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A photograph of Tim Cook and Lewis Hamilton standing side-by-side. Tim Cook, on the left, is wearing a light-colored bomber jacket over a dark shirt and glasses. Lewis Hamilton, on the right, is wearing a grey button-down shirt. They are both looking towards the camera. In the background, there is a large, stylized logo that reads "1 VARIETY".

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Driven

Tim Cook and Formula 1 star Lewis Hamilton join forces on 'F1' to take Apple's film business to new heights

By Cynthia Littleton

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David Corenswet in "Superman"; writers Tad Quill, Erin Foster, Justin Halpern, Jen Statsky, Eric Ledgin, Sarah Naftalis and Benito Skinner; Kelsey Asbille in "Don't Move"; Brenda Song



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Brad Pitt, Tim Cook and Lewis Hamilton at the Austin Grand Prix in 2024

A Deep Look at Apple as 'F1' Revs Up

→ This week's cover story has been years in the making.

We've long wanted to do a deep dive with Apple CEO Tim Cook into the company's expansion into TV and movies since the Apple TV+ streaming platform debuted in 2019. The answer from Cupertino was never a flat-out "No" but rather a polite "Not yet."

Finally, as the release of Apple's summer blockbuster hopeful "F1" appeared on the distant horizon, the time was right. And we got the incredible bonus of having the extremely

dynamic Formula 1 superstar Lewis Hamilton join in as well.

Cook and Hamilton, who is a producer of "F1," sat down with *Variety* in late April as the release plan for the Brad Pitt-Damson Idris racing movie was revving up, and so was the turbulence in the global economy caused by President Trump's aggressive tariff campaign. But you wouldn't have known it from the mood or the view that April day at the Apple Park headquarters.

Cook is unflappable, steadfast in his belief that Apple's focus only ever needs to be on quality and innovation in its products — whether it be the software of "F1" and Seth Rogen's buzzy Apple TV+ series "The Studio" or the hardware of iPhones and MacBooks. "F1" reflects that ethos with cutting-edge camera tech developed after Hamilton put the challenge to director Joseph Kosinski that no racing movie has ever really captured what it's like to be in that car. Until now, as Hamilton explains.

Meanwhile, our Alex Ritman offers a look at the struggles of the U.K. production community amid

the slowdown in film and TV production since the 2023 strikes. And we break down Warner Bros. Discovery's decision to break the company into two parts, one focused on studios and streaming, the other on CNN, TNT, Discovery, Food Network and other cable channels.

None of what's going on in the U.K. or on the Warner Bros. lot or at Apple Park is happening in a vacuum. As always, we hope our work here helps you understand it all a little better.



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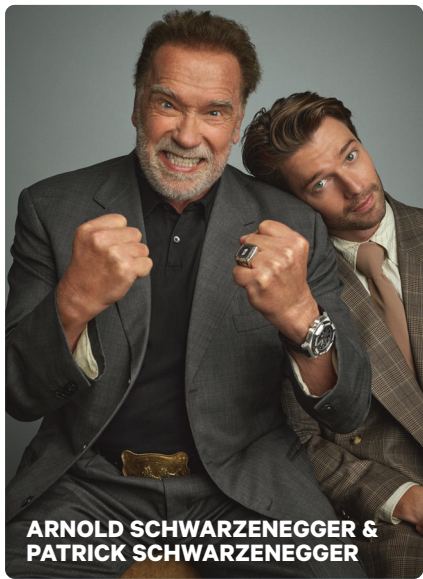


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Illustration by Alisa Gao

Road to Splitsville

David Zaslav's attempt to hack Warner Bros. Discovery into a media superpower fizzled amid cord-cutting headwinds. What's next?

By Todd Spangler

→ Four years ago, David Zaslav clinched a debt-heavy deal to merge cable mainstay Discovery Inc. — which he'd run since 2006 — with what was then called WarnerMedia. The story he told investors was that the two entities' diverse array of media assets "are better and more valuable together."

He doesn't believe that anymore.

On June 9, Zaslav announced a plan that he had already signaled to Wall Street was coming: Warner Bros. Discovery would be breaking up. The move, expected to be completed by mid-2026, will create two separate public companies. The goal is to boost the value of the high-growth streaming and studio biz by amputating the declining TV arm that has been hurt by the shrinking pay-TV



universe, while freeing up both companies to seek potentially value-accretive M&A deals. “The right path forward became increasingly clear,” Zaslav said on an investor call about the split.

WBD Streaming & Studios, to be led by Zaslav, will house HBO and HBO Max; TV and film production studios; Warner Bros. Games; and consumer products, experiences and licensing. WBD Global Networks, headed by CFO Gunnar Wiedenfels, will comprise cable nets including CNN, TBS, Discovery and Food Network; TNT Sports in the U.S. plus Bleacher Report; free-to-air networks in Europe; and the Discovery+ streaming service (which is mostly tied to the cable properties).

Zaslav and Wiedenfels are following in the footsteps of the Comcast/NBCUniversal crew, which for similar reasons has set in motion the spinoff of Versant, the cable-net vessel (sans Bravo) set to sail by the end of 2024. But really, the handwriting was on the wall for Warner Bros. Discovery even before it took a whopping \$9.1 billion charge against earnings for the devaluation of its cable assets in Q2 of last year.

Will the unwinding of Warner Bros. Discovery work? Here are the key burning questions.

● Are investors buying the spiel?

Signs weren’t great out of the gate. After Warner Bros. Discovery stock popped as much as 13% after the split-up announcement, shares ended down 3% for the day. Since the WBD deal closed in April 2022, the stock has slumped about 60%, erasing more than \$35 billion in market capitalization. Note that stockholders just last week expressed disapproval



WBD’s studio business, whose blockbuster summer slate features “Superman,” would ideally get a lift by pairing with the high-growth streaming division.

with Zaslav and other top execs, with 59% of shares voted at the 2025 annual meeting rejecting their pay packages in a symbolic rebuke (because the vote was merely “advisory”). Meanwhile, S&P Global Ratings on May 20 downgraded WBD’s debt to junk status, citing a lower 2025-26 revenue and earnings forecast for legacy TV. Altogether, the urgency may have been building for Zaslav and Co. to act sooner rather than later.

● What’s the upside for streaming and studios?

The consensus is that this side of Warner Bros. Discovery’s business will benefit from being untethered from legacy cable. Max (soon to revert to the HBO Max name) has been riding

high thanks to HBO hits like “The White Lotus” and “The Last of Us,” while Warner Bros.’ film studios have delivered strong box office results with “A Minecraft Movie” and “Sinners,” with James Gunn’s “Superman” coming this summer. WBD’s overall streaming business ended Q1 with 122.3 million subscribers, and the company is forecasting 150 million worldwide by the end of 2026 — a far cry from Netflix (300 million as of December 2024) but still a reasonably scaled and profitable business. As a stand-alone company, WBD Streaming & Studios will be “more attractive to both the public markets and potential partners,” MoffettNathanson analysts led by Robert Fishman wrote in a note. “Splitting them from the declining (but still cash-flow generating) linear assets may be the best path for WBD to unlock the greatest value of its portfolio.” The rough calculations by the MoffettNathanson team are that the stand-alone streaming and studios business will see “at least a low-double digit” price-to-earnings ratio, while the WBD networks company “should hold a mid-single digit multiple.”

● Will this spur mergers or acquisitions?

Not anytime soon, obviously. But Zaslav has voiced a hankering to see streaming consolidation in the industry. After Trump’s election, he said the administration “may offer a pace of change and an opportunity for consolidation that may be quite different” and that it may “provide a real positive and accelerated impact on this industry that’s needed.” If and when Paramount Global closes its Skydance Media merger, there might be a tie-up to explore between Paramount+ and HBO Max, for example. Meanwhile, a stand-alone WBD networks company could attract the interest of a strategic or private-equity buyer: Like NBCU’s Versant, it’s a reliable cash generator for the time being despite the secular decline.

● What happens to WBD’s debt?

According to Warner Bros. Discovery, the majority of the debt load — standing at \$34 billion in net debt as of the end of March — will remain with the linear TV company. It also announced a \$17.5 billion bridge loan to help tide it over until the split occurs. The devil’s in the details here: It’s unknown how the debt would be divvied up and what the terms would be. WBD claims that both companies “will have a clear path to de-leveraging,” with “significant cash flow” and strong liquidity through cash and revolving credit. And the company says the linear networks spinoff will have “up to a 20% retained stake” in WBD Streaming & Studios that will help it efficiently pay down debt. But that’s predicated on an enhanced valuation for the Streaming & Studios entity, and right now the size of such a lift is still an X factor.

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Avengers Economize!

Shaken by several box office blunders, Marvel may be forced to do the unthinkable — cut costs

By Rebecca Rubin

→ Days after “Thunderbolts” hit the big screen, Disney CEO Bob Iger was feeling celebratory. He publicly touted the comic book adventure as the “first and best” example of Marvel’s new movie strategy, referring to the film’s positive reception from audiences and critics. And what a relief, following a bumpy few years and a string of poorly reviewed misfires in the franchise.

Six weeks later, “Thunderbolts” has cratered at the box office. With \$371 million globally, it’s one of the lowest-grossing installments in all of Disney’s Marvel Cinematic Universe. If this is the second coming of Marvel, the superhero empire might need another reboot.

“Marvel’s calculus has changed,” says Shawn Robbins, Fandango’s movie analytics director. “We’re in a new era where not every Marvel movie is going to hit \$1 billion.”

Since the MCU’s inception with 2008’s “Iron Man,” Marvel has been Hollywood’s most consistent hit maker. It’s also the highest-grossing film franchise in history, with \$31 billion across 36 films. A billion dollars per movie shouldn’t be a barometer for success. But before COVID scrambled things, even less-beloved installments were guaranteed a certain level of box office. Pre-pandemic, 19 out of 22 films at least cracked \$500 million globally. Since then, the once-Teflon brand has struggled with commercial consistency. Starting in 2020, just six out of 13 films have reached the half-billion benchmark.

At least February’s “Captain America: Brave New World” and 2023’s “The Marvels” and “Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania” could blame their disastrous grosses on terrible reviews. “Thunderbolts” had enthusiastic word-of-mouth and has yet to climb out of the red, suggesting there’s a new ceiling for superhero movies that *aren’t* based on marquee characters.

A diminished global marketplace and oversaturation of superhero stories on the big and small



screen are partly responsible for the decline. Audience’s habits and tastes also have shifted: This year’s biggest blockbusters have been kid-friendly films like “A Minecraft Movie” and “Lilo & Stitch” or original fare such as “Sinners.”

“These lower-tier comic book movies aren’t cinematic slam dunks anymore,” says Exhibitor Relations analyst Jeff Bock. “‘Thunderbolts’ wrapping up after just a month in theaters is also a concern. These films aren’t legging out like previous iterations.”

It’s coming at an inflection point for the MCU. After inundating viewers with complex, interconnected stories across film and television, Marvel is intentionally slowing down to focus on quality

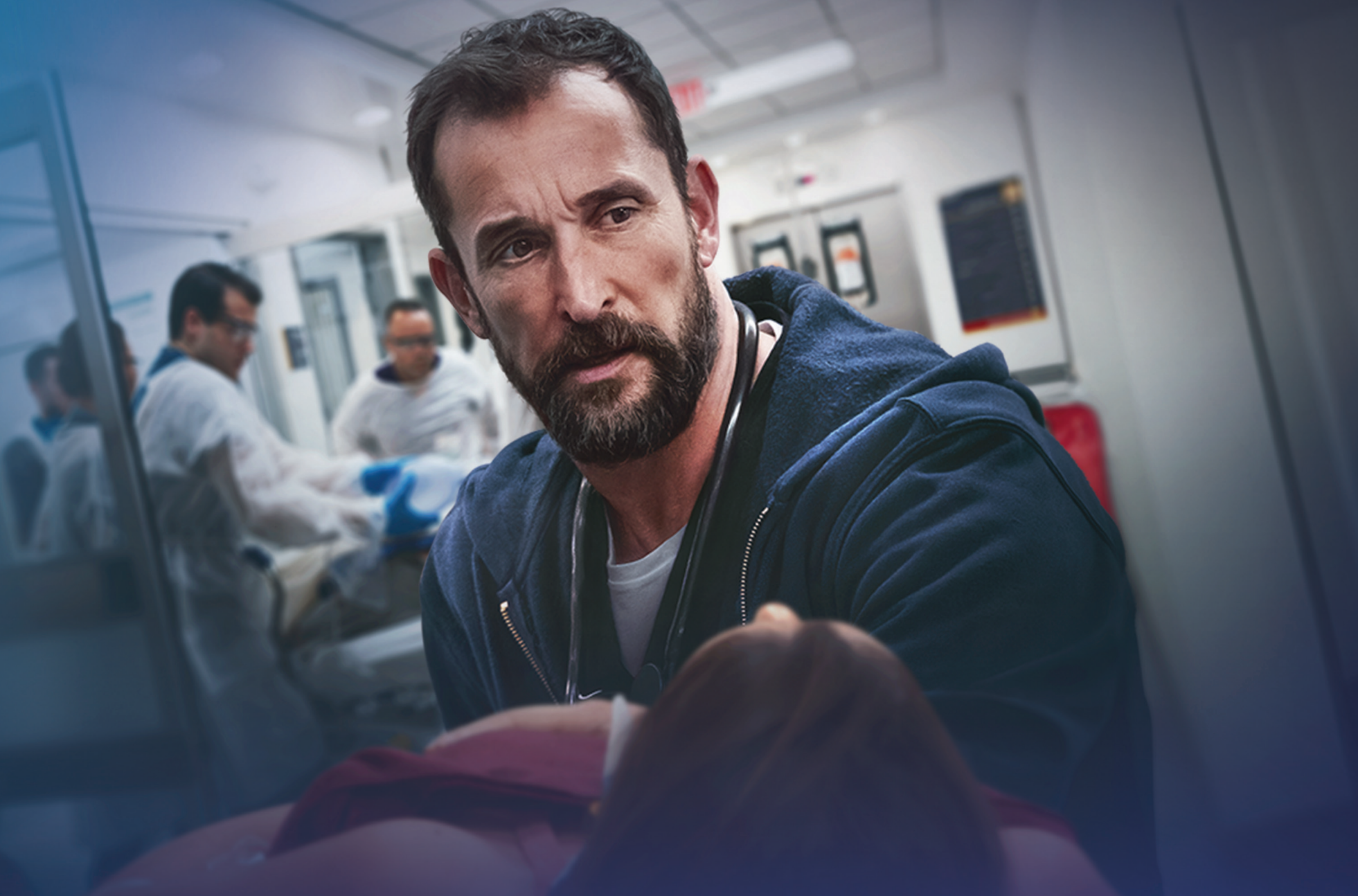
over quantity. Is there an incentive to back stand-alone stories that are no longer safe bets? Or will the studio only greenlight sure things, à la the Avengers or Spider-Man?

After July’s “The Fantastic Four: First Steps,” another cinematic introduction of sorts, Marvel seems to be embracing a go-big-or-go-home mentality. The upcoming calendar is populated only by heavy hitters with hefty budgets: “Avengers: Doomsday” and “Spider-Man 4” in 2026 and “Avengers: Secret War” in 2027. An untitled film is set for July 2027, and “X-Men” and “Black Panther” movies are in the works. But other projects that focus on one character, like Blade, have been stuck in protracted limbo.

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Let Them Find You

How Brands Are Creating for Discoverability on TikTok

A standout group of marketers, called the MVPs of POV, are winning discoverability.

By Sofia Hernandez
Global Head of Business Marketing
& Commercial Partnerships, TikTok

Open TikTok and you're entering a living feed of cultural points of view. Every scroll is a spark. Every tap is a choice. That's the magic of TikTok: People don't just discover content; they go looking for it.

In fact, 64% of users say they search TikTok to find multiple perspectives⁽¹⁾. For brands, that's a creative invitation to show up in the billions of daily searches happening globally⁽²⁾.

TikTok has been watching how a standout group of marketers, called the MVPs of POV, are designing their content to be discovered. Their creative connects to curiosity, taps into trends and becomes part of the cultural conversation.

Here are six strategies these leaders are using to win discoverability on TikTok.

Brand Early, Not Late

Visibility doesn't have to wait until the end. The MVPs introduce the brand upfront with clarity and purpose. When it's done with intention, it's not disruptive — it's welcomed.

Kory Marchisotto, CMO at e.l.f. Beauty, puts it beautifully: "TikTok is a constellation in the making — a festival of imagination. We're breaking ceilings

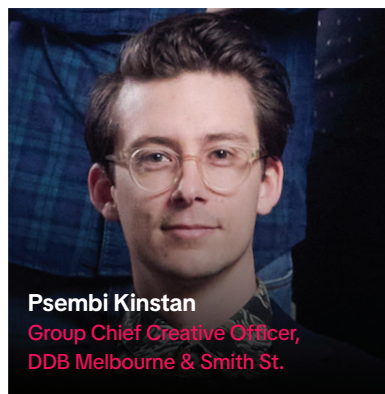
by appealing to feelings. Far more than any lipstick or lotion is e.l.f.'s devotion to the art of emotion."

Start with your why. Lead with your vibe. Make the brand part of the story from the jump.



Win the First Few Seconds

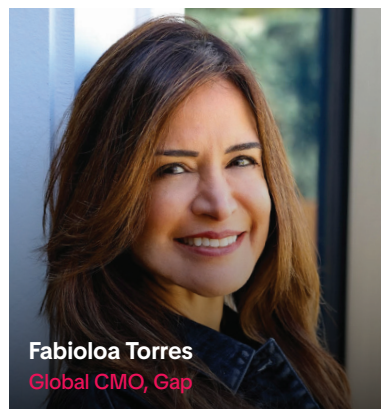
You don't get a second shot at the scroll. The most effective content hooks you instantly with a twist, a break in pattern or an unexpected visual.



As Psembi Kinstan, Group Chief Creative Officer at DDB Melbourne & Smith St, says: "Learn what works, how to hook viewers in the first three seconds. Craft has never been more important. But it is different, and you need to really consider what it means on TikTok."

