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The Duffer Brothers SAY GOODBYE TO THE ERA-~~DEFINING~~ DEFINING NETFLIX SENSATION

By Adam B. Vary + Kate Aurthur

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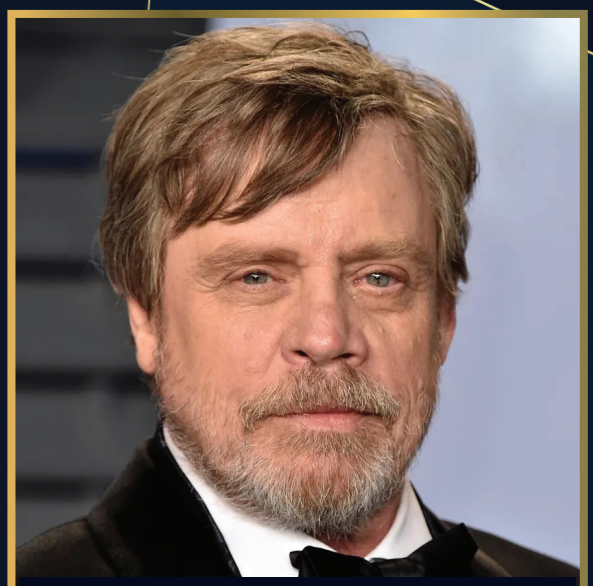

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Cover photograph by Ryan Pfluger

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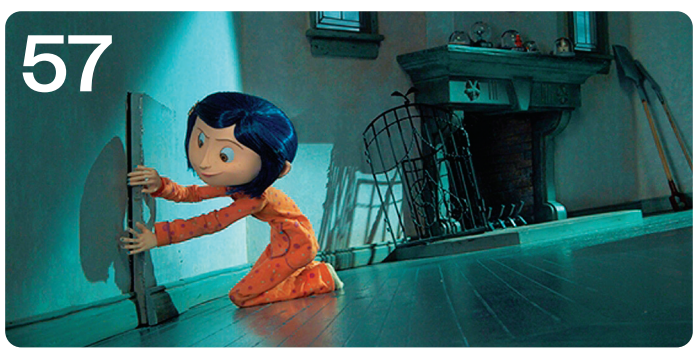





Clockwise from left: Henry Kissinger in 1971; “Coraline”; Josh O’Connor in “Wake Up Dead Man: A Knives Out Mystery”; Richard Dreyfuss and Diane Keaton at the 1978 Academy Awards

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Clockwise, from top: Tom Blau/Camera Press/Redux/PBS; Everett Collection; Focus Features; ABC Photo Archives/Disney General Entertainment Content/Getty Images

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Goldie Hawn, Diane Keaton and Bette Midler in 1996's "The First Wives Club"

First Wives Club: Everett Collection; Littleton: Photograph by Dan Doperalski; Setoodeh: Photograph by Alexi Lubomirski

Diane Keaton and Her La-Di-Da

→ In this week's issue, we honor the enchanting and electric Diane Keaton, who died on Saturday at 79. After appearing on Broadway and in "The Godfather," Diane became one of the most beloved actresses of her generation with "Annie Hall," winning the Oscar for the title role in Woody Allen's 1977 romantic comedy. She was a beacon of sunshine, fun, optimism and cheer, though she could also showcase her dramatic chops at the drop of a hat. (Diane was famous for her bohemian fashion sense — turtlenecks, belts, all topped with bowler hats.)

Diane's artistry was as eclectic as her personality: She wrote a book about using Pinterest to furnish her home and starred in a Justin Bieber music video for "Ghost," after divulging to Ellen DeGeneres that she had a crush on him. And Diane has left the world with a filmography that will be watched and admired for generations — from bursting into song in "The First Wives Club" to holding back tears in "Reds" to sobbing in front of her laptop after a bad breakup in "Something's Gotta Give." That Nancy Meyers film, for which Diane received her fourth and final Oscar nomination, reminded the world that great acting is great acting, regardless of genre.

Diane reignited the romantic comedy, and her own career, blowing even Jack Nicholson off the screen with her portrayal of a playwright with her heart on her turtleneck sleeve. We open our magazine with an essay on the actress by our chief film critic Owen Gleiberman. Diane will be remembered for her work and for her love of her family, which included her two children, Dexter and Duke, and her dog, Reggie.

Elsewhere in our magazine, Adam B. Vary and Kate Aurthur spent months reporting on the Duffer brothers — twins Matt and Ross — as they prepare to bid farewell to "Stranger Things," the zeitgeist-defining TV series that helped Netflix attract a new generation of subscribers. And Gene Maddaus looks at how studios are using AI to assess scripts, only the latest development in our current technology revolution that will change the way aspiring screenwriters get discovered.





CO-EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Cynthia Littleton Ramin Setoodeh

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GO INSIDE THE EVENT

marquee



Diane Keaton starred as Linda Christie in 1972's "Play It Again, Sam."

Remembered 1946-2025

Simply Incandescent

She'll always be Annie Hall ... and not Annie Hall. That's because Diane Keaton's radiance set every character she played aglow

By Owen Gleiberman

Everett Collection

→ She'll always be Annie Hall. The first time you see Diane Keaton in Woody Allen's great touchstone of a romantic comedy, she's walking into a tennis club, her eyes peering around as cautiously as a cat's. Within seconds, Annie is apologizing for herself, but the faltering, abashed quality of it all is pure unapologetic movie-star charisma — her grin like a sunbeam, her words tumbling out in an infectious clutter, until she finally coughs up that phrase (*"La-di-da!"*) as if it were a surrender. At that moment, Annie has given up trying to make a sensible sentence speak for her. That's probably the moment when a great many people in the audience, men and women alike, fell in love with her.

Yet part of why the blushing, halting charm of it was so *funny* is that Annie, as Keaton portrayed

Part of why the blushing, halting charm of it was so *funny* is that Annie, as portrayed by Keaton, didn't look like someone who needed to apologize for who she was.





From top: Keaton with Woody Allen in "Annie Hall" and with Al Pacino in "The Godfather"

her, didn't look like someone who needed to apologize for who she was. The character's famous thrift-shop-boutique surreal wardrobe, which was really Keaton's — the vests worn like jackets, the tops worn like dresses, the scarves and billowy khakis and too-stately hats, the men's ties — fit Annie to a T, because she *was* a little scattered. Yet those outfits were a bit like a cubist painting: They drew elements from everywhere to create a new kind of beauty.

What the wardrobe, like Keaton's indelible performance, expressed was the hidden power of Annie Hall's dither. She came along at a moment when women had begun to root themselves in a newly forceful role in the culture. Yet that evolution had been preceded by too many years of women feeling like they needed to apologize, maybe in a dither, for being who they were. Annie expressed the collective abashment that women, at last, felt they were ready to leave behind, yet at the same time she paid a kind of romantic tribute to it, acting out the hidden resolve of it. When she finally got up and sang "Seems Like Old Times," it was an homage to the world that was, but now those eyes of hers, no longer cautious, held the room. They held the whole world.

In addition, Diane Keaton will always *not* be Annie Hall. She first came to prominence in some earlier Woody Allen comedies (like "Play It Again, Sam" and "Sleeper"), but well before she charmed the universe and won an Oscar for "Annie Hall," Keaton had already established herself as a major artist with her performances in "The Godfather" and its sequel, where her acting etched an arc of its own.

In the first "Godfather," she stands by her boyfriend-and-then-husband, Michael Corleone, with a devotion that's very pure and old school. You see, for the first time, the gravitas Keaton could bring — her lilting voice and rosy stare summoning a quiet moral authority. In the movie's fateful final scene, she looks at Michael with a haunted question. But in the second film, the wool is off her eyes. Kay has come to see the man — the monster — Michael has come to be, and the scene in which she tells him that she has aborted their child is one of the most lacerating moments in all of American cinema.

It's no wonder that after "Annie Hall" elevated her to a nearly legendary presence, she used her new clout in the industry to portray a series of characters who were all, in different ways, embodiments of complicated feminine power. "Looking for Mr. Goodbar" is far from a great movie, yet Keaton's raw performance as a bed-hopping schoolteacher made it a *study* of the sexual revolution — the one that allowed people to act out their "liberation" as an escape from their own damage.

And going forward, what she let out, and explored, in movie after movie was an underlying quality of anger that lent her characters an animating force. You first saw it in Allen's "Manhattan," which is one of her greatest performances — she invests Mary, the high-strung, above-it-all New York journalist, with an acid quickness that bespeaks a new information-age temperament.

And Keaton marched into the '80s as a very different kind of steel-sheathed-in-velvet leading lady. In "Reds," opposite Warren Beatty, she acts out an epic tug-of-war of love and politics, and in "Shoot the Moon," perhaps the most scalding drama ever made about divorce, she and Albert Finney go at each other with an intertwined rage and regret that leaves you shaken.

But lest one thought her incandescent comic charm had gone away, Keaton never let go of it. It was there in her most casual moments — the way she could light up the screen with that blissed-out grin. And it's there in what became one of my all-time-favorite guilty-pleasure movies, "Baby Boom" (1987), a piece of pure kitsch, but behold the daffy conviction with which Keaton plays it.

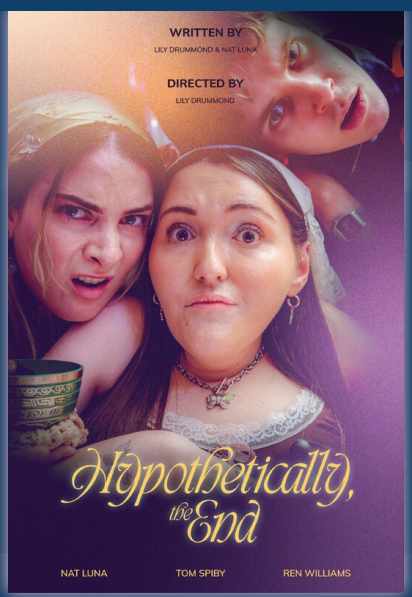
She became a director and producer, and as she moved into middle-aged roles Keaton put her stamp on them in a special way, retaining every effervescent bubble of her charm, but investing the giddy farce mechanics of comedies like "The First Wives Club" with a devotion that helped elevate them into enduring entertainments. As someone whose most famous role had her dithering to find the right words, she became an actor who could use words in the most cutting of ways. Yet it must be said: The fact that audiences never stopped seeing Annie Hall in her was not a mark of patronization — it was a measure of how much she could transport us with her glow, which remained, to the end, as irresistible as it was undimmed.

Everett Collection (2)

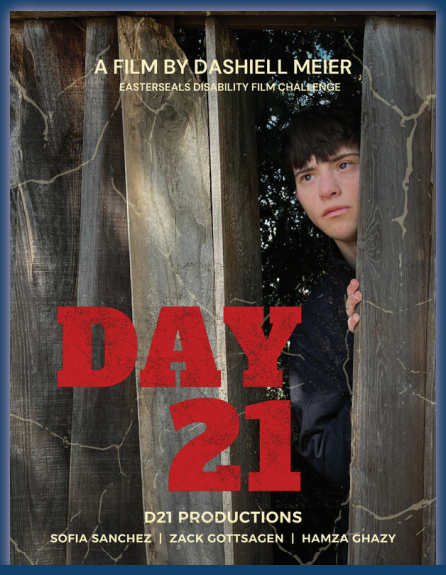
Easterseals Disability Film Challenge

Easterseals Disability Film Challenge (EDFC) is an annual 5-day long contest open to filmmakers worldwide. The challenge strives to advance disability representation in front of and behind the camera and bring tangible, sustainable employment opportunities in scripted film and television, both broadcast and streaming, for people with disabilities.











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"The Smashing Machine" saw a 70% decline in its sophomore outing.

Critical Condition

Why are many of the year's buzziest films failing to make a profit at the box office?

By Brent Lang and Rebecca Rubin

Every Monday morning, Virginia-based cinema owner Mark O'Meara pores over grosses to see how the newest releases are playing in his area. Last weekend didn't offer much to celebrate as some well-reviewed Oscar contenders collapsed at the box office.

A24's "The Smashing Machine," a sports biopic starring Dwayne Johnson as MMA fighter Mark Kerr, "died pretty quickly," O'Meara reports. Meanwhile, "nobody did really well with 'Roofman,'" a dramedy featuring Channing Tatum.

"It was slow as hell," O'Meara says. "I thought the movies were good. There was a lot of hype with them that just didn't happen."

The D.C. metro area wasn't the only place where those films failed to connect. "Roofman" debuted to a paltry $8 million, while "Smashing Machine" endured a brutal 70% decline in its sophomore outing, bringing revenues to $18.8 million. As for other films aimed at adults, "Kiss of the Spider Woman," a $34 million-budgeted musical adaptation with Jennifer Lopez, fizzled with $850,000 — albeit from far fewer theaters than Tatum's film.

Even Paul Thomas Anderson's "One Battle After Another," led by Leonardo DiCaprio, struggled to break out despite being hailed as a generational masterpiece. Though the global haul of $138 million is impressive for a film that's original, R rated and nearly three hours long, "One Battle" requires roughly $300 million to break even. That's because Warner Bros. spent more than $130 million on production and $70 million on promotional efforts, and ticket sales are typically split 50-50 between studios and theater operators.

