, we have a movie. And she was so encouraging. She would say things like, "You're so me, it hurts. I'm going to throw a fit if you don't get it." She even had a dream I was going to play her.

● **After you shot "Zola," you shot "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," which was released first. In that, your love interests are Viola Davis and Chadwick Boseman.** I still can't believe I got to do that. I still get really emotional talking about it. And I will say there was never a moment on that set that I didn't feel worthy of being there. Everyone made me feel very much valued.

● **You worked with Colman Domingo in both "Ma Rainey" and "Zola."** It all feels very divine because I shot "Zola" and didn't book anything until "Ma Rainey," almost seven months later. And I grew close to Colman during "Zola," so it was so nice to have him in Pittsburgh. Our whole cast was wonderful. I think what you see in "Zola" is literally four people falling in love with each other. Riley is someone who I share a similar brain and heart with; I've never collaborated or worked with someone and felt that understood before.

● **How did you prepare physically for the dancing scenes?** I actually worked at Crazy Girls in Hollywood for four weeks. I got close with a couple of strippers and eventually told them what I was up to. But I kept it pretty low-key. Although a couple people would say, "Aren't you the girl from that show ['Hit the Floor']?" 🙌

Taylor Paige was not familiar with A'Ziah "Zola" King when she auditioned to play her in "Zola," the film based on King's October 2015 viral Twitter thread, but she has since corresponded with her on social media. The thread (and film) tells the tale of a crazy weekend during which Zola, an exotic dancer, embarks on a road trip to strip in Florida with new friend Stefani (Riley Keough) and Stefani's cohorts — a clueless boyfriend (Nicolas Braun) and a temperamental pimp (Colman Domingo). "Zola" premiered at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival, receiving rave reviews for the

performances and for co-writer/director Janicza Bravo. It premieres in theaters on June 30.

Paige came to the role with plenty of dance experience: At age 12 she was touring with Debbie Allen, and she previously starred in the scripted VH1 show "Hit the Floor," about dance cheerleaders for a fictional L.A. basketball team.

● **What was your initial response to the "Zola" script and her story?** Originally I got it in 2017. And I thought it was really racist and sexist. My agent kept saying, "Just put yourself on tape." So I put myself on tape, begrudg-

ingly. Then it just kind of went away. Later I got an audition for "Hustlers," and it's about strippers and a true story, and it made me wonder about "Zola." I found out it had a new writer and director and asked to read it. And I was like, "Oh yes, this is that collective Black voice that I know." It was all there. So I went on tape again. And I reached out to the real Zola.

● **How did you get in touch with her?** On Instagram. I said, "I auditioned to play you today, and I just think you're so badass and wonderful." Because regardless of how people receive her story, she processed her trauma by writing



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