Make the Tap Inevitable

The magic doesn't end with the video. It begins in the comments. The best content invites reaction, conversation and community participation.



Fabiola Torres, global CMO at Gap, explains the power of community-driven creativity.

"We let the content speak for itself first," she says. "When we see comments and organic virality, we amplify that dialogue in our own content." Great content provokes reactions and gives viewers something meaningful to discuss.

Lead With Layers

While single posts have impact, ongoing narratives and multipart stories keep audiences coming back, deepening their engagement.



Ghadeer Khub, creative and production director at the Abu Dhabi Department of Culture and Tourism, highlights strategic timing: "Our team identifies buzz in niche communities days before it gains momentum."

By tracking emerging conversations early, brands build stories that captivate curiosity and maintain momentum over time.

Show Up in the Conversation

Search on TikTok is where curiosity meets culture. Winning brands don't wait to be looked up by name; they bring themselves into topics people already care about.



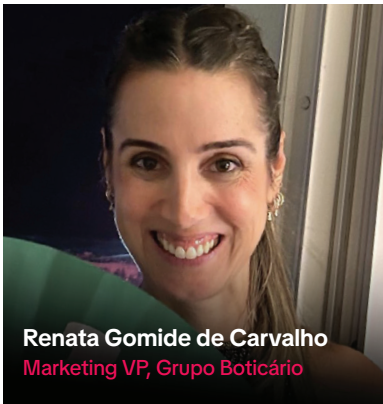
Charlie Smith
CMO, Loewe

"Reacting to what's happening in the world is also a really important thing," Charlie Smith, CMO at Loewe, explains. "It is important to be that mirror and amplifier of culture, and that's what people gravitate towards."

Whether it's fashion, food, finance or fandom, being culturally present is the key to being discoverable.

Stack the Signals

Discoverability is deliberate. The best-performing content is engineered to be found through search, scroll and social cues.



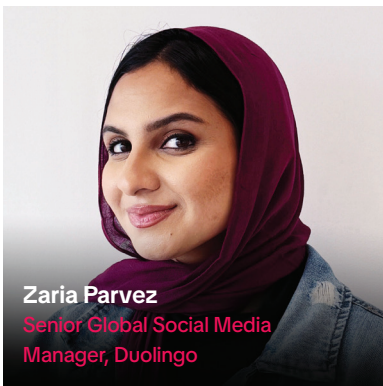
Renata Gomide de Carvalho
Marketing VP, Grupo Boticário

Renata Gomide de Carvalho, marketing VP at Grupo Boticário, puts it simply:

"Mastering how the platform works — formats, creators and conversations — makes all the difference."

Everything matters: the caption, the hook, the tone, the thumbnail. Treat SEO as a creative input, not just a technical detail.

The MVPs of POV aren't just riding trends; they're bringing perspectives that are worth discovering. They understand that winning attention means showing up with a point of view that's clear, creative and culturally relevant.



Zaria Parvez
Senior Global Social Media Manager, Duolingo

"When creating content that stops the scroll, remember the cost of fear is expensive," says Zaria Parvez, senior global social media manager at Duolingo.

"Your competition isn't other

brands; it's the content our customers interact with when they pick up their phone."

Your audience is already looking. So let them find you.

Meet the MVPs of POV

Marketing Leaders Making Their Brands Discoverable on TikTok

Avery Akkineni
CMO, VaynerX

Anna Lenka Jáuregui
CMO, BCP/Credicorp

Armagan Engel
Director, Communication Office, QNB Türkiye

Benjamin Braun
VP and CMO, Samsung Europe

Camila Ribeiro
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Charlie Smith
CMO, Loewe

Daisy Kelly
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Domingo Iudice
Director, Brainpull

Fabiola Torres
Global CMO, Gap

Ghadeer Khub
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Juliana Roschel
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CMO, Property Finder MENA

Shazan Zahir
Head of Beauty and Wellbeing, Unilever

Sunil Naryani
President of Partnerships and Product Solutions, APAC; Dentsu

Tamera Ferro
CMO, Sol de Janeiro

Tina Chikhani Nader
Head of Digital Marketing, Media and Commerce, Unilever

Trey Ferro
Founder and CEO, Spot Pet Insurance

Zaria Parvez
Senior Global Social Media Manager, Duolingo

(1) Source: TikTok Marketing Science Global, Future of Search Study 2025, conducted by WARC
(2) Source: TikTok Internal Data

What's been working for the MCU is major team-ups like 2021's "Spider-Man: No Way Home" (\$1.9 billion) and 2024's "Deadpool & Wolverine" (\$1.33 billion), or sequels to series-within-a-series such as "Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness" (\$955 million), "Thor: Love and Thunder" (\$760 million), "Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3" (\$845 million) and "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever" (\$859 million).

Marvel used to thrive on the unfamiliar. When Kevin Feige was assembling a cinematic universe in the early aughts, X-Men and Spider-Man, Marvel's best-known characters, had been licensed to other studios. Yet he created an enormously popular property by introducing Iron Man and Thor in stand-alone adventures and then bringing them together for "The Avengers." Those victories emboldened Feige to place bets on dicier propositions such as "Guardians of the Galaxy," which paid off spectacularly and expanded the franchise. But

after too many confusing spinoffs and lackluster sequels, audiences seem less invested in new additions to Earth's Mightiest Heroes.

Robert Downey Jr. can't return each time the MCU lands in dire straits. (He'll be back as the villainous Doctor Doom in "Avengers: Doomsday.") If the studio wants to replenish the well with new vigilantes, it needs to spend less on origin stories. But belt tightening is getting harder as the cost of everything — from actors' pay to visual effects to catering — has drastically risen. And turning these movies into can't-miss events requires huge promotional dollars for globe-trotting press tours and premieres.

Marvel reined in spending on "Thunderbolts," aware the characters hailed from the pandemic-hobbled "Black Widow" and underseen Disney+ series. Typically, the studio's tentpoles cost \$200 million to \$250 million to produce and another \$120 million to \$140 million to market. "Thunder-

bolts" was slightly cheaper, costing \$180 million to make and closer to \$100 million to market.

"Studios are working hard to bring the high-end budgets down," says David A. Gross, an analyst with Franchise Entertainment Research.

Still, "Thunderbolts" needed to make \$425 million worldwide to break even, a figure that seems unachievable. Marvel is unique because it isn't as encumbered as rivals by the profits or losses of single films. The company can recoup some costs through Disney+ and other home entertainment markets, to say nothing of the massive revenue streams from merchandising, theme parks and cruises.

And every film between "Avengers" installments can be viewed as a marketing tool. Case in point: Disney revealed the motley crew of reformed bad-dies in "Thunderbolts" will return in "Avengers: Doomsday." If audiences missed that chapter, they can always catch up on Disney+.

Access Denied

A court sides with Trump in an ongoing 'Gulf of America' battle with the AP, part of his broader attack on media

By Todd Spangler

➔ What's in a name? For President Trump, the Associated Press' insistence on referring to the Gulf of Mexico by the name it's been called for more than 400 years is a sign of disrespect. And it's an opportunity for him to punish his perceived antagonists in the press.

According to Trump, the AP Stylebook decision about the gulf's standard nomenclature is "fake news." That's because, on his first day back in the White House this year, Trump declared that he wants it now called the "Gulf of America." In retaliation for the AP's noncompliance, his administration barred the news organization's journalists from events in the Oval Office and other areas.

In February, the AP sued three White House officials, alleging violation of the First Amendment. Now Trump has won the backing of a federal appeals court, which ruled that the White House can exclude any journalists it chooses from "restricted areas" like the Oval Office or Air Force One for any reason, including on the



A federal appeals court ruled that Trump can selectively exclude journalists from Oval Office events.

basis of a news outlet's "viewpoint" — even the viewpoint that readers better understand what the Gulf of Mexico is than they do the Gulf of America. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit, in a 2-1 decision on June 6, issued a stay on a lower court's ruling that the First Amendment prohibits the U.S. government from allowing access to some journalists but not others based on viewpoint.

"If the president sits down for an interview with [Fox News host] Laura Ingraham, he is not required to do the same with [MSNBC anchor] Rachel Mad-

dow," wrote Judge Neomi Rao in the D.C. appeals court ruling. She was joined by Judge Gregory Katsas; both are Trump appointees.

The AP indicated that it will continue the legal fight, with a spokesperson saying the org is "reviewing our options."

The Gulf of Mexico/Gulf of America spat may seem minor compared with, say, Trump's unusual move to deploy federal troops to L.A. in response to localized protests over crackdowns on illegal immigration (which the state of California, in a lawsuit against the president, alleged was unconstitutional). But it's another example of how the president is trying to thwart reporting he doesn't like, such as with his lawsuit against CBS over an edited portion of a "60 Minutes" interview with Kamala Harris that didn't even mention Trump.

The D.C. appeals court ruling is "troubling" in its argument that "newsgathering is not itself a communicative activity" that warrants First Amendment protections, says Aaron Terr, director of public advocacy at the nonpartisan Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression.

The AP, which supplies content to more than 3,000 outlets worldwide, has credibly claimed the White House access ban harms its ability to cover the administration. And the decision could skew overall coverage of the Trump administration, as Judge Cornelia Pillard of the D.C. appeals court, an Obama appointee, wrote in a dissenting opinion.

If the White House is able to exclude journalists based on viewpoint, she opined, "each and every member of the White House press corps would hesitate to publish anything an incumbent administration might dislike."

OUR FAVOURITE APOCALYPSE YET

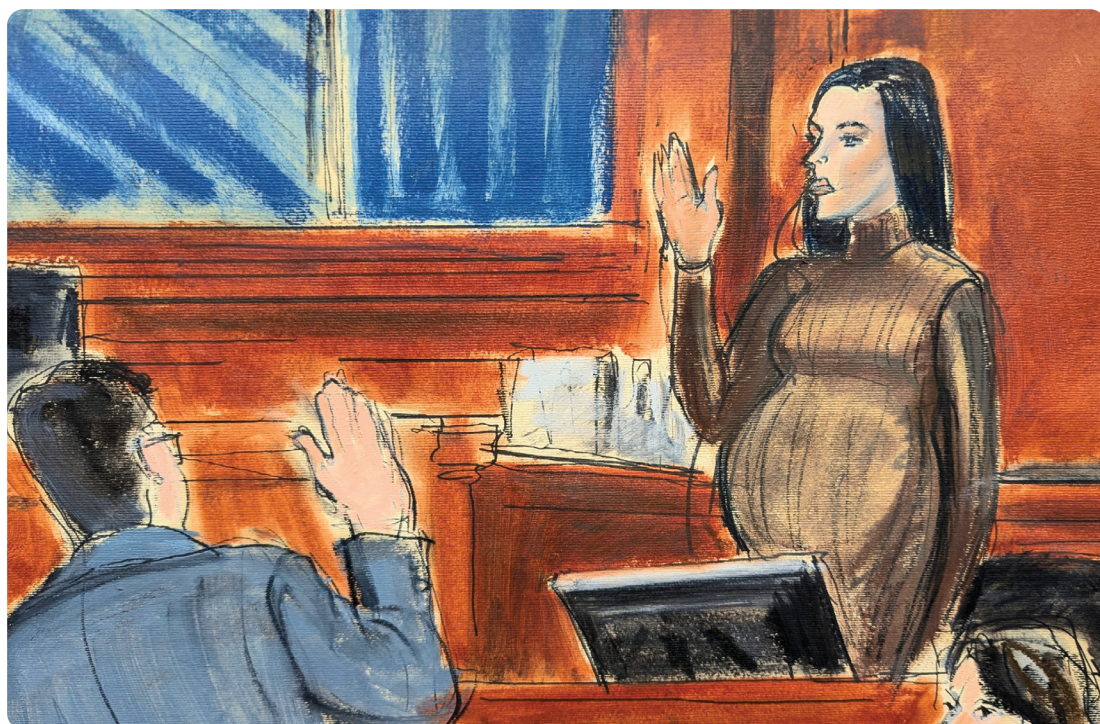
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Witnesses for the Prosecution

In Sean 'Diddy' Combs' blockbuster sex trafficking and racketeering trial, these testimonies will be the hardest to refute

By **Ethan Shanfeld**

➔ What makes an effective witness? Twenty-eight people have testified against Sean "Diddy" Combs in his sex trafficking and racketeering trial, including his ex-girlfriends, former employees and men who say he paid them to participate in sex acts. The prosecution has also called everyone from hotel managers to members of the Los Angeles fire and police departments.

On the stand, they've recounted Combs' alleged violence, sexual abuse, drug distribution, blackmail threats and much more. Still, former prosecutor Mark Chutkow believes hotel surveillance video from 2016, in which Combs is seen beating his ex-girlfriend Cassandra "Cassie" Ventura and kicking her while she's on the ground, is more important than any single testimony. "You can't really cross-examine videotape," he says. "It's like a crime scene frozen in time."



Cassandra "Cassie" Ventura (top) is at the center of many of the charges against Sean Combs.

But you still need people who knew Combs intimately — or witnessed his alleged acts — to make the case against him stick. As the trial enters its fifth week, here are the most damning witnesses so far.

● **Cassandra "Cassie" Ventura**

There would be no federal case against Combs without Ventura and her bombshell 2023 lawsuit accusing him of physical abuse and sexual coercion. Spending four days on the witness stand, Ventura accused Combs of rape as well as physical and emotional abuse. She said over their 11-year relationship, Combs coerced her into participating in drug-fueled "freak-offs," in which she would have sex with male escorts. She said Combs filmed these encounters and threatened to ruin her career by releasing the footage. "The case rises and falls with Cassie. Especially the sex trafficking

charges," says Chutkow. Ventura is at the center of many of the charges, and other witnesses, including her friends and mother, have corroborated her testimony. Put simply, she is the witness who can best speak to who Combs was behind closed doors.

● **"Mia"**

The first witness to testify under a pseudonym, Mia was an employee of Combs' from 2009 to 2017. Among other allegations of assault, Mia accused Combs of raping her when she worked as his personal assistant. She also said Combs made her take drugs and work five days straight with no sleep, pointing to the underlying racketeering crime of forced labor. Her account of Combs allegedly attacking Ventura outside Prince's house will be memorable to the jury, according to Chutkow. On the stand, Mia spoke softly, with her head down. She was an effective witness, because she seemingly has nothing to gain from testifying against Combs. Unlike some, she did not file a civil lawsuit against him and is not seeking money or fame.

● **Capricorn Clark**

Clark, who worked for Combs from 2004 to 2018, testified to witnessing his violence against Ventura, as well as alleged incidents of kidnapping and extortion, which are predicate acts of racketeering. Through tears, Clark said Combs kidnapped her at gunpoint and drove her to the house of Kid Cudi, with whom Ventura was briefly intimate. According to Clark, Combs said, "Get dressed. We're going to go kill [him]." Clark also supported the testimony of Ventura's mother, Regina, who said Combs demanded she pay him \$20,000 the same week he threatened to release her daughter's sex tapes.

● **Eddy Garcia**

Unlike Combs' former lovers and employees, who spent days tearfully relating their experiences, Garcia was an unsympathetic witness whose testimony lasted less than two hours. Still, the security guard's account of an alleged bribe may have a big impact on the jury, experts say. Also, the fact that he was subpoenaed and testified under an immunity order could play well. In 2016, Garcia worked at the InterContinental in L.A., where Combs was caught on surveillance cameras beating Ventura. In exchange for Garcia's deleting the footage, Combs allegedly ran \$100,000 in cash through a money-counting machine and handed it to him in a bag. "Sometimes jurors look at the cover-up as worse than the crime," says criminal defense attorney John Day. "The image of \$100,000 cash in the paper bag — that's the kind of thing that's going to stick with them." Chutkow puts it more bluntly: "What legitimate mogul has a money counter? It sounds like something right out of 'The Wire' or 'The Sopranos.'"

The Taurus World Stunt Awards Academy and its members
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2025 Taurus World Stunt Awards

LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

Henry Kingi, Sr.

BEST STUNT RIGGING

Brock Thornburgh
James Finnis
Michael Roughan
Michael Saliba
Noorroa Poa

Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga

BEST HIGH WORK

Troy Brown

The Fall Guy

HARDEST HIT

Harry Makanga

The Killer's Game

BEST WORK WITH A VEHICLE

Logan Holladay

The Fall Guy

BEST STUNT COORDINATION AND/OR 2ND UNIT DIRECTION

Chris O'Hara
Keir Beck

The Fall Guy

BEST OVERALL STUNT BY A STUNT WOMAN

Lucy Johnson

The First Omen

BEST FIGHT

Alex Kyshkovych
Andy Lister
Dan Stevens
Liang Yang

Deadpool and Wolverine

BEST SPECIALTY STUNT

Fred North
McKinly Wilder
Rex Reddick

Beverly Hills Cop: Axel F



TAURUS [25]
WORLD STUNT AWARDS

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Column

By Daniel D'Addario

And Judge Like That

Why does it make perfect sense that Sarah Jessica Parker is on the jury of this year's Booker Prize?

→ Carrie Bradshaw isn't just a writer; she's, more than ever, an avid reader, as is the woman who plays her. And now Sarah Jessica Parker is one of five people helping to pick out what will become one of the year's most celebrated books.

Parker is among the judges of this year's Booker Prize. One of the most prestigious awards in English-language literature, the prize (administered in the U.K.) has gone to books as wide-ranging as Michael Ondaatje's "The English Patient," Yann Martel's "Life of Pi" and Hilary Mantel's "Wolf Hall." Once limited to authors from the Commonwealth, Ireland and South Africa, the award today can go to any novel written in English and published in the U.K. or Ireland. Parker has much to consider (a pool of 170 books, to be exact). She has told a New York Post reporter that she is reading two titles a day to keep pace with prize deadlines.

Having just completed a promotional cycle to launch the third season of "And Just Like That ..." — on which Carrie, coincidentally enough, is starting to write her own first novel — Parker has time in her schedule. And having spent years promoting books as a publisher (of the imprints SJP for Hogarth and SJP Lit), a public figure (relentlessly touting favorite titles on Instagram) and an artist (Carrie's always reading, and Parker executive-produced the 2025 anti-book-ban documentary "The Librarians"), the star is a notable champion for literacy. Still, she might seem to stick out among a jury whose other members are career writers.