"These prestige-type movies have failed to create a sense of FOMO," says box office analyst Shawn Robbins. "They weren't event-ized enough."

In the case of "Roofman," backed by Paramount Pictures and Miramax, a lean $19 million budget means that losses will be minimal. Other recent awards fare won't be as lucky. "One Battle After Another," which is mounting a multimillion-dollar Oscar campaign, is tracking to lose $100 million, according to studio executives with knowledge of the economics of similar-sized films. A Warner Bros. spokesperson refutes those estimates while noting the company has enjoyed a successful year at the box office with hits like "Sinners" and "A Minecraft Movie."

"Films across the studio's slate, including 'One Battle After Another,' have achieved financial reward in 2025, with more than $4 billion earned to date," the spokesperson says.

The $4 billion figure refers to box office revenue, not profits. However, Warner Bros.' 2025 slate of triumphs does help offset a loss like "One Battle." Earlier in the fall, a Warner Bros. source pegged year-to-date theatrical profits at roughly $600 million before counting a major winner in "The Conjuring: Last Rites" and a money loser in "One Battle."

With "The Smashing Machine," the failure troublingly exposes the risks of A24's new corporate strategy. In 2024, the indie studio completed a round of funding that pegged its valuation at $3.5 billion. The company has used the capital to back a much pricier slate of films. "The Smashing Machine," for example, carries a $50 million price tag — tens of millions of dollars more than a typical indie. Meanwhile this December's Timothée Chalamet-led table-tennis drama "Marty Supreme" has a $70 million budget, making it the most expensive film in the studio's history. A24 clearly wants to make the kind of mid-budget films that major studios have abandoned, but higher expenses mean flops will hurt more.

With "The Smashing Machine," A24 mitigated some risk by selling off foreign rights. Rival studio executives believe that limits losses on the picture to roughly $10 million, but it will leave a bad taste in the mouth of the studio's overseas partners, who will shoulder the bulk of the pain.

Although some movies for grown-ups are having a tougher time, analysts hope studios continue to make them. They believe it'll take films of all shapes and sizes to push moviegoing toward pre-pandemic levels. Revenues remain roughly 20% behind those of 2019.

"Consumers go to the theater a few times a year at most. They gravitate towards what they know," Texas Capital Securities analyst Eric Wold says. "It's tough for studios to put a lot into original IP. Risk of failure is higher."

"These prestige-type movies have failed to create a sense of FOMO. They weren't event-ized enough."
Shawn Robbins, box office analyst

Eric Zachanowich/A24

Stranger Than Fiction

Mark Wahlberg is making a documentary that will tell embattled hip-hop star Pras Michél's side of the story

By Tatiana Siegel

→ On Oct. 3, Pras Michél was scheduled to be sentenced to federal prison in a wild case tied to the $4.5 billion looting of the Malaysian sovereign wealth fund known as 1MDB. But lawyers for the Fugees founder, who is facing 22 years behind bars following a 2023 conviction, delayed sentencing for the third time as President Donald Trump considers pardoning the hip-hop star.

The move marked the latest development in a case that sparked international headlines thanks to Michél's stranger-than-fiction trajectory from Grammy winner to convicted spy. Now, Mark Wahlberg has struck a deal with Michél to make a feature documentary that limns his path from Yale-educated virtuoso to unlikely target of the FBI in its investigation into one of the world's biggest financial scandals.

"Everyone is fascinated by all the twists and turns, like it's some kind of thriller," says Michél, who's speaking from Los Angeles and is restricted from leaving the country. "But for me, this is just my life — the real, messy, complicated truth of what I've been living through."

Produced under Wahlberg's Unrealistic Ideas banner, the film will explore Michél's musical legacy as the still-touring artist behind the seminal "Ghetto Supastar (That Is What You Are)," as well as the personal toll of navigating high-profile legal proceedings that culminated in a jury finding him guilty on 10 counts, including conspiracy, witness tampering and failing to register as an unregistered foreign agent of China. In August, Michél underwent emergency surgery to remove colon cancer.

Wahlberg, who produced "Juvies," a documentary about incarcerated teens, calls Michél a "legend." "I'm rooting for Pras and excited to tell his story," the Oscar-nominated "The Departed" actor says.

At the center of the 1MDB case is Jho Low, the profligate financier of "The Wolf of Wall Street," whose Hollywood social circle included Leonardo DiCaprio, Wahlberg's "Departed" co-star. Back in 2023, DiCaprio testified for the prosecution in Michél's trial. Like Michél, DiCaprio was a recipient of Low's spending, accepting gifts from the producer that included a $3.2 million Picasso and a $9 million Basquiat. Still, Michél is the only figure in the case looking at jail time. Low remains at large, believed to be in hiding in China.

Wahlberg will produce the documentary alongside Unrealistic Ideas president Archie Gips, who calls Michél's arc "just the kind of complex, shocking and emotional story" the company finds compelling. "It's a surprising mix of pop culture and geopolitical intrigue that feels like a spy thriller come to life," he adds.

Ever since the FBI put Michél in its crosshairs in 2018, his friends have been distancing themselves. In a 2024 *Variety* profile, he talked about how the investigation sent his life into chaos — noting an incident when federal agents visited the L.A. home of one of his closest friends, a married father of three.

"Look, you get a call, FBI show up to your place — I don't care who you are, your heart is going up your throat," he said at the time. "They're like, 'Hey, we just got a couple of questions for you. So can we come in?' Who's going to say no? So he let them in. The wife comes, sits in the living room, don't know what's going on, but she's scared. And at some point, one of the agents goes, 'What's that? Do you smell that?' The wife defecated on herself. She was that scared. And the wife later told my friend, 'If you ever speak to Pras again, I'll take my three daughters and you'll never see us again.'"

Crisis publicist Erica Dumas was one of the only people willing to take a call from the embattled star; she began working with him in the run-up to the trial. She also serves as a producer on the documentary.

"Pras put his complete trust in Mark, Archie and Stephen [Levinson] at Unrealistic Ideas to tell his story authentically, without any filters or agenda," she says. "This project doesn't shy away from the challenging aspects of Pras' recent experiences."

The doc will include footage Michél shot on his phone during pivotal moments in the saga, like a meeting in China with a top CCP official who was sentenced to death by the Chinese government in 2022 for taking bribes.

"Everyone is fascinated by all the twists and turns — like it's some kind of thriller. But for me, this is just my life." Pras Michél



Mark Wahlberg and Pras Michél at a Patek Philippe event in 2023

Erica Dumas



PBS CEO Paula Kerger is realistic that a "white knight" won't save public broadcasting.

In the Public Interest

PBS CEO Paula Kerger is trying to save stations and programming in the absence of federal funds

By Michael Schneider

→ PBS president and CEO Paula Kerger is in a race against time. Usually, public TV and radio stations across the country receive their annual financial grants from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in November. But after President Donald Trump signed a rescission bill in July, the $1.1 billion in federal funding that had been earmarked for public broadcasting in 2026 and 2027 was eliminated — forcing a scramble to fill that financial gap. That's particularly urgent for smaller stations in rural markets that depended more on federal funds to remain in operation.

Already, several PBS stations are in danger of shutting down: Penn State University has announced plans to close its public TV outlet WPSU, while New Jersey PBS said its band of stations will likely go dark next year. Meanwhile, state legislatures in places like North Dakota and Indiana have also cut funding for local public broadcasters.

"I'm most worried about the most vulnerable stations, so I have spent a fair amount of time working with a few others and some key foundations to try to put a corpus of money together that will give those stations a glide path — so they have a couple years of funding that they can figure out whether they consolidate or they merge," Kerger says.

"Some of the smaller stations are looking at coming together in some sort of shared agreement, which would change the way they operate, but would keep local media in communities around the country," she adds. "I think that's a really good model. There are some stations that are looking at merging with an adjacent station and serving a larger market. And then I think there will be some that will find this a bridge too far and will decide not to continue."

In light of those budget shortfalls, PBS cut the dues it requires from member stations. But that means less money coming in to cover PBS' own budget. The broadcaster recently announced it would lay off around 15% of its workforce; hardest hit was its kids programming operation, after the U.S. Department of Education eliminated the CPB's Ready to Learn grant in May.

Kerger has also been looking to raise money through the nonprofit PBS Foundation to cover the cost of fare that it funds or that is produced by partner stations like WGBH Boston, WNET New York and WETA Washington.

"Obviously, the first priority is 'PBS NewsHour,' because that's an ongoing news operation where you're burning through money all the time," Kerger says. "And we're looking at some of the big series where CPB was helpful, like 'Nova,' 'Nature' and 'Great Performances.'"

But Kerger says PBS will have to adjust its output. The long-running series "American Experience," for example, will be put on hiatus after its two-part "Kissinger" airs at the end of this month.

"By the end of the year, there will be no more 'American Experience' staff," says executive producer Cameo George. "There will be no new films. ... I will always hold out hope that PBS will bring 'American Experience' back, because I think it's foundational to understanding America's history."

Kerger says next year, PBS will rebroadcast episodes from the show's library that fit the theme of the U.S.' 250th anniversary. Beyond that, PBS still has plenty of original fare in the pipeline, but the service might also rely more heavily on repeats of signature programs like Ken Burns' "The Civil War" to make up for budget deficits.

"With some series, we're going to potentially have fewer episodes and maybe leverage a little deeper off of our library," she says.

Kerger is realistic that a "white knight" won't be coming in to save public broadcasting. And that's why in the long term, PBS is looking at things like reducing its real estate, the kinds of shows to greenlight, where PBS should focus its output in this changing media landscape and how to better rely on philanthropic support.

"We have been very heartened by the fact that so many people have been stepping up," Kerger says. "All of these contributions that are coming into our PBS Foundation are hugely helpful as we're trying to figure out how exactly to rightsize the organization so that we can operate based on the amount of resources that we have."

"The first priority is 'PBS NewsHour,' because that's an ongoing news operation where you're burning through money all the time." Paula Kerger, PBS CEO

Allison Robbert/For The Washington Post/Getty Images

Fan Service

Instead of shutting down TikTokers' homemade edits of movies, studios are starting to embrace them

By Ethan Shanfeld

→ What if a movie trailer had filters and huge neon text, and was set to, say, a Dua Lipa song? What if it was made by a teenager in the Philippines, or Brazil, using pirated material? What if the plot of the film was entirely irrelevant?

If you've spent time on TikTok, odds are you've seen your fair share of fan edits — intricately crafted montages of film, TV or other clips that are set to popular music. Some are like highlight reels, others are like memes and still others are fantasy-based interpretations of popular media that stray far from the tone or text of the source material. Take #SydCarmy, a hashtag that offers hundreds of edits that project a romantic relationship between the two platonic main characters of "The Bear."

These edits rack up millions of views, activating fan communities around titles from "The Summer I Turned Pretty" to "Barry Lyndon." Briana McElroy, Lionsgate's head of worldwide digital marketing, calls them "love letters from fans." Put cynically, they're also free advertising.

Hollywood studios like Hulu and Paramount+, noticing the immense viral impact of these TikTok videos, have started to adopt fan edits in official marketing campaigns. Lionsgate has gone all in on the format, posting edits every few days of new titles like "The Long Walk" and old ones like "Divergent."

"Within our digital marketing team, we operate like fans," McElroy says. "If we're trying to have a conversation with fans online, we need to be able to speak their language." Lionsgate works with "legacy agencies" to craft a more "polished" voice on Facebook and Instagram, McElroy says, while for TikTok it creates content that feels "native to the platform."

Of course, any corporation attempting to engage in internet culture runs the risk of being the desperate "cool mom" who spoils the fun. So instead of trying to emulate viral fan editors, Lionsgate decided to hire them. Felipe Mendez, who manages the Lionsgate account, reached out to around 250 editors on TikTok and built a roster of about 15. "We're going to the artists that fans are already obsessed with and saying: 'We want you to create what you're already doing; we just want to work together,'" says Mendez, who is 26.

Mendez, a member of UTA's Next Gen team, has helped brands like Axe and PBS reach younger demographics. He says he pushes company leadership to lean into what they don't understand about Gen Z. "To do well on TikTok, your videos have to be so divorced from what your brand is," he says. In other words, the brand has to be OK making fun of itself. (A "Hunger Games" edit posted by Lionsgate pairs Katniss Everdeen's bird call with Flo Rida's unsubtle ode to oral sex, "Whistle.")

Mendez says he realized the potential of fan edits a couple years ago, when "Suits" videos were garnering hundreds of millions of views on TikTok. He credits those clips with catapulting the 2010s legal drama to the most-streamed show of 2023 and spawning a spinoff.

While it's difficult to measure the conversion rate of people who see a fan edit and then watch the movie or show it's based on, Mendez says the proof is in the comments section. He points to a "Creed" edit by user Areq, which has amassed 195 million views and 19 million likes since July. A sampling of the 300,000 comments: "Guess I'm watching 'Creed' today"; "OK, I'll watch 'Creed 1,' '2' and '3' today"; "Just let the editors make the trailers for the movies at this point." The week Areq's edit was posted, viewership of the 2015 boxing drama increased 29% on Amazon Prime, according to Luminate data.

