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Bad Bunny

Inside the career-topping concerts bringing him home to Puerto Rico

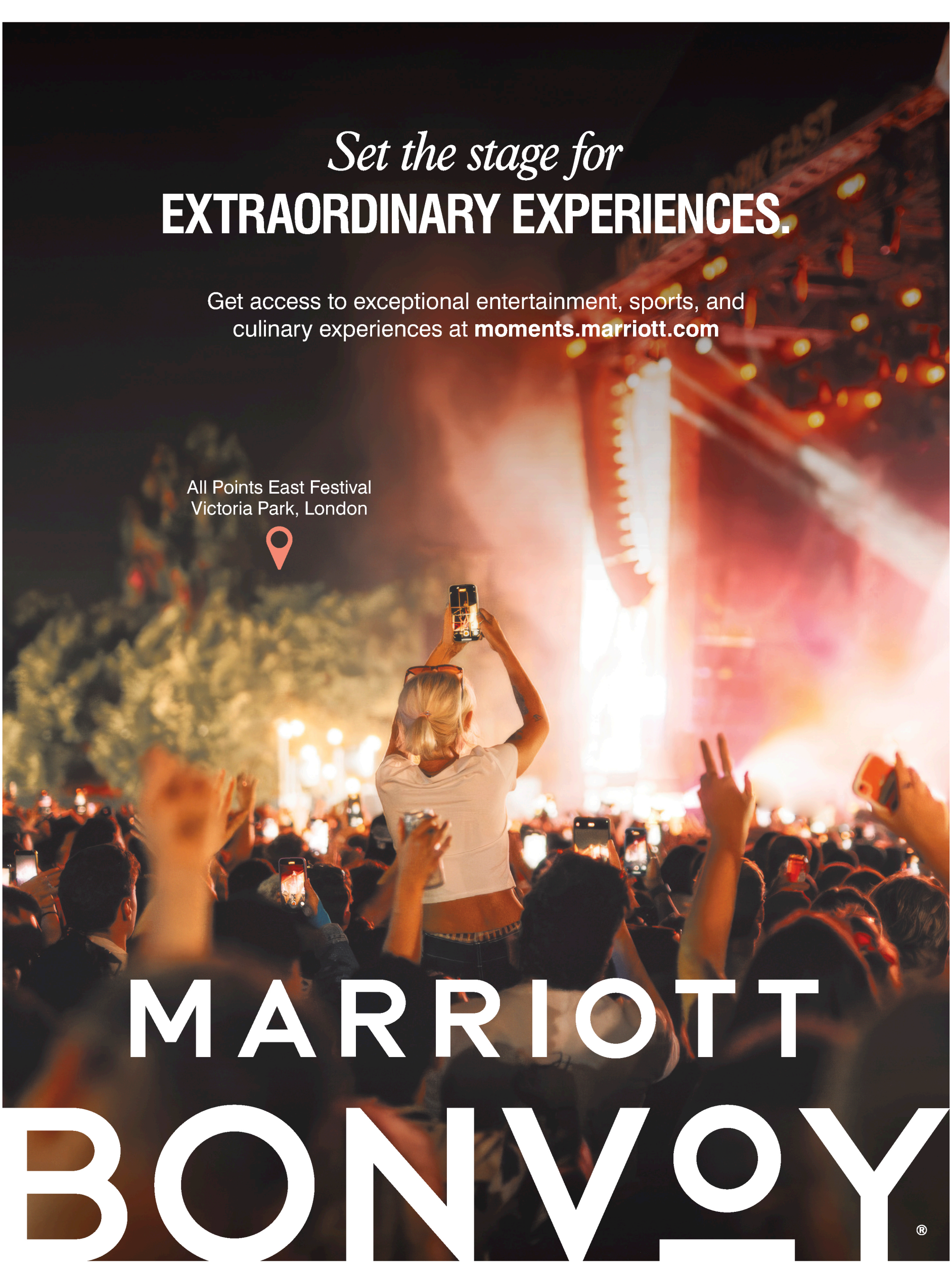
By Thania Garcia

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Clockwise from top: "Caravan"; Danielle, Este and Alana Haim; Brian Wilson in 1988; Ariana Madix; George Clooney in "Good Night, and Good Luck"

Clockwise, from top: Courtesy of MasterFilm; Columbia Records; Ann Summa/Getty Images; Gizelle Hernandez/Bravo; Emilio Madrid

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Bad Bunny's Dream Stage

→ Nothing says summer like concert season — and while you still may be able to grab tickets to Beyoncé and Lady Gaga shows in the continental U.S., one of the most anticipated performances of 2025 will require you to book a flight to Puerto Rico. In this week's cover story, Bad Bunny talks to our Thania Garcia about staging the 30-night residency of his dreams on the island where he was born and raised. After touring the globe, Bad Bunny — also known as Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio — is coming home.

For three months, a star who is shaping culture will perform a concert-length love letter to the culture that shaped him. Bad Bunny is keeping the staging and set lists of his P.R. residency — called "No Me Quiero Ir de Aquí" ("I Don't Want to Leave Here") — private for now, but he opens up to Garcia about why life as a civilian on familiar soil suits him better than the celebrity experience.

At 31, Bad Bunny has become one of the savviest headliners in music; it's hardly lost on him that his shows back home will boost the economy of an island for which he cares deeply. With appearances in "F9," "Bullet Train" and the upcoming "Happy Gilmore" sequel, Bad Bunny is a full-fledged multi-hyphenate. Add on one more title: He's also a fashion icon, as you'll see in a dreamboat portfolio styled by Law Roach and shot by Greg Swales.

And add on one title further: provocateur. Rather than hunker down in a hotel room, our cover star took our journalist for a walk in the rain in New York. And when she didn't ask him any pointed questions about his love life, Bad Bunny teased her while keeping the truth enigmatic. Here is a celebrity who understands what it means to be famous. How lucky we are to live in his orbit, and to acknowledge that, as he performs, Puerto Rico will be a center of gravity of contemporary stardom.





CO-EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Cynthia Littleton Ramin Setoodeh

Bad Bunny: Greg Swales; Littleton: Photograph by Dan Doperalski; Setoodeh: Photograph by Alexi Lubomirski

marquee







Clockwise from left: Iggy Azalea at one point was one of OnlyFans' top earners; rapper Trey Songz and "The Sopranos" star Drea de Matteo have also been active on the platform.

Clockwise, from left: Alexi Rosenfeld /Getty Images; Prince Williams/WireImage/Getty Images; Jamie McCarthy/Getty Images for MTV

Sex Sells

How OnlyFans has turned fetish-friendly celebs and porn stars into a multibillion-dollar juggernaut

By Tatiana Siegel

→ For the same amount of money it takes to buy one of Hollywood's five remaining major studios, some investor may walk away with the 9-year-old porn-friendly platform OnlyFans.

While Skydance's bid to buy Paramount in a deal valued at $8 billion continues to spark headlines, little-known Hollywood player The Forest Road's efforts to buy OnlyFans for $8 billion is playing out under the radar. That's a stunning juxtaposition considering the Paramount portfolio consists of CBS, Showtime and the "Godfather" trilogy, while popular content on OnlyFans includes pictures of Carmen Electra's feet and nudes of "Wizards of Waverly Place" alum Dan Benson. It also signals an economic shift in the entertainment industry.

"The name of the game is streaming and online content, and the OnlyFans $8 billion valuation could exceed the price tag of some legacy Hollywood studios, speaking to a new world for the industry where headwinds abound," says Wall Street analyst Dan Ives of Wedbush Securities.

But do the numbers add up? Many in Hollywood's private equity space are skeptical that Forest Road, which is led by Zachary Tarica and reportedly manages $127 million in assets, could raise $8 billion. The Century City-based film financier has occupied a niche space in Hollywood since 2017, backing such films as Maggie Gyllenhaal's "The Kindergarten Teacher" for Netflix and Guy Nattiv's "Skin" for A24. Few outside the AFM set are familiar with the company and its slate of films, which also includes "The Manson Brothers Midnight Zombie Massacre" and "Chronicle of a Serial Killer." In 2019, Forest Road invested in Yale Productions, which churned out low-budget movies like the 2023 Uma Thurman-Samuel L. Jackson pairing "The Kill Room." Last month, Yale filed for bankruptcy, listing more than $55 million in liabilities against $18 million in assets. And in 2023, former Disney COO Thomas Staggs and onetime TikTok CEO Kevin Mayer stepped down from the Forest Road board. According to the SEC filing, Forest Road "has expanded its specialty finance platform across blockchain, digital assets, technology, entertainment, real estate, renewable energy tax credit lending, film tax credit administration, and tax credit brokerage."

But a source who has dealings with Forest Road says the company is legit. "They are very much in touch with BlackRock, Ares and these monster funds," the source says. "They would not have any problem raising huge money on a deal like this." (In October, Forest Road and Ares Management founders David Kaplan and Bennett Rosenthal bought a Formula E team.)

Forest Road did not respond to a request for comment on this story.

On the seller side, even less is known about Leonid Radvinsky, the 43-year-old majority owner of OnlyFans. The Soviet-born billionaire, who bought a 75% stake in OnlyFans' parent company Fenix International in 2018, has reportedly donated millions to causes involving Ukraine and Israel. (Radvinsky has denied that he pledged $11 million to Israel lobbying group AIPAC.) The father of four, who is partly based in Florida, does not do press. OnlyFans declined comment for this story.

While a potential Forest Road-OnlyFans transaction is shrouded in mystery, plenty is known about the parade of random celebrities who have migrated to the platform and how they are monetizing their brands. OnlyFans allows content creators to upload videos to their subscribers and takes 20% of their fees.



Whitney Cummings is the most high-profile comedian on the platform.

Initially, the content was mostly explicit, earning OnlyFans a reputation as a purveyor of pornography. Bella Thorne was an early adoptee, making $1 million on her first day on the platform, but faced backlash from the sex worker community, which labeled her a "tourist."

More recently, a wide range of notable names have joined. "Harry Potter" alum Jessie Cave, catering to a fetish community, posts pictures of and sounds made by her hair. In response to criticism for taking the OnlyFans plunge, Lily Allen wrote in an X post: "Imagine being an artist and having nearly 8 million monthly listeners on Spotify but earning more money from having 1,000 people subscribe to pictures of your feet. Don't hate the player, hate the game." Others, like rappers Cardi B and Trey Songz, offer behind-the-scenes content (including adult-oriented material in Songz's case). At one point, Australian rapper Iggy Azalea was among the top earners, but she has mostly left the platform in favor of Telegram.

"I got myself out of a lien on my house. I was in foreclosure. But then the men are fickle and they drop off."
Drea de Matteo on joining OnlyFans

The two biggest areas of growth for OnlyFans come via the comedy world and sports stars. While Whitney Cummings is the most high-profile comedian on the platform, having debuted two specials there, newbies are benefiting most.

In 2023, OnlyFans launched the grassroots comedy show "LMAOF," which highlighted up-and-coming comedians whose humor might be too risqué for mainstream audiences.

Some earnings have been wildly exaggerated. Blac Chyna reportedly pulled down $240 million from OnlyFans, but later said the true number was closer to $2 million.

Still, there is real money to be made. On June 11, model Sophie Rain, who is believed to be among the highest paid on the platform, posted a screenshot of her earnings from subscriptions alone since she joined in 2023. The figure was more than $76 million. (An OnlyFans source did not dispute that figure.)

"The Sopranos" star Drea de Matteo says she staved off foreclosure on her Laurel Canyon home by starting a page and posting racy content.

"I got myself out of a lien on my house. I was in foreclosure," she tells *Variety*. "But then the men are fickle and they drop off, and, you know, I'm not like super freaking naked all the time. People know that. Like it's more of a me-and-my-panties vibes. So if you really want to make the big bucks, you gotta go full-on."

Adds de Matteo: "I was a moderate success. But to be totally honest, I wasn't Bella Thorne. It saved my life, and now I have to think about doing other things because it won't sustain."

Weiss Eubanks/NBCUniversal via Getty Images

Coming Off the Sidelines

With Universal and Disney's Midjourney lawsuit, Hollywood enters the AI fight

By Gene Maddaus and Brent Lang

→ What were they waiting for? Disney's lawsuit against Midjourney, an AI image generator, on June 11 was hailed by creatives as a welcome development — if long overdue.

The Writers Guild of America, which went on strike partly over AI two years ago, congratulated Disney and Universal, which joined the suit, for coming "off of the sidelines." Others were similarly effusive.

"Wonderful news," says Matthew Butterick, an attorney who sued Midjourney on behalf of independent artists in January 2023. "I love to see Hollywood getting engaged in what I think is the most important intellectual property issue of our generation."

The lawsuit marks the first time major studios have sought to enforce their copyrights against an AI company. But the suit takes on one small company — Midjourney has 11 employees — for relatively egregious violations. "It just seems like the lowest hanging fruit and the easiest way to make a point," says one exec at a rival company.

At least for now, it isn't a full-scale fight against AI.

"In general, studios would like to have their cake and eat it too," says Ben Brooks, former head of public policy at Stability AI, speaking in his personal capacity. "They'll zealously protect their IP from even the hint of AI infringement while using that same technology to cut production costs."

Disney, at the behest of its general counsel Horacio Gutierrez, first made the decision last fall to confront Midjourney as a "shot across the bow" of the AI industry. Midjourney brought in $200 million in revenue last year, making it big enough to pay the studios' attorney fees if they prevail. A victory would also send a message to Google and OpenAI without having to face those heavyweights in court.

The two studios could have had company. Warner Bros. Discovery was approached about joining the litigation, but decided against suing in early 2025. It's unclear if other studios and streamers, like Paramount and Netflix, were also asked to be plaintiffs. The Motion Picture Association wasn't involved in the lawsuit. Some executives say they were surprised by the filing, believing that it signaled a shift in strategy. To this point, Hollywood companies have focused more on influencing legislation around AI deepfakes while letting others take the lead on copyright litigation.

Ultimately, Disney and Universal felt compelled to defend their greatest vulnerability — their iconic characters. The suit argues that Midjourney is duplicating Buzz Lightyear, Yoda, Elsa from "Frozen" and Wall-E. That amounts to "bootlegging," the suit argues, equating Midjourney to a vendor of knockoff T-shirts.

"Disney can't just let Midjourney sell pictures of Darth Vader," says Avery Williams, an IP lawyer at McKool Smith.

In a sense, the suit is not even about AI. It doesn't argue that training models on copyrighted work is in itself infringement — skirting the central issue.

"The focus on output as opposed to training data does say they're still carving a path for them to continue using AI in some way or another," says Roma Murphy, a co-chair of the AI committee at the Animation Guild. "I don't read this as a 100% rejection of AI from the studios."

Butterick's lawsuit and others argue that the models themselves are infringing, regardless of output. That's a thornier question, going to the heart of whether AI is piracy or legitimate reuse.

"I believe that the AI defendants in those other cases are, generally, in a very strong position to argue fair use," says Matthew Sag, a law professor who specializes in AI at Emory University. "Midjourney is not, at least not in this case."

Disney also appears to offer Midjourney an out, suggesting that it should be able to implement filters to prevent infringement.

OpenAI's ChatGPT, when asked to "create an image of Mickey Mouse surfing," responds: "This image generation request did not follow our content policy."

The Animation Guild sees AI as a threat to animators' jobs. Sam Tung, AI committee co-chair, says it's heartening to see the studios finally draw the line somewhere.

"It's going to take a big player like the studios to bring them to heel," he says. "Better late than never."

—

Todd Spangler contributed to this story.

"I love to see Hollywood getting engaged in the most important intellectual property issue of our generation."
Matthew Butterick, attorney



Disney and Universal's lawsuit includes images — like this one of stormtroopers from "Star Wars" — alleged to be instances of Midjourney's copyright infringement.

Image from Disney-NBCUniversal complaint against Midjourney



AMPAS insiders say Lucasfilm head Kathleen Kennedy has been lobbying board members to rally support for an Honorary Oscar for Disney boss Bob Iger.

Trophy Hunt

'Star Wars' boss Kathleen Kennedy is hustling to get Bob Iger an Honorary Oscar, but some inside the Academy see a glaring corporate conflict

By Matt Donnelly

In Star Wars, the Force is a mystical energy field that can be harnessed into supernatural powers by a chosen few. In Hollywood, it's called "leverage."

Kathleen Kennedy, president of "Star Wars" creator Lucasfilm, certainly knows how to use the Force — specifically within the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. The producer-executive has been ardently lobbying members of the group to obtain an Honorary Oscar for her boss, Disney chief Bob Iger, four insiders with knowledge of the matter tell *Variety*.

Kennedy has reached out to select players at the board level inside AMPAS, encouraging them to recommend one of the annual honors go to Iger — the man who secured Marvel, Pixar and Lucasfilm for Disney's war chest of intellectual property, selling billions of dollars' worth of movie tickets in the process. All branches of the Academy have been active in recent weeks, meeting about new membership matters, and Kennedy has used the opportunity to schmooze on Iger's behalf.

While few in the industry would question Iger's worthiness to receive the prize, some board members have been squeamish over the optics, sources say. Disney, of course, owns the Oscars' longtime broadcast partner, ABC. Some of the members pitched feel that's a conflict of interest.

Moreover, others note, the Academy is in the middle of negotiations with the network to renew its licensing agreement beyond 2028 (which will mark the 100th Academy Awards ceremony). Iger had no knowledge of Kennedy's outreach and did not request she pursue the honor, according to two people familiar with the process. It is considered routine for Academy members to lobby on behalf of Honorary Oscar candidates, an AMPAS insider says, though some within the organization are curious about her motives.

Representatives for Kennedy and Iger had no comment. An AMPAS spokesperson also declined to comment.

Kennedy's future at Lucasfilm was the subject of rampant speculation in February. *Variety* reported that she would return to producing when her contract expires in 2025; another dispatch said she'd be out sooner. However, those close to Kennedy pointed to an inconclusive interview she gave to a trade publication where she said she's been leading her own succession planning but won't step down imminently.

Disney acquired Lucasfilm in 2012 for $4 billion and tapped Kennedy as president. On her watch, the label has seen mixed results. The producer successfully transferred the cinematic universe to streaming with the flagship series "The Mandalorian," awards-bait show "Andor" and the fan-favorite "Ahsoka." Films such as "The Force Awakens," "Rogue One" and "The Last Jedi" were big hits, but "Solo" bombed.

More troubling for the studio's bottom line is that Kennedy hasn't managed to get a single "Star Wars" movie into production since 2019, with the notable exception of the forthcoming "Mandalorian" feature starring Pedro Pascal. Shawn Levy's "Star Wars: Starfighter" with Ryan Gosling is in the casting phase. Lucasfilm also has movies in development with directors Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, James Mangold, Taika Waititi and Simon Kinberg.

The Honorary Oscars are handed out each year in November at the Governors Awards. Previous winners include Jean-Luc Godard, Lauren Bacall, Samuel L. Jackson, David Lynch and Mel Brooks.

Kennedy herself received the Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award at the Governors Awards in 2018, alongside her work and life partner Frank Marshall. The Thalberg prize is not an Oscar statuette, though it hardly matters for the eight-time Oscar nominee. Kennedy has been nominated for producing some of Steven Spielberg's most iconic films, including "E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial" and "The Color Purple." She's also been a best picture contender for "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button," "The Sixth Sense" and "Seabiscuit."

Some board members have been squeamish over the optics. Disney owns the Oscars' broadcast partner, ABC. Some members pitched feel that's a conflict of interest.

Jesse Grant/Getty Images for Disney

Eric Dane's Objective

The 'Euphoria' actor on his new role as a counterterror agent on 'Countdown'

By Daniel D'Addario



Eric Dane is gearing up for a new mission. The actor — perhaps best known for playing Jacob Elordi's complicated dad on "Euphoria" — steps into the role of Nathan Blythe on Amazon Prime's "Countdown," launching June 25. On the series, an act of violence against a Department of Homeland Security officer spurs the creation of a task force across law enforcement agencies; their objective is to thwart a catastrophic plot against the city of Los Angeles. Dane's a special agent who has to manage the various officers working together.

The role capitalizes on a certain authoritative quality in the straight-backed, iron-jawed actor, who's played an Army ranger in 2024's "Bad Boys: Ride or Die" and a captain in the 2010s series "The Last Ship." Dane's career has otherwise been defined by the roles of sexy surgeon "McSteamy" (also known as Dr. Mark Sloan) on "Grey's Anatomy" from 2006 to 2012 and as "Euphoria"'s Cal Jacobs, whose conflicted sexuality and coiled rage make the case that problems don't go away when you graduate high school.