That's a good thing. Parker isn't entirely alone: She joins a recent heritage of actors including Dan Stevens and Natascha McElhone in judging the award. In theory, prize juries gain a great deal from having a diversity of experience on their panels, so that every aspect of a work gets evaluated; Cannes, for instance, knows this, which is why its

juries comprise directors, actors and other sorts of artists, including the occasional novelist. (Just this year, "The Perfect Nanny" author Leïla Slimani helped pick the Palme.)

In practice, an actor might bring a sprightly eagerness to the work. These are people who cram scripts on short notice for a living, and a certain esprit de corps might be welcome. Parker was chosen after pleading to join the jury in an Instagram comment; Stevens, of "Downton Abbey," got the gig in 2012 after publicly criticizing the 2011 jury's selections, signaling his passion.

As for Parker, her recommendations, over time, have indicated that she is a serious reader of literary fiction — of just the stripe the Booker organization tends to honor. (A spin through her Instagram reveals that, before getting caught up in judging, she was reading Rachel Kushner, Sally Rooney, Rumaan Alam and other esteemed contemporary authors.) But her approach will necessarily be closer to that of a civilian reader than that of a pro. Parker's high profile will boost the prize just

as Stevens', at the peak of his "Downton" fame, did; her perspective as someone who approaches literature as an ardent advocate but not a practitioner may add a tempering aspect to the deliberations, helping to elevate a book that casual followers of the prize might be eager to read.

But simply treating Parker — or any talented actor who likes to read and gets a shot at judging a prize of this caliber — as a fan isn't sufficient. There's one more aspect that makes Parker counterintuitively apt. As an actor with decades of experience, she knows language. Indeed, given Carrie's facility both with wordplay and with sometimes lacerating dialogue, Parker knows language better than many of her peers. And she surely can tell when it sings and when it needs another pass. A book prize judged solely by actors might not be worth much. But a book prize with one actor in the room, sharing views on how words are tools to develop and reveal character? Well, to quote a notable New Yorker who rarely leaves her West Village home without a book in hand — that's just fabulous.

Given Carrie's facility with sometimes lacerating dialogue, Parker knows language better than many of her peers.



Sarah Jessica Parker's recommendations have indicated that she's a serious reader of literary fiction.



WHERE BROADWAY GATHERS





Savannah Chrisley asserted the “Trumps of the South” claim more than a year after her father Todd’s trial.

Playing the Trump Card

The Chrisleys claimed their bank fraud trial was political persecution. Court records tell another story

By Gene Maddaus

→ In September 2023, Savannah Chrisley went on a podcast and claimed that her parents, reality stars Todd and Julie Chrisley, were in prison due to political persecution.

“The prosecutors in Fulton County, Georgia, started off the trial by stating, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, what we have here are the Trumps of the South,’” she said.

That claim, since repeated many times, entwined the Chrisleys’ narrative of victimization with Donald Trump’s, ultimately leading to a May 28 presidential pardon.

But according to court records and two people who were there, it didn’t happen.

“Politics never came up. Trump never came up,” says juror Glenda Hinton. “It was strictly a fraud case. There was no politics.”

The Chrisleys’ former accountant, Peter Tarantino, was convicted at the trial of filing false tax returns. He confirms that Trump’s name was never mentioned.

“I sat through three weeks of trial testimony, and I never heard that said,” Tarantino says, adding that it would have sparked an uproar from the Chrisleys’ defense.

Variety reviewed the 3,400-page trial transcript and found no mention of Trump or politics by anyone.

When confronted with the inconsistency, Savannah Chrisley tells *Variety* that the “Trumps of the South” remark was made in a “meeting” among the judge and the lawyers. She initially says the jury was not present, then that she cannot not recall. Asked why it was not in the transcript, she says, “There were a lot of things the judge had redacted.” The transcript has no obvious redactions.

“This case is about fraud and tax evasion,” said prosecutor Annalise Peters in her opening

statement. “Todd and Julie’s fraud schemes are simple. They make up documents, and they lie through their teeth to get whatever they want when they want it.”

“Chrisley Knows Best” debuted on USA in 2014, introducing America to a family that was lavish and loud, but not especially political. In 2016, Todd Chrisley said he was not impressed with Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump, saying the choice left the country “up shit’s creek without a paddle.” On a recent podcast, Savannah Chrisley said she was “not involved in politics really at all” until two years ago, when her parents were sent to prison.

They fully embraced Trump as they sought a pardon. Savannah Chrisley wore pink MAGA gear to greet her father upon his release. Alex Little, their attorney, thanked Trump for recognizing they had been “targeted because of their conservative values and high profile.”

Trump’s “pardon czar,” Alice Marie Johnson, told Fox News that the case had been weaponized: “They called them the Trumps of Georgia.”

Todd and Julie Chrisley were convicted in June 2022 of tax evasion and of defrauding banks out of \$36 million.

“It was a slam dunk,” Hinton says. “We were unanimous, and it didn’t take us long.”

The claim of political bias did not emerge during the trial, nor in the appeal, nor in a separate proceeding in which the Chrisleys alleged they were targeted due to their celebrity status by a state tax investigator who happens to be a Republican.

Savannah Chrisley leveled the “Trumps of the South” claim on her podcast, “Unlocked,” more than a year after the trial. She repeated it on a podcast hosted by Lara Trump, the president’s daughter-in-law, and again at the Republican convention last July.

“He called us the Trumps of the South,” she said onstage. “He meant it as an insult. But let me tell you: Boy, do I wear it as a badge of honor.”

The claim was included in a pardon application submitted to the White House earlier this year, which Savannah Chrisley read aloud on “Unlocked.” She said it again on Lara Trump’s Fox News show a week before the pardon was issued, adding that the legal ordeals of the two families were “eerily similar.”

None of the Chrisleys’ attorneys has publicly repeated the claim. Shannen Sharpe, the marketing director at Little’s firm, said she wasn’t able to specify when the prosecutor made the remark.

Tarantino, who served 18 months and was not pardoned, doesn’t believe the case was politically motivated.

“They were indicted during the Trump administration,” he says.

Edited by Marc Malkin



Lily James and Riz Ahmed at the "Relay" premiere

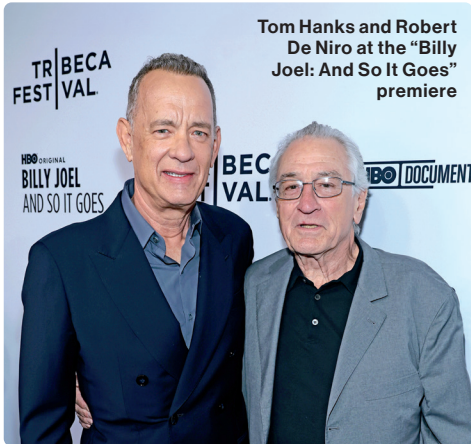
Tribeca Festival

Various locations, New York JUNE 4-8

Hours before the premiere of her visual album "Something Beautiful," **Miley Cyrus** spoke about being a co-director of the project at Chanel and the Tribeca Festival's Through Her Lens Luncheon. "Throughout my career, my story has been told from so many lenses outside of myself and from so many perspectives outside of myself," she told *Variety*, adding, "[I've] never been able to actually get behind the lens and see myself in the way that I do." **Billy Joel** couldn't make it to the opening-night premiere of his documentary "Billy Joel: And So It Goes" because of health issues (he was recently diagnosed with a brain disorder known as normal pressure hydrocephalus), but the film's co-director **Susan Lacy** read a brief note from the Piano Man: "Getting old sucks, but it's still preferable to getting cremated."



Tribeca Festival's Jane Rosenthal with Miley Cyrus at the Chanel and Tribeca luncheon



Tom Hanks and Robert De Niro at the "Billy Joel: And So It Goes" premiere



Gustavo Dudamel and Bradley Cooper at the "All We Cannot See" premiere



Brian Tyree Henry



Gotham Film & Media Institute's Jeffrey Sharp with Sheryl Lee Ralph



Jack Thorne, Erin Doherty, Owen Cooper and Stephen Graham

Gotham Television Awards

Cipriani Wall Street, New York JUNE 2

"The White Lotus" star **Parker Posey** was honored with the Legend Tribute at the Gotham Film & Media Institute gala. "Thank you, **Mike White**, for writing this character for me, for believing in a middle-aged woman, and believing in a legend," Posey said to big laughs. Netflix's "Adolescence" earned three prizes, including outstanding lead performance in a limited series for **Stephen Graham**. "I don't normally get these," Graham said, but "sometimes the lunatics take over the asylum and we show what we're capable of." While honoring Sidney Poitier, **Sheryl Lee Ralph** recalled being directed by the late Oscar winner in her first film, the 1977 comedy "A Piece of the Action." Fighting back tears, the "Abbott Elementary" star said, "I have worked, I have endured, I have overcome and I never gave up. I kept going because Sidney Poitier believed in me."

Sam Rockwell, Parker Posey and Leslie Bibb



Clockwise, from top left: Roy Rochlin/Getty Images for Tribeca Festival; Dimitrios Kambouris/Getty Images/Tribeca Festival; Mark Sagliocco/Getty Images/Tribeca Festival; Kristina Bumphrey/Variety; Dimitrios Kambouris/Getty Images/The Gotham Film & Media Institute; Dimitrios Kambouris/Variety; Dimitrios Kambouris/Getty Images/The Gotham Film & Media Institute



Lin-Manuel
Miranda and
Jonathan
Groff



Paul Tazewell



Sarah
Snook



Nicole Scherzinger
and Oprah Winfrey



Amal Clooney
and George
Clooney

Tony Awards

Radio City Music Hall, New York **JUNE 8**

Nicole Scherzinger broke down in tears while accepting the best actress in a musical Tony for her portrayal of Norma Desmond in **Jamie Lloyd's** "Sunset Blvd." revival. "Growing up I always felt like I didn't belong, but you all have made me feel like I belong, and I have come home at last," the former Pussycat Dolls singer said. "If there's anyone out there who feels like they don't belong or your time hasn't come, don't give up." "Succession" star **Sarah Snook** took home the prize for leading actress in a play for her work playing 26 roles in the one-woman adaptation of "The Picture of Dorian Gray." "This means so much for a little Australian girl to be here on Broadway," Snook said. Costume designer **Paul Tazewell** won his second Tony (he earned his first for "Hamilton") for "Death Becomes Her." Just months earlier, he made history as the first Black man to win the Oscar for costume design for "Wicked." "The Black queer little boy in Akron, Ohio, had no idea that in 2025, he would have the year that he had," Tazewell said.



Kara Young



Cynthia
Erivo



Darren Criss



Francis Jue



Sarah Paulson, Cole Escola and Jean Smart



Katie Holmes



Danielle Brooks

Tonys After-Party

The Carlyle, New York

After Tonys host **Cynthia Erivo** said, "Good night," and the credits began to roll, it was time to hit the party circuit. As always, Broadway publicist **Rick Miramontez** and producer **John Gore**'s VIP gathering was the place to hang until the wee hours.



Jak Malone



Ronan Farrow, Hamer Morgenstern and Mia Farrow



Ariana DeBose



Glenn Davis and Sadie Sink

P.28

VARIETY

THE RACE IS ON

From 'F1' to 'The Studio,' 'Ted Lasso' to major league sports, Apple has gone deep into the business of producing TV and film. CEO Tim Cook, in his most expansive remarks to date, says Apple's investment in content is not about trying to sell more iPhones

By **Cynthia Littleton**

Photographs by **Joe Pugliese**



TIM COOK AND LEWIS HAMILTON ARE ON TOP OF THE WORLD.

Or so it seems, as the CEO of Apple and the Formula 1 racing superstar stand on the deck of Apple Park's observatory in Cupertino, California.

This high perch is the last stop on a tour of the 175-acre Apple Park campus that Cook is giving Hamilton on a sunny day in late April. It's Hamilton's first visit, despite having been in business with Apple since 2022 as a producer on "F1," the nearly \$250 million action movie from Apple Original Films that stars Brad Pitt and arrives in multiplexes on June 27.

Apple and Hamilton are enormously invested in the film, and both have a lot to prove with its performance at the global box office. There's no margin for error: "F1" will either soar to become one of the year's biggest hits, or it will be considered a costly disappointment. It's a high-stakes gamble on the world stage — the kind of "Let's go for it!" risk that builds bonds between executives and creatives.

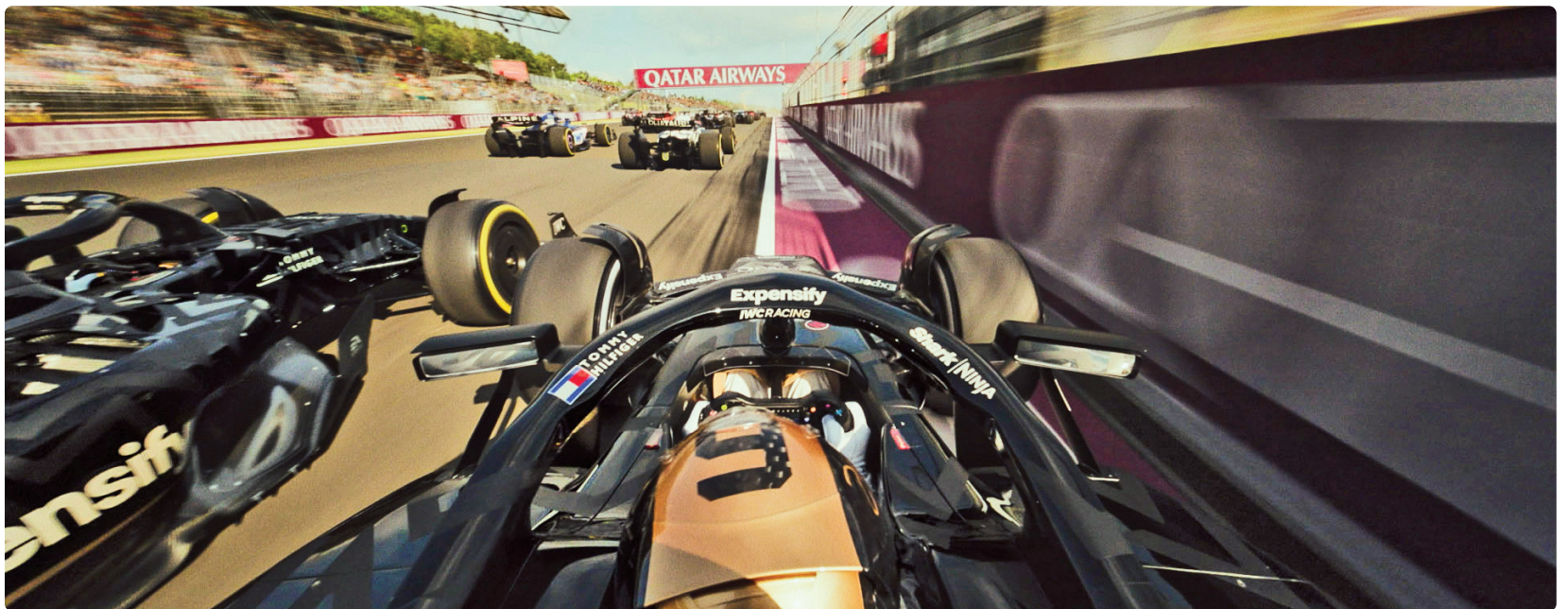
On this breezy afternoon, however, the film's opening-weekend reckoning is still eight weeks away, and there's much work to be done to sell the movie to the masses. But in this moment, Cook wants to show off the breathtaking view to his starry guest.

"Is that San Jose?" Hamilton asks, pointing off in the distance at the dim outline of boxy office buildings. Cook, 64, nods, and the two survey the land all around them. It's a quiet moment both seem to enjoy as they contemplate what each has riding on the release of "F1."

Hamilton, 40, is a seven-time Formula 1 champion, one of the winningest race car drivers of all time and a trailblazer for inclusivity in sports and other fields. The U.K.-born prodigy who began racing at age 8 is also an entrepreneur, part owner of the Denver Broncos and a style icon with a growing apparel business called Plus44. Though Hamilton has traveled the world at 200 miles per hour, even *he's* impressed by the rarefied air of Apple Park and the view he's taking in overlooking Silicon Valley.







Racing footage from "F1"

Not only is Hamilton about to celebrate the release of his first major film as a producer, but he's still busy competing in the 2025 season of Formula 1, which began in March and ends in December. If Formula 1 devotees and fellow drivers don't like the film, Hamilton will surely feel it on tour. He's anything but worried: "If you look at previous racing movies," he says, "it's very hard to create the authentic racing feel. This is the best racing movie that's ever been made."

Cook, meanwhile, is marshaling considerable resources to support what is the splashiest movie-launch campaign in Apple's short history of producing. The film, spearheaded by "Top Gun: Maverick" writer-director Joseph Kosinski, included a year's worth of development on advanced camera technology to capture the sheer force of auto racing. Cook emphasizes that that same tech is baked into the camera of the latest iPhone model.

"F1" hails from Apple Original Films, Pitt's Plan B, Jerry Bruckheimer Films and Hamilton's Dawn Apollo banner. Warner Bros. is handling worldwide theatrical distribution. Hamilton and Apple have also teamed up for a feature-length documentary on his life that is expected to have a limited theatrical run. And there's speculation that Apple may be a contender for U.S. TV rights

to Formula 1 when the league's current deal is up, starting with the 2026 season. Simply put, Apple is deeply invested in "F1."

Weeks before tracking reports emerge to indicate "F1" is indeed highly anticipated by moviegoers, Cook asserts that he is confident the movie is worthy of the Apple brand. "You can feel that you're in the car with the camera," he says. "We cared about every detail."

"F1" marks a big milestone for Apple in its expansion over the past half-dozen years of making movies and TV shows. Apple is banking on Kosinski and the team behind 2022's hit "Top Gun: Maverick" to deliver a four-quadrant smash that will be measured as much for its impact on pop culture and filmmaking as it will be in box office receipts. In a best-case scenario, "F1" becomes the kind of sensation that launches a million memes and is the engine that accelerates the popularity of Formula 1 racing in the U.S. once and for all.