Can fan edits drive engagement offline? For Lionsgate, the first major test is the upcoming rerelease of "Twilight," itself prompted in part by the response to a fan edit campaign. The studio has posted nearly 40 edits since last summer and believes there is a whole community of TikTokers born after "Twilight" came out who will show up in theaters for the vampire romance.

In fact, McElroy says the marketing aim is much bigger than just one theatrical event. "When we started posting 'Twilight' content on TikTok, it wasn't with the goal of driving revenue or bringing the film back to theaters," she says. "Our goal was just to make sure we're creating a community and sustaining it."

"We're going to the artists that fans are already obsessed with and saying, 'We want you to create what you're already doing.'" Felipe Mendez, Lionsgate account manager



Lionsgate's "Hunger Games" edits borrow the irreverent spirit of fan-created clips.

Sonic Youth

Cameron Crowe's new memoir is a remembrance of his teenage music journalist past

By Chris Willman

In some regards, you could think of Cameron Crowe's new memoir, "The Uncool," as "Almost Famous: The Novelization." The book focuses on his early life and his time contributing to Rolling Stone as a precocious teenage genius in the 1970s, stopping (except for a few flash-forwards) at his writing of the movie "Fast Times at Ridgemont High" — leaving his directorial career perhaps for another volume. Of course, describing "The Uncool" as a mere adjunct to Crowe's beloved cinematic roman à clef doesn't get at how rich the book is on its own literary merits, whether you're looking for about a hundred intriguing rock ' n' roll stories, a deeply felt remembrance of a very unusual nuclear family or both.

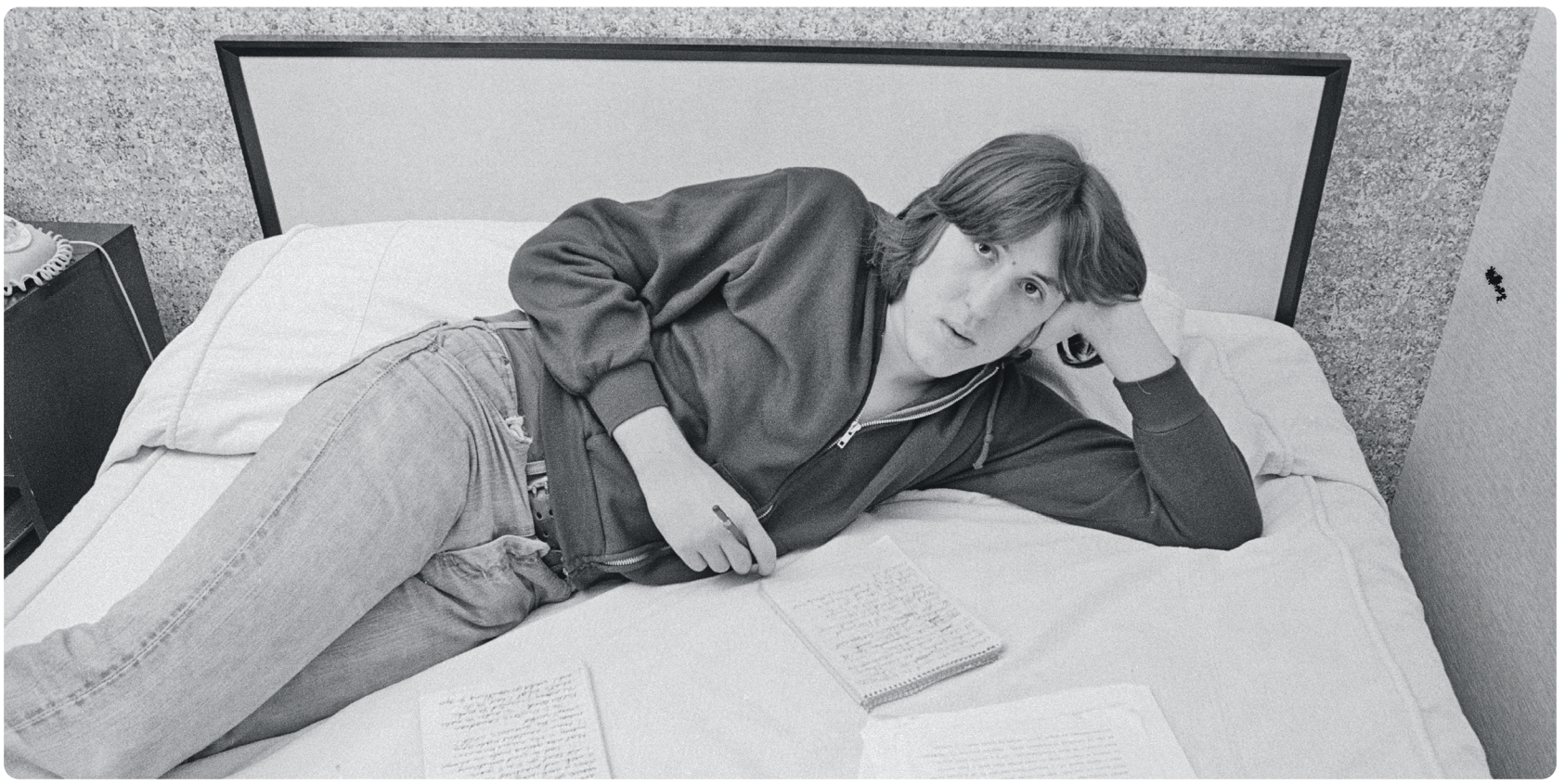
Crowe spoke with *Variety* from his Los Angeles home before embarking on a seven-city book tour that will include joint appearances with Jake Tapper, Sheryl Crow and Kate Hudson.

What were the seeds of wanting to write an autobiography, or partial autobiography, that is of course also a "music book"? With some of the last movies that we'd made, the lunchtime experience in the editorial room had been about, like, "What was Fleetwood Mac like around 'Rumours'?" It turned into the Garrison Keillor-ization of some of these stories. At a certain point, I just felt like I need to write all this stuff down so that I have it, but also just have a chance to put people in a place where we're not looking back. We are *with* Glenn Frey in the moment, we're with David Bowie. ... It was an exciting chance to not say, "I remember," but just to be in the moment with the writing.

It sounds like you started working on another book that would collect some of your classic Rolling Stone profiles, and this more personal memoir branched out of it? And the other book will still come out later? It's true. Well, I think they go hand in hand. But what I didn't realize is that there was so much that I still wanted to say about Southern California and what that life was like and the way music sounded and felt then. And I loved "Just Kids," the Patti Smith book. I thought that was a magic trick — it made me feel like I was right there with her, and there wasn't any soggy sentimentality about it. It was just like, "Come meet these people." I loved the quiet generosity of it, and just thought, "You know what? That's a great place to be."

Will you do a follow-up focused on the movie years? Maybe so. Yeah, I'd like to do it. It's a different book. Things really do change at that point. That wasn't a life I ever imagined when I was 15, when I was talking to Kris Kristofferson about the set of "Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid" and it felt like he was talking about a faraway, magical place where only special people were let in. And it kind of *is*. But that wasn't the feeling that this book is about, which is music and the way it informed everything that came after, including the movies in a big way. I wanted the characters to all have equal value — like Chuck, the guy that lived in our condominium complex, has equal value with Gram Parsons.

Where is your Joni Mitchell movie at? We're gonna do it next year. I just feel really confident that we are telling that story in a way that you wouldn't call a traditional biopic. It's the telling of her story with amazing input from the artist herself, who is opening her life, her closet, her collection of instruments, her notes, her *everything* for us to make a movie as emotionally authentic as her music. I feel really lucky to have spent the last few years finding the way to tell the story that will give you a physical body rush as well as just loving her story.



Cameron Crowe joined Deep Purple on tour in 1974.

Fin Costello/Redferns/Getty Images



Big Thief have gone from playing dive bars to headlining the Hollywood Bowl.

To Infinity and Beyond

With a new album and their biggest tour yet, Big Thief grapple with a band departure and commercial success

By Ethan Shanfeld

→ It's often said that Big Thief functions like a four-headed organism.

Gathered at a picnic table in a Brooklyn park, the members of the folk-rock outfit cross limbs and finish each other's sentences, weaving their thoughts into a long-winded quilt. At one point, singer Adrianne Lenker looks across the table at guitarist Alexander "Buck" Meek and says, "Alexander," communicating in one word that she wants him to remove his blue-tinted biker glasses so she can see his eyes. Message received.

So last year, when the band "broke up" with bassist Max Oleartchik, chopping off one of those heads, Big Thief didn't wallow in his absence but rather expanded, becoming something else entirely. For their sixth album, "Double Infinity," the band invited 10 additional musicians into the studio, including percussionists, vocalists, jazz players and New Age artist Laraaji. The album preserves Big Thief's earthy, country-tinged sound but injects it with tapestried rhythms and an exotic flair.

"We wanted to push into the change and not hold on to something that isn't there," says drummer James Krivchenia, clad in a torn-up blue hoodie and Lennon-esque sunglasses. The result is a strange and sometimes fascinating album, where Lenker's delicate warble floats above drones, tape loops and Laraaji's wordless chanting. On "Words," Meek breaks into a frenetic solo, warping his instrument into a sped-up, distorted sitar. And replacing Oleartchik as Big Thief's touring bassist is Joshua Crumbly, whose hypnotizing groove anchors "No Fear."

But is Oleartchik's departure a permanent one, or might he return at some point?

"I don't know," Lenker says, covering her eyes with Meek's sunglasses.

After a brief pause, her two bandmates chime in: "It feels pretty permanent."

"I mean, it feels permanent," she agrees. "It's just weird to say."

Big Thief recorded "Double Infinity" in the winter, reveling in daily bike rides from Brooklyn to a Hell's Kitchen studio in the icy cold. It was important to them to tape "Double Infinity" in New York, the city where, more than a decade ago, Lenker met Meek, fell in love and formed a band that has outlasted their marriage.

In the early days, the duo slept on a concrete floor in a "slumlord artist house" in Bushwick. Lenker had a job on the Upper West Side polishing silverware, and Meek worked as a bike courier. They saved up $3,500 to buy a van they named Bonnie and routed tours across the East Coast, performing in dive bars and backyards.

"It didn't matter if we were playing in a basement and the microphones broke, or we didn't have a guitar because our instruments broke, or our van broke," Lenker recalls. "We, come hell or high water, would play music. It's something that can't be destroyed."

"Connecting with the infinite," she adds, "nobody can take that away."

After years of critically beloved albums, nonstop touring and a couple surprise indie hits, Big Thief is now on their biggest tour yet, having just performed at the Hollywood Bowl and looking ahead to Forest Hills Stadium. But as bands become popular, they also become businesses. Lenker says it's their job to "protect the heart at the center of our music." That means three-hour meetings every Monday in which the band discuss potential opportunities, shooting down the ones that feel "icky." Imitating a ninja with an invisible sword, she says it feels like "slicing energies" away.

Big Thief has weathered algorithmic forces and avoided the "commodification" of their music. They've turned down licensing offers — like a Levi's commercial — as well as brand partnerships. Meek says Harley Davidson once offered to follow the band with a film crew as they rode motorcycles from California to South by Southwest. "Driving through the desert, wind in our hair, it sounded fun," Meek says. "But hell no."

"What people want is the very thing they ask you to sacrifice," Lenker says. "The thing that draws people to you in the first place, you're given every opportunity to give that thing up."

"I've seen a lot of people lose touch," Meek adds. "We want to be making records and playing shows together for the rest of our lives. We put a lot of thought into protecting that."

He stops, looks across the table and playfully snatches his sunglasses back from Lenker.

"What people want is the very thing they ask you to sacrifice." Adrianne Lenker

Michael Bushas

exposure

Edited by Marc Malkin



Oscar Isaac and Jacob Elordi

'Frankenstein' Premiere

Academy Museum, Los Angeles OCT. 6

Mia Goth, who portrays Elizabeth Lavenza in the Netflix adaptation, says she was nervous when filming began. "It was a lot for me, and I was always in my head," she told *Variety*. "I kept thinking to myself, 'Guillermo del Toro is making "Frankenstein," the movie you've always wanted him to make, and I get to be a part of that.' And I was so scared that I was going to be the one bad thing in it, and I would ruin it." **Jacob Elordi** stars as the iconic monster. Elordi said that "Frankenstein" and Emily Brontë's "Wuthering Heights" — he'll appear as Heathcliff in **Emerald Fennell**'s adaptation next year — were novels he was reluctant to read as a teenager but was excited to rediscover as an adult: "I'm in my later 20s now, so they mean something else — the experience of ... the characters. It's kind of ideal."



Kim Morgan and Guillermo del Toro



Mia Goth



Josh Safdie, Timothée Chalamet and Odessa A'zion

'Marty Supreme' Secret Screening

Alice Tully Hall, New York
OCT. 6

Josh Safdie's sports drama follows Marty Mauser (**Timothée Chalamet**), an aspiring professional table tennis player in 1950s New York City who travels overseas for a championship match. "Thank you everyone for being here," Chalamet said at the New York Film Festival screening of the film, which also marks **Gwyneth Paltrow**'s return to acting. He added, "This movie in many ways, beyond being about Marry Mauser, is a love letter to New York — the New York that is, the New York that was as you'll see in the movie in the 1950s. ... I went to high school down the street. This is fucking awesome." Calling Chalamet "a young man who chases greatness," Safdie said that he and co-writer **Ronald Bronstein** created the role for the Oscar nominee: "Before any words were put down on page seven years ago, I asked this young man to play the part."