In April, Dane announced that he was diagnosed with ALS; he remains in production on "Euphoria." Dane spoke to *Variety* in a Zoom interview in late May.

You're often cast as authority figures. Did it take time to gain the gravitas and authority to do roles like these? I'm not like that in real life. It's not something I carry around with me. It's just something I play. But that role seems to come pretty naturally to me. I try to play against the beats that 100 other actors might take. There should be an attempt at some humor. Every leader that I've respected has a great sense of humor.

"Countdown" was shot in the hiatus between Seasons 2 and 3 of "Euphoria." Is it nerve-racking to find work in the time between seasons? It's frustrating because HBO has exclusivity. So it's tough to go out and find another job. HBO is probably not going to allow that. So it was tough being put on ice for a little, but I did find some other interesting things to do. And you learn how to just wait.

"Countdown" plays like a network drama, and the show's creator has obviously worked in network TV with the "Chicago" franchise of shows. Is that pace familiar to you? Do you enjoy it? It's familiar. I wish we had another day per episode; that's something we need to discuss with Amazon. But I am used to that pace. However, we take 20 to 30 days to shoot an episode of "Euphoria." And that is an absolute luxury. I learned very early what the rhythm was on an eight- to 10-day shoot to complete an episode. It comes naturally to me, but I have to tell you, it's fucking exhausting sometimes.

I wanted to address the way you announced your ALS diagnosis recently. A lot of people care deeply about your well-being, and I'm curious how it felt to share this news with them. With real respect, I really don't want to talk about it. That's what's going on with me; it's very personal to me. And I just want to keep talking about "Countdown."

On that note: What kind of work do you hope to be able to do going forward? That's a good question, because it dovetails into the question you asked me before. I am ready and willing to do just about anything, but I have limitations that I understand will preclude me from playing certain roles. I'm working on "Euphoria." I finished "Countdown." I'm pretty capable.

All we know about the future of "Euphoria" is that you're shooting Season 3 right now. Do you wish the show could go on beyond that? I will ride that show until the wheels fall off. I don't know what the fate of the show is. I do know that it takes a heroic effort to put it together. If all the elements are going to be there to keep going, I would work on it as long as they'll have me.

Photograph by Dan Doperalski

Shooting Their Shot

With 'F1,' race-car champion Lewis Hamilton joins the new wave of superstar athletes turned producers

Formula 1 superstar Lewis Hamilton enters a new race this summer — as a movie producer chasing the box office crown. He speeds into multiplexes with "F1," the high-octane blockbuster hopeful from his company Dawn Apollo Films and Apple Original Films. Hamilton isn't the first athlete to try his hand at producing scripted content — think LeBron James and his SpringHill Company or the late Kobe Bryant, who won an Oscar for best animated short — but his entrance on the scene underscores that audiences are invested in more than just football, basketball and baseball. Here are a few more of Hollywood's new heavy hitters. —*Angelique Jackson*

Peyton Manning



SPORT Football
SHINGLE Omaha Productions
SCORE The NFL Hall of Famer launched his entertainment career with docuseries like "Peyton's Places" and the "Manningcast," which he co-hosts with brother Eli Manning for ESPN. Now, Omaha gets into the scripted game with "Chad Powers," a comedy for Hulu that stars Glen Powell and comes out this fall.

Stephen Curry



SPORT Basketball
SHINGLE Unanimous Media
SCORE In the producing space, Curry's version of shooting threes means creating content across platforms, genres and formats. At the Annecy Animation Festival, Unanimous revealed Caleb McLaughlin and Gabrielle Union will star in "GOAT," an animated comedy for Sony that debuts in 2026.

Simone Biles



SPORT Gymnastics
SHINGLE Religion of Sports
SCORE After pulling back the curtain on her Olympics return in the Netflix docuseries "Simone Biles Rising," the gold medalist teamed up with Tom Brady and Michael Strahan's Religion of Sports to develop more sports stories, with particular attention to athletes of color and mental wellness.

Serena Williams



SPORT Tennis
SHINGLE Nine Two Six Productions
SCORE After executive producing the Oscar-winning "King Richard," the Grand Slam great launched Nine Two Six, with an emphasis on female stories. Next up is the Netflix adaptation of Taylor Jenkins Reid's novel "Carrie Soto Is Back," which was loosely inspired by Serena and her sister Venus Williams' tennis prowess.

Megan Rapinoe and Sue Bird



SPORTS Soccer and basketball
SHINGLE A Touch More
SCORE What began as an Instagram Live series hosted by the sports-star couple — one, a World Cup champ and the other, a WNBA legend — has evolved into a hit podcast and an entertainment company. A Touch More's first scripted offering is a series based on Meryl Wilsner's queer romance novel "Cleat Cute."

Remembered
1942-2025

Brian Wilson's Smile

By Chris Willman



Brian Wilson, one of the most influential musicians of the 20th century, died June 11 at 82. Darian Sahanaja, his longtime right-hand man, talks with *Variety* about the loss.

"How ironic is it that Brian, eldest of the three Wilson brothers ... the 'troubled one' with all the physical and mental health challenges ... would end up being the last man standing?" says Sahanaja. "Then again, he was always defying the odds. From the very first concert I played with him in 1999, when it was predicted that he may not make it through a song, let alone an entire show, to him overcoming serious demons to find closure to the unfinished album 'SMiLE,' the man could somehow reach deep down and find the willpower to get through most any challenge. Even if the process was not always a smooth one."

Recently, "a few of us would visit him on a regular basis, to sit and sing with him, just wanting to keep his musical gears spinning. To be able to give back even a fraction of the joy he'd given me — how does one possibly show gratitude? By singing a song by the Ronettes and making him smile."

Clockwise, from top right: Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images; David Berding/Getty Images; Michael Reaves/Getty Images; Corey Sipkin/AFP/Getty Images; Cao Can/Xinhua via Getty Images; Ezra Shaw/Getty Images; Ronald Martinez/Getty Images



Opulent Newport estates like The Breakers double as the New York manses of "The Gilded Age"'s blue bloods.

Alison Cohen Rosa/HBO

High Society

'The Gilded Age' needed backdrops ornate enough to match its social-climbing plotlines. Enter Newport

By Brent Lang

"Stand back, I'm about to act," Ashlie Atkinson, who plays gossipy Mrs. Fish on HBO's "The Gilded Age," jokes as she prepares for another take of a luncheon scene that finds her giving side-eye to Mrs. Astor (Donna Murphy), the grande dame of the upper crust.

It's a sunny October morning, and Atkinson is surrounded by women in elaborate gowns, as well as tuxedo-clad butlers. Her stately surroundings look like something out of a John Singer Sargent painting. That's fitting because the scene unfolds at The Ledges, the oceanfront estate of the Cushing family, members of Newport's social scene when it was *the* summer destination for the old-money elite and robber barons that Sargent immortalized. It's one of several historical locations to feature prominently on "The Gilded Age" since the show started in 2022. For the creators, the Rhode Island resort — which boasts the highest concentration of homes from the era that lends the show its title — was vital to the success of "The Gilded Age."

"We couldn't do this show without Newport," says David Crockett, an executive producer on "The Gilded Age." "The stately homes from the period that are still in New York are all hotels or embassies or schools. Inside, they've been modernized."

That means that Newport palaces like The Elms, The Breakers and Chateau-sur-Mer don't just appear on the show as opulent summer getaways; they also double as the bedrooms, ballrooms and studies of the New York City mansions where much of the series takes place. These houses are mostly operated as museums, preserved as they were when the Astors and the Vanderbilts ruled over high society. They serve as stunning backdrops, helping "The Gilded Age" bring a period of history renowned for its ostentatious displays of wealth to life on-screen.

"I can point my camera in any direction in these locations and look like a genius," quips Deborah Kampmeier, one of the show's directors. "There's not a bad angle at any of these places."

The showrunners have worked closely with the Preservation Society of Newport County, custodian of more than a dozen historic residences, to get the kind of access that's rarely granted to film crews. The city has been rewarded by a boost in tourism. To meet demand, the Preservation Society started offering location tours three years ago for $250 a ticket; they sell out in minutes.

"We've had so many people, many of them from out of state, who come by and say, 'Oh, this is the room where Bertha Russell hosted that party,'" says Trudy Coxe, the Preservation Society's executive director.

Coxe credits the show, which began shooting during COVID, with helping the organization maintain the houses when tourism had shut down.

"It saved our bacon," Coxe says. "We were dying on the vine, because nobody was traveling and everybody was hunkered down. That meant no visitors and that's how we make our money, so the revenue from the rentals to HBO helped us get through that period."

"The Gilded Age" also more firmly established Rhode Island as a production hub. The state offers a 30% incentive but competes with larger states like New York and Massachusetts for films and shows. It has managed to attract some large productions, with "Hocus Pocus 2" and James L. Brooks' "Ella McCay" recently heading to the Ocean State. A study commissioned by the Greater Newport Chamber of Commerce found that every dollar in tax credit returned $5.44 of economic activity. The third season of "The Gilded Age," for example, reportedly accounted for $27 million in production spending in the state.

Steven Feinberg, executive director of the Rhode Island Film & Television Office, said the state pursued "The Gilded Age" for more than a decade, following the show as it was first set up at NBC and then later when it moved to HBO. At one point, Feinberg and Coxe convinced "The Gilded Age" creator Julian Fellowes to visit Newport's mansions, setting up a candlelight dinner at Marble Head, complete with a harpist. After wrapping up a tour, Feinberg turned to Fellowes to get his thoughts.

"It's one thing to read about these houses," Fellowes told him. "But nothing compares to seeing them in the flesh."

"I can point my camera in any direction in these locations and look like a genius. There's not a bad angle."

Deborah Kampmeier, "The Gilded Age" director

Awards Circuit

By Michael Schneider



Sticking Up for What's Right

Kudos to the TV Academy for keeping its diversity, equality and inclusion initiatives



→ It's been quite stunning and disappointing to see the cowardice among major businesses that in recent months have turned their back on diversity, equality and inclusion. You know, the idea that all are welcome and should be treated fairly, with decency and respect. That people's differences should be tolerated and valued. That communities that have traditionally been underrepresented or discriminated against should be given a seat at the table.

Once the Trump administration started signing executive orders demanding the end of diversity, equality and inclusion programs in the government, the White House also urged private companies to abandon such outreach. So firms that just a few years ago noted that diversity was good for business quickly retreated. Turns out corporations like Target weren't as open and progressive as we thought they were — the retailer said earlier this year it would conclude its diversity, equity and inclusion goals.

You've heard this administration trash "DEI," and yet you'll notice that the — I'm not gonna sugarcoat it here — racist/homophobic/hateful people who oppose it never call it by its full name, "diversity, equity and inclusion." That's because most right-minded and empathetic Americans would never oppose that. It's easier to attack "DEI" when the public doesn't actually realize what it means.

The most surprising and dispiriting about-face this year was from the major media companies like Disney, Warner Bros. Discovery and Paramount Global — all of which found ways to chicken out and downsize their diversity, equality and inclusion departments. In some cases, they were just renamed — but the effect was the same: The power and the message that comes with making people of all stripes feel comfortable and welcome has been lost. These companies didn't have to pull back on their programs so fast, but they did anyway. Let's call it what it is: pathetic and spineless.

This is why I want to single out the Television Academy for sticking to its mandate and making sure its membership body continues to evolve with the times. And it's upfront about it. The org put out its latest "Transparency Report" earlier this year via its Focus on Equity & Inclusion initiative, and its goal is sadly refreshing in 2025: "The Television Academy remains committed to its efforts towards building a welcoming and inclusive community for all of its members. ... The Academy is steadfast in the belief that a more inclusive and equitable industry allows a greater array of talented, creative individuals to thrive across professions, drive growth throughout the industry, and make television that impacts the world." You hear that, Target?

The TV Academy has been working with human resources consulting firm ReadySet to develop a more inclusive environment — which includes an impact progress report, an All-Academy inclusion summit, new peer circles, listening sessions and even expanding the available race and ethnicity options in its members database.

The Academy's membership outreach appears to be working. After a COVID- and strike-related slump, the org is back to approximately 26,010 members — up 2,597 from 2024. New members tend to be younger and more ethnically diverse, helping build the TV Academy for the next generation.

I almost don't want to highlight all of this, because I'd hate to put a target on the TV Academy for this administration to take aim at. But we can't run away from this. It took years for the industry to finally wake up and add diversity, equity and inclusion into its daily routine. I remember attending many events in the late 1990s where the networks were scolded after sheepishly admitting that their lineups lacked diversity.

"If we want our industry to thrive, to lead culture instead of chasing it, we need to make room for more voices, not fewer," says TV Academy chairman Cris Abrego. "I am proud that the Television Academy continues to invest in diversity, as it is the only way to stay relevant and safeguard the ongoing excellence of our medium."

The TV Academy can often be a punching bag for Emmy rules that networks and studios don't like. So let's take a moment to laud the org for standing its ground while some of those conglomerates don't.

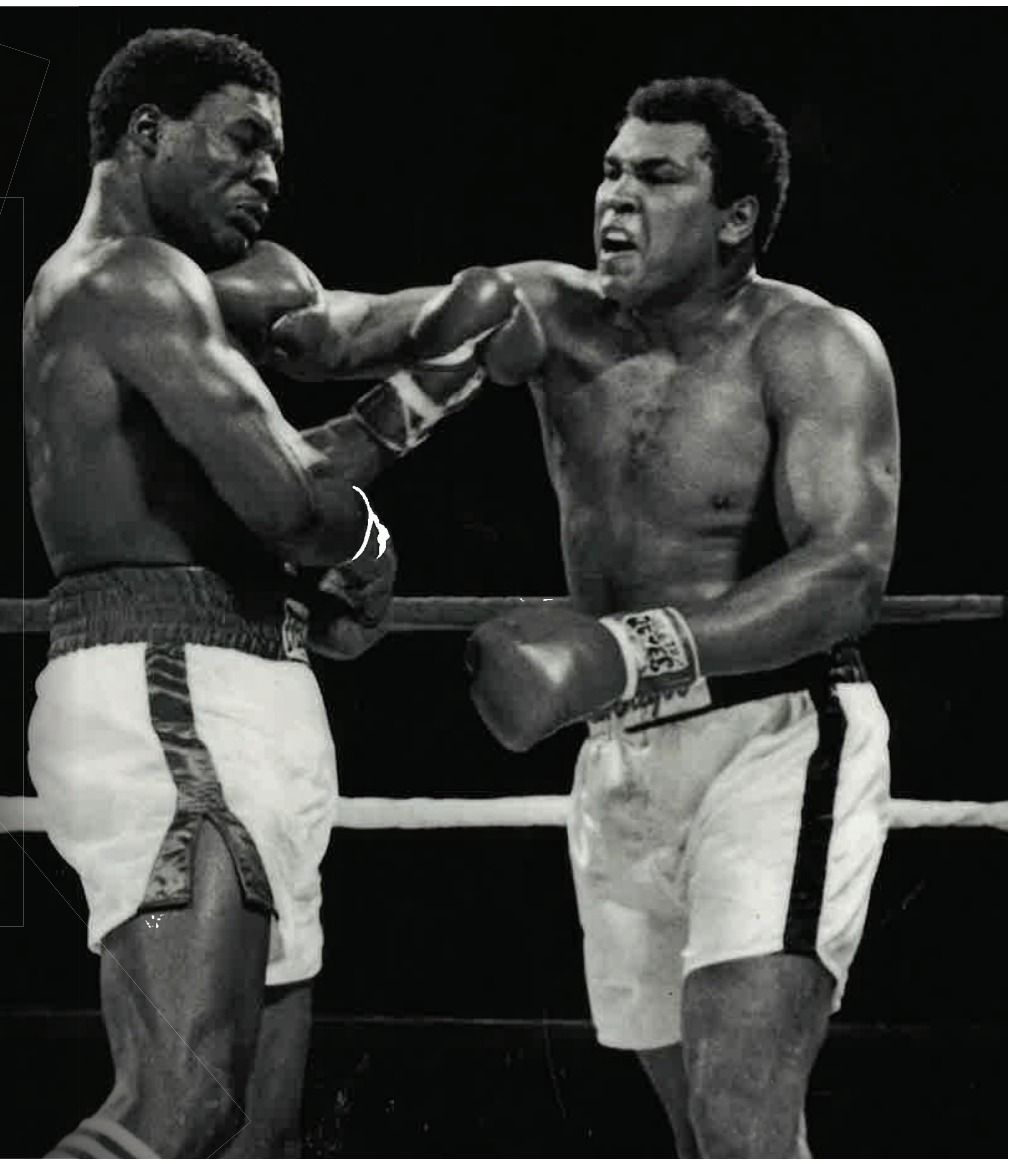
The most dispiriting about-face was from the major media companies.

Vince Bucci/Invision for the Television Academy/AP Images

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Mariah Carey


Lil' Kim

BET Awards

Peacock Theater, Los Angeles JUNE9

While accepting her first BET trophy for best female hip-hop artist, **Doechii** delivered a fiery rebuke of the Trump administration. "I do want to address what's happening right now, outside the building," the "Anxiety" hitmaker said, referring to the protests against ICE raids in downtown Los Angeles. "These are ruthless attacks that are creating fear and chaos in our communities. In the name of law and order, Trump is using military forces to stop a protest, and I want you all to consider what kind of government it appears to be — when every time we exercise our democratic right to protest, the military is deployed against us." Calling for support for "oppressed people, for Black people, for Latino people, for trans people, for the people in Gaza," Doechii continued, "We all deserve to live in hope and not in fear. And I hope we stand together, my brothers and my sisters, against hate and we protest against it."


Lizzo and SZA


Kendrick Lamar


T-Pain, Babyface, Kevin Hart and Ludacris


Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg

Clockwise, from top right: Christopher Polk/PMC; Leon Bennett/Getty Images for BET; Earl Gibson III/Variety; Bennett Raglin/Getty Images for BET; Christopher Polk/PMC (2); Gilbert Flores/Variety; arl Gibson III/Variety



Kerry Condon

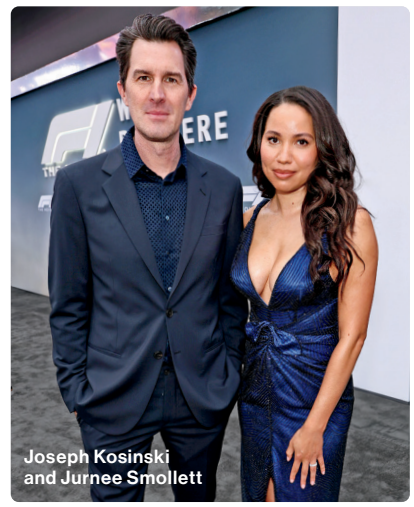
'F1' Premiere

Radio City Music Hall, New York **JUNE 16**

Brad Pitt plays a former Formula 1 champion attempting a comeback alongside a rising rookie (**Damson Idris**) in the **Joseph Kosinski**-directed movie. The actors immersed themselves in the motorsport to prepare for their roles. "We ended up driving for about two years," Pitt told *Variety*. "I was told that we drove 6,000 miles in total in these cars, so I'm kind of proud of that." Idris said, "Every time I was behind that wheel, it was the most exhilarating feeling in the world, and the fact that we got to follow the real Grand Prix and be around all the drivers ... it was so welcoming."


Brad Pitt, Lewis Hamilton, Apple's Tim Cook and Damson Idris


Javier Bardem


Joseph Kosinski and Jurnee Smollett


Mason Thames and Nico Parker


Gabriel Howell

'How to Train Your Dragon' Premiere

Academy Museum, Los Angeles **JUNE 7**

Nico Parker stars as Viking warrior Astrid in the live-action adaptation of the DreamWorks Animation fantasy film. "The most empowering and most impressive thing is to be open and willing for change, and that's what I've carried from playing Astrid," she told *Variety*. "She's a boss bitch." Co-star **Gabriel Howell**, who plays Snotlout Jorgenson, talked about the universality of the dragon story. "Growing up, you feel so in between phases and in between people," he said. "It's also the ultimate wish fulfillment, getting to meet a best friend who is a dragon. Underneath all that, it's about finding out who you are." The red-carpet event also turned into a surprise birthday celebration for director **Dean DeBlois**, complete with a Viking-inspired cake and **Gerald Butler**, who stars as Stoick Vest in both versions of the movie, serenading him with "Happy Birthday."