"F1" has been a passion project for Eddy Cue, the architect of Apple's expansion into producing movies and TV shows. He's an Apple veteran and racing buff who sits on the board of directors of Ferrari, Hamilton's racing team. His dreams for the film are loftier even than a nine-figure opening weekend: "I hope that when most people go see the movie, they walk out wanting to be a race car driver," says Cue.

In Cook's view, "F1" is the perfect vehicle to test Apple's power to affect culture with the soft power of a broad-appeal movie rather than through the hardware of its computers and smartphones.

"To bring something to life that would be authentic to the sport, that would tell a great story as well about the ups and downs of life — 'F1' hit on all the things," Cook says. "And then we could bring some things that are uniquely Apple to the movie, like our camera technology. And we plan to have the whole of the company support it as well — our retail operation and everything. So it was something that we could get the entire company around. It feels wonderful to be a part of it."

Kosinski felt the Apple touch throughout the making of the movie. With Apple's bankroll and Hamilton's connections, Kosinski was permitted to film "F1" at numerous Grand Prix races during the 2023 and 2024 seasons. The movie's racing production crew became the unofficial 11th team on the circuit, complete with its own paddock in the heart of the action in order to better capture racing sequences.

At times, Kosinski had as many as 28 cameras running simultaneously at key events. It added up to more than 5,000 hours when the flag came down on the 2024 season.

"The world of F1 is about pushing boundaries technologically — it's embedded in the sport," Kosinski says. "It meshed well with the whole Apple vibe." He adds that the film "ended up being an incredible partnership between two giant brands. It was needed to pull this off."

Jerry Bruckheimer, the producer behind "Top Gun," "Flashdance," "Beverly Hills Cop" and "CSI," agrees. "This was an enormous production," he says. "I've never seen a company throw everything they had at a movie like this."

As befitting a company that measures its market cap in trillion-dollar increments (\$3.1 trillion as of June 2), Apple's bar for success is high. Steve Jobs, the company's late co-founder and Cook's

"We elected not to go out and procure a catalog. I know that's a faster way into the business, but it didn't feel like Apple at the end of the day."

TIM COOK



"FI" stars Damson Idris and Brad Pitt on the scene at the British Grand Prix at Silverstone Circuit in July 2023

predecessor as CEO, established early on that the Apple brand was something to be revered and protected. Jobs was light-years ahead of the pack in understanding the immense value for a tech firm of building a titanium-strength consumer brand that is synonymous with innovation, creativity and coolness. The apple-shaped logo and what it stands for in the minds of consumers is an incalculable part of that \$3 trillion valuation.

Like Cue, Cook has a clear vision for what Apple TV+ and Apple Original Films bring to the company. "We stand at the intersection of technology and the liberal arts," Cook says. "We wanted Apple TV+ to be a place where great storytellers would tell their best stories."

Apple TV+ opened for business in November 2019. Cue and Cook both observe that 2025 marks the first time in the service's history that it will roll out a carefully planned full-year slate without the extra burden of managing around a global pandemic or the two strikes in 2023 that blew a six-month hole in production pipelines. "I finally feel like we're at the point where our slate hasn't been impacted by the strikes or by COVID," Cue says.

Apple could have easily M&A'd its way into the industry, buying a major studio or enter-

tainment library. The company, which has \$30 billion in cash reserves, can certainly afford to write the kind of big check that could make a deal happen overnight. But build rather than buy has been the Apple ethos ever since Jobs and co-founder Steve Wozniak were laboring in their garage in the mid-1970s.

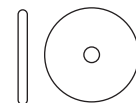
"We elected not to go out and procure a catalog. I know that's a faster way into the business, but it didn't feel like Apple at the end of the day," Cook says. "Apple should have something that we pour our passion into, and that's exactly what we're doing with the shows. And now you can see us hitting a stride. It feels wonderful."

In conversation, Cook speaks slowly and softly, with a Southern lilt that reflects his Alabama roots. He's thoughtful and methodical in answering questions in a voice that is both calming and authoritative.

When pressed about what Apple's investments in movies and TV shows have meant for the company as a whole, Cook explains that Apple is at heart "a toolmaker," delivering computers and other devices that enable creativity in users. (This vision for the company, and the "toolmaker" term specifically, was first articulated by Jobs in the early 1980s.) "We're a toolmaker," Cook says again. "We make tools for

"We make tools for creative people to empower them to do things they couldn't do before. So we were doing lots of business with Hollywood well before we were in the TV business."

TIM COOK



"It's very hard to create the authentic racing feel. This is the best racing movie that's ever been made."

LEWIS HAMILTON

creative people to empower them to do things they couldn't do before. So we were doing lots of business with Hollywood well before we were in the TV business.

"We studied it for years before we decided to do [Apple TV+]. I know there's a lot of different views out there about why we're into it. We're into it to tell great stories, and we want it to be a great business as well. That's why we're into it, just plain and simple."

Indeed, Apple has faced questions from Wall Street about the larger strategy around its investment in movies and TV. The company, unlike most other streamers, doesn't disclose how many Apple TV+ subscribers it has signed up; nor does it break out financial results for the service, which it lumps in with its "Services" segment, along with revenue from music, games, the App Store and more.

Media analysts and observers have wondered how the content side of Apple threads together with the hardware sales that fuel the core business. As Cook sees it, that's not the point, although such connections are emerging organically in the course of doing business, as evidenced by "FI" and the camera tech. "I don't have it in my mind that I'm going to sell more iPhones because of it," Cook says. "I don't think about that at all. I think about it as a business. And just like we leverage the best of Apple across iPhones and across our services, we try to leverage the best of Apple TV+."

Since Donald Trump took office in January, Apple has faced a new business threat from the administration's campaign to enact steep tariffs on imported goods — and iPhones specifically.

Cook said on Apple's May 1 earnings call that Trump's tariffs would add \$900 million in costs in the June quarter. He said that predicting the effect past then would be very difficult, given the uncertainty of the situation. That came after Cook announced in February that Apple would invest \$500 billion in the U.S. over the next four years, a pledge Trump proudly heralded.

Apple certainly didn't need to charge into the volatile world of show business. But a decade ago, with the streaming wars and the Peak TV expansion boom on the horizon, Cue sensed opportunity. "We've always thought that art was a big piece of the DNA of who we are," he says. "But we never expected to be creating movies

or TV shows." Yet as streaming platforms proliferated, "we saw that the world was changing, and it seemed like everybody was going after quantity. We thought there was an opening for us, if we really focused on high quality," he says.

Cue is the ultimate Silicon Valley insider, having been with Apple since 1989. This was during the bad old days, after Jobs had been elbowed out of his own company in 1985.

By 1997, a debt-laden Apple barely escaped having to file for bankruptcy. Jobs returned as CEO in a rescue mission later that year. Three years later, Apple would be reborn, starting out on its 2001-10 run of unleashing world-shaking devices and services including the iPod, iPhone, iPad and iTunes. Cook, who joined Apple in 1998, had the formidable challenge of stepping into the top leadership role after Jobs died in 2011.

Cue was the natural choice to lead Apple's entertainment push. The executive got his start at Apple leading software engineering and customer support teams. He rose to the senior ranks after playing an instrumental role in launching crucial businesses that supported Apple's main business of selling phones, computers and tablets. He helped create Apple's first online store in 1998. That was followed by the Herculean job of negotiating with the largest music labels to launch the pay-per-download iTunes Music Store in 2003. In 2008, Cue steered the launch of Apple's App Store.

In hindsight, iTunes and the App Store were steppingstones for Apple to move squarely into the world of media and entertainment. More so than Silicon Valley neighbors like Google and Facebook, Apple has put its money and its reputation on the line to produce TV series and big-budget movies like 2023's "Killers of the Flower Moon," Martin Scorsese's \$200 million, three-and-a-half-hour period epic.

It took Cue two years of scouting and seeking recommendations from entertainment industry veterans to find the right leaders for Apple's move into Hollywood. In 2017, Apple enlisted Zack Van Amburg and Jamie Erlicht as heads of Apple Worldwide Video, encompassing all TV and film activity for the company. At the time, Van Amburg and Erlicht were co-heads of Sony Pictures Television and were riding high on the much-lauded AMC Network drama series "Breaking Bad" and "Better Call Saul."

Two years later, the Apple TV+ streaming platform debuted, as did Disney+. Disney had "The Mandalorian," which commanded attention from the start, and Apple had "The Morning Show," with Reese Witherspoon, Jennifer Aniston and Billy Crudup. Nine months after launch, in the teeth of the pandemic, Apple TV+ fielded a worldwide success with the feel-good vibes of Jason Sudeikis in "Ted Lasso" in August 2020.

The service's run of late — Seth Rogen's "The Studio," Jon Hamm-starrer "Your Friends and Neighbors," Season 2 of "Severance," Jason Segel and Harrison Ford in "Shrinking," Gary Oldman in "Slow Horses," Cate Blanchett in "Disclaimer," Kristen Wiig and Carol Burnett in "Palm Royale," Joel Edgerton and Jennifer Connelly in "Dark Matter" — has been particularly strong. Like the smooth blond wood and sanded white marble in the buildings at Apple Park, the list of A-listers doing business with Apple goes on forever.

"We've worked five and a half years to become an overnight success," Van Amburg jokes.

Ben Stiller, executive producer of "Severance," credits Van Amburg, Erlicht and Cue for establishing a nurturing and close-knit environment for creatives to work in. "They're very open to the back and forth that comes with the creative process," he says. "It feels very familial. They really care about what they're making, and they reach out on a personal level."

The film side for Apple, headed by Matt Dentler, has been a slower build amid the strain of pandemic shutdowns. Last year, Apple did a last-minute about-face on plans for a wide theatrical release of "Wolfs," starring George Clooney and Brad Pitt, in part because of tepid reviews. That move spurred questions about the company's commitment to theatrical exhibition for its films.

Erlicht says the campaign around "FI" will put that chatter to rest. He emphasizes that the film is designed to deliver what exhibitors say they want most: movies with broad appeal. In the spirit of "Top Gun," "FI" hinges on a heart-tugging redemption story for Pitt's character, Sonny Hayes. Hayes was tailor-made for Pitt and crafted to be seen on the biggest of screens.

"Just because something is unapologetically commercial, which 'FI' is, it doesn't mean it doesn't achieve the highest level of quality in that process," Erlicht says. "The film achieves everything you could hope for in a pure adrenaline racing film. And we have incredible characters with relatable human emotions. That was a critical component. This is a film that really speaks to our belief in the film industry."

In 2018, when Lewis Hamilton learned that Tom Cruise and Joseph Kosinski were working on a follow-up to 1986's "Top Gun," he reached out to Cruise for Kosinski's contact info. Hamilton sent the director a letter expressing his interest in a supporting role in the film. The two discussed the possibility of Hamilton taking on the character of Lt. Mickey "Fanboy" Garcia.

But in time it became apparent that Hamilton couldn't shoot the film in California and keep his day job as a Formula 1 driver. So racing won out (and the role went to actor Danny Ramirez).

Hamilton is candid about the fact that he's coming to a crossroads in his professional life. Racing is mostly a young person's game. But Hamilton, who has 39 million-plus Instagram followers, will have no shortage of opportunities when he does retire from the track. (Just last month, his profile in the fashion industry got a huge boost when he co-chaired the Met Gala with Anna Wintour.) Being a player in the world of TV and film is one of them.

"At some point, I have to stop racing," he says. "I really, really love film, and I'm really, really excited about building Dawn Apollo and bringing in the right people. To have a partner like Apple supporting me through that process? There's no greater partner that I could have chosen to work with."

But it was Kosinski who reached out to Hamilton a few years after their "Maverick" exchange, when the director set his sights on making "F1." He'd become fascinated with the sport after binge-watching episodes of Netflix's "Drive to Survive" during the pandemic.

Kosinski, Hamilton and Bruckheimer had a meeting at San Vicente Bungalows in West Hollywood to discuss a movie that would deliver unprecedented visuals and a crowd-pleasing story with a bona fide movie star in Pitt. Hamilton then used every ounce of goodwill that he had with the league to get access for the film team. Hamilton and other Formula 1 drivers make brief appearances as themselves in the movie.

"Lewis said to me in the beginning, 'I've never seen footage in film that captures what it's like to drive in one of these cars,'" Kosinski says. "That's the challenge he gave me."

That was three years ago. As Cook and Hamilton talk up the movie's prospects at Apple Park, it's evident that the comfort and safety of the campus is a world apart from rough-and-tumble auto racing. It's also far removed from heartland America, where the enthusiasm of moviegoers for "F1" will likely determine how long it stays in theaters. Cook and Cue know that the movie's performance will be closely scrutinized because of the Apple logo out front.

Like Hamilton behind the wheel, Cook believes strongly that the road to success is to focus on achieving the exceptional. Apple products have to be great, not just good. The movie business is no different.

"We really only do a few things. We only have a few products for the size of company we are. We pour all of ourselves in each one of those — and we do TV and movies the same way," Cook says. "It's about staying true to what Apple has always been. It's about staying true to innovation, staying true to our North Star. And if you're able to do that and entertain people in a great way, then we're doing pretty good," he says.

He adds, "I think the business of our being in this business will be good for us." ●

HOW STEVE JOBS COURTED SHOWBIZ

4.

Take a tour of a major new movie studio.

- 1 Start Here** Welcome to the world's first digital movie studio—designed to let you create and edit digital movies, or even host a website serving thousands of concurrent video streams—for less than \$5,000.
- 2 FireWire** With built-in FireWire, you can connect a professional digital camcorder and transfer video in perfect digital quality. Or send high.
- 3 Final Cut Pro** A complete, high-end digital video editing studio in a box, including special effects—at a fraction of the cost of other high-end systems.
- 4 G4 Chip with Velocity Engine** The first desktop processor to reach supercomputer speeds of one stop/slip (one billion calculations per second). Using six of Intel's core bits, the 650002 G4 (with its 128-bit Velocity Engine) is over twice as fast as the 753802z Pentium III.
- 5 Rage 128 Graphics Accelerator** With 16MB of graphics memory, mounted in a fast 167 256MB, for accelerated rendering of 24-bit images.
- 6 Ultrafast Storage** 40MB hard disk up to 27GB standard, internally expandable with up to three drives—so you can work with up to six hours of digital.
- 7 Endless Storage** Available DVD-RAM lets you archive up to 6GB of video on a single \$30 disk.
- 8 Screaming Streaming** Streaming QuickTime Server, your Power Mac G4 can host a website streaming thousands of concurrent video streams.
- 9 Apple Cinema Display** There's never been a movie screen like this in history. The Apple Cinema Display gives you the brightest, clearest, most inspiring place to work—a stunning 22 inches measured diagonally.

Think different. www.apple.com

Long before Apple TV+ and iPhones, the Apple co-founder carefully cultivated his brand in Hollywood, as seen through vintage *Variety* ads

Sometimes, a decision speaks a thousand words. The first-ever celebrity spokesman hired by Apple to pitch its personal computers in television ads was Dick Cavett. The company was barely 5 years old in 1981 when it tapped Cavett to star in a series of commercials designed to demystify the idea of using a home computer. The choice of the erudite writer and talk show host said so much about who Apple saw as its target audience.

Steve Jobs, the legendary tech visionary who co-founded Apple with Steve Wozniak, was famously attentive to image-making for his brand. And when it came to speaking to Hollywood, first and foremost, Apple took care to

position itself as a wellspring of high-end filmmaking tools. Jobs, who died of pancreatic cancer in 2011 at age 56, knew how valuable it was for Apple to be embraced as the gold standard for creative design, editing and visual effects. He also was masterful at cultivating the cool factor for his products.

Before there was Apple TV+, before iPhones and iPods and iPads, Apple was already keen to reach entertainment industry insiders, speaking to them as professionals and as proto-influencers.

Here's a look at Apple's evolution as a brand as seen through vintage ads from the pages of *Variety* from 1994 to 2001.

1.

What's on your PowerBook?

Terry Ellis
President of Imago Records

Notes for speeches
Notes to my assistant
Notes regarding a charity dinner I'm organizing
My children's sports schedules
Company marketing plans
Company budgets
A calculator
One of my daughter's poems
America Online
Now Up-to-Date
Microsoft Word
A HyperCard stack cataloging my wine collection
A fax modem
A personal organizer
A detailed record of my wife's dinner parties
Racehorse breeding records
A calendar of my artist's concerts
PTA meeting notes
Itinerary for the Ellis family vacation
A dictionary
A thesaurus
Archive files of correspondence
A recipe for Yorkshire pudding

Henry Rollins
Musician/Spoken Word Performer

My show log
My workout log
Eye Scream, a book in progress
Get in the limo, a book in progress
Other people's books I'm proofreading
A fax modem
My journal
An article for Details
An article for Elle
An article for Purr
Databook Pro
Microsoft Word
Virex
PSI Fax
The release schedule for Infinite Zero Records
My tour schedule
The preface to a friend's book
Phone numbers and addresses
Lots of letters
Lots of faxes
A lyric book
Liner notes for Hubert Selby's spoken word CD
Transcripts from recent interviews
Notes for my next video
A list of things that are true

What's on your PowerBook?

Gene Shalit
Movie Critic

Transcripts of 30 years of my movie reviews
Material for three books I'm currently writing
Form letter declining invitations to speak
Microsoft Word
MacDraw
Details of consequences (medical, legal) of being hit by a car
List of movie producers who may have been driving that car
Letters to write, calls to make this month (37 items)
Form letter explaining how to tie a bow tie
Form letter explaining why I wear a bow tie
Form letter explaining why I do not fly
Catalogue of 571 CDs
Catalogue of 5477 books
Notes for an essay on procrastination
Letters to people disagreeing with my reviews
Letters to people praising my reviews
My will

Linda Fetteris-Howard
Stuntwoman

Meeting schedule for the Stuntwomen's Association of Motion Pictures
Ideas for the new SWAMP brochure
PGA Tour Golf game
Stunt coordinators' phone numbers
Burn specialists' phone numbers
Birthday list
Anniversary list
Medical emergency file for SWAMP members
Microsoft Word
Now Up-to-Date
New Contact
A fax modem
My personalized fax cover sheet
My résumé and bio
My husband Kent's résumé and bio
Women in Film contacts
Directors' phone numbers
My friends' phone numbers
A dictionary
An alarm clock
My Christmas card list
Phone number of Dr. Richard Fleming, reconstructive surgeon

1. Dec. 5, 1994 & Feb. 6, 1995 The forerunner of today's sleek MacBook laptops was the PowerBook. This BBDO-designed campaign is aimed at entertainment industry insiders. The juxtaposition of prominent people in different fields underscored how handy the device could be. Among the pairings were Imago Records' Terry Ellis with Black Flag belter and actor Henry Rollins and movie critic Gene Shalit with stunt performer Linda Fetteris-Howard.