Gwyneth Paltrow



Julia Fox



Luke Manley

Clockwise, from top left: Kevin Winter/Getty Images; MICHAEL TRAN/AFP/Getty Images; Monica Schipper/WireImage/Getty Images; Dimitrios Kambouris/Getty Images for FLC (4)





‘Is This Thing On?’ Premiere

Alice Tully Hall, New York **OCT. 10**

Bradley Cooper directed and co-wrote the marriage drama with **Will Arnett**, who plays a financier who begins doing stand-up comedy when he and his wife (**Laura Dern**) separate. “We have to pinch ourselves every step of the way,” Arnett told *Variety*. “It’s just such a joy for us to be able to do this together. We appreciate how rare it is.” Meanwhile, just days before the screening, it was reported that Cooper and **Margot Robbie** were in talks to star in an “Ocean’s Eleven” prequel. “Her work ethic is incredible, besides her immense talent,” Cooper said of the “Barbie” star. “Her and her husband, **Tom [Ackerley]**, they’ve created a company that does really incredible things. That would be amazing to work with the both of them.”




Laura Dern and Will Arnett

‘Best in Drag Show’

Orpheum Theatre, Los Angeles **OCT. 5**

The annual amateur drag queen pageant benefits APLA Health’s Alliance for Housing & Healing. “Best in Drag is just fun as hell, and it’s about accepting everybody where they are, celebrating people as they are,” said “The Pitt” star **Katherine LaNasa**, a first-time judge. (alongside *Variety*’s **Marc Malkin** and others). “I hope that this event teaches people that ... there’s nothing to be afraid of here.” Former “Saturday Night Live” star **Cheri Oteri** was also a judge. “Let your freak flag fly because it’s so fun to watch and to be an audience member,” she said. “It’s wonderful for every gay young person to learn that there are all different types of ways to be gay.” This year’s winner was the bearded, circus-themed Miss Wisconsin, **Bailey Barnum**.






Steven Spielberg and Sam Mendes



Paul Mescal, Chloé Zhao and Jessie Buckley

‘Hamnet’ Premiere

Royal Festival Hall, London **OCT. 11**

Producer **Steven Spielberg** made a surprise appearance at the BFI London Film Festival screening of writer-director **Chloé Zhao**’s drama. “I really believe the earth has a heartbeat. It’s a 24-second seismic cycle, and all of us are connected to this heartbeat which happens right under our feet. But Chloé Zhao is connected to it in a profound way because it’s where her art comes from,” Spielberg said. “It’s what she brings to set every day; it’s what she anoints and shares with her cast every day. And I really believe that when you see ‘Hamnet,’ you’ll be able to feel the seismic heartbeat of the earth because of Chloé Zhao.” **Paul Mescal** stars as William Shakespeare opposite **Jessie Buckley** as his wife as they navigate the death of their son. Mescal described Zhao as “one of the great witches of our day,” adding that “the atmosphere she established is one of the main reasons that people seem to be responding to the film.”

Clockwise, from top right: Best in Drag; Amanda Edwards/Getty Images; Lia Toby/Getty Images for BFI (2); John Nacion/Variety (4)


GRADUATION DAY



As STRANGER THINGS ends its epic five-season run on Netflix, creators Matt + Ross Duffer are gearing up for their next chapter

By Adam B. Vary + Kate Aurthur Illustration by Neil Jamieson



Inside a dark military lab, a booming voice announces an unseen explosive event, and Millie Bobby Brown falls to the floor, a drop of blood trickling from her nose. Sirens flash above her as she curls up amid piles of shattered glass and smashed equipment, signs of a recent, violent struggle. She cries out in pain, and the disembodied voice speaks once more.

"You hear footsteps coming from behind the door," says Matt Duffer, his direction piped in from a hidden speaker. "Closer. *Closer.* Door opens. You see something! Get up. Cut!"

It's July 2024, and Matt and his twin brother, Ross Duffer, are on the Atlanta set of the fifth and final season of "Stranger Things," the television phenomenon they created that propelled Netflix from an upstart streamer into a transformative force in the entertainment industry. They're directing the show's feature-length fourth episode, "Sorcerer," and today's scene, Day 131 of the yearlong shoot, places Brown's psychokinetic teenage heroine Eleven at the precipice of a game-changing revelation. (Fear not: This story will be spoiler-free.)

Matt Duffer (he's the chattier one, with longer, unkempt hair, a streak of which is white above his forehead) and Ross Duffer (he's the quieter one, with shorter hair and a perpetual enigmatic smile) sit at the nearby monitors. While the crew prepares the next setup, Brown wanders over to watch playback of what she's just filmed.

"I need to pee so badly, but I really want to see it," she says. "Did you like the last one? The one before?"

Ross shrugs and laughs. "I don't know. There were a lot of good ones!"

"I'll just focus on my performance, like when I was 12," she says with a dramatic sigh. "I peaked at 12." She cackles as she passes a reporter. "You can write that in *Variety*. I peaked at 12, and it's been downhill ever since!"

Later in the day, the brothers sit down in the elaborate green room on Stage 16 of the 35-acre production facility. Alongside the "Stranger Things" pinball game, a re-creation of the famed Christmas lights alphabet from Season 1 is on display — a reminder of how far the pair have come since the show premiered in 2016. Then, they were unknown 30-somethings with few credits to their name. Now, at 41, they're certified star-makers, having supercharged the careers of the cast (Brown, David Harbour, Sadie Sink, Joseph Quinn — the list goes on!), not to mention reasserting the pop-culture bona fides of '80s icons like Winona Ryder, Paul Reiser and Sean Astin. And now, with a lucrative new four-year deal for film and TV at Paramount for their production company, Upside Down Pictures, they're primed to become the crown princes of Hollywood.

"We are more confident and knowledgeable than we were back then," Matt says, taking a deep breath. "But there's all these other added pressures now. It feels like there's the Eye of Sauron on you, a lot of people watching, lots of expectations. A lot of money is being spent."

Like "Game of Thrones" and "Lost" at their height, "Stranger Things" has seized the public's imagination by blending a deep ensemble of richly drawn characters with dazzling — and expensive — genre storytelling at cinematic scale. Like those earlier shows, too, "Stranger Things" has woven a knotty mythology — in this case, involving an alternate dimension called the Upside Down that's populated with ferocious supernatural entities, along with a nefarious government program bent on weaponizing children with psychic abilities. The stakes of "Stranger Things" are no less than the end of the world, all taking place within the bucolic 1980s suburban setting of fictional Hawkins, Indiana. The young stars have spent literally half their lives on this show, their characters' fierce and hard-fought bonds creating a found family that fans have devoured. The series has hit the Netflix Top 10 in all 93 countries that the company measures; Season 4 was the first-ever English-language series to cross 1 billion hours streamed on the platform, and continues to be the streamer's third-most-popular English-language TV title.

And now the Duffers must somehow resolve all these plot threads, along with the storylines of a massive cast (with 21 series regulars for Season 5) — a daunting undertaking, considering how many hits have failed to stick the landing.

"They have had their hearts broken by shows that they loved that failed fans in the end," says "Stranger Things" executive producer Shawn Levy, who first championed the project (and the Duffers) through his company, 21 Laps, and brought it to Netflix in 2015. "They do not want and refuse to be one of those shows."

The Duffers are acutely aware that the way they conclude "Stranger Things" matters more than any other creative decision they've made

"We took very little time FOR OURSELVES. The break between seasons was almost NONEXISTENT."
-ROSS DUFFER

Previous spread: Netflix. Grooming: Emily Zempel/Exclusive Artists using Murad Skincare; Styling on Matt: Nancy Collini/CDG; Handwriting by Adam B. Vary



PHOTOGRAPHS BY Ryan PFluger


Matt
Duffer

over the past decade. And they've been determined to deliver a climactic final eight episodes that provide a feeling not only of resolution, but of satisfying inevitability. So that, as Ross puts it, when future Netflix subscribers binge the entire series, "it doesn't feel like we dropped a storyline — it all connects."

"We do every last remaining thing we wanted to do with the Demogorgons and Mind Flayer and Vecna and the Upside Down and Hawkins and these characters," adds Matt. "This is a complete story. It's *done*." (As for how much money they've spent along the way, the Duffers decline to elaborate; all that Netflix chief creative officer Bela Bajaria will say is "We want to spend as much money as it is to realize the vision of what's on the page, and this season is no different." The budget is reportedly $50 to $60 million per episode, meaning the season cost more than $400 million to produce.

For Netflix, "Stranger Things" represents the first time the streamer learned how to *be* Netflix as we know it today. The company developed its now-robust consumer products division because of this show, and has partnered with brands ranging from Nike and Coca-Cola to Lego and Williams Sonoma to promote it. Funko, the show's first licensing partner, has sold an astonishing 14 million "Stranger Things" Pop figures, including 1 million Demogorgons, according to Netflix. Nor is merch the only brand extension: The prequel play "Stranger Things: The First Shadow" has been running in the West End (since December 2023) and on Broadway (since April), and has won two Olivier and three Tony awards.

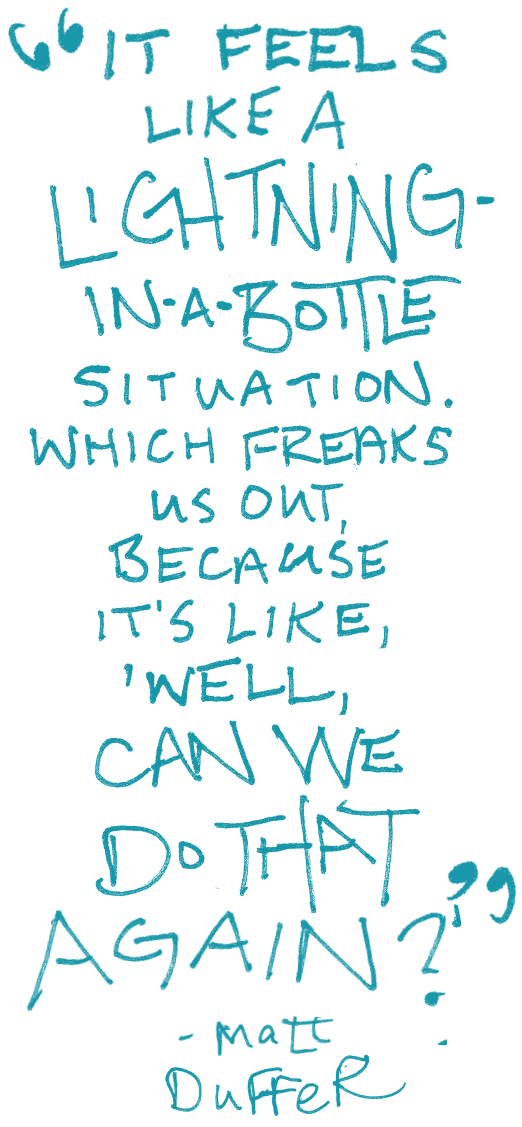
No surprise that Netflix is expecting the show to dominate the holiday season: The first four episodes premiere over Thanksgiving, the next three at Christmas and the finale on New Year's Eve.

"When we finish a season, there's always the safety net of 'Oh, we get to go back to these characters,'" says Ross. "That is going to be the hardest thing to adjust to, when it's Jan. 1 and it's like, 'Oh, we don't have that!'"

These final months were always going to be bittersweet for the Duffers, but the Paramount deal, landing right as Netflix is about to crank up the volume on its global campaign for their show, has made this time even more dramatic. They still have business at the only home they've ever known, including (among other projects) an as-yet-undetermined "Stranger Things" spinoff series. But when their deal there concludes in April, the Duffers will abandon the "crazy creative leash we have at Netflix," Matt says, for a wide-open future that won't be governed by streaming algorithms or defined by their single, and singular, success.

"Stranger Things" made its debut at the height of Peak TV, when two guys with no track record could be afforded the creative freedom and gargantuan resources to tell their story their way. "It feels like a lightning-in-a-bottle situation," says Matt. "Which freaks us out, because it's like, 'Well, can we do that again?'"

Since their childhood in Durham, North Carolina, as wholehearted film nerds seeing movies with their father whenever they could, the Duffers have lived inside what Levy affectionally calls a "bubble of twinship." Sitting together in their postproduction offices in Los Angeles more than a year later, Matt goes bug-eyed when he's asked how often he and Ross are apart. "When it comes to work, never, except when we're working on our individual computers — so what is that, five feet?" he says with a laugh while bending his body into an awkward angle in his chair.



"There have been a couple instances when Ross is not there, and it does cause quite a bit of panic for me. There was one time where he was gone for one shot and I did an obscene amount of takes, like 20 takes, just because I couldn't live with the idea that he was unhappy with how it turned out."

Writing "Stranger Things" makes their mind-meld, if anything, even stronger. "Ross paces back and forth all day, and Matt sits in a chair, and they look very unhappy because their brains are going all the time," says writer Paul Dichter, who began as a writer's assistant in Season 1. "And then when someone has a good idea ..."