'Fubar' Premiere

Tudum Theater, Los Angeles **JUNE 11**

Carrie-Anne Moss summed up the reason she joined the second season of the Netflix action series in two words: "**Arnold. Schwarzenegger.**" "When it came my way, it made so much sense," Moss told *Variety* of the chance to act opposite the "Terminator" star. "I just loved working with him and getting to know him and becoming friends." Co-star and stand-up comic **Fortune Feimster** said besides herself, Schwarzenegger was the funniest person on set. "He likes to tease people, but in a loving way," she said. "I like to say his catchphrases to him a lot, and he is a really good sport about it." Schwarzenegger took time to address the ICE protests in Los Angeles; the former governor of California blamed both Republicans and Democrats for not doing enough for meaningful immigration reform: "They're all political hacks rather than public servants."


Netflix's Bela Bajaria flanked by Carrie-Anne Moss and Arnold Schwarzenegger


Monica Barbaro and Fortune Feimster

Clockwise, from top left: Jamie McCarthy/Getty Images for Warner Bros. Pictures (4); Charley Gallay/Getty Images for Netflix (2); Gilbert Flores/Variety (2)

BAD BUNNY

VARIETY
06.18.2025

By THANIA GARCIA

Photographs By GREG SWALES

is throwing the
DANCE PARTY
of THE SUMMER
as he launches a
LARGER-THAN-LIFE
residency to
CELEBRATE
PUERTO RICO



iT'S

a drizzly late-May afternoon in New York when I arrive at the Equinox Hotel in Hudson Yards to interview one of the world's biggest music stars. Before I can even introduce myself to Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio — known to millions as Bad Bunny — a security guard leads me to a private, monochromatic 25th-floor conference room where he suggests we can speak. All that's visible from the windows is dense clouds. Other meetings between men in blazers are taking place in smaller rooms.

Martínez emerges with an entourage of six, sporting a pair of black Ray-Bans that hide his eyes, his curls pushed back by a sweatband. He peers inside the conference room for a split second, and the idea is immediately rejected. "This looks like the scene of a federal investigation or like an episode of 'Black Mirror.' I want to be outside, even if it's raining. I need some air."







Styling: Law Roach/The Only Agency; Hair: Ryan Austin; Grooming: KC Fee/Redefine Representation; Production: Alexey Galetskiy. First page: Hat: Binata Millinery; Sunglasses: Dita; Top, pants, bolo tie and belt: Kid Super. Previous spread: Jacket, shirt and shorts: Paradis; Hat: PDF; Shoes: Adidas

We travel down an elevator and exit through the lobby, where we're met by a doorman who excitedly calls out to the now smiling superstar, enunciating the middle vowel of his first name: *"¡Ben-iii-to! ¡Amigo, Boricua!"* Variations of this interaction happen several times as we walk toward Hudson River Park, with New Jersey facing us in the distance. He shakes the hand of a young woman who, with desperation in her voice, confesses how much his music means to her. She's visibly eager to tell him, "I'm from Puerto Rico too!"

I trail behind as best I can in slippery, wet heels, struggling to keep up with Bad Bunny, much like the rest of the world.

"Doesn't this feel much better?" he asks as we begin walking along a stretch of piers. Even with throbbing feet, I agree — the cool breeze, the open sky and the distant lull of the buzzing city seem to insist that we take our time.

"I'm here often, but I don't really get to ...," he begins in Spanish, gesturing to the view of the river. "New York is somewhat of an extension of home for me. But obviously, nothing compares to the real deal. Some things you'll only find in Puerto Rico."

While we walk and talk — him in Spanish, I in Spanglish ("Ask me again in Spanish," he jokes at one point. "You're getting too comfortable speaking to me in English") — Martínez manages to hold eye contact with a quiet but welcoming intensity. And yet, like a distracted child, his attention occasionally drifts to his acquaintances, who are strolling a few feet behind us. When I bring up the intricacies of and the business behind his multimillion-dollar successes, I find myself having to playfully pull him back in, re-earn his focus. Still, even in those flickers away, his presence is commanding.

"I've always felt that I read people extremely well," Martínez , a Pisces, says of his circle of friends and his business associates, which often overlap. "I'm very intuitive with who and how I spend my time," he says. "I take care of my mental and heart space, *bien cabrón*. There are people that I work with who I've known since I was a kid, and what a blessing that is — to know that despite the outside world and time passing, or anything, they still love me the same."

By the end of 2024, Martínez had been on tour for nearly a full year, away from his native island, basing himself, when not on the road, in Los Angeles and New York. After conquering the world — he grossed a whopping $435 million on tour in 2022 alone and has sold the equivalent of 100 million albums — it was time to come home.

"NEW YORK IS SOMEWHAT OF AN EXTENSION OF HOME FOR ME. BUT OBVIOUSLY, NOTHING COMPARES TO THE REAL DEAL. SOME THINGS YOU'LL ONLY FIND IN PUERTO RICO."

In a massive love letter to the place that raised him, he will perform a 30-night residency at the Coliseo de Puerto Rico in San Juan, less than an hour from Vega Baja, where he grew up. It runs weekends from July 11 to Sept. 14 and will be followed by a 56-date world stadium tour that begins in November in the Dominican Republic and is set to conclude in Belgium on July 22, 2026.

"The idea for the residency was always there, for as long as I can remember," he says as we continue aimlessly strolling down the boardwalk. "But it became difficult to ignore, the more time passed. I'll admit, it was hard to complete my last tour, because all I wanted to do was move into this chapter."

The chapter he's referring to is defined by his sixth solo studio LP, "Debí Tirar Más Fotos (I Should Have Taken More Photos)," a cultural time capsule that threads together the folkloric history of Puerto Rico using plena, jíbaro, salsa and reggaeton, each song name-checking legends from Willie Colón to Héctor & Tito.

"I don't ever want to hit a point where I'm constantly thinking about the next thing, but this album came when it wanted to because it *had* to," he says. Searching for the best analogy, he compares the process to a sneeze. "It started with one line that led to me writing more, and eventually I discovered just how much I was missing home."

Martínez is spending the month in Manhattan crossing off a list of impressive to-dos: Attend the Met Gala; record voice-overs for Darren Aronofsky's upcoming action film "Caught Stealing" (where he'll portray a gangster opposite Austin Butler and Zoë Kravitz); sit courtside at multiple New York Knicks games; make a third appearance on "Saturday Night Live," this time for the season finale.

In that episode, he performs two "Debí" songs, "PERFuMITO NUEVO" and "NUEVAYoL." With a Knicks cap tilted over his brow, he sings as if he's speaking directly to the diaspora living just beyond the stage — across Spanish Harlem and the Bronx and beyond to the millions of viewers who share a similar pride in their Latin American heritage.

It's that interrelationship that's made him a cultural icon among communities long overlooked, including queer Latinos and generations of immigrants who see their complexities reflected in him. Whether it be dressing in drag for his "Yo Perreo Sola" music video in 2020, or shedding light on neocolonialism in "Debí," Martínez represents these communities unapologetically, denouncing the patriarchal values historically found in reggaeton and broader Latin culture.

Needless to say, the residency — titled "No Me Quiero Ir de Aquí" ("I Don't Want to Leave Here") — is much more than a series of concerts: It's a celebration of the island and its biggest homegrown success story and a defiant and joyous declaration to the world from a region that has been brutalized for centuries by hurricanes, gentrification and the American government.

The first nine shows of "No Me Quiero Ir de Aquí" have been made exclusively available to residents of the island, who, to purchase tickets, were required to present proof of residence at one of nine locations. Within eight hours of their release, more than 80,000 tickets had been sold, totaling more than $11 million in revenue.

"Before the residency, my fantasy for the longest time was to do a massive free show in Puerto Rico that could be locals only," Martínez says, acknowledging the improbability of that happening without financial complications and safety concerns. "And if it were up to me, all of the shows for the locals would be free, but what we've got planned now is next level."

The remaining 21 dates will welcome fans from near and far. Around 400,000 people are expected to attend, two-thirds of them from overseas — a huge boon to the local economy. More than 700,000 fans registered to receive the general pre-sale codes.

Martínez is the first Latin artist to sell out stadiums in European hot spots like Poland and France. He's set to perform a string of 12 shows in Spain, where he broke the record for the most tickets sold in the country on a single tour.

"I don't know if this is a good or bad habit yet, but I prefer not to think about the numbers or the weight of everything. Because then I start, 'Should I be proud? Should I be nervous? Should I just act like this is totally normal for me?'" He bows his head for a few seconds. Locking eyes again, he says, "When they first showed me the routing for the stadium tour, I was like, 'Two nights in Sweden?!' Bro, I thought it was a prank."

But whether he's in a packed arena overseas or back home in Puerto Rico, his approach to the shows stays the same. "I like to perform like nobody there knows who I am or what I've accomplished," he says. "The stage is where I'm the most present and happiest. I'll probably be doing this until I'm an old man."

He goes on: "At times, I do think, *cabrón*, what I'm signing up for is a lot. But the way I see it, I'm not a doctor; I'm not a teacher; I'm not someone who has to wake up every morning at 5 a.m. to lay down concrete on a busy road to survive. My job is to fucking sing, and even though it comes with its own set of sacrifices, it feels silly to complain about it."

These days, Martínez's day-to-day looks vastly different from what it did a dozen years ago, when he was a college student at the University of Puerto Rico at Arecibo, bagging groceries for money and recording music as a hobby. Born March 10, 1994, he grew up in a lower-middle-class household with his father, a truck driver, his mother, a teacher, and two brothers. He sang in the choir of his Catholic church until he was 13 and continued making beats and writing music until he hit it big on SoundCloud in 2016, with his unique blend of trap and reggaeton. The song "Diles" was the first to take off. Then he met the CEO of indie label Rimas Entertainment, Noah Assad, who's been his manager for the past eight years.

"He handles the boring stuff," Martínez cracks and dissolves into laughter. Martínez knows he can be meticulous, maybe difficult, when it comes to his creative decisions. "Sure, I can be a little stubborn at times, but never excessively so," he adds. "And now that we've reached"— he lifts his arm, gesturing toward the sky — "*this* level, Noah knows we've earned the freedom to chase even our wildest ideas."

Without spoiling details about the show itself, Assad says that it will take the production team 10 days to rebuild their oversize stages at the Coliseo; the stages at the moment of this interview are housed on a lot on the side of a freeway in San Juan, disguised by an unassuming tent.

"This was the safest way to do it because Benito's capable of getting onstage hours before the show and saying, 'I need this changed.' He did that for the 'Un Verano Sin Ti' tour, when he said the stage needed to be way smaller the night before opening day," Assad recalls. "We told him it was impossible and then made it happen in less than 12 hours, so maybe it's our fault."

The team has recruited more than 1,000 local workers, from stagehands to crew, in preparation for the shows. "We're trying our best to follow the nature of the album and preserve Puerto Rican traditions across all aspects of what we do," Martínez says.

When concertgoers arrive on the island, they'll be equipped with a map of where to visit and what to do — from ziplining to picking coffee in the central mountains. At the venue, vendors will serve everything from bacalaítos to empanadillas. "It's important to me that we translate the feeling of really being proud of where you come from in a way that is still honest," Martínez says, noting that the residency shows will likely be shorter than his usual three-hour sets to help him preserve his stamina.

In recent years, Martínez has been expanding into many areas of entertainment, with a presence in sports (just check out his 24-minute montage on WWE) and as an actor in movies such as "Cassandro," in which he played a gay wrestler, and "Bullet Train" opposite Brad Pitt and Aaron Taylor-Johnson.

"I like to pick projects that teach me new things," he says about his choice of high-profile, often unexpected roles. "And I don't like to settle on the first thing that comes. An acting performance is as important as a concert."

Assad says later, "People tend to think that just because he's Bad Bunny, he gets what he wants, but that couldn't be further from the truth in the film industry. The way he got his role in Netflix's 'Narcos: Mexico' was by standing in the line at a casting call and auditioning in person just like everyone else."

After "Caught Stealing" and Adam Sandler's "Happy Gilmore 2" are released, Martínez's acting career will have to go dark for a while. Some fan theories posit that the stadium tour will serve as a "Bad Bunny Eras Tour," complete with album-specific segments that celebrate his career.

"First of all, I'm not Taylor Swift," he says. "I want to clarify now so that they don't get so excited: It's not going to be organized that way. It's still very much a tour for 'Debi,' with some older songs sprinkled in."

Conspicuously absent from Bad Bunny's 2025-26 tour dates? The United States. "It's unnecessary," he says, pointing out that fans in the U.S. have had no shortage of opportunities to see him perform over the past six years. What about an official concert film? Also unnecessary, he says.

Skipping a concert film isn't an oversight, but a deliberate choice that allows Martínez to focus on making the live show matter. In an era when fans can binge endless streams of content from their favorite artists, the musician

"WHEN THEY FIRST SHOWED ME THE ROUTING FOR THE STADIUM TOUR, I WAS LIKE, 'TWO NIGHTS IN SWEDEN?!' BRO, I THOUGHT IT WAS A PRANK."

Top and pants: Paradis; Shoes: Dhruv Kapoor; Rings: Alex Moss




vacation
NUEVAYOL
Procida
2014
got beer?
MILWAUKEE
GOYA

and his team are investing in his stage presence. "He wants to create memories," Assad says, " and share emotions with the individuals willing to listen."

As the evening draws to a close, Martínez flips the script. "You're not going to ask me who I'm dating now?" It feels like a trap he's carefully baited. I had asked about his meaningful relationships earlier, and he had deflected. So I go for it again, and ask him the question — and he boyishly laughs me off.

Who's who in Bad Bunny's orbit has been a hot topic of tabloid blabber ever since he temporarily relocated to Los Angeles in 2023. That's when he regularly appeared in paparazzi shots with one of the city's most media-saturated dynasties, the Kardashians — specifically, in an on-again-off-again romance with Kendall Jenner. They seem to be just friendlies now, but the fan response has lingered.

For many, the image of their hometown hero rubbing elbows with Hollywood's elite was all the proof they needed to brand him a sellout. That suspicion lives even now, just weeks before his residency kicks off — some critics still questioning the optics of opening the island to thousands of tourists while being the author of a song like "TURiSTA," which likens a shallow fling to the clueless entitlement of a tourist.

"I'm still me, my greatest friends are still the ones from my childhood, and in the middle of it all, there's always Puerto Rico," he says. "It's not like I'm living a detached reality — I still live on the island. Of course, there's a line you hit in terms of relatability when you become famous. But Puerto Rico has a very rough and real duality to it: One moment you can say, 'I love living here; I'm proud to be from here,' and other times, you're like, 'Fuck, man, *pa'l carajo, todo*' ['To hell with everything']."

He concludes, "That's why I chose to call this tour 'I Don't Want to Leave Here.' It's not always paradise, but it's also a place that requires you to exercise enough resistance to say, 'I don't want to leave, and no one can make me.' It's a phrase that comes from pride, pain and love."

But no matter how rough and real he may be, there's no question that things have changed. Moments later, as if on cue, a line of black Escalades appears to take him back to his hotel.

"See? Sometimes they're too good at their job," he whispers. "Because of all the privacy measures, some days I feel like I spend them mostly in the car. I appreciate it, of course, but it's a lot."

He politely declines the service, opting to walk instead. ●

"THERE ARE PEOPLE THAT I WORK WITH WHO I'VE KNOWN SINCE I WAS A KID, AND WHAT A BLESSING THAT IS — TO KNOW THAT DESPITE THE OUTSIDE WORLD AND TIME PASSING OR ANYTHING, THEY STILL LOVE ME THE SAME."

Jacket: Kenzo; Briefs and socks: Calvin Klein

BAD BUNNY'S BUSINESS

For the rapper, Noah Assad is as much a creative partner as he is a manager

What's on Noah Assad's list of things to complete in the weeks leading up to July 11, the opening night of Bad Bunny's residency at Coliseo de Puerto Rico?

"We're going to need to open up some more seats," he says, exhaling deeply. "Right now, even if my cousin called me and asked me for a ticket, there's nothing left. We even considered opening seats in restricted viewing areas to get more people inside because that's how badly people want in."

Beginning his journey as a teenage promoter of local artists and events in Puerto Rico, Assad, now 35, has, in many ways, been preparing his entire life for the challenge of organizing Bad Bunny's three-month residency at El Choli, as it's known to residents. Assad not only manages Bad Bunny but also leads the indie powerhouse Rimas Entertainment, whose signings include Eladio Carrión and Mora; with management clients including Karol G, Arcángel and Sebastián Yatra.

"I had to fail a lot in life in order to learn and truly understand how to do something like this," says Assad of the concert run that ends Sept. 14. "What we're bringing into El Choli has never been done at that venue. It's the biggest thing Benito and I have ever put together, only because of how many moving parts are involved. We're welcoming his most devoted fans — locals and people traveling to see him perform — where he thrives."

Assad's Move Concerts promotion company is organizing the event, with help from specialized businesses including Vibee, which is administering hotel accommodations for the more than 200,000 visitors flying in. Assad began conversations about the residency with Jorge L. Pérez, the general manager of El Choli, more than three years ago, though the pair didn't begin blue-skying until December 2023, when Martínez birthed the idea for the album "Debí Tirar Más Fotos," a heartfelt tribute to Puerto Rico.

"It was a no-brainer," says Assad. "How do you tour an album that's dedicated to your island and go on a world tour before performing it for your people?"

"I thought I'd seen all I could see in my days," says Alejandro Pabón, a promoter at Move Concerts who has spent the past 15 years working on shows for Bruno Mars, Beyoncé, Justin Bieber and more. "But I couldn't have ever imagined something this high-impact — or that I'd be learning so much about hospitality as a concert promoter."

Discover Puerto Rico, the region's nonprofit destination marketing organization, estimates the residency will produce economic profitability of close to $200 million across hotels, restaurants, shops and tourist attractions.

Assad adds, "Our in-person ticket sales in Corozal, which is a quiet area, had thousands of people lined up. And we got phone calls from nearby pharmacies telling us they sold out of their ticket inventory in a few hours. No one expected those results. But it's at the heart of everything Benito and I do: We eat, live, drink, sleep and think about our community every day. This is going to show the world the intangible value of our home." — *T.G.*


in the Group”

BRAVO'S CONSCIOUS UNCOUPLING

The second season of 'The Valley' – involving drug addiction, a violent incident and a cast member in a mental health facility – is pushing how dark unscripted TV can get

BY KATE AURTHUR

ILLUSTRATION BY LÆMEUR





or Brittany Cartwright and Jax Taylor, stars of Bravo's hit reality show "The Valley," toxic arguments were nothing new. It's why Cartwright left Taylor in January 2024, taking their young son, Cruz, with her. But last July, two days before the show's second season started production, Taylor crossed a line. Cartwright and Cruz visited him at the Valley Village home where he continued to live, and while looking at the family iPad, Taylor found intimate texts between Cartwright and a friend of his. As Taylor later recounted in the premiere, "I went full fucking unhinged rage."

In a frenzy, Taylor flipped over a coffee table — which, Cartwright says on the show, hit her knee, hurting her, and "it turned black immediately." He punched the wall. He threw furniture, breaking one of the kitchen bar stools. All the while, 3-year-old Cruz was in the next room.

In the show's April 15 premiere, Jax strives to justify his actions in a confessional interview. "I lost all control. I saw red. I had an out-of-body experience," he says, speaking to the camera. "But show me a guy that wouldn't handle the situation the way I handled it."

By his own telling — on "The Valley," and on podcasts since filming Season 2 ended in mid-September — Taylor had been spinning out since Cartwright left him: partying, drinking, doing cocaine and having sex with whatever women were in his DMs. Taylor's volatility is partly what made him so skilled as a shit-stirrer and chaos agent on "Vanderpump Rules," the progenitor of "The Valley," during which his relationship with Cartwright began. But measured against the "Vanderpump Rules" storyline known as the Scandoval — the entrancing intra-cast cheating scandal turned international news story from spring 2023 — Taylor's violent flare-up, and the fallout from it, has been its tonal opposite: deeply upsetting.