2. Dec. 5, 1997 By the fall of 1997, the ad campaign that would become synonymous with Apple marketing — "Think Different" — was in full swing. Director Alfred Hitchcock was among the iconic innovators featured in arresting print ads.

3. Feb. 2, 1999 Who says computers have to be drab gray? The iMac era defined fin de siècle Apple in fluorescent hues. Here, Apple nods to

2.

Think different.

www.apple.com

5.

The \$50,000 editing system. Now 98% off.

Introducing Final Cut Pro 3, a revolutionary editing technology that brings unprecedented productivity to editing professionals. It's like getting a \$50,000 editing system for under \$10,000. With 64 real-time effects, you don't need "PC" hardware to do transitions, titling or color correction in real time, even on a PowerBook. That means you're editing not rendering. Need to hold lots of video off-camera? Allow you to capture over 40 minutes of video on your digital or iMacintosh hard drives. Edit in real time, then recognize with frame-level accuracy to your master format. It's fast and it's easy. And with the advanced color correction tools, you can bring the footage as close to your vision as possible. Don't worry about editing format, either. Final Cut Pro 3 is the only professional

multicam editor available that covers the entire range of professional editing formats — DV to SD and HD — with the same flexible application. And with Final Cut Pro 3 on a PowerBook G4, you can go your rough cut down the road in the car on the way back from the shoot. And video works in a made-for-consumer. There's no more inefficient switching between modes for editing, effects and trimming functions. Final Cut Pro 3. It's everything you need to get the job done at a price you'll never forget. See it at DV Super U.S. Convention Center, December 4-6.

Final Cut Pro 3

the demand by consumers to customize their devices. The "Collect All Five" pitch also reflects the public's growing obsession with Apple products.

4. Jan. 25, 2000 This ad is a flashing-neon signpost of the future for Apple users and Apple itself. (Three words: "Final Cut Pro.") The world of content creation has been upended by a tech-savvy generation that has grown up with sophisticated camera and editing tools. And now Apple itself is a studio of major importance.

5. Dec. 5, 2001 Apple's genius in design has been to deliver tools that appeal to everyday users with the drive to learn. Here's a Final Cut Pro 3 pitch that seems to anticipate the future world of social media platforms and DIY content creators.

3.

Collect all five.

Think different.

www.apple.com

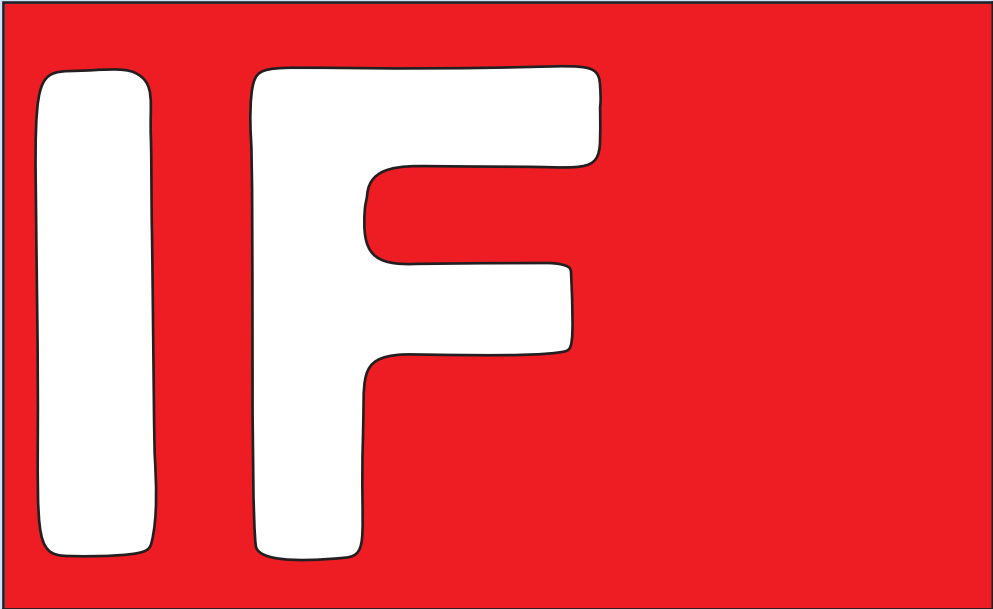


MIND THE GAP

More Hollywood movies and shows are being made in the U.K. than ever, so why are so many people out of work?

BY ALEX RITMAN
ILLUSTRATION BY GRACE PARK





the United Kingdom has become such a hot spot for Hollywood films and shows, why are so many of its entertainment industry workers out of a job?

On the one hand, the country’s soundstages are filled with massive American productions ranging from Marvel movies to a “Harry Potter” TV show to Greta Gerwig’s upcoming adaptation of “The Chronicles of Narnia.” These shows employ hundreds, if not thousands, of British workers.

But the homegrown part of the entertainment business in the U.K. is in a deep depression, beset by rising costs and shrinking budgets at major production hubs like the BBC. For the grips, cinematographers and production designers who once made their living on British-produced content, it’s never been harder to get a gig.

“It’s feast or famine right now,” says veteran producer Jonathan Weissler. “I’ve got friends who are going from \$100 million film to \$100 million film and haven’t had a day off in a year. But I know others who would kill just to have a week of that.”

Elisabeth Murdoch, whose company Sister is behind shows such as “Black Doves” and “Kaos,” recently said the U.K. is experiencing a “perfect storm” of challenges. She and others argue that spiraling costs, a collapsing ad market and major funding cuts across the local networks means there’s less money to back television programs. Moreover, since studios and streamers are economizing, they’re less interested in buying foreign-made prestige shows and movies of the kind that the U.K. is known for. That’s set the stage for a contraction in a once thriving part of the industry.

“We’ve got lots of members who are really struggling and have been for 18 months to two years now,” says Philippa Childs, head of the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Communications and Theatre Union (Bectu). “I

reckon about 50% of crew are unemployed at the moment,” says another executive. (That number could climb even higher if Donald Trump makes good on his threats to impose tariffs on films and shows produced in foreign countries.)

This bust for U.K. production is taking place alongside a boom in U.S.-backed films and series that have crossed the pond in search of the country’s generous subsidies and legendary soundstages.

On paper, there are lots of reasons to be optimistic about the direction of the business. Total investment on film and prestige TV in the U.K. in 2024 leaped 31% to \$7 billion, the second-highest year on record, according to figures from the British Film Industry. And these productions couldn’t be splashier. (Crews in places like Georgia, New York and Los Angeles are jealous, even angry, that so many major films have decamped overseas instead of being made in the U.S.) One recent émigré, “Avengers: Doomsday” — likely to be among the priciest movies ever made — began shooting in London’s Pinewood Studios last month. Several other enormous movies are filming in the U.K. or starting soon, including “Spider-Man: Brand New Day,” “Supergirl: Woman of Tomorrow,” “Masters of the Uni-

P.40

verse,” “Enola Holmes 3” and “Wuthering Heights,” along with returning series like “The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power” and “Ahsoka.”

But major studio releases are the only part of the business that’s growing (the bulk of the \$7 billion film and prestige TV expenditures in the U.K. came from U.S. studios); nearly everything else — which, for the U.K., largely means broadcast TV programming for the likes of Channel 4 — is flatlining.

Prestige programming has fallen by a quarter. In a recent government inquiry, Peter Kosminsky — who directed the acclaimed 2015 BBC series “Wolf Hall” — claimed that last year’s follow-up to the show, “The Mirror and the Light,” could only get made when writer Peter Straughan, leading man Mark Rylance and he “all gave up a significant proportion of their fees.”

Kosminsky said part of the problem was that deep-pocketed streamers who had moved their productions to the U.K. had created an “inflated cost environment,” making it prohibitively expensive to produce lower-budgeted local content. He faulted these American companies for having “little or no interest in making ... high-end dramas that are of specific interest to a U.K. audience.” “The Mirror and the Light” was eventually produced on a vastly reduced budget by the BBC. But other shows are stuck in funding limbo, unable to get made.

Due to the predominantly freelance nature of the U.K. workforce, precise unemployment figures can’t be determined. A Bectu survey of a small sampling of its members in February 2024 indicated that 68% of film and TV workers were, at the time, “not currently working” (only a slight improvement from September 2023 when the writers and actors strikes were raging). More than a third also said they were “planning to leave the industry” in the next five years.



early 2021, Nic Pringle got a call to work on Lionsgate’s “Borderlands,” a star-studded adaptation of the popular video game. Pringle was working on a low-budget children’s TV show at the time, after years spent moving from job to job. The studio was offering him a gig as the film’s second assistant director, a more important position on a much bigger film than any of his previous credits. “I went from talking about kids to speaking to Cate Blanchett about how she was going to hold a flamethrower,” he says. “It was like whiplash.”

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Pringle’s experience mirrors that of many in the industry around that time. A desperate need for crew was catapulting workers up the chain of command. COVID lockdown restrictions had just been lifted across the U.K., and the industry was in a rush to get productions started again. There had been a major pre-pandemic growth spurt, but the dramatic rise in demand for fresh content during lockdown saw production skyrocket to levels not seen previously. The following year, they climbed even higher. “I had one week off in 2022,” notes Pringle, who says he started work on a project on Jan. 8 “and I went all the way through until Dec. 21.”

A British Film Industry report from 2022 showed overall spending on film and TV reached a high of \$7.72 billion. At that time, there weren’t enough skilled workers to fill all the jobs on sets, so in order to keep growing, the industry instituted training programs and initiatives to educate people and try to meet the demand for below-the-line positions.

But then the actors and writers strikes hit in 2023. “In the space of perhaps just 18 months, we have gone from a situation where everyone was screaming about there not being enough skills in the industry to a situation where we’re concerned about people leaving because they just aren’t able to sustain themselves,” says Childs.

The consequences of this slowdown could be dire. “The fundamental problem is that we got too big,” says one executive producer. “We need 50% of our industry to — excuse my French — fuck off. We’ve got too many people; we need to just naturally Darwin it out. We need to become smaller, faster and leaner.”

That reduction appears to be underway. In September, the staff at Euston Films — a production company with a history in TV dating back to the 1970s — was laid off by corporate owner Fremantle. Other British indies have suffered similar fates.

Pringle bought an apartment in London’s studio hub of Ealing in 2023, anticipating

that he’d be living near his work. But since then, most of his jobs have been far afield, in places like Italy and Scotland. He’s barely been able to spend a night in his new digs. “Unless you’re on one of the blockbusters in London, the business has fallen off a cliff,” he says. “I’m very lucky to have been working, but I’ve just not been home.”

WITH
pressure mounting, the U.K. government has taken a few steps to spark more investment in production. Last year, the country unveiled an independent film tax credit for U.K.-produced features under \$20 million, which many hope will give the sector a much-needed kick-start. “I’ve not known so many British independent producers that I’ve talked to in the last six months being so positive — the tax credit has stimulated new investment,

both from the U.S. and from Europe,” says Adrian Wootton, head of the British Film Commission. There are now calls for a similar intervention to save the U.K.’s television business. One proposal would raise tax breaks for prestige scripted shows to 40% to match the support that indie films receive. Kosminsky is among those also lobbying for a tax on streamers such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, which would see 5% of their U.K. subscription revenue go into a fund for high-end British drama. Germany and France have imposed similar fees to support their local entertainment industries. Not everyone is on board. Although a Parliamentary committee recently endorsed the idea of a tax on streamers, culture secretary Lisa Nandy says she is concerned that it could backfire and “deter” Hollywood investment. One truly terrifying possible scenario would do more than just discourage stu-



Tom Holland in “Spider-Man: Far From Home”

dios and streamers from working in the country. The U.K. entertainment industry is praying that President Trump’s tariff plans are nothing more than bluster. If, however, the president makes good on those threats or even institutes a different series of tariffs to discourage studios from shooting movies overseas, no amount of tax credits and belt-tightening will be able to save the day. As one producer notes: “If this goes the distance, it will decimate the industry.” ●

CEMETERY

Does Heaven admit celebrities?
Who knows, but there's always Hollywood Forever,
the burial ground for the industry's
most famous families

By PAT SAPERSTEIN

Photos by DAN DOPERALSKI

TO
THE STARS



BURT
REYNOLDS

02.11.1936

09.06.2018



W

Who wouldn't want to live on the fifth floor of Los Angeles' new Gower Court building, an architectural landmark with one of the best views in town? Looking over a vast swath of the city, with the Hollywood sign in the distance, it has the ideal vista for anyone who would like to be part of showbiz history. There's just one thing — only the deceased can stake out a premium spot on the Sky Terrace of this mausoleum, where crypt prices start at a cool million.

This real estate, right next door to Paramount Studios, wasn't always so desirable. Before Tyler Cassity and co-owner Yogu Kanthiah took over in 1998, Hollywood Forever Cemetery — the final resting place of legendary cinematic figures including Rudolph Valentino, Judy Garland and John Huston — had fallen into disrepair.

"It had been padlocked twice, and it had lost its license to operate," Cassity says.

Since Cassity bought the place, though, Hollywood Forever has evolved into much more than a memorial site: It's also a parklike expanse for a city that needs green spaces, an animal sanctuary, a concert venue, a movie-screening spot and an outdoor yoga studio.

"A lot of the things I've enacted here we'd never enact now. But there was a certain creative desperation that gave us some leeway to pay the bills and to figure this out," he says.



Not only its president, Cassity is Hollywood Forever's principal cheerleader and regular yoga teacher (kundalini style, on Tuesdays at 9 a.m. on the lawn). With spiky blond hair and a deep repository of stories, he's soft-spoken and careful with his words, as befits someone who deals frequently with the bereaved.

According to Cassity, 55, Hollywood Forever has always been a magnet for the famous. "We celebrate the celebrity," he says. But in recent years the cemetery has become particularly known for welcoming a certain type of star — one whose family doesn't mind a

loved one's gravestone becoming a tourist attraction.

That's certainly true of David Lynch, whose headstone has been one of the most visited since being placed in April after the director's death in January. The modest memorial stone is engraved with the phrase "Night blooming jasmine," which refers to a Lynch quote about Los Angeles from 2016: "On a summer's night ... if you smell that night-blooming jasmine, you can almost see Clark Gable or Gloria Swanson."

Cassity bought the 62-acre property for just \$375,000 two years short of the millennium after his father



Anton Yelchin's family erected a life-size statue of the "Star Trek" actor at Hollywood Forever.

heard about the plight of the broken-down graveyard on "Entertainment Tonight." For Cassity, turning the cemetery into an asset to the community was a way to repair the family name, which was tarnished when his father, who died in 2020, and his brother Brent served jail time for fraud for their involvement in a \$600 million funeral insurance scheme. "I felt if I didn't build this building, I would be like him," Cassity says of the newly erected Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired mausoleum. "And if I did, I would have delivered to my co-workers and my community."

Originally called Hollywood Memorial Park, the cemetery was founded in 1899, before there were movies or movie stars. A Jewish section, Beth Olam, was added in the 1920s. A few years later, Paramount bought a swampy, unused part of the grounds, using the land to erect the RKO Pictures headquarters. The cemetery and the studio next door have always had a close connection; Paramount stars like Douglas Fairbanks, Valentino and Tyrone Power found their final resting places there, and Cecil B. DeMille built himself an impressive marble tomb on the site.

**"We serve the real Hollywood —
the people who actually
live here — and then we
serve those who want to
be buried with Judy Garland."**

TYLER CASSITY

For decades, it was one of the city's preferred burial places for Golden Age stars like Adolphe Menjou, Marion Davies, Virginia Rappe, Paul Muni and Norma Talmadge. Famously, Jim Morrison sneaked onto the grounds for an acid trip. And in 1974, the crematorium had to be shut down after bricks began falling during Cass Elliot's cremation. The cemetery was closed in the 1990s, after families complained that the owner, ex-con Jules Roth, neglected the graves and grounds.

But after Cassity took over, Hollywood Forever once again became the place to bury the famous. "If someone was in the film industry, they like to be with their peers," he says.

These days, stars and their families often select a grassy spot overlooking Sylvan Lake in the Court of Legends. Additions over the past two and a half decades include Paul Reubens ("He had been coming here for years, just enjoying the animals," Cassity says), Burt Reynolds, Fay Wray, Anne Heche, Johnny Ramone and Dee Dee Ramone, Chris Cornell, Vampira, Yma Sumac, Holly Woodlawn, Tony Scott, "Rust" cinematographer Halyna Hutchins and writers Jonathan Gold and Eve Babitz.



Tyler Cassity,
co-owner of Hollywood
Forever Cemetery

"Celebrity in this cemetery in particular happens often when someone dies young," Cassity notes.

Some families, such as "Star Trek" actor Anton Yelchin's, erect elaborate statues of their loved ones (starting at \$95,000). Yelchin's family found Hollywood Forever when other local memorial parks wouldn't allow a life-size bronze figure of the young actor. Cassity says Yelchin's

parents continue to visit nearly every day. "I've never encountered a vigil like theirs," he observes.

It's not unusual for those who have already purchased their burial sites to frequently visit their eventual resting place. There's journalist Mike Szymanski, whose memorial bench is adorned with statues of his dachshunds, and Tom McLoughlin, director of "Friday the 13th Part VI:

Jason Lives," who wrote the movie's screenplay on a bench at the cemetery, scribbling in a mausoleum on rainy days.

"When I turned 60, my kids and ex-wife threw me a party at Hollywood Forever because that's where I shot my first movie," McLoughlin says.