"They come alive," interjects fellow writer Kate Trefry (who also penned "The First Shadow"). "You think they're not paying attention for the longest time, but they're just existing in a different dimension."

The Duffers' bubble of twinship was already well established when M. Night Shyamalan began working with them as writers on the first season of his mid-2010s Fox series "Wayward Pines." "It was kind of unfair, because there's two of them," Shyamalan says. "And they were going twice as fast. They were sharing a document, and they were working on different parts of the document at the same time, with their screens back-to-back."

Shyamalan hired them on the strength of their screenplay for their feature directorial debut. They'd shot "Hidden" in 2012, and Warner Bros. eventually dumped it onto VOD in 2015. Convinced their filmmaking careers were over, they soaked up as much as they could about episodic television from "Wayward Pines" so they would feel assured enough to pitch "Stranger Things."

Levy is still giddy recalling his experience of reading the pilot script for the first time. "It was breaking so many rules," he says. "It was a show about kids that wasn't for kids. It was coming-of-age sweetness with horror-genre darkness. It transgressed with such assurance." And yet, from his first meeting with the brothers in March 2015 through production on the first season that fall, Levy was also struck by the contrast between the confidence of their writing and their shy real-life presentation.

"My first impression was hair twirling and gum fidgeting," he says. "They told me straight up: 'We don't do great talking about feelings. Our feelings are in our writing.'"

They poured so much of themselves into the show's first season, from their cinematic obsessions with Steven Spielberg-like kidventure and Stephen King-inspired terror to their early adolescence as outcast geeks with a small, fiercely loyal circle of friends. "We were playing Magic: The Gathering and video games and making movies and having adventures in the woods," Ross says. "A lot of the show, especially the early years, was us tapping into that feeling."

With success far from guaranteed and their careers on the line, their work on the early seasons of "Stranger Things" was "seven days a week," says Ross. "We took very little time for ourselves. The break between seasons was almost nonexistent."

"Apart from their talent and their intelligence, they work really hard," says Harbour, who plays Jim Hopper, Eleven's adoptive father and Hawkins' former police chief. "I don't think I've ever seen any two human beings work harder than they do, sometimes to the point where you want to go, 'Other people can do things for you.'"

Aside from the delays caused by the pandemic and the guild strikes, the Duffers admit their



Noah Schnapp, Gaten Matarazzo, Caleb McLaughlin and Ross and Matt Duffer on the set of "Stranger Things" Season 5

Atsushi Nishijima/Netflix

immersion was a self-created problem. They were determined to direct as much of the show as possible — almost unheard of for showrunners working in genre TV. (Including the finale, they will have helmed 24 out of 42 episodes.) Their favorite filmmakers, such as Michael Mann, Peter Weir and David Fincher, "tend to be obsessive," Matt says.

But they also understand that it didn't have to turn out this way. "Part of me regrets not having been able to tell more different stories over the course of 10 years," Matt continues. "Sometimes I wonder about that — because it ate up our entire 30s. I wish we had gotten it done a little faster, but it is what it is."

He shoots a quick look at Ross, who jumps in. "But when we started, it was very early Netflix," he says, exuding a Zen-like calm in contrast to his brother's restlessness. "And I don't know how many more opportunities there are going to be to tell stories of this length on that size canvas. So whenever I have the regrets that Matt was saying, I'm excited that we were able to take advantage of this very specific period of time in the industry."

"To go this long was our choice," Matt adds. "We could have jumped ship and done movies, and we elected not to — and I'm glad we didn't. We finished telling this story, and luckily we weren't too old when we started it, so we're OK. I mean, Ridley Scott didn't start making movies until he was in his 40s."

Shortly after Skydance Media's deal to buy Paramount Global closed on Aug. 7, the Duffers heard from Cindy Holland, Paramount's recently installed head of direct-to-consumer content, who oversaw "Stranger Things" when she was Netflix's head of original content. "It all happened very quickly," Ross says of Paramount's bombshell proposition. He's not exaggerating: One week later, *Variety* reported that Paramount and the Duffers were in talks to move Upside Down Pictures from Netflix to Paramount. They officially signed the deal on Aug. 19.

The Duffers stress that they hadn't been looking to leave, but as they discussed their future while making Season 5, they realized that what they most wanted wasn't creating and running another series — but to make their first theatrically released movie.

"Even though I have a great projector in my house, I still take my 4-year-old to the theater," Matt says. "We get her a giant Icee and giant popcorn.

"We're going to turn 42 soon," he continues. "I was like, 'If we're going to do a movie for the theaters, let's go!'"

When asked whether they're concerned about any of Paramount Skydance CEO David Ellison's recent headline-grabbing moves that appear to telegraph the company's rightward tilt, they hesitate. "We're used to having creative freedom to do what we want to do and what we want to tell," Ross says carefully. "Paramount's 100% behind it." He looks over to Matt.

"It all comes down to relationships," Matt says. Along with Holland, Matt Thunell, the new head of Paramount TV, was the executive on "Stranger Things" until he left Netflix for Skydance in fall 2022. The Duffers had been with Thunell "since the beginning of the show," Ross says, and "we've kept in touch off and on with Cindy through the years — Cindy's incredible, obviously."

"Whatever's in the press is in the press," Matt says. "I care about who I know — it's Cindy and Matt. I trust them completely."

They decline to discuss their negotiations with Paramount or Netflix's counteroffer. "I don't want to get into the specifics of it," Matt says. "But I will say the biggest draw to us was just to be able to do something theatrical, which is not something Netflix does."

Bajaria — who replaced Holland after she was fired in 2020 — echoes that point. "I knew that the very traditional theatrical release was important to them if they really wanted to start doing film," she says.

The success of the "KPop Demon Hunters" sing-along theatrical event in August, and the impending Imax release of Greta Gerwig's "Chronicles of Narnia" adaptation, sparked a glimmer of hope for the Duffers that the "Stranger Things" finale could be shown in theaters. "People don't get to experience how much time and effort is spent on sound and picture, and they're seeing it at reduced quality," Matt says. "More than that, it's about experiencing it at the same time with fans."

When *Variety* broaches with Bajaria the idea of putting the finale in theaters, however, she shoots it down. "A lot of people — a lot, a lot, a lot of people — have watched 'Stranger Things' on Netflix," she says. "It has not suffered from lack of conversation or community or sharing or fandom. I think releasing it on Netflix is giving the fans what they want."

As for the Paramount deal? "I had a very honest conversation with them, right?" she says. "I've told them we'd always be fans and friends. We're so proud of everything we've built together."

If Bajaria doesn't sound devastated about losing two of her company's top homegrown creators, perhaps it's because the Duffers will continue to build with Netflix. Two new shows from Upside Down Pictures will premiere on the streamer in the first half of 2026 — "The Boroughs" (about seniors in a retirement community combating the supernatural) and "Something Very Bad Is Going to Happen" (a horror-filled week leading up to a wedding) — which, if successful, would be ongoing series they'd continue to executive produce. The animated offshoot "Stranger Things: Tales From '85," currently without a release date, is set during the winter after the events of the second season. That's ideal, Matt says, "because the kids can stay young forever."

Then there's the spinoff. Matt reiterates that they have no desire to "increasingly expand what could become an insanely convoluted mythology" after Season 5. Instead, another "Stranger Things" show, Ross says, would "live in a bit of a different world," but "there's going to be connective tissue." Yes, they've been imagining that world — but no, they aren't telling anyone, including their closest collaborators, about it yet.

"They've been very protective of spinoff talk, and I understand that the Matt-Ross bubble is sacred," Levy says. "I'm excited to extend the storytelling life of 'Stranger Things' — I'm not going to call it a 'universe,' because that would be obnoxious." He pauses. "'The STU'? Too soon?"

"I think it CHANGED ME as an actor Forever."
— MAYA HAWKE

Even with the wait, however, "Netflix has been surprisingly patient," Matt says. "I feel that patience wearing thin a little bit, with the show coming to an end. But they're understanding." (After asking what the Duffers told *Variety* about the spinoff, Bajaria says there's no set timeline. "I'd always love more 'Stranger Things,'" she says with a laugh. "When they're ready, we'll be ready.")

Whatever the spinoff turns out to be, the Duffers won't be running it. They'll be "heavily creatively involved," Ross says. "But we'll hopefully be writing and directing something new in the meantime, helping shepherd it along."

As for what that "something new" might be, well ... that's another matter. Though Paramount has some attractive properties in its stable — "Star Trek," "Transformers," the company's newly acquired "Call of Duty" rights — the Duffers aren't interested in going that route. "Everyone knows there's not enough original stuff out there right now. Everything is so IP driven," Ross says.

They claim, though, to have zero idea about what to dive into next. The week they were brokering the Paramount deal felt "surreal" (Ross) and "super stressful" (Matt). But those heady moments didn't last: Practically speaking, they have no time to worry or wallow.

"I couldn't think about it anymore, because we're just back in working on 'Stranger Things,'" Matt says. "I've actually stopped thinking about the future entirely."

"And we've spent 10 years on this," Ross says. "We're trying to put 100% energy in just making sure we land this plane. So no thought is going elsewhere at the moment."

"*At all*," Matt says, pausing, then adds: "Hopefully Paramount doesn't read this."

At the end of Season 2 of "Stranger Things," the Duffers were burned out. After the runaway success of Season 1, Netflix wanted the second installment to premiere before Halloween in 2017 — a deadline they met — and they were also trying to create "a mythology that could sustain multiple seasons," Ross says. Feeling exhausted, Matt remembers telling journalists the show would be "four and done." But as they made Season 3 — a twist on "Jaws" set during the July 4

In 2016, the Duffers with Millie Bobby Brown, Matarazzo, Finn Wolfhard and McLaughlin



Curtis Baker/Netflix

holiday in Hawkins, which did little to advance the show's larger plot — they realized, Matt says, "we needed five."

"Once we got into 4," Ross says, "you're fully building out the endgame."

At the start of Season 5, the formerly far-flung characters — like Joyce Byers (Ryder), who rescued Hopper from a gulag in the Soviet Union — are all back in Hawkins, living under military quarantine. It's an 18-month time jump from the Season 4 finale, when the show's apex villain, Vecna (Jamie Campbell Bower), cracked open the Upside Down, eroding the membrane between the two dimensions. That everyone is in the same place has brought down the episodes' run times, which had ballooned in the fourth season — the finale was two hours and 22 minutes. With the final season, most of the episodes are about an hour, with Episode 4 clocking in at 83 minutes and the finale running "around two hours," Matt says.

Going into the writers' room, they knew the biggest questions they needed to answer were "about what the Upside Down *was*," Ross says. "Every season would be like, 'Should we talk about it?' And we'd go, 'No, let's wait.' And then finally, we're like, 'Well, we have to now!'"

Beyond that, though, when mapping out the final season, "everything was on the table when we first started," says Dichter. "We had the names of every character on a whiteboard, and it was like anything is possible for any of these characters. They could live or die. They could end up together …"

"Or not together," adds Trefry. Especially as the show's arc drew toward the final climax, the writers had to deliver "enormous spectacle," she says, while not allowing it to "devolve into a CG slimefest, where you don't really care who's doing what and why."

"How do we keep grounding it in what the show is really about?" Trefry says they'd ask in the room. "It's never cynical. It's never winking at you. It's looking toward that core of innocence and how to maintain that as you grow older and are beset by all of the nightmares of the world."

As they worked on the finale script, she says, "we went back over and over and over and over, dozens of times. We'd blow it up, and we'd just rinse and repeat."

The Duffers studied series finales that they felt really worked, such as the final installments of "Six Feet Under," "Friday Night Lights" and even "The Sopranos," whose cut-to-black conclusion was controversial at the time but is now widely respected. "The best ones were very true to themselves," Ross says. "The shows that are trying to be super clever — I think that's where it can go wrong really quickly."

It helped that they were writing toward something specific, according to Matt. "We knew roughly what the end scene was for years — it wasn't something we had to strain to come up with," he says. "There were elements of it that were discussed for weeks, but the core idea of the ending, we had for a really long time."

He stops and adjusts his baseball hat, which is emblazoned with a Warhol-esque sequence of Stephen King's face. "Anyway, we're really happy with the way it ended," he says with a sigh. "It's nerve-racking to put it out. I'm sure people will have opinions!"

On Sept. 8, 2024, the Duffers, the "Stranger Things" cast and a handful of people who'd been with the show since the beginning gathered in the green room on Stage 16 to read the finale, "The Rightside Up." The writing process had grown so protracted that they'd had to start feeding draft pages to their department heads so sets and costumes could be ready in time to shoot. ("Pages we hadn't even shared with Netflix," Matt says. "I don't think they knew that.")

Save for the Duffers, Levy, the writers and a few executives, that warm Sunday in Atlanta was the first time anyone in that room had seen the finished script.

"IT WAS BREAKING SO MANY RULES. IT WAS A SHOW ABOUT KIDS THAT WASN'T FOR KIDS. IT WAS COMING-OF-AGE SWEETNESS WITH HORROR-GENRE DARKNESS. IT TRANSGRESSED WITH SUCH ASSURANCE."