At the end of the second episode, Taylor checks into a nearby mental health facility, urged to go there by Cartwright, his sister, his team, the show's producers and Bravo. He stays there for 30 days, during which he still manages to text Cartwright threats like "trust me i gave my friends your address. they are gonna stop by." When Taylor returns home in the June 17 episode, instead of trying to see Cruz, he gets Botox and a haircut. In the final scene, he learns Cartwright has filed for divorce and sole legal custody.

Though reality programming has been consistently dismissed as fluff even as it's become a dominant force in television, there are countless examples of how unscripted series have reflected real life in groundbreaking ways. On Bravo alone, amid lavish parties and glamorous trips, cast members have faced divorce, bankruptcy, illness, legal problems, imprisonment, abuse and death by suicide.

What sets "The Valley" apart is how much Season 2 has turned its cameras on the darker realities of most of its ensemble, beyond even Taylor and Cartwright's disintegrating marriage. The results have been as fascinating and layered as they are unprecedented. Divorcing real estate agents Jesse Lally and Michelle Saniei appear to loathe one another; she's accused him of blowing through their money, while he's called her a "lying, cheating whore." Voice actor Daniel Booko and former Miss USA Nia Sanchez Booko — who were living in an overstuffed condo with their three small children — have presented a united front as Daniel's drinking has become a major storyline, centered on the time he got blackout drunk and inappropriately touched castmate Jasmine Goode and her now-fiancée Melissa Marie. Married couple Janet and Jason Caperna have stoked drama among the ensemble, especially with Booko's drinking. (An exception is





From top: The cast of "The Valley" at the upcoming reunion with Andy Cohen; Nia Sanchez Booko, Daniel Booko, Luke Broderick and Kristen Doute on Season 2 of "The Valley"

the sweet love story of Luke Broderick and "Vanderpump Rules" alum Kristen Doute, who get engaged during the season; Doute gave birth to their daughter on June 11.)

After the Scandoval caused "Vanderpump Rules" to become a ratings sensation (and eventual Emmy nominee), executive producer Alex Baskin pitched Bravo on "The Valley," a show that cast members from the original could graduate into as they married, had kids and bought homes. Although Taylor, Cartwright and Doute had been let go from "Vanderpump Rules" in 2020 for different reasons, the Scandoval brought all three back into the public eye as pundits (yes, there were pundits!), and most viewers welcomed them with open arms. "There was overwhelming interest in the franchise itself," Baskin says. Erica Forstadt, NBCUniversal's SVP of unscripted current production, agrees. "It was a slam dunk, honestly," she says. "I think the audience wanted to see what was going on with those three at that time."

Production began immediately, and "The Valley" premiered in March 2024, with Season 11 of

"Vanderpump Rules" as its lead-in. It became Bravo's most-watched freshman series in a decade, and ratings remain strong in the show's second season, according to Nielsen and NBCUniversal, with the premiere episode drawing 3.1 million cross-platform viewers (and counting) on Bravo and Peacock. Despite how fragmented TV audiences have become, "The Valley" averages as many viewers as Season 2 of "Vanderpump Rules" did in 2013-14.

Data aside, what's perhaps most significant is an ineffable measurement: "The Valley" has sparked a tonnage of conversation in the Bravosphere, the world of fan podcasts, social media accounts and subreddits that scrutinize every move the network's cast members make. Not all chatter about the cast has been positive though; broadsides directed at Cartwright — some in the Bravo cognoscenti say she should have known who Taylor was when she married him — especially bother Baskin. During an interview at his office in, yes, the Valley, Baskin, whose company 32 Flavors produces the show, says the season's igniting incident was impossible to look away from once Cartwright told them that Taylor had done "something unacceptable."

"It was really scary," he says. He calls the Cartwright of today "a different person" from who she was on "Vanderpump Rules," and wishes the audience would recognize "her growth and her assertiveness." He adds: "This is all Brittany's real life."

The show's tone has been a delicate balancing act this season, Baskin says, and he's in constant conversation with Bravo about achieving the right equilibrium. Taylor and Cartwright were *the* central couple of "The Valley," and the ugly ending of their marriage presents a new challenge for the series and the network. To Forstadt, the "Valley" team comes at the story "from a documentary place," she says. "In my mind, it's *real*. This is what is happening." Later, she adds: "Had we not covered it, then we wouldn't have been telling a truthful story. And I think that's even more problematic."

"Remind me again what you want to watch?" Baskin asks rhetorically at one point. "We're all trying to figure out how to tell the story responsibly and fairly, in a way that is entertaining and real. But that doesn't put a gloss on what is really happening. This subject matter is dark!"


Brittany Cartwright

Even if their interests have seemingly diverged, Cartwright and Taylor continue to share the same manager and publicist. After *Variety* first spoke with Baskin, their publicist canceled an already scheduled interview with Cartwright; Taylor declined to be interviewed.

There's a lot of material out there already though — everyone has a podcast. In fact, in March, Taylor went on Baskin's "Bravo's Hot Mic" podcast and confessed that for more than 20 years, he'd struggled with cocaine and had recently quit it, as well as drinking. But Baskin wants to be clear that going into treatment is not something that Taylor's employers "can legally mandate — we can't. That's a step that someone has to take on their own."

Viewers weren't at all surprised by Taylor's cocaine confession — the response online was basically, sweetie, we knew. But what happened with Cartwright has managed to shock the audience — and the cast. In an interview at the Roosevelt Hotel, Sanchez Booko described her reaction when Cartwright told her about the fight with Taylor. "I was like, 'It's not safe. You definitely can't be around him,'" she says. "It made me really worried for my friend."

"I was like, 'It's not safe. You definitely can't be around him.' It made me really worried for my friend."

NIA SANCHEZ BOOKO

Cartwright and Taylor had security cameras in their home at the time — unrelated to filming — and Cartwright also showed Sanchez Booko video of Taylor's explosion. "When I saw the video, my first question to Brittany out loud was, 'What was he on?'" Sanchez Booko says. "And she said, 'No, he was sober, just so mad.' He looked scary from a woman's point of view."

Although reality stars have gone to rehab before during filming, Taylor's drug use hadn't yet been openly acknowledged. And though drunkenness is a staple of reality TV, hard drugs have always been highly taboo — if cast members are using, they hide it from production. But as he packs to go to the facility in the season's second episode, with his anxiety clearly spiking, Taylor and Cartwright argue once more for the road — and during this fight, she at last exposes him. "Jax, you have a coke problem!" she yells up their stairs. "Everybody

Previous page, from top: Trae Patton/Bravo; Griffin Nagel/Bravo. This page: Trae Patton/Bravo

knows it! Own up to it. Be real with the doctors."

Jax, you have a coke problem. Was Baskin surprised that Cartwright finally snapped?

"She was going to say everything that she had experienced — that's her story," Baskin says. "She felt like the problem was he had been enabled for too long. And she's like, 'Fuck that. I'm not doing that. I'm going to say it out loud.' She was done. She was going to say *everything*."

Speaking one's mind can cut both ways, however. In an interview in his Los Angeles home above the Sunset Strip, Lally expresses remorse about the vicious things he's said on camera about Saniei. "I mean, obviously I regret calling Michelle a hooker," he says. "I'm trying to raise a little girl. Do you know what a guy like me from Boston would do if somebody called my daughter a whore? Whatever is to blame for that, it's just shameful." At another point, he says, "We're doing this to make a great show, but we're also still real families with real careers and children."

Booko's indiscretion — when he drunkenly fondled Goode and Marie during a Halloween party — happened off camera, and though Booko felt before filming that he'd already made sufficient apologies, he says he heard that Taylor was "talking to people to bring it back up for the show." He called Taylor to confront him, Booko says, and after some hemming and hawing, "he blew up, and he was like, 'You guys got off easy in the first season, and the second season I'm putting a target on your back! You and Nia are fake!'"

Booko says Taylor apologized at the reunion, which was filmed in early May. But at the time, he thought: "I'm trying to have your back, and all you're doing is stabbing mine."

"It was a hard summer," he adds, mentioning how betrayed he feels by other castmates who he feels played up the drama at his expense. "Lies — just malicious, vindictive behavior from some people that I thought were my friends. Whether they're doing it for a storyline or attention or whatever, it's just like: You don't do that."

Yet, both Bookos would come back for Season 3, which will likely start production after the final reunion episode of Season 2 airs in August.

What "The Valley" will look like remains a puzzle, according to Baskin. "It's very likely the show does look different next season, but I don't know what different means."

After the first season, it was easy simply to bring the whole cast back, upping Zack Wickham and Goode from "friends" status to series regulars. But there are now huge rifts in the group, and there's also the question of what to do with Taylor, who's done a lot of harm — but has also sought help. The events filmed for this season took place 10 months ago, and according to a statement from his personal rep, he "has remained committed to his sobriety from alcohol and cocaine" and "is dedicated to self-improvement and healing through ongoing therapy."

"No one is guaranteed a job indefinitely," Baskin says. "Many times before, we've had to make a change based on someone's behavior. But seeking help is the opposite of that. Seeking help is obviously what we completely support."

"It was a hard summer. Lies — just malicious, vindictive behavior from some people that I thought were my friends."

DANIEL BOOKO

But Baskin specifically wants to address the frequent accusation that putting Taylor on TV means the show and Bravo are platforming an abuser. "Our job is to tell the full story," he says. "If we didn't, then we would be covering up something that really happened, and denying Brittany the chance to share what she had been through. I don't think that's really 'platforming an abuser' as much as that is platforming the *story* — which includes Brittany's experience as well as Jax's."

At the same time, he says, "We don't want to be in a situation where we are forcing together people who wouldn't spend the time together in real life. That can become taxing and difficult to watch." Given the large size of the ensemble, Baskin hopes at least some of them can spend time together. "But at this point, I don't know what form that will take going forward."

For his part, Lally doesn't think "The Valley" will always be this way. "I don't think the audience is going to want it," he says. "This show was about young families trying to navigate their lives, being married and having young kids and stuff like that. We'll get back there. There's some light at the end of this dark tunnel, I think."

However Season 3 does shake out, Baskin laughs at the memory of an early worry that "The Valley," with its focus on fortysomethings with kids, might be boring.

"There were people involved who were like, 'Is everyone *too* settled and are their lives *too* grounded?'" he recalls. "Um, there's a lot there!" ●

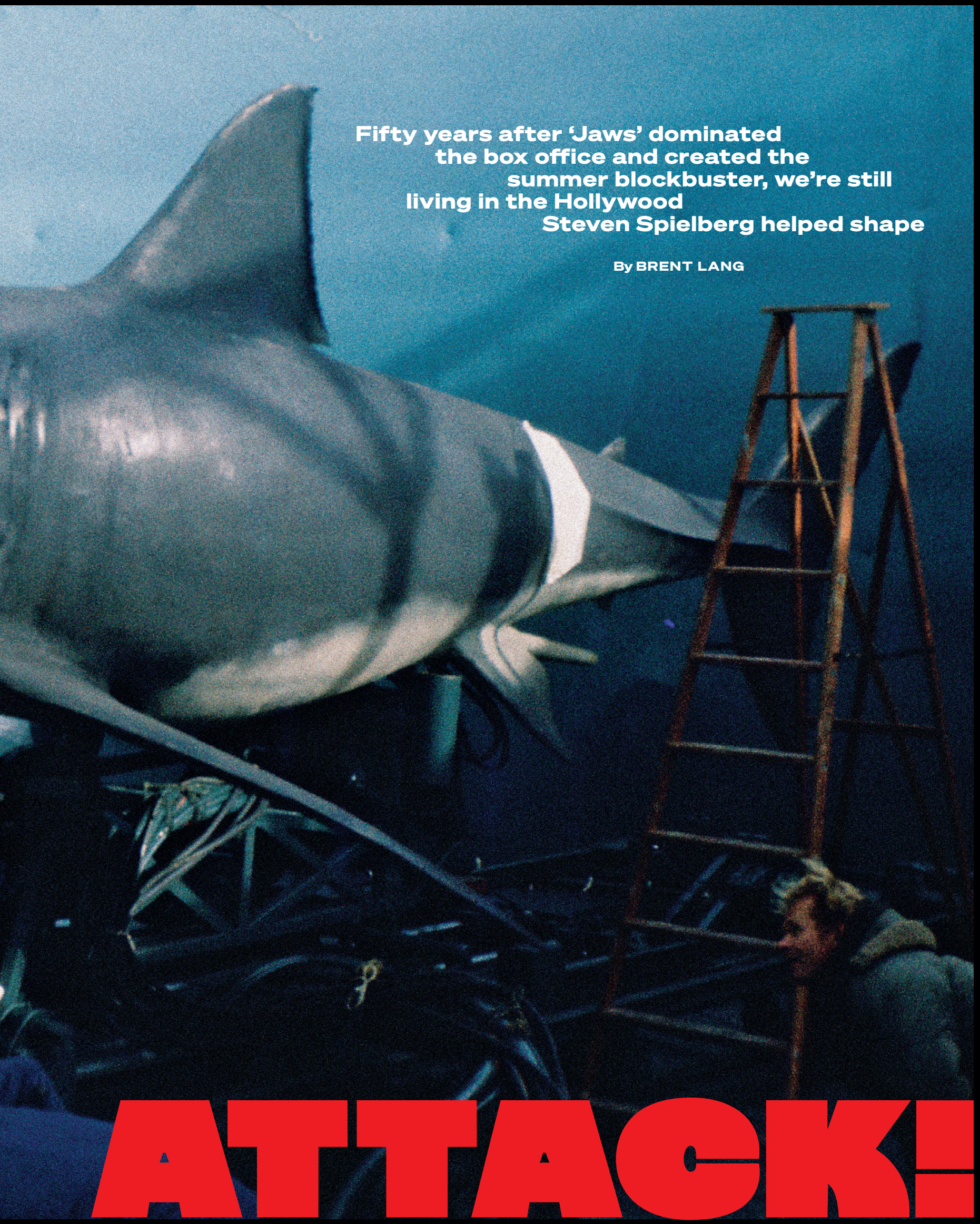


Jax Taylor

Trae Patton/Bravo

SHARK





Fifty years after ‘Jaws’ dominated the box office and created the summer blockbuster, we’re still living in the Hollywood Steven Spielberg helped shape

By BRENT LANG

ATTACK!

“THE SHARK’S NOT WORKING.”

For weeks, the cast and crew of “Jaws” kept hearing the same four words over their walkie-talkies while shooting the film’s climactic ocean battle. That familiar message terrified Steven Spielberg, 27 years old at the time, with only one theatrical feature to his name. If one of the production’s three animatronic great whites broke down, it could mean another wasted day. All the setbacks put the film more than 100 days behind schedule and doubled its budget to $8 million.

“We didn’t know how they were ever going to finish this movie,” remembers Jeffrey Kramer, who played a sheriff’s deputy in the film. “There were rumors all around the set that the studio was going to shut us down.”

Spielberg, who had been entrusted with turning Peter Benchley’s bestselling novel about a rampaging shark into a cinematic event, feared he’d be fired. Yet he was determined not to betray how much pressure weighed on him.

“His nails were bitten to the stubs,” remembers Carl Gottlieb, the film’s co-writer. “But that was the only manifestation of his nerves. Steven knew he needed to lead by example. That meant concentrating on his job and keeping his cool even when everything around him was going to hell.”

And everything that could go to hell, did. Filming just off Martha’s Vineyard had been Spielberg’s idea. He thought making “Jaws” on the open water would give it authenticity. It turned out to be an agonizing ordeal. Boats filled with pleasure cruisers drifted into shots; the waves and weather were unpredictable, so maintaining continuity was nearly impossible; and everyone kept getting seasick. When they weren’t retching over the side of the boat, the actors often clashed, with hard-drinking veteran Robert Shaw, playing fisherman Quint, frequently belittling Richard Dreyfuss, the up-and-coming actor cast as Hooper, a cocky oceanographer. The whole enterprise seemed doomed.

“‘Jaws’ should never have been made,” Spielberg admitted to Time the Monday after the film opened in 1975. “It was,” he said, “an impossible effort.”

Despite its chaotic creation, “Jaws” became the highest-grossing movie in history, earning a staggering $260.7 million. Fifty years later, we’re still living in the entertainment landscape that “Jaws” reshaped. Its outsize success made studios realize that if they packaged and promoted movies correctly, they wouldn’t just be hits — they could become phenomena, selling T-shirts and toys along with tickets. “Jaws” established the template for “Star Wars,” “Jurassic Park,” “The Avengers” and the other culture-defining smashes that followed in its wake.

“This movie changed cinema, and you still can’t go to a summer blockbuster or to the beach without thinking about it,” says Eli Roth, the director of the horror film “Hostel.” “So much of the language of cinema comes from this film. He created all of it.”

“Jaws” is a masterpiece, rivaling “Psycho” in its use of editing, music and camera angles to establish tension and suspense. The film works because it taps into familiar anxieties. Who hasn’t felt suddenly paranoid about all the creatures lurking beneath the waves? But the irresistible force of Spielberg’s vision and ambition allowed him not only to finish “Jaws,” but to create something far greater than the sum of its potboiler parts.

“It’s a great story of what Steven Spielberg accomplished by surviving what was a nightmare,” Steven Soderbergh says. “If that person hadn’t made it, it probably wouldn’t have been made at all. It certainly wouldn’t be a classic.”

And it continues to inspire artists who were born decades after “Jaws” opened. “When directors bring us ideas, ‘Jaws’ is still referenced as much as any other movie,” says Jason Blum, founder of Blumhouse, the company behind “The Purge” and “Get Out.” “Even young filmmakers say, ‘It’s going to be like the shark in “Jaws.”’ That’s incredible for a film that’s 50 years old.”

No one would be more surprised by the enduring appeal of “Jaws”



Robert Shaw, Roy Scheider, Steven Spielberg and Richard Dreyfuss during the filming of “Jaws”

Previous spread: Pangolin Pictures. This page: Universal Studios/Getty Images



Crowds line up outside a movie house in New York City to see "Jaws" when it opened in June 1975.

Bettmann Archive/Getty Images

than the Universal executives who greenlit the picture. Initially the studio treated the film as just another B movie. "Nobody thought much about it," says Joe Alves, the production designer. "People at Universal were much more excited about this George C. Scott film called 'The Hindenburg.'"

As word leaked out in the Hollywood trades about the delays and cost overruns, there was a growing sense that "Jaws" had all the makings of a disaster. "Everywhere we went, people treated us with sympathy, like we had some kind of illness," David Brown, one of the film's producers, told *Variety* three weeks before "Jaws" debuted. "They'd say, 'I hope you overcome your difficulties.'"

But after the film was finished and started testing, preview audiences were electrified by what Spielberg delivered; they screamed so intensely that popcorn flew out of buckets.

"As soon as the studio saw that reaction, they went, 'Jesus, this is going to be a big movie,'" remembers Alves. "That's when everything shifted."

Suddenly Universal was inspired to back the picture with a massive (for its time) $1.8 million promotional blitz, one that revolutionized how movies were marketed and released.

It started with the decision to debut the film on June 20, 1975. Nowadays, summer is the most popular time for moviegoing, but before "Jaws," studios hadn't yet become obsessed with that season. Many of the biggest films — including "The Godfather," "Love Story" and "The Exorcist" — premiered in the spring or winter. But those were aimed at adults; "Jaws" wanted to attract teenagers along with their parents, so it helped to debut the film when school was out. The film's huge gross illustrated the commercial power of this younger audience. It was a lesson Hollywood would never forget.

"Jaws" also demonstrated how a movie could be turned into a zeitgeist-tapping sensation through the power of mass-marketing and distribution. "Jaws" went national, with Universal releasing the movie in more than 400 theaters across the country. Studios were still employing a road-show model for many films, rolling them out slowly across different markets and advertising in local papers and TV stations along the way. But Universal wanted "Jaws" to be easily accessible to everyone in America all at once, so it could become an event. To generate excitement, the studio invested heavily in television spots, airing dozens of 30-second commercials on primetime network shows like "The Waltons" and "Happy Days."

The company also leaned into the popularity of Benchley's novel, which was released in 1974, coordinating with the publisher so the marketing campaigns for the movie and the book that inspired it would be aligned. That ensured that the "Jaws" film would arrive with "pre-awareness" — meaning that audiences would already be primed for the carnage in store.

"We sent copies to people who talk to other people, like headwaiters and cab drivers," Brown told *Variety* in 1975. "We adapted the artwork of the book to the artwork of the film promotion. By the time we sneaked the film in Dallas, we didn't even need to name it in the ad. We put in the logo of the shark's teeth and the swimming girl and 3,000 came out in a hailstorm."