After the party, he bought himself a crypt just a few feet from Peter Lorre's. "I visit it quite a bit. Sometimes I bring my harmonica and play," says McLoughlin, who for the past 12 years has celebrated his birthday in front of his crypt. The director sees his relationship with the cemetery as a sort of "psychic experiment," laying the groundwork for possible contact from beyond the grave. He especially likes the idea of movies being screened on the wall outside his crypt.

Johnny Ramone's widow, Linda, also arranges memorial events every year, and is known as the queen of the cemetery for her consistent presence.

It's not all punk rockers and cult actors though. The majority of the sections, including a Thai area and Russian and Armenian enclaves, serve the diverse surrounding community and all its cultural traditions. "If you believe in something and you live nearby, we probably know how to serve your beliefs," says Cassity.

"We serve the real Hollywood — the people who actually live here — and then we serve those who want to be buried with Judy Garland," he adds.

The cemetery also serves cats and peacocks. Perhaps because it is



smack in the middle of L.A.'s urban grit, Hollywood Forever has long been a refuge for wildlife. There were peacocks back in the 1950s, when DeMille "would come and take lunch breaks and sit and look at his spot," says Cassity. DeMille loved to incorporate feathers into his film's costumes, and Cassity says that the late casting director and Hollywood historian Marvin Paige told him some of the plumes used in the "Ten Commandments" costumes were collected by DeMille on his lunchtime strolls.

When Cassity took over, bringing back the long-gone peacocks seemed only natural, so his assistant bought several at a swap meet. "She got two white ones and three blue ones. The white ones were Sid and Nancy," recalls Cassity. "One of the blue ones killed Sid and then mated with Nancy."

Now the peafowl number more than 50, and funeral coordinator and embalmer Eddie Martinez is in charge of their care.

The peacocks roam freely, though they like to hang out in the back lot where the headstone engravers work, and their cacophonous honking can be heard across the grounds. They seem to coexist relatively peacefully with the ducks, geese, swans and turtles that live in the lake.

Then there are the cats. Around 50 semi-feral ones live along the north wall, cared for by Michelene Cherie, who started as a volunteer before being hired by the cemetery after what Cassity calls the "Cat Lady Wars" began.

"There have always been cats, and there's always been cat ladies," he says. "Being a cat lover, I've always gotten along with the cat ladies, until the cat ladies all started to fight. They were territorial about who was feeding them; they were insulting each other. About five years ago, the Cat Lady Wars started, so we finally just hired a cat lady."

Cherie has worked for years to trap and neuter the cats, whose numbers are down from a high of 80-plus when she came on.

Cassity's own black cat, Nina Simone, was dumped at the cemetery before he rescued her, and cats that are abandoned there are sometimes offered for rescue on Hollywood Forever's Instagram. Proceeds from the yoga classes help pay for the animals' food and vet bills.

"We try to be present — not just in sad ways, but in other parts of people's lives," Cassity says. He's mostly talking about Cinespia, an outdoor screening series started in 2002 to help pay the cemetery's hefty water bill.

Now Cinespia attracts thousands of moviegoers on summer evenings, who lug lawn chairs, blankets and picnic baskets for one of the city's most popular alfresco activities. The May 31 memorial screening of "Blue Velvet" played to a sold-out crowd, who were eager to commune with both the film and the filmmaker — or at least his ashes.

Fourth of July weekend includes "Top Gun" with fireworks on the holiday, and more fireworks for "La La Land" the next night. Other July screenings include "It" and "Romy and Michele's High School Reunion."

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Music is also a big part of the programming, either in the 1927 Masonic Lodge or on the lawn. Past performers have included indie artists Father John Misty and Flaming Lips. (For a Bon Iver set in 2009, concertgoers slept in the cemetery and awoke to the band playing at sunrise.) Natalie Bergman will be there on July 25.

With two more new mausoleums planned and a full schedule of events, the dead might not be getting much rest. But diversification is the way to survive these days — and a way to make sure the cemetery never faces another Hollywood ending. ●



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**Storyteller
Notes**
A Night in
the Writers'
Room
spotlights
top scribes
who spill
the secrets
of their
processes

By Emily
Longeretta
Photographs by
Kate Jones

→

Benito Skinner
Overcompensating

"I was worried about some of the specificity of it, because this was my experience in the closet... instead, I'm being met with so many messages from people who I think saw themselves in the show and maybe saw themselves not only in my character, but in this nostalgic world of college, and being able to laugh at that cringe time in their life."



→

Sarah Naftalis

What We Do in the Shadows

“The conceptual joke of the whole series is they’re making a documentary about an entire lifestyle that’s supposed to be hidden. It felt like in the final season you sort of had to deal with that. We really wanted the finale to feel like we were just starting any old episode, and have it feel abrupt and remind the viewer that you have been watching a documentary the whole time.”



↓

Dan Fogelman

Paradise

“I have a pretty open process with my writers. We take all of our scripts, collectively, and we just beat the shit out of them in front of one another constantly. It seems like a wonderful open process until your writer’s PA is giving you notes for four and a half hours.”

→

Craig Mazin

The Last of Us

“I’m terrified still [going into Season 3]. But I think that’s probably a good sign— we’re terrified that we’re going to fuck it up, so we try our hardest.... But I’d rather be scared and give it my all than be kind of vaguely satisfied.”

→

Dan Erickson

Severance

“I feel like we finally have a sense of what the hell the show is, what it was actually, always trying to be. The pressure keeps going up, but you get a little bit wiser every time, and that does help.”





Kim Rosenstock

Dying for Sex

“Our writers included a cancer survivor, someone who’d lost somebody to cancer, someone who had chronic illness... We made sure that we had our blind spots covered. Because we had fart jokes and dick jokes covered on our end.”



Lauren LeFranc

The Penguin

“My hope with the show is that you look at it, maybe you’re looking at advertisements or the fact that it’s called ‘The Penguin’ and you’re judging it... I was really hoping by the end you’d be like, ‘Oh, this is not at all what I expected and weirdly, I feel things.’”



Elizabeth Meriwether

Dying for Sex

“We went into it knowing that the tone was gonna be hard. That was actually what drew both of us to it. We decided to just focus on the humanity of the characters and really not try to think about genre that much.”



Ian Brennan

Monsters: The Lyle and Erik Menendez Story

“Mendez is Rashomon. It’s a story told from different perspectives and no one will know the truth. The people who know the truth — two of them are in prison, two of them are dead.”





↑
Neil Druckmann, Halley Gross
The Last of Us
“We have this roadmap [from the game]. We don’t quite know how long that road will be and what kind of detours we’ll go on. But we know the main stops and we know the final destination.”

→
Jen Statsky
Hacks
“We always said that the heart of the show is the relationship between Deborah and Ava... it’s not a will-they-won’t-they in terms of get together, but, it’s will Deborah allow herself to have one friend? She’s really fighting that for a long time.”



←

Ben Watkins

Cross

“I had started going through the [Alex Cross] books and I started thinking, a lot of these are set in a time where I’m either gonna have to do a period piece, or I’m gonna have to take something that’s not gonna be as relevant in today’s day and age. But these characters are relevant, this world is relevant, these relationships are relevant. Let me take all of that.”

→

Olivia Milch

The Better Sister

“We were never particularly super sticklers, but we were super sticklers for making sure that our entire team knew that the best idea won, and that we wanted that feedback and collaboration that the door was always open.”





←

Nikki Toscano
Long Bright River

"I'd love to be able to say we set out... like, 'We're gonna hire all females [for our crew].' No, that was not it at all. We literally talked to a bunch of different people. Honestly, the women just won the fucking job."



←

Ashley Lyle
Yellowjackets

"The one thing that has gotten a little bit easier [after three seasons] is... the fear that you won't make people happy. Because at a certain point you realize you can't make **everybody** happy. You just have to realize you will make **some** people happy."

←

Bart Nickerson
Yellowjackets

"We have a tendency to look forward a lot. A lot of it ends up just collapsing and turning into something different... There's a constant revising as we move forward."

→

Barbie Kligman
Doc

"I'm the only one with an illustrious network [show]. I am gonna ride this until I die. Network does allow for that... I hate saying this out loud because it sounds douchy, but the characters sort of dictate where they wanna go. We make plans but I know they're all going to change."

→

R. Scott Gemmill
The Pitt

"I've been doing it a long time, and I also think, at the end of the day, I'm not saving kids' lives. I'm making a fucking TV show. It's 'Gilligan's Island.' If it's still on the air 50 years after I'm dead, wonderful. I'm just so damn lucky to get paid not to have people shoot at me or run into a burning building."





Erin Foster

Nobody Wants This

“Everybody passed on it and Netflix felt sort of like an unrealistic place to buy it. It was our last pitch and sort of like a formality — do the pitch so they can say no, and then I go back to all the recipes I learned during COVID. Then they bought it and it changed my life.”



Tad Quill

Animal Control

“I think [will-they-won't-they relationships] are the emotional heart of the show. I love having those arcs. When you're trying to break stories and you have like a romantic triangle to go to or something like that, it just makes everything less terrifying.”



Eric Ledgin

St. Denis Medical

“There's multi-generational households watching our show and laughing together. That to me is what TV was when I was a kid. That was the joy of it. So it's pretty cool to hear that from people that don't owe me the compliment.”



Justin Halpern

Abbott Elementary

“We were told network TV was dead when we pitched the show and, you know, we're still on the air. It may be dead, but we're there among the corpses. There's a bunch of people out there who still like writing comedy, still like making comedy, and we've found each other.”





Sam Nivola in "The White Lotus" finale

A Deadly End 'White Lotus' creator Mike White breaks down the Season 3 finale and the Ratliff family's mess

By Selome Hailu

→ Yes, "White Lotus" creator and director Mike White put an implied incest scene in Season 2 — the two men turned out to be lying about their familial relation — then upped the ante in Season 3 to a hand job between real brothers. But he does draw the line somewhere: a man killing himself, his wife and his children, for example.

"As dark as we go in this show, that's too dark," White says. That's why Timothy Ratliff (Jason Isaacs) can't go through with his plan to poison his family in the Season 3 finale, even though letting them live means they'll soon learn he's lost everything they have by getting caught in a money laundering scandal. "You're showing the weaknesses of human behavior and how that can lead to deadly consequences. At

the same time, there's hopefully enough empathetic humanism to offset all the acid. It's got enough of everything to be palatable, and yet, you still feel like you're doing something new."

Timothy is partially based on French aristocrat Xavier Dupont de Ligonnès, who was plagued by debt and allegedly killed his wife, four children and two dogs in 2011 before disappearing. A producer pitched White on writing a show about the murders, and though he found the idea too depressing, he never stopped thinking about that family.

"I kept thinking about how someone could lose the plot and kill the thing that he loves the most — this idea of somebody wanting to protect his family from hardship, and that they couldn't survive

without all the creature comforts they're used to," White says. "I started thinking it'd be interesting to have a guy realize this at the beginning of a vacation, so there's this public shaming that's going on back home, but they're ensconced in this paradise somewhere far away." White's thought was, "Well, that is so 'White Lotus.'"

The Ratliffs' phones are taken away upon their arrival at the Thailand outpost, but Timothy eventually wrangles his back and finds out that the FBI is investigating him. Dosed up on lorazepam he stole from his wife, Victoria (Parker Posey), Timothy spends the rest of the series having visions of suicide, which broaden to murder-suicide as Victoria and their children inadvertently reveal how ill-prepared they are for poverty.

"It's not a fantasy; it's a plan," Isaacs says of the dream sequences. "I mean, it's a drug-addled plan, but even if he wasn't taking the drugs, there is no way to avoid the stuff going on in his head — the terror of the abyss." While visiting a monastery, a monk (Suthichai Yoon) tells Timothy that death is like being a single water droplet falling back into the ocean, saying, "No more suffering. One consciousness. Death is a happy return." Unsurprisingly,

Timothy takes away the wrong message, deciding he can now justify his most depraved instincts.

In their own ways, Victoria, Saxon (Patrick Schwarzenegger) and Piper (Sarah Catherine Hook) all fail to prove to Timothy that they can handle a more humble life. So, in the finale, Timothy hatches a plan to blend the poisonous seeds of the resort’s native pong-pong trees into piña coladas for his family to share — minus Lochlan (Sam Nivola), who isn’t 21 and, crucially, is the only family member who passes Timothy’s secret test and is deemed grounded enough to make it without wealth.

The images on screen slow and distort as the lethal cocktail comes together on the Ratliffs’ last night in Thailand. Rum and coconut milk fall gently from Timothy’s hands into the blender, the camera watching from a chaotic assortment of angles that make each ingredient appear close enough to get a whiff.

“We really wanted to put the audience inside of Tim’s head,” says cinematographer Ben Kutchins. “He’s lost in this nightmare where no one loves him if he’s not rich, and I was using various lenses, including these very old projection lenses, to show how disturbed his worldview had become.”

Each family member elegantly slides in and out of frame as Timothy distributes the poison. “We’re doing this ballet with the camera and the actors as he’s passing out the drinks in floating, dreamlike slow-motion,” Kutchins continues. “Then we hard cut. Previously, this would have been where we reveal that this is just a dark fantasy. But this time, we see that Lochlan is getting a Coke, and everyone else has the piña coladas. This is real. This is happening.”

After an awkward speech about their “perfect family” and “perfect life,” the Ratliffs clink their glasses and take a sip. However, they notice that something tastes wrong but continue drinking anyway — until Timothy suddenly swats Saxon’s glass out of his hand, shattering it.

“This was his solution, but instinctively, he bypasses his brain,” Isaacs says. “On an animal level, he just loves them too much. There aren’t completed thoughts, just terror, panic and the overbearing love for life.” Thus, the Ratliffs trade their piña coladas for Chardonnay as Timothy mutters about the coconut milk being “off,” and he eventually goes to bed understanding that his money problems are inescapable, but at least he has his family by his side.

But the next morning, Lochlan makes a protein shake in the unwashed, poi-

son-laden blender and, in a way, dies. After vomiting into the swimming pool and rolling onto his back, he begins to hallucinate that he’s deep under water and trying to swim towards four shadowy figures who are standing over the surface. At first, he sees flashes of his family’s faces, but the figures turn out to be monks.

According to editor and second unit director John Valerio, an earlier version of the finale script included Lochlan’s body washing ashore at the full moon party, where he watches a group of four monks using a flaming jump rope. White cut the scene before it was ever shot, but the idea stuck with Valerio.

“While I was shooting second unit, one of the transition shots we had for Episode 3 was this very low angle looking up at the monks. That reminded me of Mike’s original finale script,” he says. “I was like, ‘What if, when Lochlan is in the water, he can see the monks waiting to take him to the next world?’ So we shot the monks standing over a mirror. We threw water on it to give it a reflective, watery surface, and I cut to it when Lochlan is dying. It was a more simple, personal, spiritual moment,

rather than the wild bacchanal of a full moon party.”

Eventually, while being held and shaken by a sobbing Timothy, Lochlan wakes back up. “I think I just saw God,” he says.

“Lochlan is a kid in search of firmer footing in the world,” White explains. “He wants to be a believer, but he needs some kind of proof. He’s so lost with what happens with Saxon” — the aforementioned sexual encounter — “that I was like, ‘Well, here’s some catharsis for him. He’s centered in a deeper way than he was at the beginning of the week.’”

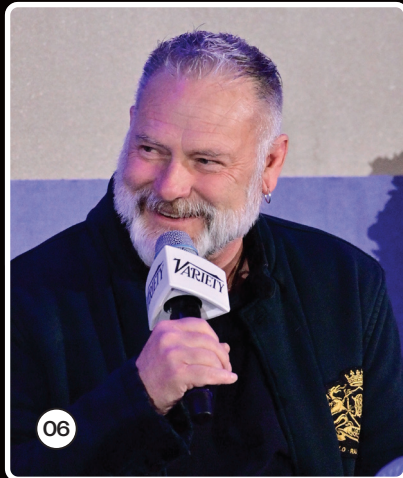
As the Ratliffs take the boat from the resort, moments away from learning of their financial ruin, there’s an almost-smile on Timothy’s face. The water surrounding them recalls the image of death described to him by the monk.

“He thinks, ‘This is exactly what we need: to be a drop of water in the ocean. To be part of common humanity,’” Isaacs says. “It’s actually the best thing that could happen. They will be humbled by this, and they’ll no longer need to maintain this huge gap of superiority over the rest of the world. They’ll recognize they are just like everybody else.”



“You’re showing the weaknesses of human behavior and how that can lead to deadly consequences. At the same time, there’s hopefully enough empathetic humanism to offset all the acid.” Mike White





VARIETY

A Night in the Writers' Room

JUNE 5 LOS ANGELES

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The Next Class These up-and-coming producers champion diverse talents and storytellers on the big screen



Zainab Azizi
“Don’t Move”

Azizi says her films are like her children — she loves them all. But she’s particularly proud of Brian Netto and Adam Schindler’s “Don’t Move” (2024), about a grieving mother (Kelsey Asbille) kidnapped and injected with a paralytic agent by a seemingly kind stranger (Finn Wittrock). She got the script from manager Marc Manus and liked what she read. So she quickly assembled the financing, and six months later, she was in Bulgaria shooting the California-set thriller, which was eventually picked up by Netflix.

Part of the reason it’s dear to her heart is that it gave her the opportunity to pay it forward.

“I was running the set with another female producer [Sarah Sarandos], and I bumped up her credit,” says Azizi, who also appears as Selfie Girl 2 in the movie.

Six years into her producing career with Raimi Prods., Azizi has already brought a large family of “children” into the world, including Iris K. Shim’s horror-mystery “Umma” (2022), starring Sandra Oh; Scott Beck and Bryan Woods’ sci-fi adventure “65” (2023), starring Adam Driver; David Yoroovesky’s psychological thriller “Locked” (2025), starring Bill Skarsgård; and production partner Sam Raimi’s upcoming deserted island survival drama “Send Help,” starring Rachel McAdams.

A native of Maryland, Azizi began her showbiz career in the mailroom at WME. Later, she was helping the agency package a film for Raimi — who’s directed everything from “The Evil Dead” franchise to “Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness” — and he told her she should come be a producer for his company.