– SHAWN LEVY



As they all gathered, the actors started chanting, "Speech! Speech! Speech!" Despite believing that "we give really bad speeches," Matt stood up and gave it his best shot.

"Everything we wanted to say about the show, the experience of making the show, you as actors and the characters — we tried to put all of that into the script," he remembers saying. "I'm not going to be able to say anything better than that. We write much better than we speak. Let's just read the script."

Halfway through, the tears began to flow. "It felt like they were writing the end of our real-people lives — it went beyond just the screenplay," recalls Noah Schnapp, who plays Will Byers, whose abduction into the Upside Down is the catalyst for the series. "I'll always connect my life to some of the beats that they wrote."

Harbour struggles to find the right words to describe the table read. "It's like you're asking me to talk about my family," he says. "The events that happen in that script, they pay off a lot of things that we started in the first season. The series begins with kids in a basement, and when we leave the series, they've grown



Courtesy of Netflix

up. The passage of time is just very moving."

After it was over, Dichter remembers coming up to Ross to share his sudden realization that his "Stranger Things" experience was truly over.

"'I'm done after 10 years, and it feels *crazy*,'" Dichter told Ross. "And he was like, 'Uh-huh.' He was not crying. I was like, 'You don't feel done, do you?' He's like, 'No, I got months of shooting; I got a year of post.' I was like, 'Yeah, you're not taking this moment in.'"

In their office, a little more than a year later, and days away from locking their cut of the finale, Matt and Ross maintain they still haven't quite reached that feeling. There's still so much to do — sound mixes, color timing, visual effects work, and then the gauntlet of promotion.

And yet, as they talk about the final days of the show, it's obvious they are very much feeling *something*. In a feat of logistics, the production miraculously arranged the shooting schedule so that every principal actor's final scene on the show was also their last day of filming — something the Duffers have been freshly reliving again and again in the edit bay.

"Particularly the last 35 minutes, 40 minutes, of that episode are us processing the end of the show and saying goodbye to these actors," Ross says. "We just finished editing all those scenes, and ..." He pauses, and his voice breaks a little. "It was *emotional*, just to edit it. Because these people, they weren't acting in this moment."

They really weren't. "Everybody was feeling the fatigue of shooting for a year," says Joe Keery, who plays reformed dickhead Steve Harrington. "Everyone was looking forward to being done, but then once you get to the finish line, you look back and think, 'Oh, man, can I just have one more?'"

"I was at Winona's last day," Schnapp says. "I was like, 'This is a work goodbye; we'll see each other soon.' And then I was in her trailer, and I was like, 'No! You can't leave!' I was holding on to her, just sobbing. I did not expect it to hit me so hard."

"I think it changed me as an actor forever," says Maya Hawke, who started in Season 3 as the motormouthed teenager Robin Buckley. "I am a different actor today, and I think a better actor, because of that opportunity to do a scene that was on such a high-stakes emotional day of my life that was also a high-stakes emotional *scene*. It was just this extraordinary gift. But I did spend 12 hours in a rolling cycle of weeping."

The first four episodes of Season 5 will premiere over Thanksgiving.

Needless to say, directing their actors through this torrent of deep feeling was its own challenge. "It was hard to even get through take after take," Ross says, running his hands through his hair. "You're just going, 'They're feeling every moment of this.' Occasionally, they were actually too emotional in moments when it was a little too early in the scene. We're like, 'You're not supposed to be upset!'"

Matt, who's been nodding, jumps in. "I'm never going to spend 10 years on something again, I don't think, where you become this much of a family with the people who are working on it," he says. "It was really hard. Each day was saying goodbye. Each of those actors only had to say goodbye once. Ross and I had to do it four different times. Every time I'm like, 'I'm not going to break!' And I broke every time." ●

LIFE OF A SHOW GIRL

Ahead of accepting an award as an Icon of Culture, Diane von Furstenberg reflects on her glorious career, her marriage to Barry Diller and the power of kindness

By ***Ramin Setoodeh***

Photographs by ***OK McCausland***



IF YOU VISIT

Diane von Furstenberg's office in the Meatpacking District, she won't necessarily give you clothes. You might leave with a more unusual gift bag — filled with books. As we discuss her long career, she calls out to her assistant, asking her to fetch the story of her life, as told in several written collections. There's a self-help book ("Own It: The Secret to Life"); a coffee-table tome of some of her best looks ("Diane von Furstenberg: Woman Before Fashion"); a small novelty book in Italian, which I don't speak ("Serenissima: Solution & Seduction"); and a book about the Statue of Liberty, because she served as the monument's "godmother" during a fundraising event. "I thought it was a better title than being on the board," she says of the self-invented appointment.

The godmother of Liberty suits her well — after all, in her very best book, the 2014 memoir "The Woman I Wanted to Be," von Furstenberg spills on all her adventures. The daughter of a Holocaust survivor, von Furstenberg came to New York in 1969, after a whirlwind adolescence of traveling in Europe, and changed fashion with the wrap dress, which she debuted in 1973. When she got to the city, von Furstenberg was already royalty as the socialite wife of Germany's Prince Egon von Fürstenberg; she soon ruled the party scene too. After becoming a self-made millionaire, she bought herself an apartment on Park Avenue and a farm in Connecticut. In 2001, she married a second time, to the Hollywood mogul Barry Diller, reinventing herself as part of another New York power couple.

Today, von Furstenberg splits her time between her farm, Cloudwalk, where she lives; New York, where she works; and Venice, Italy, where she plays. "I read a biography of Venice, and I realized Venice is a woman," she says.

Feminism is often on DVF's mind, and she says her family refers to her as an "oracle or a goat."

Why a goat?

"I climb," she says.

At 78, she's talking to me because she's agreed to accept the Perelman Performing Arts Center NYC Icon of Culture award. But DVF doesn't like awards. She begrudgingly agreed to accept after former Mayor Michael Bloomberg invited her. She told Bloomberg she would appear at the Oct. 28 gala only if the event's organizers roasted her.

Hair: Michael Silva; Makeup: Laura Mele





Diane von Furstenberg in the early 1970s

In person, DVF is so modest, she'd rather talk about anything other than her achievements. "Ramin, are you Persian? I speak Persian," she says, and she offers me a few sassy phrases in Farsi.

Only with some prodding does she acknowledge her place in fashion history. But once she gets going, the stories spill out of her. After an hour, she sends me home with Sharpie-written inscriptions to me in all her tomes and some magical tales that only a New York godmother could spin.

Congratulations on your award. Michael Bloomberg will be at the celebration.

He called me and said, "You're the only icon I know, so you have to say yes." I was totally embarrassed. I said, "I don't want to do this. The only way I agree is if you make it a comedy."

Is it because you're at a place in your life where laughter is important?

No. Because otherwise it's boring. And embarrassing. But if you do it as a comedy, it's fun hopefully.

What does it mean to be an icon of culture in New York?

I don't know. It means you've lived a long time and you've been around a long time. Have I shaped our culture? I don't know. I lived our culture.

But you also changed our culture.

I don't know if I changed it. I witnessed it. I changed it with the dress.

With the invention of the wrap dress, you were suddenly a star. You were featured on the cover of Newsweek in 1976, and you made fashion more affordable.

I definitely did that. I would drive from Park Avenue to Seventh Avenue and count the dresses on the street. They were everywhere. And at a point, I was making 25,000 wrap dresses a week. Every woman in America had one. Five. Twenty! That's why it saturated the first time around.

Instead of being an elitist, it let everyone look good. Also, QVC — I brought Barry there. [In 1992, Diller became head of QVC, and von Furstenberg appeared on the channel, selling her latest designs.] I brought everyone there — Marc Jacobs. Karl Lagerfeld made a drawing of me in a crystal ball like a magician in the TV. I have it somewhere.

"Andy Warhol never spoke. He wanted to know about you. He would photograph you, tape you. He was a voyeur. He is the one who created the idea of the icon."

But you forget all the things you do. Sometimes I talk to kids: "Oh, I knew this one." I don't want to say it, because it's like I'm boasting. I've known everyone my age who went around New York. I knew Andy Warhol.

What was Warhol like?

Andy Warhol never spoke. He wanted to know about you. He would photograph you, tape you. He was a voyeur. He is the one who created the idea of the icon. He lived in New York with his mother. His mother was very religious. In Greek churches or in Russian churches, you have lots of icons.

When you first moved to New York, as a socialite you threw infamous parties with Prince Egon. Madonna came to one before she was Madonna.

She was already Madonna, but no one knew her. She was 19. She came with a big brown hat, and she talked the entire time to my mother.

OK, let's talk about DVF as a brand. You recently took back control from a company in China.

We have taken control back of the product. [*Her cellphone rings. She picks it up and says, in Italian, that she's in a meeting: "Ciao."*] It's the last thing I wanted to do. In this stage of my life, where I am, I'm 78 years old. I'm in the winter of my life. It's very important I take all the things I learn, accomplish, experienced, and all the connections that I have

Courtesy of Diane von Furstenberg Archives (3)



Hillary Clinton, Alyse Nelson and von Furstenberg in Venice in 2022

to kind of put it in a bundle and try to make sense of it and try to make other people benefit from it.

How do you do that?

I discovered the power of kindness. That is going to be my main focus for whatever time I have left. Kindness is a currency — like money, it compounds. Of course, it's a virtue. It's a tool. It's a trick. It's a muscle. Once you start practicing it, it's a wonderful thing. I have a little manifesto which I'll give you: Connect. Every day I make one miracle by introducing one person to a person who can change their life. I don't need to speak. All I need to do is a nice, meaningful, thoughtful email — and a miracle happens!

As a designer, you always told your models to smile on the runway.

Very important. Before the show, I'd say, "Be the woman you want to be — and smile." They'd look at me, because no one ever wants them to smile. I don't know why. What is most beautiful in a woman is the eye contact, the smile and the body language. Or sometimes I would say, "Don't behave like a model. Just be the woman. And when you look at the camera, think of your boyfriend. Seduce the camera." I used a less attractive word.

How has New York changed in your lifetime?

When I came to live here, it was 1970. It was dirty, cheap and dangerous. It was dangerous and therefore cheap. And because it was cheap, you had a lot of artists. New York was great because it didn't cost anything. I used to go to the supermarket and pay $50 for 25 people.

And you helped revitalize the Meatpacking District by bringing DVF here. And now the Meatpacking District is synonymous with fashion and luxury.

That I did. I bought a carriage house on West 12th Street. Everybody thought I was crazy. But I'd started my company again and thought, "Why pay rent uptown?" All the hard bars were still here. I got involved. We made the High Line happen. And then Barry came after me. He renovated the pier. It was his dream, and it was a wonderful thing.

I wanted to ask you about your marriage to Barry, the great love of your life.

He turned out to be my soulmate. I didn't think of it at first. He was a man about town. I was giving a party for Sue Mengers, and he came. I was interested in being a good friend; I never thought it would be anything else. Then it turned to passion. He was very insistent.

He called me the next day, and then we had dinner. And then I went to Paris, and he called me : "Why don't you come to L.A.?" I made a stop in Montreal. I called the boyfriend I had at the time to tell him I was going to L.A. to meet someone else. Barry came to pick me up. He had a limousine for my luggage. Did he say that in his book?

You write about that in your book. In his book, "Who Knew," released this year, he made the decision to come out as a gay man. Can you talk about supporting him in doing that?

Supporting him? What do you mean, *supporting him*? People see it that way. For me, it's not that way. I don't know. Yes, I encouraged him to do that book, and yes, I encouraged him to do the Audible. But for me, the book is not about that. It's about his life. And of course, with me, he opened immediately. For 50 years, I was the only person he opened to. Then he wrote the book.

What does it mean to be a woman married to a man who's gay?

What's the difference? I don't understand.

A lot of women wouldn't want to be married to a gay man.

But it doesn't change anything. I'm sorry — it's a stupid question. I married two gay men, OK? I don't know why, but to me, they're not gay, so it doesn't make any difference.

I think I understand. Were there any downsides to becoming successful so young?

No, of course not. Then you can make mistakes. I thought I would die by the time I was 30 because I had done everything. But I didn't. Strangely enough, I feel the same energy I felt in those early years.

How would you describe your business in the year 2025?

The brand more than the business. The brand is really about: We make clothes for the woman in charge. It's to give women confidence and to make them feel sexy on the go, ready to go. They're a woman's best friend in the closet. I stick to the closet: The clothes come out of the closet, the men come out of the closet! The closet is very important.

Do you have a large closet?

Yeah, in the country, I have archives. I am an archive too. I'm an archive in the closet. No, I'm not in the closet at all.

I wasn't asking that. In your book you write about choosing your own burial place in a patch of land on your ranch in Connecticut.

Every Saturday with my son, we used to walk: "Oh, where should we be buried?" It was *there*, it was *there* and it was *there*. I got a little bit more land, and it was *there*. And then I made it a real cemetery. You have to go to town so it's official.

Is it comforting knowing your resting place?

Yes. But then I could be pulverized in a plane. You're not in control of everything.

If there was a movie about your life, who would play you?

I used to say somebody, and then they aged. I don't know. There have been plenty of documentaries.

One day there might be a movie.