"JAWS" IS A BRIDGE between the darker, moodier stories that dominated late '60s and early '70s Hollywood, such as "Bonnie and Clyde" and "The French Connection," and the blockbuster era that followed. In some ways, the two halves of its story connect those two distinct periods in cinema history. The first part of "Jaws" follows ineffectual police chief Brody (Roy Scheider) as he tries and largely fails to resist political pressure from the mayor (Murray Hamilton) to keep the beaches open, even as the body count rises. It's a portrait of how institutional corruption can lead to bloodshed. That resonated with viewers who lived through the Vietnam War, and it was very much in keeping with the skeptical tone of the movies that immediately preceded it.

"You could feel this malaise and cynicism start to seep into movies in the late '60s. You had the war and the hippie movement and then Watergate," says Kevin Sandler, associate professor of film and media studies at Arizona State University. "Movies reflected that for a while. But by the mid-'70s tastes were shifting, and people wanted things that were less politically aware and purely entertaining."

The second half of "Jaws" taps into that desire for escapism, leaning into spectacle and helping to establish the blockbuster formula in the process. As soon as Brody, Quint and Hooper embark on a quest to kill the shark, the picture assumes a narrative propulsion that Spielberg understood innately. He instructed Gottlieb to streamline Benchley's novel, casting aside subplots such as an affair between Dreyfuss' character and Brody's wife, as well as a real estate conspiracy involving the Mafia.



Spielberg on one of three animatronic great white sharks used in the filming of “Jaws”

Sunset Boulevard/Corbis via Getty Images

"He wanted to eliminate everything that was extraneous so we could be totally focused on the story of three men against the sea," says Gottlieb.

Spielberg also knew that the movie's villain needed to have a gargantuan size and scope that would make it truly terrifying.

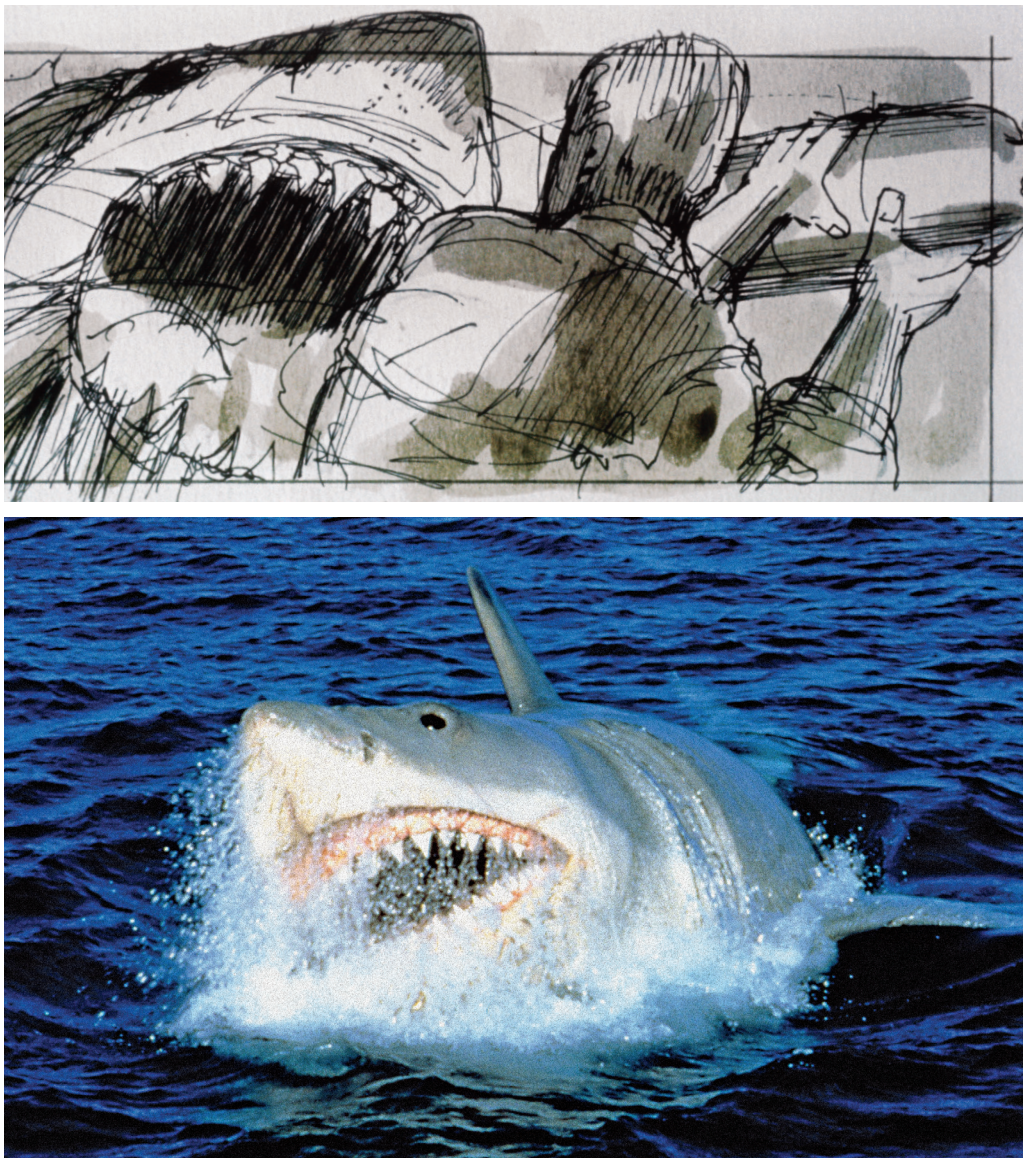
"The way Peter wrote the book was that this was just a normal shark doing what normal sharks do, so he kept urging Steven to keep the shark down to 15 feet," says Wendy Benchley, the author's widow. "But Steven understood movies; he knew that he needed the shark to be 25 feet so it could be this monster who could swallow Robert Shaw whole."

Initially, the great white was supposed to have even more screen time. However, the mechanical difficulties meant that Spielberg had to shoot around the shark, finding novel ways to suggest its deadly presence. To keep audiences off guard, he relied on creative editing by Verna Fields, who cut together shots from the fish's perspective with glimpses of a fin cutting through the water and set them to John Williams' pounding and foreboding three-note theme. That iconic music, partially inspired by the score that plays during "Psycho"'s shower scene, took Spielberg a second to embrace.

"I played *boom boom boom* on the piano for him," Williams told *Variety* in 2024, "and Steven said, 'Are you serious?' I said, 'If you hear the basses and celli in the orchestra, I think it might work.' And so we did a session with the orchestra, and he said, 'Oh, this is wonderful.'"

In 1975, when the shark finally leaped out of the ocean, crashed into the ship and sank his teeth into Quint, audiences were as dazzled as they were terrified.

Today, the effects seem primitive. What resonates most strongly is the film's subtler or more emotional moments — the camera lingering on a man left holding a stick after his dog fails to come back from a swim or the scene where Brody's son mimics his depressed father's body language at the dinner table. And, of course, there's Quint's USS Indianapolis monologue, an aria of trauma and suffering, in which he drunkenly describes watching his fellow sailors get ripped apart by ravenous tiger sharks after their cruiser sinks. The speech was honed by various writers, including Gottlieb, Gloria Katz and John Milius, but it was Shaw, a playwright as well as an actor, who finally cracked it.



From top: Part of a storyboard; a shot from "Jaws"

"Steven understood movies; he knew that he needed the shark to be 25 feet so it could be this monster who could swallow Robert Shaw whole."

WENDY BENCHLEY

"He took all the versions to his house," Gottlieb remembers. "Then he came to dinner one night, slammed his hand on the table and said, 'I've got that pesky speech licked.' He read it to us. It was so stunning that when he finished, Steven said, 'That's it. We're shooting that.'"

The entire monologue lasts roughly four minutes, an eternity in an era of quick-cutting superhero films and fantasies. But it is essential in establishing the bond between the three protagonists, so that audiences will actually care if they live or die. The villain may be fantastical, but the drama still operates at a human level. That sensibility has been lost in the ensuing decades as the blockbusters that "Jaws" inspired have become more obsessed with establishing cinematic universes than creating compelling characters to inhabit them.

As for Spielberg, "Jaws" launched his career into the stratosphere. Public fascination with the wunderkind filmmaker intensified as the film dominated the box office. The attention Spielberg received was flattering but came with its own pressures.

"I don't think I'll ever top 'Jaws' commercially," Spielberg said in a 1977 New York Times profile shortly before the release of his next film, "Close Encounters of the Third Kind." "The minute 'Jaws' became so successful, people kept saying, 'How can you top that?' But I don't run my career on what people think."

Spielberg was wrong about one thing. Two of his films, "E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial" and "Jurassic Park," would become the most commercially successful in history, before they too were supplanted by even bigger blockbusters. As for the director, he would move beyond his populist roots to examine bleak moments in history with his masterworks "Schindler's List" and "Saving Private Ryan." As an artist, Spielberg kept stretching, telling bolder and more challenging stories — as long as they took place on land.

"You've probably noticed I haven't done very many water pictures since 'Jaws,'" Spielberg told biographer Richard Schickel in 2024.

"Jaws" left even its director terrified of the ocean. ●

From top: mptvimages.com; Everett Collection



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Running the Villa ‘Love Island’ host Ariana Madix had the biggest year of her life — after the worst

By Kate Aurthur

It was a little more than two years ago when Ariana Madix’s life blew up on Bravo as a result of the “Vanderpump Rules” cheating scandal that came to be known as the Scandoval. That was the bad news: The good news was Madix handled the mess with such grace that she ended up getting several life-changing opportunities when the smoke cleared. After the end of her nine-year relationship with fellow “Vanderpump Rules” castmate Tom Sandoval in March 2023, Madix was cast on that fall season of “Dancing With the Stars,” appeared as Roxie Hart in “Chicago” on Broadway (twice!) and, in summer 2024, became the host of Peacock’s “Love Island USA” for its sixth season.

Madix’s presence on the dating show — which airs nightly on Peacock, practically in real time — brought new viewers to the series, making it last summer’s No. 1 reality series, and an inescapable juggernaut.

As she prepared to head to Fiji for Season 7 — before she knew anything about the new season, which premiered on June 3 — Madix sat down with *Variety* at her West Hollywood sandwich shop, Something About Her, which she owns with Katie Maloney. She discussed her love of “Love Island,” her first time stepping on the “Chicago” stage and her experience of filming Season 11 of “Vanderpump Rules,” which will have an entirely new cast when it eventually returns.

It actually came up on “Vanderpump Rules” that you were a “Love Island” fan. Which one got you? U.K.? It was actually “Australia.” My friend Brad had introduced me, kind of pandemic-time. He was like, “Well, it’s great — I think this might be our

show." I started binge-watching "Australia," then I went to U.K. and then I went to U.S.

The U.S. version had struggled a bit before you took over. What did you want to bring to it? I'm a big fan of so many of the women who have hosted the show. I think that no matter what, if you try to do what someone else is doing or has done, it won't work. I wanted to really bring myself to it. So, whatever that is — being a little bit more on the sexy side, and trying to bring a level of confidence that, even if I'm not feeling it in the moment, you fake it until you make it. And of course, humor. That's one thing that "Love Island" has that a lot of dating shows sometimes don't have, is the level of humor.

And I knew I really wanted to bring some amazing looks; that was inspired by other hosts around the world, because when Maya Jama is walking into that U.K. villa... she is sex on a stick.

I'm going to say this for you because you won't. But I feel like your presence as the host brought in the Bravo audience, and then it was an incredible cast and a great season, and people stayed. What do you think of that theory? I've seen people say that online — that if they hadn't watched it before, they turned it on initially thinking, "Oh, Ariana's hosting." With the cast, ultimately, they stayed because of who they're connecting with throughout the season. And our cast was so incredible.

You would make your opinion known in a way that past hosts didn't — Sort of!

What do you mean? I mean that I definitely was holding back on a lot of stuff. I'm not allowed to be biased. I've seen footage because I'm watching the show and the Islanders haven't, but I know that this is a thing I'm going to want to get them to talk about — which I think you saw definitely in the Casa Amor recoupling, because we really do have all the time in the world. I will stand there until you talk about it. That's what "Aftersun" is so good for; I can go on "Aftersun" and talk about stuff. But in the villa, in front of them, it's interesting having to keep my mouth shut a little bit, because I can't show bias.

A colleague of mine who's a huge "Love Island" person thinks that your mere presence empowered the women contestants to stand up for themselves more. Oh, wow! Oh, I love that. I mean, they do such a good job of that, and they're so much younger than me. They're way younger than I ever was on "Vanderpump." For them to be as strong and as empowered and as vocal, but able to express how they feel at that age, they're doing great.

Switching topics! How did it feel the first time you went on stage in "Chicago"? Terrifying and exhilarating, and I was super, super nervous. The crowd was so loud.

They were there for you. It was really amazing, but so loud at times that I couldn't hear the band on stage. So, I was like, "Well, let's really hope that we have this ingrained in the muscle memory enough that that's OK." One of my castmates, Jeff Gorti, when I told him how I was super nervous, he said, "You have nothing to prove — only to go out and show off."

And I thought, "OK, that's not something I had thought of before." Because I always feel like there's so *much* to prove.

You went back a second time too. Might you do it again? I would love to. I would love to do Roxie again. And I would love to do another show.

Shifting to "Vanderpump Rules," after the cheating scandal happened in spring 2023, were you always going to come back for a Season 11? I mean, I had to. I was definitely not in a position where I could say no to work. I needed to say yes to "Vanderpump Rules." But the next time it came around, I wanted to be in a position where I didn't have to, because I wasn't feeling great, obviously. I love the show for so many reasons. But when you feel like you don't have a choice, it's not a good place to be in.

It was such a huge story, and a lot of opportunities came your way because of it. But at the same time, you were experiencing terrible personal turmoil. Terrible! Yes. I get so grossed out every time I try to talk about my work, and the headline is about somebody else, or making *my* life about somebody else. Saying "post-breakup glow-up" I find insulting. It insinuates that I was some sort of troll before, and that time was super, super hard. It's funny, me and my two best friends — you know how your phone loves to show you photos?

"Memories from..." Like, can you not?! There's so many photos of us, pictures of me sleeping in bed where they were like, "She's doing fine!" and us together having sleepovers. It's this really weird, somewhat beautiful and scary time. And yes, the headlines and the attention were all about this thing, but the reality was much, much darker. And that's not something that I was going to bring to "Vanderpump Rules" Season 11 either.

I was like, "Look, I'm putting all my boxes in my room; my room is my apartment." And then they come in and film, and they don't talk about me trying to move, they cut all the scenes of me with a real estate agent. They cut all the stuff of me talking



Madix has hosted Seasons 6 and 7 of "Love Island."

Ben Symons/PEACOCK

"Saying 'post-breakup glow-up,' I find insulting. It insinuates that I was some sort of troll before, and that time was super, super hard."
Ariana Madix

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Ariana Madix on "Love Island," above, and comforted by co-stars on "Vanderpump Rules," below.

"My mental health really started to get better when I was doing 'Dancing With the Stars' because I was able to physically express things."
Ariana Madix

about meeting with a lender and turn it into some sort of other story.

You're a squatter in your own home. And that right there was another thing that was frustrating. Because as if it's not hard enough, trying to uproot from what you thought was a house you're going to live in for at least 10 years. Trying to pull everything out that you own and trying to organize — and then being told you're some sort of loser.

You've been very open about your mental health struggles. Where were you when the cameras started rolling on Season 11? I was slowly getting there, maybe a little bit better. But it was hard because I wanted to let people in on where I was. I feel like you're really seeing that. I mean, you see me holed up in my room trying to organize my life and trying to figure out what's next. What am I doing? Where am I going to be living? I've got to get pre-approved, because I need to get out of this house.

It's hard to get a mortgage when you already have a mortgage. That was the biggest issue for me. I ended up doing it, but I had to put down a lot more. I was really like, "Let's show where I'm at. Let's show the warts and all." And then when it aired so much later — it airs six to seven months after the wrapping — I think people were like, "What's her problem?"

Do you guys know how time works? Are you guys OK?

That drove me insane. I think it's important to show where I was at. And if somebody relates to that and they've also been there, then I feel like that's worth it. My mental health really started to get better when I was doing "Dancing With the Stars" because I was able to physically express things.

The finale — which turned out to be the series finale for this cast — was explosive and broke the fourth wall in a huge way. Had word reached you what happened after you left that party? I knew that people were going off, and I was like, "Yeah, see, I was right."

To leave and go to Applebee's? Yeah. I was like, "Bro, I just proved the whole point! I'm glad. Show your true selves." Especially knowing that my ex was being like that. I thought, "That's exactly what I've been saying! This whole thing is fake."

The idea of being together in the same space? Him coming, "Oh, can I just talk?" I was like, "See? Because if you don't get what you want, and you flip like that, and start screaming, then you're literally proving me right." So I said, "Great," over my buffalo chicken wings — I went really old school. I think I was taking shots of Fireball or something.

Were you told ahead of time that they were going to announce that "Vanderpump Rules" would be rebooted with a new cast? Yeah.

What did you think? I said, "Cool! Good luck."



Love Island USA: Kim Nunneley/Peacock; Vanderpump Rules: Casey Durkin/Bravo

Power of a Dad Joke Seth Meyers' latest special is mostly about life at home — and he knows what works and what doesn't

By Ethan Shanfield



Seth Meyers: Dad Man Walking; Lloyd Bishop/HBO

"My wife and I are both very cognizant of the fact that we don't want our kids to have trauma based on what I'm doing on stage," says Seth Meyers, whose latest stand-up special, "Dad Man Walking," focuses almost entirely on his domestic life.

The comedian still targets his kids in the HBO hour, with careful consideration as to whether they'll appreciate the jokes when they reach high school. His wife, meanwhile, only has one rule about being the subject of Meyers' material.

"She once said, 'I never care how mean you make me sound, as long as you make me sound right,'" Meyers recalls. "That tells you more about my wife than literally any joke I've ever written."

Do your kids find you funny? Ish. I wouldn't say I'm their favorite. My wife is a former prosecutor, and I would say she does just as well as me, if not a little better.

Coming from "Saturday Night Live" and "Late Night," where every joke is workshopped by writers, what is it like putting together a stand-up special alone? It's liberating, but it's also — I would say thrilling, more than scary. As opposed to a really good joke on our show, which is also great but immediately loses its value as soon as you say it, if you write a really good stand-up joke, you can do it for as long as you're doing that hour.

As someone who interviews politicians on "Late Night," are you at all envious of comedians who can talk to them for hours on their podcasts? We've kind of weaned ourselves off politicians as guests to begin with, because we have more fun talking about politics than talking to politicians. I think it's good for the politicians and good for the voters for them to go someplace where there's more time and less of a race to hit whatever their PR team has come up with.

"I once tried to do improv at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival ... and very drunk Scottish people did not care for me." Seth Meyers

Your compatriot Jimmy Kimmel said there may not be late-night hosts in 10 years. Do you similarly see yourselves as the last bastion of late-night television? Unless some major sea change happens, I don't think there's going to be a whole new wave of network hosts in the way there always has been. Then again, interesting voices are always going to use the technologies they have at hand to find an audience. So, if you're a great lover of the institution of late-night talk shows, there's probably some sadness in your future. But if you love funny people telling funny jokes and talking to people in interesting ways, that's always going to be available.

You re-upped your contract at "Late Night" through 2028. How much longer do you see yourself behind the desk? After '28, I think we'll go on a week-to-week contract. No — the network knows that I would like to do it as long as they'll have me.

Will you be consulting for the U.K. version of "SNL"? I would love the offer, just for a boondoggle to the U.K. But I have not been asked.

What makes you laugh the hardest? My kids.

Worst you've ever bombed? I once tried to do improv at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival at a stand-up comedy night, and very drunk Scottish people did not care for me and my partner asking for suggestions.

What is the best type of audience member? A good listener.

Worst type of audience member? A person with a unique, piercing laugh.

What is the hackiest thing a comedian can do in 2025? Be in a room and realize that everybody is there to laugh and have a good time, and what an incredible privilege it is to be the person that they have asked to do that for them.

I think you heard "happiest," but I said "hackiest." So, I definitely did!