Back home, Azizi’s parents didn’t know what to make of her new “producer” job, so she told them it was like being a wedding planner.

“You understand what the concept is, and then you bring it to life,” she explains. “It’s all of these months and months of planning ... and it happens, and then you just hope for the best.” —*Todd Longwell*

Stephen “Dr.” Love produced “They Cloned Tyrone,” top; “Don’t Move,” above, is from Zainab Azizi.



studios in the world," she notes. "So, I had to go."

Her first feature producing credit finds her starting out big with "Toy Story 5," the latest entry in the blockbuster franchise, scheduled for release next year. Choi was excited to work with writer-director Andrew Stanton, noting, "I really wanted to challenge myself and work with someone that was considered the best." She's aware expectations are high. "Obviously it's a massive franchise film and there's a lot of eyes on it," she notes. "But I feel like every film I've worked on has led me to kind of figure out what needs to be done on this one."

Among her skills, Choi says, "I love connecting people. I love bringing everyone together and being on the sidelines for the creative of it. I think what brings me joy in my day-to-day is really just working with the team and having everyone perform at their best." —*Jenelle Riley*



Thomas Hakim & Julien Graff

"All We Imagine as Light"

When Thomas Hakim and Julien Graff launched Petit Chaos in 2018, their approach was organic. "It was a bit spontaneous," says Hakim of their Paris-based production company's origins. "I was developing projects and needed a structure to produce them. When I met Julien, he told me, 'One day I would like to produce.' And so I said, let's do it together."

The duo's complementary backgrounds — Hakim's on-set production management experience at companies like Geko Films and Why Not, paired with Graff's seven-year tenure as CFO at Ecce Films — created an ideal foundation. "We had a similar vision about stuff, but also we could bring different skills and learn from each other," Hakim explains.

Their instinctive decision-making has paid dividends. Both of Petit Chaos's feature films began their journeys with major Cannes recognition: "A Night of Knowing Nothing" won the l'Œil for best documentary at Director's Fortnight in 2021, while "All We Imagine as Light" claimed the Grand Prix at the 2024 festival competition. Both films are by India's Payal Kapadia.

The company's philosophy centers on genuine connection rather than calculated strategy. "It's really about being moved by



Juliet Berman

"Griffin in Summer"

Say what you will about "Carlito's Way: The Beginning," but it marked the start of Bergman's producing career when she landed a production assistant role on the critically acclaimed prequel while still studying film at Columbia University.

"Stepping onto the first movie set and realizing there's this huge apparatus and everything's moving at a million miles an hour toward a common goal was so infectious to me," Berman recalls.

After working for a studio exec, a TV director and an agency, she realized her future lay in independent films. "I wanted to be developing new voices," she says.

She spent nearly 11 years as a producer and head of development at Treehouse Pictures before starting her own company, Spiral Stairs Entertainment, in 2023. She subsequently produced a remake of "Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead," and critics' darling, the coming-of-age film "Griffin in Summer," which won three awards at the Tribeca Film Festival.

"It's hard to define what a producer is," she says. "But that's what's rewarding, wearing a million different hats for whatever the moment requires. I love figuring out how to turn a no into a yes."

Juliet Berman produced critically acclaimed "Griffin in Summer," above.

A hands-on producer, Berman enjoys everything from development to post-production. "I love being on the set with the fast pace, putting a fire out and protecting the creatives," she says.

That said, the only part she doesn't love is packaging and sales, but even there she goes all in: "For 'Griffin,' I'm literally going to call the chains myself and pitch the movie."

Berman is a proud member of Producers United, which she describes as working "to reassert the value that career producers bring to film and TV ... It's important to recognize how vital the producer is to the process." —*Stuart Miller*



Jessica Choi

"Toy Story 5"

Choi started off her career at DisneyToons and DreamWorks Animation, before moving into visual effects on films both acclaimed ("Avatar: The Way of Water") and not ("Cats"). She then joined Netflix's animation division as a production executive "when there was 30 people and we grew into 1,200 with 30 movies on the slate," which reinvigorated her love for the medium. Then Pixar reached out — one of the rare instances where the company hired from the outside — and Choi didn't hesitate. "This is considered one of the best

a film,” says Hakim. “The production company is a tool to be able to work with directors that we want to champion and that we want to actually be the first audience for.”

Both productions emerged from their relationship with Kapadia, whom Hakim met while the company was forming. “I fell in love with her work, with a short film, and the discussion started,” he recalls.

Named after a 1967 Rainer Werner Fassbinder short, *Petit Chaos* — which has produced 11 short films — operates on the principle that “it’s really the emotion” that drives their choices, as Graff notes. “What really moves us is the meeting with the director — it’s like meeting a human being at first and the project and this connection is the most important for us,” says Graff.

With projects including fiction features, documentaries, shorts and Kapadia’s upcoming films in the works, the partners continue building long-term collaborations. — *Naman Ramachandran*



Jesse Hope
“Rebuilding”

Growing up in Telluride, Colo., Hope was immersed in film culture early on. He started volunteering at the Telluride Film Festival at a young age and after college, worked on “The Hateful Eight” when it

filmed in the town. He went on to work as a union special effects technician. Eventually, Max Walker-Silverman, Hope’s childhood friend and an New York University graduate film student, sought out his input. Hope ended up producing Walker-Silverman’s shorts, and the two cemented a producer-director partnership that has since resulted in the features “A Love Song” (2022) and this year’s “Rebuilding.” Both features are set in Colorado and were filmed in the state, where Hope and Walker-Silverman still reside.

Compared to “A Love Song,” which was a “small, scrappy film that came together in two months in the midst of the pandemic,” “Rebuilding” was a three-year process, Hope says.

“Rebuilding” stars Josh O’Connor as a rancher who has lost his property in a wildfire. The film, which premiered at Sundance in the wake of the L.A. fires, was inspired by Walker-Silverman’s own experience of losing his grandmother’s home to a fire. “What I loved so much about the project was that it’s a film that’s about climate change that managed to find a way to be hopeful,” Hope says.

Making the film involved creating “relationships with the local community.” To that point, the duo started a company dedicated to crafting “regional stories with a community-based approach to filmmaking,” Hope says.

While the shingle is in the midst of looking for projects, Hope and Walker-Silverman

Josh O’Connor, below left, and Lily LaTorre star in “Rebuilding,” produced by Jesse Hope.



“This is a business that’s built on building lasting, meaningful relationships and creative collaboration.”

Jesse Hope

recently worked as producers on feature “Tomahawk Springs.” And since Walker-Silverman is back to writing, the duo is likely to team up again on their own project soon. “This is a business that’s built on building lasting, meaningful relationships and creative collaboration, and that’s just been something that’s been growing for a long time with Max,” Hope says. — *Abigail Lee*



Stephen “Dr.” Love
“The Land”, “They Cloned Tyrone”

Love was 12 years old when he declared he wanted to be a movie producer. But as a kid growing up amid the cotton fields of rural South Carolina and with the closest movie theater an hour away. His path was forged thanks to an after-school program, where kids got to make their own short films. Love was naturally drawn to being the “team leader,” he recalls. “I remember asking the instructor, ‘What is this called the real world?’ And they said, ‘Producing.’ [I said], ‘That’s what I’m gonna do for a living.’”

He continued pursuing his passion for cinema through high school and college, but he also studied business, marketing and finance at Morehouse because they didn’t have a film program until he started a student society — for which alum Spike Lee eventually became an advisor. That was a formative relationship for Love, who learned from watching Lee navigate the business and fight to get his movies made.

Love made his dream a reality, producing five movies in the decade. He’s worked as a producer, including the Sundance-premiering gem “The Land,” directed by Steven Caple Jr.; the Netflix top 10 hit “They Cloned Tyrone,” a sci-fi conspiracy caper starring Jamie Foxx; and the Lionsgate action-thriller “Shadow Force,” starring Kerry Washington and Omar Sy, which hit theaters earlier this year.

Zoë Worth was behind the indie hit “Thelma,” starring June Squibb, left, and Fred Hechinger.



“I only have two mandates on my slate,” Love says about his Made With Love Media banner. “One is to create the comp: I like the challenge of making a movie that’s absolutely needed for the audience, but it does not exist or hasn’t in a long time. The other is ‘sugar with the medicine.’ Narratives and storytelling can shift culture, shift politics, shift consciousness. I take that responsibility very, very seriously.”

Up next, Love will produce “Notes From a Young Black Chef” for A24 and, last summer, his team quietly — and independently — shot “That’s Her,” a rom-com starring Coco Jones and Kountry Wayne that hearkens back to “Boomerang” or “Brown Sugar.” —*Angelique Jackson*



Lizzie Shapiro
“The Plague”

Shapiro recently crossed off one of the key goals on her professional bucket list: bringing a project to Cannes’s main selection. She traveled there in 2025 with Charlie Polinger’s debut feature, “The Plague,” produced through her company, The Space Program. “It was a fever dream,” Shapiro says of being at the festival, where the film played in the Un Certain Regard section.

“The Plague” explores dynamics of masculinity and competition at a boys’ water

polo camp. She remembers people reacting, “how the hell are you gonna make this movie?” Getting the film off the ground was a challenge: Beyond getting financed, the production navigated a location shoot in Bucharest, extremely hot weather and the logistics of teaching young actors to play water polo. “It was just all the skills I had learned leading up to one opus moment,” she observes.

Shapiro calls The Space Program, which also includes partners Gus Deardoff and Lexi Tannenholtz, a “filmmaker first” company. An NYU film alumnus, Shapiro developed her skill set producing debut features by Emma Seligman (“Shiva Baby”) and Annabelle Attanasio (“Mickey and the Bear”). She says that collaboration with first-timers often involves balancing “a certain patience of them going through their own learning curve and trying to help them get ahead of things that you’ve already learned from past experiences.”

Her future slate includes “The Bear” writer Catherine Schetina’s film, “Pure,” and Pete Lee’s “kung fu adventure film” that’s an ode to San Francisco’s Chinatown. Plus, The Space Program is collaborating with Boots Riley on new projects.

“We’ve got the newcomers, and then we’ve got the more veteran slate,” Shapiro says. “But the important thing is they’re all things that I love deeply with my heart and can feel like I could put my full body and soul into.” —*Abigail Lee*



Trevor Wall
“Ponyboi,” “Slanted”

When Wall went to Cal State Long Beach to study film, he planned to become a director. That didn’t last long. “I quickly learned that’s not where my skill set lies and it’s not my jam,” recalls Wall, who recently served as producer on “Ponyboi” and “Slanted.”

Working in development at production companies stoked a desire to produce. Wall previously thought producers were “just the money people” but learned he could “see the entire process from beginning to end, bridging the gap between the business and art of filmmaking.”

He loves “working closely with writers and filmmakers,” saying this lets him “scratch my creative itch,” especially in breaking the stories with writers early on (then “they have the hard job of actually scripting it”) and in the editing room with directors.

“The key to a relationship with the director is trust,” he says, adding they’ll accept his creative suggestions if they know he’s supportive of their vision. When cost factors rear up, Wall gives his director options: “If you really want this we may have to pull something somewhere else,” he’ll say, and then let them decide. “I’m rid-

ing shotgun, navigating and saying, ‘Hey, there’s a road sign up ahead.’”

On set, Wall’s job shifts. “I’m basically a project manager or a walking complaint box. I’m putting out fires and managing situations to keep the show going, which can be equal parts thrilling and insanely stressful,” he says. “I’m learning to be at peace with recognizing that a lot of things, like the weather, are beyond my control, while realizing I need to be quick on my feet, pivoting and improvising.”

While “Slanted” is a slightly surreal comedy about ethnicity and “Ponyboy” a crime drama about an intersex sex worker, Wall sees a common thread. “They’re both about identity so they’re personal to me, being Black biracial and at the intersection of two identities,” he says. “A few of the other projects I have cooking also are about identity in different ways. —Stuart Miller



Zoë Worth
“Thelma”

Worth has always believed in fostering a creative community. As a student at New York University, she and actor Alden Ehrenreich formed a group called the Collectin to bring film and drama students together and collaborate on actor-driven work. “Calling it a ‘company’ would be generous,” she notes. “I’d say we were somewhere between a collective and a club, with a bit of a support group thrown in.” The spirit of that group lived on when Worth moved back to L.A. and started a similar weekly workshop on the West coast.

It was there that she first met Josh Margolin, and years later, would read the script that would become “Thelma,” the 2024 Sundance breakout that turned June Squibb into an action star. Prior to “Thelma,” Worth produced and starred in features “Running Wild” (made for \$20,000), “Shut Up and Drive” and the web series “Chloe and Zoe.” Though “Thelma” had a bigger budget, it was still an indie with challenges — shooting during COVID with a senior-led cast, for one. But the film charmed audiences and became Magnolia’s highest-grossing narrative feature ever. For Worth, it taught her “everything” and earned her a nomination for the prestigious Producers Award at the Spirit Awards.

Having formed the production company Bandwagon with fellow “Thelma” pro-

ducer Chris Kaye, Worth is currently writing and developing a slate of new comedy projects, including Margolin’s next movie. And while her job as a producer is multifaceted, she stresses the creative side. “We purposely do not have a big slate because we are really more of an incubator,” she says. “We’d rather develop closely with artists than do a little on a lot.” —Jenelle Riley



Tony Yang
“Lucky Lu”

Yang was a pre-med student in college, following in his parents’ footsteps. But he had an awakening. “My junior year of undergrad, I just had this sudden realization that pre-med wasn’t the right path for me. I switched to film because I had always loved going to the movie theater growing up,” Yang says.

The year Yang switched, the new dean of the media school had the students make a feature-length film based on a play. “That was my first real hands-on experience with producing. From there, I applied to graduate school and was lucky enough to be accepted into Columbia’s master’s program for creative producing.”

By the time Yang had graduated, he had 50 shorts under his belt, across every department.

“Blue Sun Palace” (2023) was his first feature. As a producer, Yang says, “It means

doing whatever I can to provide the resources, tools, guidance, expertise, etc. to the creatives that are the driving force behind the story so that they can operate at the highest level possible. Producing is about trying to elevate the people on set and make sure they are in a setting where they feel truly free to do their best work.”

Being a producer is also about being the rock.

His most recent project is Lloyd Choi’s “Lucky Lu,” a short film that Choi adapted as a feature-length film. The indie film, which bowed in Cannes’ Directors’ Fortnight, was shot in New York City over 22 days. Yang credits the “amazing team behind and in front of the camera” for helping pull it off. “Lloyd’s vision was precise from beginning to end and as producers, we had to step up multiple times to meet a lot of challenges head on. The support we received from the community, our friends and family, and our financial partners was crucial, and it was because of that support that we were able to do so without compromising his creativity,” Yang says. —Jazz Tangcay

“Producing is about trying to elevate the people on set and make sure they are in a setting where they feel truly free to do their best work.” Tony Yang



“Lucky Lu,” produced by Tony Yang, debuted at Directors’ Fortnight in Cannes this year.

Focus on Local Action The Bentonville Film Festival slots homegrown pics and a diverse range of filmmakers

By Matt Minton

➔ As the Oscar-winning actor looks back on the Bentonville Film Festival's growth since 2015, festival chair Geena Davis knows this year is all about "staying true" to its roots while spotlighting local Arkansas production with a new home-grown category.

"For a while, now, we've been nationally recognized as one of the fastest-growing festivals in the country, and we're really proud of bringing audiences and filmmakers from all over the world," Davis says.

The 11th edition of the festival runs June 16-22 in Bentonville, Ark. with founding partner Walmart, presenting partner Coca-Cola and a partnership with Variety's Producers to Watch. This year's lineup features 28 feature films in competition, including nine world premieres, curated by artistic director Drea Clark. Among those include the Danielle Deadwyler-led thriller "40 Acres," topical Sundance documentary "Heightened Scrutiny" and opening night selection "East of Wall," directed by Kate Beecroft.

Finding a new way to spotlight local films has been an ongoing conversation with production companies and producers for years, says Bentonville Film Festival president Wendy Guerrero. "We have found a huge rise in really wonderful productions with filmmakers, directors and producers and this year, they rose to the top," she adds.

Those titles include "West of Greatness: The Story of the Westwego Muscle Boys," "Beyond the Ashes: An Adaptive Trail Story," "Abigail Before Beatrice" and "Sovereign," which stars Nick Offerman and Jacob Tremblay. Being included here is extra personal for local filmmakers

like "Abigail Before Beatrice" director Cassie Keet.

"I think it's really important to show where we live and how beautiful it is," Keet says. "People don't think of Bentonville or Arkansas in general as a huge epicenter of the entertainment business, but we have so many wonderful things to offer with gorgeous locations and people who are really dedicated to their craft."

While major hubs like Los Angeles have struggled in recent years with record-low production rates, states like Arkansas will have to increase incentives to become more competitive. Over the years, Bentonville has expanded its presence within the state of Arkansas by collaborating with other festivals and organizations, including the Arkansas Cinema Society, which was founded by filmmaker Jeff Nichols.

Diversity has also been a huge pillar of the festival since the beginning. This year, 66% of directors in the screening lineup identify as female or gender non-confirming, while 29% identify within

the LGBTQ+ community and 18% of filmmakers are over the age of 50. And with on-screen representation, 49% of leads identify as BIPOC.

"A lot of other festivals have different verticals or programs that emphasize native or tribal women, but really what Geena said when we started the festival is that she just wanted to reflect the population," Guerrero says. "It wasn't such a radical idea, it was just, 'Why don't we look at stories that do that and do that well?' It's actually very easy to do."

Additional programming will honor Lucy Liu with the Rising to the Challenge Award on June 21. Geena will also read from her new children's book during the "Read with Sesame Street's Elmo & Geena" event.

But out of all the events and stars like Mimi Rogers, Betsy Brandt and Elmo expected to be in attendance, Davis is most looking forward to her long-standing tradition "Geena and Friends" where she, along with other female actors, act out all-male scenes from popular movies.

"It's the big event of the festival because it points out that plenty of male roles could be played by females or people with disabilities. Even if it's a serious movie, it's just funny," Davis says with a laugh of her own.