But it won't be as good as the movie I lived. ●

"Kindness is a currency — like money, it compounds. Of course, it's a virtue. It's a tool. It's a trick. It's a muscle. Once you start practicing it, it's a wonderful thing."

Barry Diller and von Furstenberg at the opening of Manhattan's High Line in 2009



SCREENWRITING FOR ALGORITHMS

P.36

AI IS CHANGING THE WAY HOLLYWOOD WORKS — STARTING WITH HOW IT SEARCHES FOR PROMISING MATERIAL AND TALENTED WRITERS

BY
GENE
MADDAUS

ILLUSTRATIONS
BY
CHEYNE GATELEY



MORRIS CHAPDELAINE ALWAYS HAS A DAUNTING STACK OF SCRIPTS ON HIS DESK.

As an indie producer, he reads about three a week and farms out the rest to interns and film students, who send back detailed coverage reports. But he struggles to get through them all.

At a film festival, some friends suggested he investigate artificial intelligence to help with his workload. "I was a little arm's length with anything AI-related," he says. "Some of it scares me."

But Chapdelaine did some research and eventually signed up for Greenlight Coverage, which uses large language models to summarize scripts and grade elements like plot, character arcs, pacing and dialogue on a scale of 1 to 10. It even gives a verdict: Pass, consider or recommend.

He found the AI more honest than human feedback — even his own — while it doubled his reading pace. "It's such a time saver," he says. "And it's getting better and better."

If AI does anything well, it's summarizing written material. So of all the jobs in the development pipeline, the most vulnerable may be the very first: the script reader. The industry's initial gatekeeper could someday be a software program.

In fact, machines are already playing a role. At WME, agents and assistants use ScriptSense, another AI platform, to sort through submissions and keep track of clients' work. Aspiring screenwriters are also turning to AI tools like ScreenplayIQ and Greenlight to provide feedback (sometimes too flattering) on their drafts.

At the major studios, human story analysts still dig through piles of submissions much as they've done for 100 years. But as AI creeps into everyone's workflow, they worry about their jobs.

Jason Hallock, a story analyst at Paramount, recalls his first unsettling experiments with ChatGPT, the bot that launched the current AI frenzy. "How quickly am I going to be replaced?" he wondered. "Is it six weeks? Or six months?"

Working with the Editors Guild, which represents about 100 unionized story analysts, he decided to find out. Earlier this year, he set up an experiment. He would ask AI tools to cover some scripts, then stack up their reports against coverage generated by humans. It was a test to see if he and his colleagues could compete.

Since the dawn of Hollywood, story analysts have been its threshing machines, separating the wheat from the chaff. AI proponents argue that algorithms can make that process more efficient, more objective and thus more fair, allowing new voices to be heard instead of relying on readers who bring their own subjective tastes to their job.

But something could also be lost. A human reader is the first to sense whether a script has potential, whether the characters are engaging and whether the story sweeps you up and has something new to say. Can AI do that? "The most important thing I'm looking for is 'Do I care?'" says Holly Sklar, a longtime story analyst at Warner Bros. "An LLM can't care."

Yet AI seems to be coming regardless. So rather than ignore it, some are trying to understand it.

"Nobody wants to lose their job," says Alegre Rodriquez, an Editors Guild analyst who participated in Hallock's study. "We're not sticking our head in the ground pretending it doesn't exist, and we're not cowering waiting for them to give us a pink slip. I think people are dusting themselves off and saying, 'How do I stay in this game?'"

Kartik Hosanagar is a Wharton business professor and an internet marketing entrepreneur. He's also a film enthusiast with a couple scripts in his drawer — a drama about a startup and a thriller about a murdered Indian diplomat. As a Hollywood outsider, he struggled to sell his screenplays. That led him to develop an algorithm to level the playing field by assessing talent objectively. That venture didn't pan out, but the next one did: Hosanagar developed ScriptSense, one of the buzzier AI script platforms. The pitch: "Evaluate 100x the screenplays."

"There's a huge unread pile," Hosanagar says. "This is a great way to clear the pile and figure out where to focus your attention."

In March, Hosanagar sold his company to Cinelytic, a service provider that is integrating ScriptSense into a suite of management tools. "It's about saving time," says Tobias Queisser, the company's CEO. "Opportunities get left aside because there's not enough capacity to look at all the stuff. Unknown writers never get a chance because their script is not submitted by a top agency."

ScriptSense provides summaries, character breakdowns, comps and casting suggestions. The tone is relatively neutral. It doesn't offer praise or criticism.

"Our design philosophy was that we're not going to make the decision for you," Hosanagar says. "You will never see a statement where it says 'Amazing!' or 'Reject it.'"

"AI PROGRAMS WOULD DEFINITELY TELL YOU EVERYTHING THAT WAS POSITIVE AND WORKING WELL. BUT WHEN YOU HAD TO GET DOWN TO PROBLEMS, IT COULDN'T NECESSARILY IDENTIFY THEM."
Alegre Rodriquez, Editors Guild analyst



"WHAT AI REALLY DOES WELL IS BEING THE AVERAGE OF THINGS. YOU WANT THE AVERAGE PERSON TO LIKE YOUR WORK. THAT'S WHERE AI REALLY SHINES."

Jack Zhang, Greenlight founder

The platforms geared toward screenwriters have a different philosophy. Jack Zhang, the founder of Greenlight, believes in the power of AI to make critical judgments. "What AI really does well is being the average of things," he says. "In terms of feedback, you are trying to reach a wide audience. You want the average person to like your work. That's where AI really shines."

ScreenplayIQ offers qualitative assessments but not numerical scores. The program summarizes plots and evaluates characters' "growth" and "depth," helping writers see their work from an outside perspective. "Our objective is to support writers where they feel they're struggling and want support," says developer Guy Goldstein. "It's holding a mirror up to your script. You wrote it with an intention; it's seeing if that intention came through."

To test the AI platforms, Hallock needed scripts. Screenwriters can be sensitive about feeding their material into AI models, as they assume it will be used for training. But a close friend was willing to provide some old screenplays for the cause. One was an unproduced script for the Syfy channel about a killer insect. Another was pitched as "'Heart of Darkness' in outer space." The author didn't mind if AI trained on that. "He said he hoped it would make the AI dumber," Hallock says.

He gathered a few others and gave them all to human analysts. He then compared their coverage with the loglines, synopses and notes produced by six AI platforms. The results were both encouraging and unnerving. The AI-generated loglines were indistinguishable from the human ones — maybe even a little better. But the differences began to show with the AI-generated synopses. "They tend to have 11th-grade-essay quality," Hallock says. "It uses the same kinds of constructions, like 'Our story begins with …'"

The more complicated the script, the more likely AI was to get things wrong — to misattribute the action of one character to another and to hallucinate plot points.

The humans won hands down when it came to notes, which require actual analysis rather than just distillation. The AI programs were "an almost total fail across the board," Hallock says.

The "'Heart of Darkness' in space" script got a "recommend" though it had made the rounds in Hollywood 20 years ago and didn't sell. That was a consistent issue. Instead of offering unvarnished criticism, Rodriquez says, the models were "biased towards the writer." "They would definitely tell you everything that was positive and working well," she says. "But when you had to get down to problems, they couldn't necessarily identify them."

In some cases, AI programs weren't evaluating; they were cheerleading.

"It's got that puppy-dog quality," Hallock says. "It wants to please you."

One romantic comedy was praised by AI as "a compelling, well-crafted coming-of-age story balancing humor, heartbreak, and bittersweet realities of navigating one's thirties. Strong character development makes this a standout work." The human reader, meanwhile, was underwhelmed: "Familiar template of female friends in Las Vegas. Potential as light streaming content, especially with Sydney Sweeney. Bawdy language, but jokes don't land hard; lacks bite of 'Girls Trip' or 'Bridesmaids.'"

Zhang defends Greenlight's taste, saying that only 5% of the scripts submitted to the platform get a "recommend." "That's very few," he says. "I wouldn't say there's huge inflation."

Hosanagar says ScriptSense doesn't make recommendations in part because AI can be too sycophantic. "Can AI get to a point where it can be truly critical?" he asks. "I think it can get there. We're not there yet."

Many of the analysts were heartened by the study, Rodriquez says. AI might be faster, but it can't pluck something original and brilliant out of the pile.

"It's still going to require a human being to look at those reports and review material," she says. "It doesn't save as much time as they think it does."

And those who over-rely on it might miss out on something great. But the study was not entirely reassuring, concluding, "Studios may be tempted to forgo quality and accuracy in favor of cheap and fast."

The makers of the AI models say those fears are misplaced. "It's not about taking away jobs," Queisser says. "We see it as an enhancement for humans."

Chris Giliberti, CEO of Avail, says story analysts are already using his AI platform to do routine tasks, which frees up time to undertake more challenging analytical work. "It's unstoppable," he says. "The cat's out of the bag. This is making people's jobs and lives easier."

Sklar, however, worries about where this is headed. Today's executives value human input. But a younger generation may be coming up that is more comfortable with AI summaries. She fears that some in Hollywood — "the cost-slashing folks who don't understand all of what we do" — will come view her role as superfluous. "That's what keeps me up at night," she says. ●

SCAD SAVANNAH FILM FESTIVAL

OCT. 25-NOV. 1

TICKETS ON SALE NOW AT SCAD.EDU/FILMFEST

awards circuit

Southern Comfort SCAD Savannah Film Festival brings student and elite filmmakers together

By Andrew McGowan

→ SCAD Savannah Film Festival returns Oct. 25-Nov. 1 with a lineup of exciting premieres, screenings, honorees and guests who will congregate at the world's largest university-run film festival in the world.

The festival, which is organized by and hosted at the Savannah College of Art and Design, showcases a combination of student and professional work. It brings together SCAD's emergent artists and Hol-



Sarah Shatz/Focus Features

Kate Hudson and Hugh Jackman star in "Song Sung Blue," which unspools at SCAD Savannah Film Festival.

“Our team’s goal when programming the festival is to curate a lineup that brings the most compelling, innovative and culturally resonant films to our screens.”
Christina Routhier



lywood’s most elite filmmakers through screenings, panels and discussions throughout the week.

“Our team’s goal when programming the SCAD Savannah Film Festival is to curate a lineup that brings the most compelling, innovative and culturally resonant films to our screens — not only to celebrate the art of cinema but to inspire the next generation of storytellers studying at SCAD,” says festival director Christina Routhier.

The festival opens with a screening of “Eternity,” A24’s romantic comedy starring Miles Teller, Elizabeth Olsen, Callum Turner and Da’Vine Joy Randolph. Teller will receive the Distinguished Performance Award that same night, joined by his co-star, Oscar-winner Randolph.

“Song Sung Blue” serves as the festival’s Centerpiece Gala. Hugh Jackman and Kate Hudson topline Focus Features’ comedy-drama about the Neil Diamond cover duo Thunder & Lightning. Director Craig Brewer will receive the festival’s Spotlight Director Award.

Finally, the festival closes with a screening of “Wake Up Dead Man: A Knives Out Mystery,” the third installment of Rian Johnson’s whodunnit murder mystery series starring an ensemble cast led by Daniel Craig’s detective Benoit Blanc. The film, which had its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival in September, begins a limited theatrical run on Nov. 26 and releases globally on Netflix Dec. 12. Johnson will receive SCAD’s Outstanding Achievement in Directing Award at the screening.

Other honorees at SCAD this year include Jon Chu, recipient of the Vanguard Director Award, while Hannah Beachler will receive the *Variety* Creative Impact in Production Design Award. Actors, including Will Arnett, Rose Byrne, Miles Caton, Zoey Deutch, Joel Edgerton, Mark Hamill, Oscar Isaac, Dylan O’Brien, Tessa Thompson, Brendan Fraser, Amanda Seyfried and Jennifer Lopez, will each be honored with a specific prize tied to their films that will screened at the festival.

This year’s festival will also showcase expansions and additions at SCAD Film Studios in Savannah, Ga., the school’s film campus. The studio’s 11 acres already feature over 40 facades and dressed interior spaces, a 17,000-square-foot production and costume space and an LED volume screen for virtual production. During the festival, SCAD will introduce new backlot facades and plans for two new soundstages and 11 new classrooms set to open in 2026.

Other events this year include the animation roundtable Pixels and Pencils, a panel of cinematographers called Behind Their Lens, an Artisans series featuring casting directors, production designers and composers, the SCAD Alumni Voices Panel highlighting accomplished graduates of the school and V*ariety*’s 10 Artisans to Watch panel.

Paula Wallace founded SCAD Savannah Film Festival in 1997 and continues to serve as its president. She says, “Every October, SCAD transforms Savannah into a masterclass in moviemaking, with our 2025 SCAD Savannah Film Festival lineup featuring Jennifer Lopez, Mark Hamill (the original Skywalker!), ‘Wicked’s’ Jon M. Chu, and so many more who help SCAD Bees make the leap from classroom to call sheet. Come for the Oscar-bound premieres and stay for the splendor of the South’s most cinematic city.”



Elizabeth Olsen, Miles Teller and Callum Turner star in festival screener “Eternity,” above, “Wake Up Dead Man: A Knives Out Mystery,” right, also plays at the fest.