Is there a joke on "SNL" or "Late Night" that you're glad you never told? I wrote a joke for "Weekend Update," and Amy Poehler was like, "You're fucking crazy. It's never going to work." And I'm like, "It's gonna crush." I did it at dress rehearsal: "A man in Washington state was recently arrested after he was caught having sex with the family dog. Even worse, it was makeup sex." Amy had to jump in front of my body, lest the audience drag me into the street.

That was cut before the live show? I think it was cut before "Update" was over.

Best comedy or joke-writing advice? Shorter.

kudos



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VARIETY

focus

Power Players These New York women saw big opportunities in an uncertain showbiz landscape

By Paula Hendrickson, Todd Longwell, Brooke Mazurek, Rosemary Rossi

→ Uncertainty swirls around so many things nowadays — the governemnt, global politics, economies, trade and, of course, the entertainment industry. The women on *Variety*'s Women's Impact Report: New York are based in Gotham and have found ways to drive their businesses forward despite the fallout of showbiz strikes, the COVID hangover and other factors buffeting the media landscape in which they operate.



Illustration by Alisa Gao



Anjula Acharia
Founder, CEO A-Series Investments and Management Founder, 5 Junction Records

Acharia, a talent manager and strategic investor, was recognized this past year by the Indian government for leading the globalization of India into pop culture. She also found herself personally invited to Buckingham Palace for recognition of her successes — including the joint venture she closed with Warner Music Group and her 5 Junction Records label this past year.

The key to nailing it all? "My failures," says the England-raised, L.A.-based daughter of Punjabi immigrants. "My first company, DesiHits!, didn't end the way I envisioned, but it became the launch pad for discovering Priyanka Chopra Jonas and initiating multiple cross-cultural collaborations that laid the groundwork for my successes this year."



Frances Berwick
Chairman, Bravo, Peacock Unscripted

With Bravo hits accounting for seven of cable's top 10 unscripted reality shows — "Vanderpump Rules" leads the pack in the No. 1 slot — one might assume Berwick has nothing left to prove, but she's working her magic at Peacock, too. Season 2 of "The Traitors" nabbed Peacock its first Primetime Emmy for reality competition program, and its third season in December debuted as the most-watched unscripted series in the U.S.

Linear vs. streaming reality: "We are seeing less than a 10% duplication across our Bravo linear and Peacock audiences, with a younger audience for streaming, but with the same high levels of engagement and loyalty. Obviously, we have more flexibility around how deep and immersive we can go with a beloved show on streaming. We can satisfy fans with almost daily new episodes in the case of 'Love Island,' and have extended and uncensored versions of our Bravo reunions on Peacock."



Kasee Calabrese's Fifth Season is behind the Appple TV+ hit "Severance," with Britt Lower, above.



Kasee Calabrese
CFO, COO, Fifth Season

"We're not making widgets," asserts the bicoastal Calabrese. "Every deal is different and custom." That means she spends a lot of time interfacing with banks and Fifth Season's strategic investors CJ ENM and Japanese studio Toho in between meetings for television series (including Apple TV+'s award-winning "Severance"), films (Netflix's "Nonnas," starring Vince Vaughn, and A24's "Friendship," starring Paul Rudd and Tim Robinson) and check-ins with the technology team.

Coming out of the strikes: "It was refocusing on building an efficient super structure and dealing with the kind of volume that we had in front of us again," she says.



Carolyn "Carrie" Casselman
Partner, Davis Wright Tremaine

The legal counsel for many of New York City's premier institutional nonprofit theaters (including the Public Theater and Manhattan Theater Club), Casselman has clients who were originating producers, commercial producers or financiers for shows that scored 55 Tony Award nominations and 15 wins in 2024 and 33 nominations and 10 wins in 2025.

New York groove: "I had never visited New York City until I applied to graduate school, so I was probably 23 or 24 before I even set foot here," she says. "But I think from the moment I was here, I plugged into the energy of the city."



Emily Gerson Saines
Founder, president, Brookside Artist Management

Gerson Saines saw client Kieran Culkin (who she has repped since he was 12) win an Oscar anda Golden Globe for his perf in "A Real Pain." Other longtime clients like Sebastian Stan, made awards season waves with "A Different Man" and "The Apprentice" while Cynthia Nixon is back in "... And Just Like That" and "The Gilded Age."

Forever young: "You know, some people say to me, why would you do this at this stage of your career? It's because it sparks joy for me, right? You know, I see people, I see young actors, and I think it's all ahead of them, and I think that's so exciting. And I love the idea of being a part of that," she says.

"We have more flexibility around how deep and immersive we can go with a beloved show on streaming." Frances Berwick

Clockwise, from top left: Sam Gold; Apple TV+; Emilio Madrid; Courtesy of Casselman; Courtesy of Calabrese; Patrick Randak

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Rebecca Glashow
CEO, BBC Global Media & Streaming

Glashow transformed BBC Studios' distribution strategy to meet the growing international demand — especially in the U.S. —for British programming like "Doctor Who" on Disney+, "The Jetty" on Hulu and "A Good Girl's Guide to Murder" on Netflix. Her efforts expanded the company's digital platforms and led to a record 27 Emmy nominations and eight wins in 2024. Through a landmark Disney deal, she set the stage for the first-ever "Bluey" movie, due in 2027, based on the global children's TV hit.

British appeal: "Much of [British storytelling] is driven by singular creative voices — writers and producers with a clear point of view — which gives our stories a distinctive edge. At BBC Studios, we produce and distribute an extraordinary range of content across every genre. What unites it all is a commitment to quality and a belief in storytelling that entertains, informs and inspires."



Randi Goldstein
Senior partner, co-head of New York office, Gersh

Goldstein, who was promoted to senior partner this year, not only saw "Babygirl" star client Harris Dickinson hit the Cannes Film Festival with his directorial debut, "Urchin," but also cast as John Lennon in Sam Mendes' buzzy Beatles movies. Client Luke Kirby leaped into hit Prime Video show "Etoile" and Megan Hilty is triumphant on Broadway in "Death Becomes Her," earning a Tony nomination.

Open mind: For a client like Dickinson, "The key is listening. Harris has always had razor-sharp instincts and clear taste, goals and opinions — whether it's acting or directing. By knowing and understanding his vision, I can best support it and help him build a career that reflects his unique voice and talents."



Lynn Hazan
Co-managing partner, Influence Media Partners

In January, Influence Media Partners announced that the company secured approximately $360 million in debt financing through an inaugural private securitization, collateralized by music royalties from a portion of its impressive total portfolio — a monumental effort Hazan personally oversaw. By April, that announcement dovetailed with news of two new joint ventures with DJ Khaled.

Artists first: "It's essential to align yourself with people whose creative talent you genuinely believe in," says Hazan. "Take the time to understand their vision and support it with thoughtful business strategies and tactics."



Sofia Hernandez
Global head of business marketing and commercial partnerships, TikTok

Hernandez has helped transform TikTok into a cultural launchpad for entertainment, merging creator content, trailers and ticketing to turn buzz into box office success. Her work has redefined how stories gain traction, making TikTok essential to driving audience action. "Entertainment is more than a great movie or franchise — it's the entire ecosystem around it," Hernandez says.

"It's essential to align yourself with people whose creative talent you genuinely believe in." Lynn Hazan

Audience engagement: "TikTok is where that ecosystem lives and breathes in real time. It's where fans are more than an audience — they remix, respond and build culture alongside the studios."



Carletta Higginson
Global head of business marketing and EVP, chief digital officer, Warner Music Group

In her post for WMG, Higginson oversees the full spectrum of global digital partnerships — from dealmaking through account management — while also working with her team to explore commercial innovation and new digital partnerships. Among two of her most notable deals this year: a multi-year agreement with Spotify that effectively ends disputes over the streaming giant's "bundling" option that was paying rights-holders less in royalties, and a new licensing deal with Amazon Music focused on delivering new benefits for artists, songwriters, and fans.



Randi Goldstein's client Harris Dickinson made his directorial debut with "Urchin."

Clockwise, from top left: Courtesy of Glashow; Courtesy of Hazan; Courtesy of Hernandez; Courtesy of Higginson; BBC Film; Courtesy of Goldstein

CONGRATULATIONS TO
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Carol Kaplan
Co-chair, theater & live entertainment, Loeb & Loeb

A dyed-in-the-wool theater person who earned an MFA in playwrighting from Yale before entering NYU law school, South African native Kaplan is one of Broadway's top legal eagles, repping Netflix for live stage projects ("Stranger Things: The First Shadow," "Patriots") and serving as production counsel for the George Clooney hit "Good Night, and Good Luck."

Time on the boards not wasted: "Some clients who are new into producing find it very helpful because I can explain to them about the creative process, how it unfolds and the kind of bumps that you can encounter along the road," she says.



Michelle King
Executive Producer, "Elsbeth," "Happy Face"

Punctuating drama with dark humor is a hallmark of King's work. Along with her husband Robert, she's drawn millions of viewers into their "Good Wife" universe, including "The Good Fight" and CBS' hit series "Elsbeth," which consistently wins its time period and was recently renewed for a third season. King recently completed co-creator/co-showrunner/EP duties on the final season of their supernatural series "Evil," and currently executive produces "Happy Face," both for Paramount +.

Controversial conversations: "Robert and I have spent our careers writing about the three topics one is advised to never discuss at a dinner party: politics, sex and religion. We didn't plan it that way, but it does keep us amused."



Jennifer Koester
President, COO, Sphere Entertainment

Koester is redefining live entertainment by modeling Sphere into a boundary-pushing platform for immersive experiences. Under her leadership, Sphere launched original content filmed with its custom Big Sky camera and hosted first-ever events across genres — proving what's possible when technology, storytelling and innovation converge on a spectacular new stage. Up next: "The Wizard of Oz at Sphere."

Well-rounded view: "To us, 'immersive' is more than just a buzzword; it's the intention behind everything we do," Koester says. "The bar is going to get higher and higher, and we're continuing to evolve and push boundaries with technology."



Sasha Levites
Partner, entertainment group, Frankfurt Kurnit Klein & Selz

In her youth, Levites acted in commercials and worked as an extra on the 1995 film "Now and Then," where she met teen acting idols including Christina Ricci. Today, she's an attorney cutting deals for clients such as Louverture Films (acclaimed film adaptation of Colson Whitehead's novel "Nickel Boys"), author Dean Koontz (rights deals with Sony Pictures Television and Amazon Studios) and producers Laura Bickford and Annabelle Dunne (upcoming doc "Ask E. Jean").

Digging the vibe: "To me, the film industry in New York feels much scrappier and grittier," she says. "It also feels more familial. It's a real community."



Bettie Levy
Founder, CEO, BCL Entertainment

Levy, a 25-year music industry veteran, is the mastermind behind BCL — the talent, event and brand partnership company specializing in matching talent with clients' creative needs in a highly nuanced way. Though her work spans everything from corporate events to virtual experiences and commercial campaigns, it was BCL Entertainment's expanding footprint within the charity space that Levy is proudest of. In the past six months, the company produced events for the Toy Foundation (the TOTY Awards and the Toy Foundation L.A. Benefit), 914Cares, Room to Read and Pace Women's Justice Center.

Transformation: "Diamonds are made under pressure," says Levy of the wisdom that keeps her going in business and in life.

"The film industry in New York feels much scrappier and grittier." Sasha Levites





Carol Kaplan was production counsel on Broadway's "Good Night, and Good Luck," left; Jennifer Koester is president of Sphere Entertainment, right.

Clockwise, from top right: Courtesy of Levy; Getty Images; Emilio Madrid; Courtesy of King; Courtesy of Koester; Courtesy of Levites

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Lynn Hazan

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Angela Lopes
Exec VP, strategy & investment, Sony Music Entertainment

Lopes, who works with Sony's executive leadership and global digital business teams to develop strategies and investing opportunities, played a key role in critical acquisition and investment transactions this past year. "We've worked consistently to weave M&A into the fabric of our organization globally," says Lopes. And doing that at scale within an organization requires far more than capital. "It requires clarity and communication … it is the collective effort of teams across the company and around the world driving to a common purpose, closely tied to our strategy and underpinned by creative-first relationships, a data-driven approach and rigorous execution."

Growth opportunities: "It's wonderful to see the amazing creative ventures that executives who joined through acquisition have accomplished here.



Katie Maloney
Nonfiction Television Agent, CAA

Maloney's clients include All3Media, the shingle behind hit "Squid Game: The Challenge," powerhouse Fremantle Media and Truly Original, whose "Summer House" is once again a zeitgeisty blockbuster. Nonfiction is a buzzy area. "Especially coming off these recent upfronts, sports, non-scripted and docs are a huge part of every media company's plan," she says.

Beyond the competition: "I think because everybody has to be a brand now, athletes just be athletes. They want to tell their stories. They want to tell other stories — of other athletes, of things they are passionate about that are not sports-related."



Katie Maloney's client All3Media produces "Squid Game: The Challenge," above; Jamie Pillet reps Fred Hechinger, below.



Jamie Pillet
Talent agent, WME

The self-proclaimed theater kid and "oddball" has an eye for unique talent: Pillet's clients are buzzy performers like Mike Faist ("Challengers," Netflix's upcoming "East of Eden"), Fred Hechinger ("Gladiator II" and indie hit "Thelma") and Paapa Essiedu (Professor Snape in the Max "Harry Potter" series). Other clients include Walker Scobell ("Percy Jackson and the Olympians"), Andrew Barth Feldman (the upcoming "Poetic License"), and she helped sign "Anora" star Mark Eydelshteyn.

Star spotting: "What I look for in these young people is just people who are not apologizing for being themselves, and who find other people like that and just feel instantly connected. And I think that they connect to the work that way."

"Sports, non-scripted and docs are a huge part of every media company's plan."
Katie Maloney





Taylor Rahmani
Agent, Endorsements & Voiceover, UTA

An advocate for representation in fashion and beauty, Rahmani crafted Michaela Jaé Rodriguez's historic role as Charlotte Tilbury's first transgender woman to front a beauty campaign, and has brokered partnerships for Travis Bennett and Monica Barbaro while looking after clients like Chase Sui Wonders of "The Studio" and Britt Lower of "Severance."

Adding depth: For Wonders and Lower, "It's a very collaborative experience between myself, their stylist, their publicist … They're on these two major shows, and I am being intentionally specific with their partnerships and strategy."



Peggy Roe
Exec VP, chief customer officer, Marriott Intl.

Roe spearheads creative customer experiences brand. She decided to rethink the traditional (and boring) sponsorship deals, and as a result, Marriott Bonvoy's partnership with Beyoncé's blockbuster Cowboy Carter tour includes access to the tour to on-property programming and specially curated hospitality packages auctioned off on the Marriott Bonvoy Moments platform.

Customer service: "What I love about what we get to do is I get to say to the teams, 'OK, dream up what's possible. What could we do to delight a customer that would be that lifetime experience for them?'"

Clockwise, from top left: Courtesy of Lopes; Netflix; Paramount Pictures; Courtesy of Roe; Courtesy of Rahmani; Courtesy of CAA; Courtesy of Pillet

Congratulations to our partner **Carol Kaplan** and the other distinguished women featured alongside her in *Variety*'s 2025 New York Women's Impact Report.

We applaud your outstanding professional achievements and commitment to excellence that resonates throughout the entertainment industry and beyond.



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CBC Docs POV: Town of Widows
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Power to Achieve
Purple Production Special
Queen Unseen, The
Queen: Anthology – A Life on Film, The
Releve, La [aka: Les Vetos]
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Short Docs: Oshkikishikaw: A New Day
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Nina Rosenstein
Exec VP, late night & specials programming, HBO, Max

Laughter is serious business to Rosenstein, be it "Last Week Tonight With John Oliver," "Conan O'Brien Must Go" or comedy specials by the likes of Nikki Glaser, Ramy Youssef and Seth Meyers. Rosenstein seeks boundary-pushing projects as varied as the Emmy-winning "David Byrne's American Utopia," Julio Torres' "Fantasmas" and "Jerrod Carmichael Reality Show."

Late night shows and politics: "In their own distinct ways, Bill [Maher] and John [Oliver] aren't just reacting to headlines; they're ripping them apart and holding up the guts. In a time when misinformation spreads fast and chaos and outrage drown out nuance, they push their audiences to think harder. That's the power (and point) of these shows: they're uncomfortable, funny, and exactly what this moment needs."



Nina Rosenstein oversees such hits as "Conan O'Brien Must Go."



Courtney Sanchez
Chief strategy officer & exec VP of operations Tubi

Sanchez orchestrated the low-latency livestream of Super Bowl LIX on Tubi, making it the most-streamed in history. Her strategy and operational precision transformed Tubi into the U.S.'s top free streaming service.

Big offers: "One of the biggest challenges facing the industry as a whole is the shifting economic landscape," Sanchez says. "But we believe Tubi is well-positioned for this type of environment as a platform offering free, premium and accessible entertainment."



Priya Verma
Partner, Yorn Levine Barnes Krintzman Rubenstein Kohner Endlich Goodell & Gellman

Verma expected sports to be the focus of her legal career, but it fell by the wayside as her work took her deeper into the world of film and TV. In recent months, she's cut deals for Rachel Sennott (HBO series pact), director Nisha Ganatra (Disney's "Freaky Friday" sequel), Fred Armisen (Netflix's "Fester") and Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Eboni Booth (write and develop "Game of Thrones" spinoff for HBO).

Tennis, anyone?: "Everyone in the business who knows me knows that sometimes my vacation schedule revolves around tennis season, because I go to all the tournaments. I also grew up playing competitively," she says.



Laxmi Vijaysankar
Partner, Serling Rooks Hunter McKoy Worob & Averill

A native of India, Vijaysankar came to Sterling Rooks Hunter in 2011 with a corporate M&A background and applied it to music acts like the Zac Brown Band, helping them set up a record label and a food and music festival, as well as non-music related ventures. Other clients include Stem Disintermedia, the Cara Lewis Group, G7 Entertainment and Blended Strategy Group.

Branching out not all about the Benjamins: "It's also a way for them to create interesting moments for themselves, like some sort of cultural cachet or some buzz around their involvement with a particular product or endorsement or company," she says.



Marsha Vlasic
Co-chairman, music division, IAG

The lauded music agent — known for her no-nonsense approach and impressive client list that spans legends like Neil Young and younger artists like Cage the Elephant — was inducted into Pollstar and Venues-Now Women of Live Hall of Fame last year and received the International Music Awards highest honors including Agent of the Year. This past year she also got to watch the culmination of Billy Joel's historic residency at Madison Square Garden.

Her advice to young women in the biz?: "Don't look at being a woman as a liability; look at it as an asset. Work harder, smarter and more passionately and you can achieve anything."

"One of the biggest challenges facing the industry as a whole is the shifting economic landscape." Courtney Sanchez

Clockwise, from top left: Courtesy of Rosenstein; Team Coco/Max; Kat Stanas; Courtesy of Vijaysankar; Courtesy of Verma; Courtesy of Sanchez

92 Noms

LA Press Club's 67th Southern California Journalism Awards



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VARIETY

Broadway Breakouts Women blazing trails on the boards



Megan Hilty earned a Tony nom for her role in blockbuster "Death Becomes Her."



Sonia Friedman
Theater producer

"It's been a landmark season on Broadway with a remarkable range of writing and acting talent," says Friedman. She should know, as her latest, "Stranger Things: The First Shadow" just opened, and Sonia Friedman Prods. received 21 Tony Award nominations, taking home five. "The Dead Outlaw" producer loves new voices, but the classics also call to her. When reviving a play like "Oedipus," she looks to "how the play speaks to now."
Fight the cuts: "We have to hope these cuts aren't permanent, and we have to fight like hell to make sure they're not. That means advocacy, yes, but also action."



Megan Hilty
Actor

No stranger to playing divas on screen ("Smash") and stage ("Wicked"), Hilty earned her second Tony nomination for playing the ultimate prima donna Madeline Ashton, an actor petrified of aging in hit "Death Becomes Her." Hilty says the show "has presented the most difficult, yet rewarding, hurdles I've ever faced in my career." And she's pushed through despite bouts with the flu and tendinitis in her throat.
This is the way: She's thrilled to be back on Broadway. "It finally feels like theater is thriving again. And the stories being told are as diverse and exciting as ever."