Tipsheet

- WHAT Bentonville Film Festival
- WHEN June 16-22
- WHERE Bentonville, Ark.
- WEB bentonvillefilm.org

Cassie Keet shot her drama "Abigail Before Beatrice," which debuts in Bentonville, in Arkansas.

●
"I think it's really important to show where we live and how beautiful it is." Cassie Keet





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Playing the Game ‘Running Point’ actor and sports fanatic Brenda Song to receive the Virtuoso Award at the fest

By Jenelle Riley



→ Brenda Song has been performing for most of her life, starting off as a model at age 4 before branching into acting. The actor, who will receive *Variety*'s Virtuoso Award at the Bentonville Film Festival on June 20, never wanted to do anything else. She had managed several tricky pitfalls of the profession despite not having many Asian-American actors in media to look to growing up. She even seemed to navigate the challenging transition from Disney child star on “The Suite Life With Zack & Cody” to mature prestige projects like “The Social Network.” But a couple years ago, she found herself at a crossroads after the birth

of her second son with longtime partner Macauley Culkin. “I just found myself wondering where I fit,” Song reveals. “Maybe the best of my career is behind me and you know what? I’m OK with that. My priorities have changed so much and maybe this is just not right for me anymore.” Simply put, Song says, she chose to “let go of expectations and allow myself to be open.”

Shortly after that revelation, director Gia Coppola reached out to Song about playing a Vegas dancer in the Pamela Anderson vehicle “The Last Showgirl.” Song took the meeting but was skeptical, noting, “I remember thinking: no one ever thinks

of me for indie films.” The pair ended up speaking for two hours about so much — including motherhood and wondering where their creative paths were headed — and by the end, Coppola asked her to join the film. “I have never gotten emotional about booking roles,” Song says. “But I was so emotional because it meant so much to me that she was trusting me with this character and this world that I’ve never gotten to delve into before.”

About a week later, Song was asked to meet with showrunners David Stassen, Ike Barinholtz and Mindy Kaling about a role in their upcoming Netflix comedy “Running Point.” Based loosely on executive producer and L.A. Lakers owner/president Jeanie Buss, the series stars Kate Hudson as an underestimated woman put in charge of her family’s basketball empire, the Waves. It was a dream come true for the longtime sports fan Song. “After talking to them for five minutes, I would have done anything,” she says. “I was willing to be a PA, I would have been happy to pull cable.”

Even better, Song was there to discuss the role of Ali Lee — chief of staff to the Waves and the kind of funny, smart, tell-it-like-it-is friend to Hudson’s character that everyone dreams of having. Lee is based on Linda Rambis, a longtime friend of Buss’, wife of former Lakers great Kurt Rambis and the executive director of special projects for Lakers, who Song immediately connected with. “This woman is incredible and the more they told me about her, the more I wanted to say, ‘Stop telling me because if you don’t hire me, you’re breaking my heart.’” Fortunately, Song was offered the role — and didn’t even have to move any cable.

In addition to being a dream role with a cast and crew she adores (it’s already been picked up for a second season) the job may have helped Song make inroads on her real dream. “I’m just doing all this so I can get into sports,” she jokes. She grew up watching the Chicago Bulls and became a Lakers fan in 1996 when they drafted Kobe Bryant. More recently, Culkin turned her onto football, specifically the L.A. Rams. So Song was thrilled to recently record a humorous video announcing their schedule that aired to a massive response in May. “It’s all part of my plan,” she says with a joke. “Like, all I want to do is be on ‘Sports Center.’”

Tipsheet

WHAT Brenda Song receives *Variety*'s Virtuoso Award

WHEN Fri., June 20

WHERE Bentonville Film Festival

WEB bentonvillefilm.org

Brenda Song stars in Netflix’s hit “Running Point” and toplined 2024 drama “The Last Showgirl.”



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YEARS



Built for Change CineEurope tackles big issues facing the global exhibition business

By Ben Croll

➔ Running June 16-19 in Barcelona, this year's CineEurope trade show reflects an industry in flux.

Last year was both a marvelous and maddening time for the European exhibition sector, as continental productions like "The Count of Monte Cristo" and "Flow" buoyed an international box office otherwise hampered by post-strike disruptions in the studio supply chain. Still, even factoring in territories able to fill such gaps with robust domestic output, Europe's ongoing, post-pandemic recovery saw an overall lull — prompting CineEurope organizers to plan this year's expo with a greater degree of introspection.

"Cinemas have always had to work hard, but they now have to work harder than ever to bring in audiences," says Phil Clapp, president of the Intl. Union of Cinemas (UNIC), which runs the event alongside the Film Expo Group. "Film is now part of a larger continuum, so what's our unique role? How do we reinforce the value of the big screen?"

Anticipating 3,200 participants — among them several new delegates from territories across West and North Africa, and the Middle East — the organizers see their event's international character as a unique advantage.

"Unlike attendees of [the U.S.-based] CinemaCon, European suppliers rarely cater to just one national market," Clapp explains.

"That's why we've designed CineEurope as a platform, bringing our focus sessions right onto the trade show floor to create a more direct link between discussion and innovation. While maintaining our European focus, we also recognize the value of learning from others by opening a global dialogue. The trade floor must also share ideas."

In that spirit, organizers have invited Allied Global Marketing strategist Adam Cunningham to deliver a keynote on keeping the theatrical experience emotionally and culturally relevant. "We've almost always featured industry insiders," Clapp says. "But Adam brings the outsider voice of a critical friend — someone who can ask: Why should I spend two and a half hours disconnected from everything else? And what are cinema operators doing to make that time feel worthwhile?"

Of course, this year's exchange of ideas will also include many practical tools, with presentations detailing the use of AI in daily operations, alongside strategies for recruitment and green energy efficiencies, while respective exhibition and distribution honors for France's Pathé and Germany's Leonine Studios draw case studies from recent successes.

Newly absorbed into the Gallic powerhouse Mediawan, "School of Magical

Animals 3" distributor Leonine Studios has kept local productions front-and-center, co-producing and releasing Germany's top-domestic grosser for the fifth consecutive year. Meanwhile, the even-more vertically integrated Pathé has matched box office prosperity with upmarket renewal, producing, releasing and then exalting titles like "The Count of Monte Cristo" in a growing roster of luxury screens meant to keep theatrical outings memorable.

"Pathé really exemplifies what can be achieved by producing high-quality content while offering a premium experience," says UNIC CEO Laura Houlgate Abbott, pointing towards the company's Renzo Piano-designed flagship Pathé Palace, opened in the heart of Paris last year. "That combination has clearly resonated with audiences, who appreciate improvements in the cinema experience."

Alongside film slate presentations from Sony, Disney, Warner Bros. Discovery, Paramount and Universal, upstart indie Angel Studios will be on-hand to claim this year's Breakthrough Distributor accolade as the faith-based outfit looks to make inroads into the European market.

"Angel's potential is clearly there," says Houlgate Abbott. "They're beginning to make distribution deals in several territories, and this award is partly to signal that we're watching their progress. It's time to welcome new players into the fold."

Tipsheet

WHAT CineEurope

WHEN June 16-19

WHERE Barcelona

WEB filmexplos.com/cineurope

Angel Studios, which is behind "The Last Rodeo," will be honored with the Breakthrough Distributor award at CineEurope.

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Night Fury dragon Toothless forms an improbable bond with Hiccup Haddock (Mason Thames) in “How to Train Your Dragon.”

FILM REVIEW / PETER DEBRUGE

A Toon Finds Its Teeth

Though little has changed at the script level, DreamWorks’ thrilling ‘live-action’ remake reinforces the idea of coexisting with dragons

How to Train Your Dragon

— **Director** Dean DeBlois

— **Screenwriter** Dean DeBlois

— **Cast** Mason Thames, Nico Parker, Gerard Butler

— **Distributor** Universal Pictures

➔ Fifteen years doesn’t seem very long to wait before doing a nearly scene-for-scene remake of an animated blockbuster. In the case of DreamWorks’ “How to Train Your Dragon,” that’s the same age as Hiccup Haddock, the callow boy Viking who deliberately defied his belligerent tribe’s long-running war on dragonkind by befriendng one of the flying fire-breathers. It’s also just enough time for those who belonged to the tween-age target market for the 2010 original to be feeling nostalgic.

That’s a gamble the studio must be feeling fairly confident about as it launches “How to Train Your Dragon” three weeks after Disney struck it rich with “Lilo & Stitch” (the “live-action” update of a 2002 cartoon co-created by the same duo that directed the original “Dragon,” Chris Sanders and Dean DeBlois).

Rather than turn the responsibility of reinventing “Dragon” over to a different director, DreamWorks



Young Vikings Hiccup and Astrid (Nico Parker) learn dragon defense techniques.

agreed to let DeBlois shepherd this remarkably faithful update, which remains largely animated (despite its scruffy human cast), especially in the back half, when dragons play such an important role.

The script feels almost identical in both versions, the way it might if the same play were being performed decades apart by an entirely different company. Fortunately, “How to Train Your Dragon” had — and therefore still has — a rock-solid screenplay.

The core of the film has always been the father-son dynamic, as Hiccup’s dad, Stoick, tries to mold his heir in his image (a perfectly cast Gerard Butler, in this case), while the tradition-bending boy frets about whether he can be accepted on his own terms.

Ergo, DeBlois’ job is to decide just how closely he wants to match what came before, and then to leverage the much-advanced state of visual effects to make “Dragon” look and feel as photorealistic as possible. Come to find, the emotional authenticity matters even more, since actors can’t telegraph what their characters are feeling quite so broadly as CG Vikings do. Which brings us to DeBlois’ most important choice: whom to cast as Hiccup? The director chose teen star Mason Thames, who doesn’t look much like a gawky misfit, though his body language speaks volumes.

Appearance-wise, Thames has the puppy-dog appeal of a young John Krasinski, with strong features and serious heartthrob potential. It’s hard to imagine dream girl — and ultra-competitive dragon wrangler — Astrid (Nico Parker) preferring Hiccup’s goofy classmates, led by Snotlout (Gabriel Howell), whose own daddy issues far exceed Hiccup’s. On the Island of Berk, the grown-ups are huge, grimy and covered in hair, while Hiccup is all peach fuzz, flicking his mop in a Justin Bieber-style swoop. Most of the adults are missing limbs, which they lost doing battle with the seven classes of dragons that routinely raid their village.

No one has seen the seventh kind, the fearsome Night Fury, until Hiccup manages to knock one out of the sky with a homemade bola contraption. As the child of chief Stoick, Hiccup is something of a disappointment. Whereas his father is macho and courageous, Hiccup comes across scrawny and sensitive. He can’t bring himself to kill the Night Fury when he finds it, preferring to bond with the beast instead.

That scene, in which Hiccup cautiously approaches the wounded dragon, offering fish as a sort of peace offering, is the make-or-break moment for the film — the virtually wordless sequence in which a wary friendship is forged. Here, DeBlois faces the added challenge of convincing audiences that a flesh-and-blood boy and a putatively deadly, computer-generated animal can truly coexist, not just as allies, but as plausible screen partners.

Witnessing their interaction feels like falling in love all over again, as DeBlois relies once again on a near-mystic mix of nuanced character animation and John Powell’s score (which conveys the dragon’s share of their cross-species affinity) to suggest that these pixels are every bit as alive as the human actor reaching out to touch them. Technically, picking the right Hiccup wasn’t nearly as risky as slightly altering the look of Toothless (as the kid dubs him), but it had to be done for us to believe that Vikings could fear such a majestic creature.

Compared with the other dragons in the film, which character designer Nico Marlet imagined with comically lopsided proportions — bulgy eyes, oversize heads, ungainly fangs — Toothless was an elegant mix of feline and canine traits, mapped onto a sleek black reptilian body. DeBlois dials the cuteness quotient back somewhat while giving this massive animal a genuine presence. Toothless holds his own alongside Hiccup, even as the actor appears in what look more like sets than bona fide locations. “Dragon” becomes more convincing as it goes along, likely because the bulk of the movie is being handled virtually, once Hiccup and Toothless have learned to fly in tandem, and Stoick forces Hiccup’s new companion to lead them to the dragons’ nest.

The original “How to Train Your Dragon” was never a one-off, blooming into a full trilogy over time. With this do-over, DeBlois has the chance to reinforce the foundation, which should make the sequels stronger. It’s hard to improve on the first movie, though the last act looks positively iconic in this new incarnation, unlocking the expressionistic power of “Heavy Metal” toons and Boris Vallejo paintings.

At first, DeBlois’ involvement felt like a way of protecting “Dragon” from some other director coming along and destroying it. But by the end, his vision serves to bring the whole fantastical story one step closer to reality.

It’s hard to improve on the first movie, though the last act looks positively iconic in this new incarnation.

FILM REVIEW / OWEN GLEIBERMAN

Pointe Blank

Ana de Armas' dancer-turned-assassin summons John Wick's killer calm in mindless but entertaining spinoff

From the World of John Wick: Ballerina

Director Len Wiseman **Screenplay** Shay Hatten
Cast Ana de Armas, Anjelica Huston, Gabriel Byrne, Keanu Reeves **Distributor** Lionsgate

→ In “From the World of John Wick: Ballerina,” an unabashedly violent, pulpy and entertaining spinoff of the “John Wick” franchise, Eve Macarro (Ana de Armas), a ballerina who is being trained in the assassin traditions of the Ruska Roma, gets a piece of advice that sounds iconic. Her trainer, Nogi (Sharon Duncan-Brewster), shoots her a gaze of fury and says, “Fight like a girl.” She means that men possess a brute strength that Eve can’t necessarily match; instead, she should evolve a combat style out of her feminine essence. That tends to be the way a lot of female action fantasies have gone, stretching back to the “Batman” TV series, where Batman and Robin were all *Pow!* and *Bam!* while Yvonne Craig’s Batgirl employed elegant karate kicks. In movies from “La Femme Nikita” to “Wonder Woman,” “Fight like a girl” has not been a sexist insult — it’s been a cool way of equalizing things.

But here’s why this is all a bit ironic. In “Ballerina,” the Eve we see does *not* fight “like a girl.” She fights by summoning the same existential viciousness, the whatever-weapon-is-at-hand in-your-face brutality (and I do mean in-your-face) that John Wick does. She fires pistols and machine guns. She breaks limbs and smashes throats and gouges eyeballs. She attacks enemies with kitchen utensils and a pile of plates and slashes them with a samurai sword. She detonates them with multiple grenades. She uses a pair of ice skates as makeshift nunchucks and, in the film’s climax, gets into the first duel I’ve ever seen fought with flamethrowers. The message: This is how girls now fight.

At the center of all this mayhem, Ana de Armas exudes an inner placidity that echoes that of the series’ standard-bearer. Back in 2014, part of the counterintuitive élan of casting Keanu Reeves as John Wick is that from the “Bill & Ted” films to “Little Buddha” to “The Matrix,” Reeves had always acted

with a slightly spacey deadpan that was maybe sort of Zen. In the “Wick” films, his very *tranquillity* became homicidal. And so it is with de Armas, an expressive actor who in “Ballerina” never loses her rose-lipped repose. Call her Jane Wick.

The plot is pure trash, and that’s more or less OK. In the opening sequence, the young Eve (Victoria Comte) watches her father get slaughtered by fighters dispatched by the Chancellor (Gabriel Byrne), leader of the dark warrior cult they all belong to. Eve is rescued by Winston Scott (Ian McShane), who returns as the mentor of Wick — and now the savior of Eve. He places her under the care of the Director (Anjelica Huston, very Tim Burton meets Madame Tussauds), who runs the Ruska Roma with an iron hand, turning ballet class into a form of violence (and staging fight training like ballet). But the Ruska Roma and the Chancellor’s cult have a centuries-long pact to steer clear of each other. When Eve is sent out into the world, where she kills a henchman with a tell-tale X branded into his wrist, she upsets the apple cart of that accord by deciding to get revenge on those who killed her father.

The film’s second half is set in a wintry middle European mountain village where the Chancel-

lor’s cult lives in secret. It’s Eve versus all of them, with one complicating factor, that being the arrival of a stone-cold killer whose identity I won’t reveal. He’s been dispatched to stop Eve, though his sympathies might waver. “Ballerina” is a worthy entry in the “John Wick” canon, though I say that as someone who doesn’t think the “John Wick” canon is all that. By the end, Ana de Armas has proved that fighting like a girl and fighting like a guy need not be appreciably different, especially if they’re all fighting like a video game.

In the film’s climax, Eve gets into the first duel I’ve ever seen fought with flamethrowers. The message: This is how girls now fight.



Eve (Ana de Armas) is a Ruska Roma ballerina who sets out to avenge the murder of her father.

The Proudest Showman

→ “There’s nothing like a demo,” Steve Jobs said gleefully when he unveiled the first-ever iPod to a rapt audience in October 2001.

Jobs took the crowd step-by-step through the wonders contained in the slim 4-by-2-inch device that promised to put “1,000 songs in your pocket.” His hourlong pitch that day has become the stuff of business legend. So has the powerful presentation Jobs made six years later when he introduced the world-beating iPhone.

Nobody knew how to sell complicated technology to the public like Jobs, the enigmatic co-founder and CEO of Apple, who died of cancer in 2011 at age 56. Videos of Jobs’ landmark Apple product launches can be found all over YouTube: the dawn of the Macintosh in January 1984; the candy-colored iMac reveal in 1998; the opening of iTunes Music Store in 2003.

In contrast to today’s tech oligarchs, there’s not a drop of tech-bro smugness, snobbishness or snark in Jobs. What comes across, even in crummy back-of-the-auditorium footage captured by fans, is his love of the product. Onstage, he’s a proud parent walking us through a long list of amazing achievements recently pulled off by his kids.

What Jobs understood better than anyone — and what allowed Apple to invent the market for “personal computers” in the 1980s — was how to focus on all the cool things that people could do with the device rather than on the whiz-bang details of the tech packed into it.

For Jobs, harnessing the power of computing tools was the next evolution in “man’s ability as a toolmaker to fashion a tool that can amplify an inherent ability that he has,” as Apple’s then-26-year-old CEO explained in a 1981 TV interview. “We’re basically fashioning a 21st-century bicycle here.” — *Cynthia Littleton*



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