Audra McDonald
Actor

Audiences have come to expect greatness from the four-time Tony Award winner and record-breaking 11-time nominee. But McDonald wowed even her biggest fans with her show-stopping turn in the Broadway revival of "Gypsy" as Mama Rose, the ultimate stage mother. McDonald is the first Black actor to play the iconic role on Broadway. She also expertly removed herself from any drama surrounding a "feud" with Patti LuPone with class befitting a legend.



Danya Taymor
Director

"There is simply nothing like a dark room with hundreds of strangers sitting together experiencing a piece of theater," says Taymor, who won a directing Tony last year for "The Outsiders" and was nominated this year for "John Proctor Is the Villain." She was drawn to the deeply-layered "John Proctor" because it draws on "the experience of being a teenage girl — and it takes that experience so seriously." As the show continues to sell out regularly, Taymor says, "Witnessing 800 people being collectively moved in the Booth Theater every night, many in tears, is so meaningful to me."
On defunding of the arts: "To me, this is a tragedy — theater is so vital and so important for us as a society. It is one of the few spaces left where strangers can coexist and experience something as a true collective."



Kara Young
Actor

Young made history as the first Black performer, and second overall, to receive four consecutive Tony nominations. Winning this year's best featured actress in a play for her scene-stealing turn in the Phylicia Rashad-directed "Purpose" made Young — a board member of the Classical Theatre of Harlem — the first Black actor to win back-to-back Tony Awards. Next, she co-stars with Sterling K. Brown and Janelle Monae in the film adaptation of Aleshea Harris' off-Broadway play "Is God Is."
Creative Funding: "We [the Classical Theatre of Harlem] lost a lot of money from funding cuts, and just had a fundraiser. They do a poker tournament every year to help raise money; this year they raised over $100,000. So there are people coming together in the community and paying attention to a what theater can do for community — in this case for Uptown, for Harlem — and what it means to have free, accessible theater."



Kara Young is the first Black actor to win back-to-back Tonys.

Clockwise, from top middle: Getty Images; Getty Images; Marc J. Franklin; Getty Images; Getty Images; Matthew Murphy and Evan Zimmerman; Courtesy of Taymor

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LOCATION UPDATE: CZECH REPUBLIC

CZECH REPUBLIC

WHERE TRADITION OF FILMMAKING MEETS EXCELLENCE



czech audiovisual fund

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Karlovy Vary International Film Festival

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"Ballerina" is among a host of high-profile international productions to have shot in the Czech Republic in recent years.

Larry D. Horricks/Lionsgate

Center Stage Czech Republic rides success of revamped audiovisual law

By Christopher Vourlias

Anyone who's spent time in the "John Wick" universe — or invested countless hours in bringing the blockbuster Lionsgate franchise to life — could imagine the pitfalls awaiting the production team behind the Ana de Armas-starring spinoff "Ballerina," which hit theaters on June 6.

Predominantly filmed in the Czech Republic, the production was a high-octane thrill-ride where "every second scene was a shoot-'em-up or an explosion or a car chase," according to Dave Arrowsmith, the film's supervising art director. That included "very big, complex set builds" — both in Prague's historic Barrandov Studios and on location — as well as a bit of elbow grease and ingenuity when things didn't go according to plan.

After an unseasonably warm winter, for example, when temperatures in the Czech countryside failed to drop below zero, Arrowsmith, SFX supervisor Ondrej Nierostek and their team had no choice but to build their own frozen lake from scratch. "The Czech crews, their skill level is massive. You can ask for anything," Arrowsmith says. "It's a real can-do attitude. They're problem-solvers here."

"Ballerina" is among a host of high-profile international productions to set up shop in the Czech Republic in recent years, including Robert Eggers' "Nosferatu," Prime Video's upcoming "Blade Runner 2099" series, AMC Networks' "Interview With the Vampire" and Netflix's German-language historical drama series "The Empress."

After an uncharacteristic downturn that saw production drop last year — due to both the Hollywood strikes and turmoil with the country's rebate system, which has since been resolved — industry insiders expect a dramatic rebound.

"It's definitely back. And it's growing," says Pavlína Žipková, head of the Czech Film Commission. "Nobody ever lost faith in the country," adds David Minkowski, head of production at leading production services outfit Stillking, which is servicing the Prime Video action-adventure series "Ride or Die," starring Octavia Spencer and Hannah Waddingham. "The government here has always delivered."

A big reason for such optimism was the launch of a new audiovisual law this year, whose key provisions include an increase in the country's production incentive from 20% to 25% for live-action projects, as well as a rise to 35% for digital production and animation. The maximum amount that can be claimed per project tripled to nearly $20.5 million.

In addition, the revamped Czech Audiovisual Fund will support a broader range of productions than its predecessor — including films, series, video games and animated projects — while an overhaul to its financing system, which includes a new levy on streaming platforms, is

expected to make the fund more sustainable in the future.

Touting the changes as a much-needed move to modernize the sector, Czech Audiovisual Fund CEO Helena Bezděk Fraňková says the new measures "should ensure stable growth and sustainability for independent producers, the development of talent and therefore an increased competitiveness of the Czech audiovisual industry."

The bump to the rebate — bringing the Czech Republic closer in line to regional competitors such as Hungary and Poland, which both offer 30% incentives — only builds on the industry's many strengths. That includes world-class studios, top-notch post-production and visual effects services, and a wide range of locations in easy driving distance from Prague, with Kevan Van Thompson, co-founder of Czech Anglo Prods., which serviced the "Ballerina" shoot, describing the Czech Republic as "one of the best countries for location work in Europe."

The country's below-the-line talents, meanwhile, set the industry apart, with notable achievements in recent years including Academy Award nominations in production design for set decorators Nora Sopková ("Jojo Rabbit") and Beatrice Brentnerová ("Nosferatu"), as well as a quartet of Oscar nods for artisans and effects specialists Linda Eisenhamerová, Viktor Prášil, Kamil Jafar and Viktor Müller for "All Quiet on the Western Front."

Such craftsmanship, Arrowsmith notes, is rooted in traditions passed down from one generation to the next across more than a century of Czech filmmaking. "They're still bringing on apprentices. They're still teaching plasterers. They're still teaching welding and joinery," he says. "I've been all over the world, and it's one of the best places to work because of that." In the Czech Republic, he notes, craftspeople are referred to as "golden hands."

Rory Cheyne, production designer for Skydance's Apple TV+ sci-fi series "Foundation," which shot much of its second and third seasons in the Czech Republic, praised his Czech crews for their outside-the-box thinking and their "collaborative way of working." "They would come up with things that I would have never thought of to add to a set," he says.

That skillset was put to the test when the Isaac Asimov adaptation arrived in the Czech Republic last year, fresh off a shoot in the Canary Islands, where heavy storms washed away one of the production's coastal sets. With no time to reshoot in the Spanish archipelago, local crews got to work "building the ocean in Czech," says Cheyne, utilizing a giant water tank and wave machine to create a tidal pool in the parking lot outside their studios in Prague.

"It's not only about production muscles. It's also about the incredible creative and technical expertise of the local crew, which makes the difference," says Tomáš Krejčí, founder of Prague- and L.A.-based outfit Milk & Honey, which serviced the "Foundation" shoot.

Foreign productions, he adds, can still find "incredible value" in a country where "the cost of labor is still far less expensive in comparison with Germany or France or the U.K."

Adds Minkowski, "It's not all about [the rebate]. It's about what else can you bring to the table. There just aren't many places like Prague."



"All Quiet on the Western Front" provided a showcase for Czech below-the-line talent.

Screen Play
Czech audiovisual law highlights

By Christopher Vourlias

→ This year saw the introduction of a new audiovisual law in the Czech Republic. Here are some of the highlights:

Under the revamped Czech Audiovisual Fund — formerly known as the Czech Film Fund — the Czech production incentive rose from 20% to 25% for live-action projects, and to 35% for digital production and animation, provided no live-action shooting occurs in the country. The maximum amount that can be claimed per project tripled to roughly $20.5 million.

The new-look fund has also given an overhaul to its selective support scheme. It will not only support films but also series, animated projects and video games, while also offering support to infrastructure such as distribution, promotion and festivals.

Under the new system, the Czech Audiovisual Fund will be financed through a 2% levy on cinema ticket revenues, broadcast advertising revenues and cable/satellite broadcast revenues, and a 3.5% obligatory assessment on revenues from all streaming platforms operating in the Czech Republic. Those amounts will be mirrored by a contribution from the state budget.

In the case of selective support, the Czech government will match the amount raised by those levies. For production incentives, the total annual budget will be calculated at six times the amount of money raised, and is expected to reach $92 million per year once the levies take effect in 2027.

For more information, visit the Czech Film Commission (filmcommission.cz) and the Czech Film Center (filmcenter.cz).

The new-look fund will not only support films but also series, animated projects and video games.

Netflix



Wide Angle Czech filmmakers cross borders, push boundaries

By Christopher Vourlias

→ It was a historic scene at this year's Cannes Film Festival, when Czech filmmaker Zuzana Kirchnerová climbed the stairs of the Lumière Theater for the premiere of her debut feature, "Caravan," the first time in more than three decades that a Czech majority production played in the French fest's official selection.

While the Cannes triumph was a crowning moment for the director, it also marked the latest in a series of watershed achievements for the Czech industry. Beyond the Croisette, Czech directors are becoming a staple at prestigious festivals, reflecting a steady growth arguably not seen in the Central European nation since the glory days of the Czech New Wave.

"I feel there's real movement in the right direction," says "Caravan" producer Dagmar Sedláčková. "That kind of consistency speaks to a maturation of the industry — better developed scripts, more precise direction and a willingness to push boundaries."

Credit goes in no small part to the Czech government, which this year overhauled its audiovisual law and transformed the Czech Audiovisual Fund — what culture minister Martin Baxa describes as "a crucial step towards strengthening the development of the Czech audiovisual industry."

Comedic supernatural mystery series "We're on It, Comrades!" is a Czech-German co-production.

Among the key provisions is an expansion of the selective funding scheme to include support for series, animation and digital productions, alongside dramatic changes to how the fund is financed.

"We have succeeded in establishing a growth-oriented system — the more successful Czech audiovisual production becomes, the more support it will receive, and the more funding will be available for film incentives," Baxa says.

Meanwhile, a new generation of Czech film folk is "thinking beyond borders," Sedláčková said. "Many of them have studied or worked abroad, and they're not trying to copy international models; they're building stories that are deeply personal but still speak to wider audiences."

It's not simply a case of Czechs looking outward. "Big sales agents are looking at the Czech Republic and are doing collaborations which they were never doing in the past 20 years," says Matěj Chlupáček, who produced Annecy-premiering animated film "Living Large." "The fact that we are finally able to make a deal with international sales and festival managers before we start shooting the film is completely changing the system."

Chlupáček, whose feature directorial debut, "We Have Never Been Modern," bowed at Karlovy Vary, is prepping his follow-up, "Sleep Well," with French actor Nadia Tereszkiewicz — who starred in François Ozon's "The Crime Is Mine" — in a leading role. "It's a great combination of an actress I admire and someone who can help us shape the film for the international market," he says. Another title from Chlupáček's company, a reimagining of the sci-fi film "Late August at the Hotel Ozone," echoes a broader shift in the Czech biz where among emerging filmmakers "genre boundaries are looser, formats are more fluid and their visual storytelling often feels bolder [than in the past]," according to Sedláčková. "A lot of filmmakers from my generation are leaning more toward genre films and also trying to find the combination of auteur and more mainstream films," says Ondřej Hudeček, a Sundance winner for his short "Peacock."

Hudeček's fiction feature debut, "Little Thief," is a genre-spanning movie that he describes as equal parts "crime-comedy and social satire." It's a reflection of the director's own influences — "a blend of American genre cinema and European arthouse" — and of a broader recognition in the Czech Republic of the ways in which world cinema is evolving. "It's not only from the filmmakers," Hudeček says. "It's also from the institutions, because they know that any healthy film industry needs diversity in the films that they produce."

Tereza Nvotová, whose sophomore feature, "Nightsiren," won the Golden Leopard at the Locarno Film Festival, says the industry has come a long way from her student days in Prague, when there was a perception that the Czech New Wave was "the only great thing that ever happened" in Czech cinema.

Nvotová, who teaches at Prague's venerable Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts, or FAMU, says her students possess a confidence and "courage" that's helping to elevate Czech cinema and "move the industry to a whole other level, in terms of being recognized by the world."

Unlike the country's last great cinematic movement, however, Nvotová says this time around, "it's not going to be a wave at all." "I think we are very individual," she says. "This new generation of filmmakers are trying to find their own voices, which are not necessarily being dictated by Western culture."



Prague Spring Ten up-and-coming Czech filmmaking talents to watch

By Christopher Vourlias

→ It's been more than half a century since the Czech New Wave heralded the arrival of a fresh cinematic movement in the former Czechoslovakia. Today's rising talents — from diverse backgrounds, working across a range of styles and media — showcase an industry that's increasingly embracing the world.

Here are 10 Czech emerging talents (in alphabetical order):



Michal Blaško

Working between the Czech Republic and Slovakia, Blaško landed on the international radar when his short film "Atlantis, 2003" premiered at Cannes' Cinefondation, before launching his feature debut "Victim" in Venice's Horizons strand. He's currently teaming up again with "Victim" scribe Jakub Medvecký on the coming-of-age drama series "Cowgirl."

Tereza Nvotová's "Father" is circling a fall festival premiere.



Kristina Dufková

The Prague-born animator made a splash with her well-received debut feature, "Living Large," which premiered in competition at Annecy, where it won the Contrechamp Jury Award en route to a lengthy festival run. Dufková will bring together much of the same creative team for her follow-up, "Wish It!," which will likewise utilize puppetry and stop-motion animation to tell a story about children's imagination.



Ondřej Hudeček

Hudeček has been one to watch since his short film, the historical queer romance "Peacock," premiered at the Toronto Intl. Film Festival before winning a jury prize for directing at Sundance in 2016. The director's upcoming feature debut, "Little Thief," is a genre-defying mash-up that revolves around a gang of petty thieves who pull a series of insurance frauds during the COVID-19 lockdowns.



Daria Kashcheeva

Kashcheeva, whose 2020 animated short film, "Daughter" won the Student Academy Award and was nominated for best animated short Oscar, is one of the bright talents at the forefront of a new generation of Czech animators. She's currently developing her untitled debut

Father: Danae Production; Hudeček: Courtesy Czech Film Center; Blasko: Courtesy Czech Film Center; Dufková: Courtesy Czech Film Center; Kashcheeva: Gabriel Kuchta

Today's rising talents — from diverse backgrounds, working across a range of styles and media — showcase an industry that's increasingly embracing the world.

feature, a sci-fantasy set in the future that will be a hybrid live-action film utilizing stop-motion animation.



Diana Cam Van Nguyen

Another rising star in animation, Nguyen's breakout short film, "Love, Dad" travelled to nearly two dozen film festivals, including Clermont-Ferrand, Locarno, London and Toronto, while winning a Czech Lion for best short film. Her anticipated debut feature, "Inbetween Worlds," was developed during a prestigious Cannes Residence and looks to move into production in 2026.



Tereza Nvotová

The Slovakia-born Nvotová, who lives between Prague and New York, made a promising debut with Rotterdam premiere "Filthy" before winning the Golden Leopard in Locarno's Filmmakers of the Present competition with the feminist horror-fantasy "Nightsiren." Her third feature, "Father," is circling a fall festival premiere, while Nvotová is also tapped to direct the buzzy Slovak political drama "Our People," awarded at Series Mania.



Olmo Omerzu

After premiering in Berlin and in San Sebastian's New Directors sidebar with his first two films, the Slovenian-born director won the Crystal Globe for best directing at the Karlovy Vary Film Festival with 2018's "Winter Flies." His upcoming fifth feature, the family dramedy "Ungrateful Beings," boasts an international cast led by Irish actor Barry Ward of "Bad Sisters" fame.



Greta Stocklassa

The Czech Swedish docmaker broke out with her sophomore effort, "Blix Not Bombs," a documentary about former U.N. weapons inspector Hans Blix that premiered at CPH:DOX to kick off a solid festival run. She followed that with the short doc "Buzz of the Earth," which scooped a pair of Czech national film awards last year.



Vojtěch Strakatý

Strakatý got off to an auspicious start with his directorial debut, "After Party," a coming-of-age drama set over the course of a single day, which premiered in the Venice Film Festival's Horizons Extra sidebar last year. The director's follow-up, "The Other Side of Summer," about a pair of teenage girls who discover a portal to another world, is eyeing a fall festival premiere.



Pavel Sýkora and Viktor Horák

This young filmmaking duo won the Student Oscar for their short film "The Compatriot," which was also shortlisted in the best live-action short film category at the 97th Academy Awards. They're currently working on their debut feature, described as a coming-of-age story for the digital era, as well as a limited series about high school sports.



Vojtěch Strakatý's "After Party" premiered in Venice's Horizons Extra sidebar.

Strakaty: Courtesy Venice International Film Festival; Cam Van Nguyen: Kvet Nguyen; Stocklassa, Nvotová: Courtesy Czech Film Center (2); Sykora and Horak: Getty Images; Omerzu: Martin Douba; After Party: Xova Film



"Living Large" was acquired by Goodfellas for international sales.

Future Frame Czech animators stir memories of golden age

By Christopher Vourlias

The Czech animation industry can point to a century-long legacy that gave rise to internationally recognized talents including Jiří Trnka, Karel Zeman, Jan Švankmajer and Jiří Barta, many of whom ushered in a golden age that flourished alongside the Czech New Wave of live-action filmmaking in the 1960s.

Thanks to that rich tradition, along with robust state support, Czech animation is again thriving, with a rising crop of fresh talents pointing to what filmmaker Daria Kashcheeva heralds as a "new wave" for the storied industry.

Kashcheeva, whose 2020 animated short film "Daughter" won the Student Academy Award and was nominated for the best animated short Oscar, joins emerging filmmakers like Diana Cam Van Nguyen, who prepped her feature debut "Inbetween Worlds" alongside Kashcheeva at a prestigious Cannes residence, as well as Kristina Dufková, whose feature-length directorial debut, the puppet animation film "Living Large," premiered in the main competition at Annecy last year.

"The Czech Film Fund really helped create this new wave," says Kashcheeva, who praised how the state-backed program — now known as the Czech Audiovisual Fund — readies students for professional careers in animation.

"As a student, I was able to [learn] the system — try to work with film funds, try to work with co-productions," says Kashcheeva. Her graduation film, "Electra" — a co-production with France and Slovakia — premiered at the Cannes Film Festival. "I already understood how [the system] works."

That support structure has helped Czech animators foster more "collaborative connections with the international industry," according to Matěj Chlupáček, who produced "Living Large" and is readying Dufková's follow-up, "Wish It!"

Indeed, the last decade has witnessed a sea change in how Czech animators approach the international market. After "Living Large" was pitched at Cartoon Movie in Bordeaux, says Chlupáček, the film was scooped up by Goodfellas for international sales while it was still in development, allowing the filmmakers "to be focused more on international stuff, to talk about festival strategies." As a result, the filmmakers were already planning an international release campaign before a single frame of the stop-motion feature was shot.

Michaela Pavlátová, whose last film, "My Sunny Maad," won a Cesar Award in France for best animated film, echoes that sentiment, noting how the emerging generation of Czech animators is "very international."

"They compare themselves with the whole world — not only with the Czech market, or only with Middle Europe or Eastern Europe," she says. "They aim high."

This year the Czech Republic introduced a new audiovisual law, with one of its key provisions including a 35% incentive for digital production and animation, alongside a dramatic increase in state funding across the board that will also boost financing for animated projects.

Pavlátová, who's developing "Night Tram," a feature film based on her Annecy-winning short "Tram," expects that to give a boost to the industry, while noting how doors are opening for a generation of rising Czech producers who "see the potential of producing animation."

"This is our future," she says. "They love going to festivals. They love being connected to animators all over the world."

"[Czech animators] compare themselves with the whole world — not only with the Czech market, or only with Middle Europe or Eastern Europe." Michaela Pavlátová

Party People Czech festivals showcase local and global fare

By Christopher Vourlias

A scenic spa town tucked within the forested hills of western Bohemia, Karlovy Vary is among the most picturesque settings you could choose for a film festival — a fact that surely wasn't lost on organizers when they hosted the fest's first edition more than 70 years ago.

Today, as the Czech town prepares to hold its 59th edition, running July 4-12, the Karlovy Vary Intl. Film Festival has grown into the most prestigious festival in Central and Eastern Europe. It's an event that combines the glamour of Hollywood with the youthful exuberance of the countless young cinephiles who flock from across Europe every summer to pitch tents, pack the festival's cinemas and party deep into the night.

Artistic director Karel Och, who has been with the festival since the turn of the last century, credits the "passion and dedication" of the Karlovy Vary team with creating its signature vibe. "It is not just a job for many of us at KVIFF, it is a way of life," Och tells *Variety*. "An exciting and sometimes exhausting one, I need to add, but we would not have it any other way."

The festival remains a key launching pad for Czech filmmakers — Jiří Mádl's period drama "Waves" rode its Karlovy Vary premiere all the way to the best international feature shortlist at last year's Academy Awards — with Ondřej Provazník's "Broken Voices" and Miro Remo's "Better Go Mad in the Wild" among the titles vying this year for a coveted Crystal Globe.

Meanwhile, the prestigious Czech fest continues to be heavy on star power, with recent editions welcoming Daniel Brühl, Clive Owen, Viggo Mortensen, Ewan McGregor, Alicia Vikander and Russell Crowe — a lifetime achievement award winner in 2023 who rocked the crowd on opening night with a performance by his band, Indoor Garden Party.

Founded in 1946, Karlovy Vary is one of several festivals established during the days of the former Czechoslovakia that have proved their remarkable staying power. The Zlín Film Festival, which was launched in 1961, is billed as the world's oldest and largest film festival dedicated to children and youth, while Finále Plzeň — a week-long event showcasing films and series from the Czech Republic and Slovakia — has been running since 1968.

The Ji.hlava Intl. Documentary Film Festival, meanwhile, whose 29th edition runs from Oct. 24-Nov. 2, has established itself as one of the leading doc fests in Europe, while One World has evolved in the quarter-century since its founding into the largest human rights documentary film festival on the planet.



Michal Cizek/AFP/Getty Images

Russell Crowe was the recipient of a Crystal Globe at the Karlovy Vary Film Festival in 2023.

Where to Shoot One-stop shops for international production

By Christopher Vourlias

While it's approaching its centennial anniversary, Prague's historic Barrandov Studios doesn't show its age, boasting some of the most modern and sophisticated facilities in Europe.

Barrandov Studios has played host to a range of high-profile international productions in recent years, including Lionsgate's "John Wick" spinoff "Ballerina," Robert Eggers' "Nosferatu" and Amazon Prime Video's forthcoming "Blade Runner 2099" series.

Construction on two new soundstages will be completed in 2026, bringing the studio's total to 18, including four at its Hostivar location.

Ample support facilities are also available — including production rooms, makeup rooms, dressing rooms, camera and prop rooms, and catering areas — as well as a 40-acre exterior lot.

Barrandov's builders and craftspeople are versatile and world-renowned, while the studio's costume and props department is one of the largest rental shops of its kind in Europe.

Full-service post-production and visual effects companies including Panavision, PFX and Flash SFX are all based at Barrandov.

Not to be overlooked is Prague Studios, which was established by the team behind production outfit Milk & Honey — "built by filmmakers for filmmakers," as the studio's tagline puts it.

Located in the heart of the Czech capital, the studio boasts seven soundstages totaling nearly 125,000 square feet, along with a water tank, a stage for virtual production and 25 acres of all-purpose backlot.

An expansion will bring an additional 375,000 square feet of production real estate next year, including five new soundstages. Productions hosted by Prague Studios in recent years include Apple TV+'s sci-fi series "Foundation," Netflix's horror series "Haunted" and Prime Video's "Carnival Row."



"Caravan," which premiered in Cannes' Un Certain Regard section, taps into how a family handles disabilities.

Journey of Discovery 'Caravan' Sparks Debate on Issues Surrounding Disabilities

By Christopher Vourlias

When Czech filmmaker Zuzana Kirchnerová began working on the script for her feature debut, "Caravan," which premiered in the Cannes Film Festival's Un Certain Regard section, she says she never intended to start a movement.

A deeply personal and emotional story inspired by her own experiences raising a son with an intellectual disability, the film's Riviera premiere struck a chord in the Czech Republic — and also sparked a broader conversation around accessibility and visibility for people with disabilities. "My main aim was to make a film," Kirchnerová tells *Variety*. "I didn't aim to change the system."

"Caravan" follows Ester (Anna Geislerová), a woman in her forties who is emotionally and physically worn out after years of sole caregiving for a son with autism and Down syndrome. Overwhelmed by the demands of motherhood, she steals an aging caravan and sets off on a road trip across southern Italy with her son David (David Vodstrčil) by her side, embarking together on a life-altering journey.

The film — the first majority Czech production to play in the Cannes festival's official selection in more than 30 years — marked an emotional bookend to Kirchnerová's last trip to the Croisette, where her graduation short film, "Bába," won the top prize in Cannes' Cinéfondation in 2009.

Speaking to *Variety* from her home in Prague, the director opened up about the difficult balancing act for a single mother raising a child with disabilities while also pursuing a career in film. "When my son was born, I was told that I would ruin my life if I don't abandon him, or that I would never film again," she says.

Kirchnerová concedes "it has been a difficult journey," though she recalls the triumphant moment when her "Caravan" star, Vodstrčil — an actor with Down syndrome — took her by the arm to accompany her up the stairs of Cannes' Lumière Theater. "I was in a trance," she says, comparing the dapper, black tie-clad leading man to James Bond. The tears didn't arrive until later that night.

Kirchnerová and producer Dagmar Sedláčková are now launching a campaign in the Czech Republic to raise awareness for people with disabilities, centered on her film. "I really hope that this will help to change the life of my son, but also of other disabled people," the director says, adding that she wants to urge others "to try and be more open and attentive and inclusive."

"I really hope that this will help to change the life of my son, but also of other disabled people." Zuzana Kirchnerová

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SCAN TO LEARN MORE

Narratives and Nostalgia Nantucket Film Festival celebrates 30 years of storytelling with special anniversary screenings

By Emily Longeretta

The 2025 Nantucket Film Festival, set for June 25-30, will celebrate 30 years of programming with quite the robust lineup.

The festival will open with two Sundance Audience Award winners. First is "Twinless," a story about men who form an unlikely friendship after meeting in a twin bereavement support group, starring Dylan O'Brien, Lauren Graham and writer and director James Sweeney.

The other is "Prime Minister," a documentary by Michelle Walshe and Lindsay Utz, which tells the story of former New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and her five years in power.

On closing night, June 30, the festival will present Jennifer Tiexiera and Guy Mossman's documentary "Speak," which also debuted at Sundance in January. The doc follows five teenagers who prepare for a national oratory contest and, according to one *Variety* critic, "plays like the nonfiction equivalent of 'Bend It Like Beckham' or 'A League of Their Own.'"

One of the biggest draws of the weekend will be NFF's Centerpiece selection, National Geographic's "Jaws @ 50: The Definitive Inside Story," which is part of the festival's Deep Dive Screening & Talk Presentations. The doc, directed by Laurent Bouzereau in partnership with Steven Spielberg's Amblin Documentaries, Nedland Media and Wendy Benchley, gives an authorized look inside how the iconic shark thriller was made in 1975 and continues to influence cinema. The doc will be followed by a conversation with Wendy Benchley, the widow of "Jaws" author Peter Benchley, producer Justin Falvey and MSNBC's Chris Matthews.

"'Prime Minister' was an easy choice — a powerful documentary about Jacinda Arden leading with empathy and strength. It feels like essential viewing in 2025. 'Jaws @ 50' is our nod to legacy. Peter Benchley based 'Jaws' on stories from Nantucket, so it was a natural fit for our 30th," Mystelle Brabbée, the festival's executive director, tells *Variety*. "And 'Speak,' our closing night film, is a big-hearted crowd-pleaser — funny, moving and full of hope. We want the whole festival to leave people feeling a little taller. That's the energy we're aiming for."

For the 30th year, the festival is meant to "feel like both a celebration and a reunion," says Brabbée. "So many incredible filmmakers, writers and artists have come through NFF over the years — like the Duplass brothers and Katie Aselton, who've been with us since 'This Is John' and 'The Puffy Chair,' or Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady, returning for the sixth time with a body of work that spans 'Jesus Camp,' 'The Boys of Baraka,' 'Norman Lear' and 'Folktales,' just to name a few."

Ben Stiller will return to the festival to host the All-Star Comedy Roundtable, with Zach Cherry, Amber Ruffin, Iliza Shlesinger, Mae Martin and a surprise guest.

Other big events include Flipping the Script: Bestsellers to Screen With Elin Hilderbrand, In Their Shoes ... With Ken Burns and Nathaniel Philbrick (featuring an exclusive first look at "The American Revolution") and the event's signature celebration, Screenwriters Tribute, hosted by Michael Ian Black and honoring "Andor" creator Tony Gilroy, award-winning documentary director Alex Gibney and "The Bear" and "Thunderbolts*" writer Joanna Calo.

"As always, sitting in a theater is still magical — that will never change. But what makes a festival special is the chance to watch a film and then dive into a raw, candid conversation with the filmmaker on a subject," Brabbée adds. "That's the real power of what a festival offers."

Additionally, they want to tell stories that feel both "timely and emotionally resonant — films that reflect where we are now, and where we might be headed."

Or, as Brabbée perfectly puts it: "Nostalgia with purpose."

Tipsheet

WHAT Nantucket Film Festival
WHEN June 25-30
WHERE Nantucket Island, Mass.
WEB nantucketfilmfestival.org

"What makes a festival special is the chance to watch a film and then dive into a raw, candid conversation with the filmmaker on a subject." Mystelle Brabbée



Sundance hit "Twinless" will open the Nantucket Film Festival.

Greg Cotten

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reviews



Lucy (Dakota Johnson) is being wooed by sweet-talking financier Harry (Pedro Pascal).

FILM REVIEW / OWEN GLEIBERMAN

Material World

Celine Song's charming rom-com, starring Dakota Johnson, is like 'Sex and the City' directed by Eric Rohmer

Materialists

Director Celine Song

Screenplay Celine Song

Cast Dakota Johnson, Chris Evans, Pedro Pascal

Distributor A24

→ Back in the day, you would have been hard-pressed to find a bigger fan of "Sex and the City" than I was. Yet even as I think it's a deliriously great show, a part of me — the movie critic side — always wondered, in the back of my mind, what "Sex and the City" might have looked like had it been played, at times, as less of a wild confectionary sitcom and as a bit more close to the bone.

"Materialists," a lavishly charming New York story of love, money and dating, is the movie that finally answers that question for me. It's the second feature written and directed by Celine Song, who made the wistfully sublime "Past Lives," and it stars Dakota Johnson as a stylishly crisp, take-charge professional matchmaker and Chris Evans and Pedro Pascal as the men she winds up caught between. (Evans plays a scruffy aspiring theater actor with no money, Pascal plays a sweet-talking



Dakota Johnson brings a radiant sharpness to the role of matchmaker Lucy.

private-equity broker who lives in a $12 million apartment, and you can kind of fill in the rest from there.)

"Materialists" sounds like a romantic comedy, and its distributor, A24, is certainly selling it as one. Yet the film is more like a beguiling contradiction — a rom-com played straight. While it's all too easy to imagine the breezy '90s version of this movie (Sandra Bullock as a matchmaker ... who can't match with anyone herself ... until she meets the mismatch of her dreams!), "Materialists" is very much *not* that movie. It's a sharp and serious social romantic drama full of telling observations about the way we live now, and about how connected that is (or not) to the way we've always lived. And there's a dark side to it. It's "Sex and the City" filtered through a sobering reality check.

Lucy (Johnson) is a dating consultant for Adore, a company that makes a promise to each of its clients: "You're going to marry the love of your life." The service attempts to live up to that promise by respecting how choosy the clients are, coddling their perfectionism. After a date, Lucy will make a private call to each of the two people to see how it went, and to massage their egos ("He checked a lot of our boxes. And you checked a lot of his"), and to assess whether a second date is in the offing. It's scientific matchmaking with a dollop of feel-good therapy.

Adore isn't an online dating app, but the service it provides reflects the shift in consciousness that was brought about by online dating, which turned the very paradigm of "romance" into an endless shopping mall. It turned the pursuit of love *into* shopping. You might say that's what it always was, but those of us old enough to remember dating before the internet can testify: No, it wasn't (not like it is now).

Yet even as Lucy's clients, women and men alike, are prima donnas with impossible standards (we see them in witty montages), there's a way that the movie also looks back — to Jane Austen, the unwitting godmother of "Masterpiece Theatre" romance, and to Edith Wharton, that supreme chronicler of love and money who is America's greatest novelist because of how profoundly she explored the intricacy of women's desires.

Celine Song's dialogue pings with wit and perception, yet it also flows; if you could bottle that skill, Hollywood would be saved. And Dakota Johnson delivers the most forceful performance I've seen her give. What I think of as that sugary-voiced Dakota Johnson *daze*, winning as it can be, is gone, replaced by a radiant sharpness that just about tingles. Lucy gets right onto the wavelength of her clients (she's a master of lines like "You're not ugly; you just don't have money"), but the mystery of the movie is what she really believes and wants.

She seems, in certain ways, like a materialistic social climber herself. But she only makes $80,000 a year, and she's still good friends with her actor ex, John (Evans), who survives as a part-time cater waiter and still has two loser-bro roommates. That sounds like a comic situation (and does produce one bitingly funny scene), but Song doesn't go in for cheap shots or easy laughs. John's lack of success is all too real, and so is the fact that it basically ended his and Lucy's relationship. We see a flashback to their fifth anniversary date, and it's a lived-in disaster of cheapskate bad planning. The message is pesky but powerful: In romance, money matters.

I've seen Chris Evans sleepwalk through roles, but not here. He's wide awake, with an anger that just makes his tenderness more appealing. And Pedro Pascal is note-perfect as Harry, a character who comes off as the film's equivalent of Chris Noth's Mr. Big. Pascal, looking like Burt Reynolds in his sexy mustache days, is effortlessly winning as the finance honcho who miraculously appears to be as nice as he is entitled. He's what Lucy and the Adore team call a unicorn — the "perfect" man every woman is looking for.

In a classic rom-com, Lucy's situation would be resolved in a way that's fizzy and a bit crazy, and that would be the Champagne pleasure of it all. But "Materialists" runs into a bit of a dilemma due to its straight-on realistic tone. We see which man Lucy belongs with, and we feel the romantic tug between them. Yet the movie's resolution doesn't give you a *surge*, and that could limit its popular appeal. "Sex and the City" had a way of staying light and bubbly. "Materialists," at times, feels like "Sex and the City" made by Eric Rohmer. Yet I mean that (mostly) as a compliment, even if the film, at least at the box office, may not end up showing you the money.

Celine Song's dialogue pings with wit and perception, yet it also flows; if you could bottle that skill, Hollywood would be saved.

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MUSIC REVIEW / CHRIS WILLMAN

Quitting Time

Haim streamline their sound and focus on an album mostly devoted to breakup songs

I Quit

Artist Haim **Label** Columbia Records
Producers Rostam Batmanglij, Danielle Haim

→ Kudos to Haim, first of all, for the best album title of the year. Breakup albums are so common that it's surprising no one previously had the temerity and/or genius to name such a record "I Quit." If that bluntness sounds a little prosaic at first, there's a curt poetry to it that comes into focus listening through 15 tracks that consist almost entirely of sisters Danielle, Alana and Este Haim handing in their respective resignations to long- or short-term partners, effective immediately. Who will be cleaning out whose desk may be in question ("You packed my shit / But it's nothing I needed," Danielle informs her ex in the opening cut, "Gone"), but there's no issue as to who's finally the boss. Or triune bosses, in the case of this sisterhood.

Danielle revealed in prerelease promo for the album that it captured a time when "we were all single at the same time for the first time since high school," which falls into the category of useful backstory that we might have gotten around to guessing anyway. There's a narrowing of focus in the concentration on "why I left" songs — and also a streamlining of their sound to go with that. Those two things may be connected. Danielle Haim's split was with Ariel Rechtshaid, which becomes relevant beyond the world of gossip because he was a primary co-producer/co-writer on the previous three records. Since their other major collaborator, Rostam Batmanglij, is still on board co-producing with Danielle, there are still points of sonic continuity. What Rechtshaid took with him, for better or worse, is some of the quirky and clever aural landscaping that marked 2020's "Women in Music Pt. III." If you wanted Haim to be more of the rock band on record that they've been onstage, this is a newly independent step in that direction.

There are trade-offs, of course. If you appreciated "WIM III" as kind of their "White Album" (and I'd still rate it among the best records of the decade, five years later), there's something to be missed from that heightened eclecticism. At the same time, I appreciate hearing Danielle get bashier on the drums on "All Over Me," or contributing power chords and a flippy guitar solo to tracks like "Gone"... even though there's still room for a non-rock outlier like the chanty R&B of "Relationships."

By the way, for those wondering what their position on that latter subject is ... it's against! For now, at least. "I'll see who I wanna see / I'll fuck off whenever I want / I'll be whatever I need," Danielle declares at the outset. The following number, "All Over Me," is sex-positive, and also monogamy-negative: "You know I've always had a wild heart / And that won't ever change / So when you see me out with someone else / I will not be ashamed." Maybe only female artists could take so cavalier of a traditionally male attitude about situationships nowadays. If you're waiting for the women of Haim to become less defensive in their fucking off, they do eventually let their guards down a little about what leaving may have cost, like in "Cry," which shows some real vulnerability about the "seven stages of grief" in having walked out. But actual regrets — too few to mention.

How can you not fall for an album that, after going almost soft on us for a few minutes, comes back around to feisty point A, ending with the couplet "Am I reaching out to say / I never gave two fucks anyway"? They gave this record the right title, but "Women in Music Pt. F.U." would've worked too.

If you wanted Haim to be more of the rock band on record that they've been onstage, this is a newly independent step in that direction.



Terrence O'Connor

VARIETY Streaming Originals Charts

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Luminate Data Ranks the Most-Watched Streaming Original Movies and TV Shows.

Streaming Originals Charts

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Streaming Originals: Television

Feb. 28 – March 6, 2025

	Title	Season	Creator/Showrunner	Platform	Est. Min. Watched	Previous Est. Min. Watched	Percentage Change
1	**Running Point**	1	David Stassen, Elaine Ko, Ike Barinholtz, Mindy Kaling	Netflix	1.9B	77.5M	2312%
2	**1923**	2	Taylor Sheridan	Paramount+	1.1B	901.7M	27%
3	**Zero Day**	1	Eric Newman, Michael S. Schmidt, Noah Oppenheim	Netflix	1B	2.8B	–62%
4	**Love is Blind**	8	Chris Coelen	Netflix	913.6M	962.2M	–5%
5	**Reacher**	3	Nick Santora	Prime Video	912.3M	669M	36%

See the Rankings

Variety.com/StreamingOriginals



Ricky Martin in Paris on July 13, 1999

Benainous/Scorcelletti/Gamma-Rapho/Getty Images

La Vida Loca

In 1999, the year the artist who would someday be known as Bad Bunny turned 5, a different Puerto Rican superstar was dominating American culture. Ricky Martin had begun his career as a preteen singer with the boy band Menudo and experienced breakthrough success with "La Copa de la Vida," the theme song for the 1998 World Cup. But the release the following year of the single "Livin' la Vida Loca," the signature track off his self-titled first English-language album, made his life, well, fairly crazy.

Martin, already known to Spanish-speaking audiences, became a crossover superstar; "Livin' la Vida Loca," a high-energy pop song about an alluring and rebellious woman, topped the Billboard chart for five weeks and earned Martin a record of the year Grammy nomination.

Charismatic and ebullient, Martin was part of a rising tide of Latin pop stars in the early aughts, a group that included Jennifer Lopez and Christina Aguilera. His combination of authentic musicianship and a willingness to shake his hips made Martin an appealing ambassador for the genre.

Yet the spotlight was not necessarily easy for Martin, who has discussed his discomfort over the rumors surrounding his sexuality, about which Barbara Walters badgered him in a 2000 TV interview.

Martin came out as a gay man in 2010, and is raising four children with his ex-husband. In living openly, Martin found himself once again a trailblazer; he'd already, in popularizing Latin sounds, cleared the way for an act like Bad Bunny to eventually take over the world.
— *Daniel D'Addario*

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