From left: A24; Everett Collection

Art in the Craft Below-the-line rising stars rely on creativity, innovation and talent

By Jazz Tangcay, Giana Levy, Andrew McGowan, Leia Mendoza







Artisans who are behind such films as "Avatar: Fire and Ash," top; "One Battle After Another," above right; and "Bugonia," above left, are being honored at SCAD Savannah Film Festival.

Clockwise, from top left: 20th Century Studios; Courtesy of Durald; Courtesy of Berg; Warner Bros. Pictures; Focus Features

→ *Variety* has announced its 10 Artisans to Watch, with this year's roster shining a spotlight on the craftspeople who work tirelessly behind some of the buzziest awards season films, including "Sinners," "F1," "One Battle After Another," "Bugonia" and more.

Since the list's inception, honorees have gone on to earn nominations and win guild and Academy Awards. Recently, 2023 honoree James Price (production designer, "Poor Things") and 2024's Paul Tazewell (costume designer, "Wicked") went on to win the Academy Award in their respective categories.

In recognition of their achievements, the honorees will be celebrated at the SCAD Savannah Film Festival.



Autumn Durald Arkapaw
Cinematographer
'Sinners'

While writing a paper on "Broadway Danny Rose" and "Raging Bull," Durald Arkapaw found herself falling in love with the prospect of being a director of photography. After previously working with director Ryan Coogler on "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever," the pair began to collaborate for Coogler's fifth feature, "Sinners." "We support each other," says Durald Arkapaw. "I've learned how to read the story through [Ryan's] eyes, to understand what he needs to tell it and what is important to him."

As the first woman to shoot on 65mm, Durald Arkapaw is grateful for the opportunity to continue opening doors for more representation in cinematography and to be an inspiration for female cinematographers. "It means the world when young girls, or film students of similar heritage, come up to me and express their gratitude, not just for the work, but for the fact that they can see someone like themselves behind the camera." — *Leia Mendoza.*



Virginia Berg
Assistant art director
'Avatar: Fire and Ash'

Shooting "Avatar: The Way of Water" and its sequel, "Avatar: Fire and Ash," posed its own set of challenges for SCAD alum Berg, who worked as assistant art director on both films. "It kept us thinking big-

ger picture in terms of the larger story we were telling."

Berg was most excited to work with Legacy Effects, developing the puppets and creatures for live action and exploring movement mechanics and materials.

On James Cameron, Berg says, "He approaches everything he does with a fierce curiosity. Every plant, creature, character, vehicle and prop you see on screen has been intensely discussed and dissected. There is a reason and a backstory behind every visual detail and having that mentality in the art department (and across all departments) produces a world that feels truly authentic and tangible, which can be hard in sci-fi and fantasy projects." —*Jazz Tangcay*



EJAE
Songwriter
'Golden' from 'KPOP Demon Hunters'

Singer-songwriter EJAE spent five years as the singing voice of Rumi in Netflix's "KPOP Demon Hunters," and co-wrote monster breakout hit "Golden," performed by the show's fictional girl group, Huntr/x.

The soundtrack spawned four Top 10 hit singles, opening the door for new generations to discover the world of K-pop.

"One of the biggest assets I brought to the movie, or when writing the songs, was being bilingual," she says. "I see myself as a songwriter. For me, I never had the goal to be a pop star. I'm more melodically driven [in writing], and I love to look at the works of songwriters that inspire me and attempt to weave that into my work."

EJAE hopes to continue her lyrical work in film. "I would love to one day work on a project like 'Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse' or do the soundtrack for a James Bond film." — *Leia Mendoza*



Andy Jurgensen
Editor
'One Battle After Another'

Jurgensen first worked with director Paul Thomas Anderson as an assistant editor on 2014's "Inherent Vice." After editing some of the director's music videos, he finally served as lead editor on 2021's "Licorice Pizza." An epic action thriller with heavy doses of satire, "One Battle After Another" is new, ambitious territory for Anderson, as well as Jurgensen.

"It was daunting to think about," Jurgensen reflects. "It's obviously a higher-budget movie, an action movie, and a much bigger movie than I've done and that he's done. It was a challenge, but it worked out."

Jurgensen was frequently present for dailies throughout the shoot and, with minimal storyboarding and no previz, he and Anderson pieced together the action film old-school style. — *Andrew McGowan*



Ben Munro is the production designer of "F1."



Ben Munro
Production designer
'F1'

Munro's approach to the drama, set against the backdrop of F1 races from Silverstone in England to Las Vegas, was to create stylish authenticity. The Joseph Kosinski-directed film stars Brad Pitt as former Formula 1 driver Sonny Hayes, who returns to the sport and partners with rookie teammate Joshua Pearce (Damson Idris). Munro says, "We aimed to blend high-end aesthetics with the gritty realism that defines F1, ensuring the world we built felt both aspirational and believable."

With access to the F1 world of race tracks and drivers (former Mercedes and now Ferrari driver Lewis Hamilton is a producer), Munro says his biggest challenge was earning the trust of the F1 community. "We had to convince both the fraternity and the fanbase that our presence wouldn't disrupt the races — and that our sets and cars could withstand close scrutiny on and off the track," he says.

Regarding working with Kosinski, Munro says, "No matter how ambitious the challenge, I learned that with perseverance and clarity of purpose, anything can be achieved." — *JT*



Stephanie Pasicov
Hair and makeup artist, prosthetics designer
'The Testament of Ann Lee'

Pasicov's fascination with film and makeup began at home with her father's robust cinematic collection. "My father was a cinephile and film collector," she says. "Because of him, I grew up with access to movies that were far beyond my age group. It gave me an unusually early exposure to cinema as an art form."

She credits Robert Zemeckis' "Death Becomes Her" as the pivotal film that solidified her interest in mastering makeup and prosthetics, as it used those skills to "visually dismantles classic beauty tropes."

"I knew from a very early age that I wanted to be in the industry, but it was that combination of storytelling and craft, intellect and hands-on artistry that ultimately drew me to makeup as my medium in film and television," she says.

For "Roofman," she drew inspiration from her experiences growing up in the 1990s and 2000s to bring the characters to life and add to the authenticity of the narrative.

Clockwise, from top right: Apple TV+; Courtesy of Pasicov; Tim P. Whitby/Getty Images; Courtesy of Jurgensen; Tim Westover

She notes that contributing to Mona Fastvold's musical film "The Testament of Ann Lee" is one of her proudest moments in her career so far. Pasicov had been striving to take on the entire visual design of a production, and "Lee" provided her the opportunity to do so. She crafted elaborate wigs for different characters, created subtle aging prosthetics and expanded her technical mastery of special effects makeup. — *Giana Levy*



Alex Somers
Composer
'Rental Family'

In Hikari's "Rental Family," the sense of alienation and severe loneliness while watching Phillip (Brendan Fraser) is compounded by Somers' score.

Instruments such as the Optigan – a scratchy-sounding early '70s electronic keyboard manufactured by Mattel that used optically recorded samples – provided the sonic foundation of the character's journey. "Hikari encouraged us to explore all of our musical and sonic instincts we had right from the beginning," Somers says. "We were moved to create music that spoke to the universal idea of help. The idea of needing help, asking for help, and receiving help."

Somers notes that his influences include "rain on the roof sounds, and when there is a note/chord change in a piece of music and it's exactly the right one." — *JT*



Malgosia Turzanska
Costume designer
'Hamnet'

"The first image in my head was a giant beating heart muscle, throbbing and pulsing with blood," says Turzanska.

Chloe Zhao's "Hamnet" is a story of love and loss, all of which inspired William Shakespeare's "Hamlet." In designing the costumes, Turzanska says she was drawn to the art of Magdalena Abakanowicz and Mrinalini Mukherjee, who both sculpt with organic, fibrous textures. The palette of Agnes (Jessie Buckley) is rooted in nature: reds, oranges and rusts.

In contrast, William Shakespeare (Paul Mescal) has Tudor details in his clothing. The pinking and slashing of textiles were used as an emotional tool to express his state of mind. "At the end, he's covered in dried clay, which then cracks and disintegrates, revealing him to be raw and open." — *JT*



Jennifer Venditti
Casting director
'The Smashing Machine'

Venditti is on triple duty this awards season. She cast A24's "The Smashing Machine," as well as Focus Features' "Bugonia" and A24's upcoming "Marty Supreme."

"The Smashing Machine," directed by Benny Safdie, stars Dwayne Johnson in the story of mixed martial arts champion fighter Mark Kerr. "It was very important to Benny for the film to have an authentic quality that honors Mark's life and especially the world of MMA," she says.

So she found great fighters as well as other characters from that world, but because it would also help Johnson and co-star Emily Blunt to fully experience the MMA world as true to nature as possible. "We were able to find Ryan Bader, a real heavyweight MMA champion" to play the role of Kerr's best friend Mark Coleman, "and his acting brought a raw authenticity to the role."

For the role of Don in "Bugonia," Venditti connected with organizations that support neurodivergent artists who have a passion for the performing arts. "We looked at many people, but it became clear that Aidan [Delbis] was the standout. In addition to Aidan's talent and captivating presence, he had wonderful chemistry with [the film's stars] Jesse Plemons and Emma Stone." — *JT*



Torsten Witte
Hair and makeup artist
'Bugonia'

Witte always aspired to become a professional hair and makeup artist. His determination to make his childhood dreams a reality propelled him to leave Germany for Paris when he was 21, launching his career in the fashion industry by assisting on photo shoots and fashion shows. Moving from Paris to New York City and ultimately Los Angeles, he landed on his first movie, "Little Miss Sunshine," as the makeup department head.

In his latest project, Witte is the mastermind behind his long-time friend and frequent collaborator Emma Stone's shaved head in "Bugonia." He credits the film's director, Yorgos Lanthimos, for his vision and collaborative efforts that helped him bring these characters to life on a project that he's extremely proud of.

"I have created some amazing characters, and I'm really proud of this [film] because it is the most important one for our planet and for where we are right now," he says. "There's no way that we knew when we were shooting this how much more relevant this project will become when it comes out." — *Giana Levy*



Malgosia Turzanska designed the costumes for "Hamnet."

Clockwise, from top left: Courtesy of Sommers; Michele Mansoor; Andreea Radutoiu; Focus Features; Courtesy of Turzanska

A World of History Hannah Beachler dug into research and culture for the Mississippi Delta of 'Sinners'

By Jazz Tangcay

When Ryan Coogler called on his go-to production designer, Hannah Beachler, to work on "Sinners," she ended up building a deeply researched, meticulously crafted world, filled with societal references and Easter eggs. But the film is more than a great vampire movie; it spoke to folklore, spirituality, history and culture.

Beachler is set to receive *Variety*'s Creative Impact in Production Design award at SCAD Savannah Film Festival on Oct. 28.

The vampire thriller set in the Jim Crow-era Mississippi Delta stars Michael B. Jordan in dual roles as twins Smoke and Stack, who, after a run-in with the Chicago mob, return home. They rally the community to help with their new business venture, a juke joint. But when the sun sets and opening night kicks off, vampires show up and cause havoc.

For Beachler, the heart and soul of the set was the home of Annie (Wunmi Mosaku), Smoke's former love.

The set was inspired by a photograph that struck Beachler. "In some way, it's one of the first images that I was looking at in the research, and it was the sharecropper home with this mound of cotton just on the porch. There was a woman standing outside, and there was just something about that image in that small home leaning to one side in this massive field that just spoke to me immediately. It said everything to me about that time in that place, the hard life and the meager living situation," Beacher says. "There was something about her that still had this dignity and beauty in front of all of this, what you would say is in abject poverty. Annie was strong, and I felt that from this woman in this image."

Annie's home was painted haint blue, a protective light blue inspired by the Gullah Geechee people and enslaved Africans who used that shade to safeguard themselves from evil spirits. Annie is the community's spiritual leader, a Hoodoo conjurer, herbalist and healer.

"Annie served the community even though she was on a plantation ... And as far as selling to the workers, I wanted to make her feel like she was the protector in that place. She was the one that you could go to if you needed to heal," says Beachler.

As for the juke joint, where most of the action takes place, Beachler spent eight weeks building the set, which needed to look rusty. To achieve that, "we did levels of paint and actually used boric acid to rust the sheets of metal outside," she explains.

Additionally, Beachler made sure every environment leading up to that set was represented inside. "There's representation of Annie's oak trees that protect and cover her home in the juke joint that protects and covers them. In the third act, the white wall where Mary (Hailee Steinfeld) bites Stack (Michael B. Jordan) is the representation of the white church, and there are horizontal lines above people's heads, specifically Stack and the vampires, I should say, within that."

To replicate what Clarksdale, Miss., looked like in 1932, dirt was laid on the roads around the train station and town sets. Over 1,200 plants were brought in for the cotton field. "We had people tying on these pieces of cotton, and each plant got 3,040 pieces of cotton," she says.

As for the downtown set, Coogler wanted to divide the street with one side being for Blacks and one side for whites. The two grocery stores on the main street show the racial divide. With the Black grocery store, "it's all working things to buy like hoses, brooms, buckets and mops. If somebody wanted you to be their maid, you had to be their maid. That was just the way that it was," she says, adding, "The candy on the Black side is hard, but when you get to the white side, there are cakes, fruit and there's more advertising."



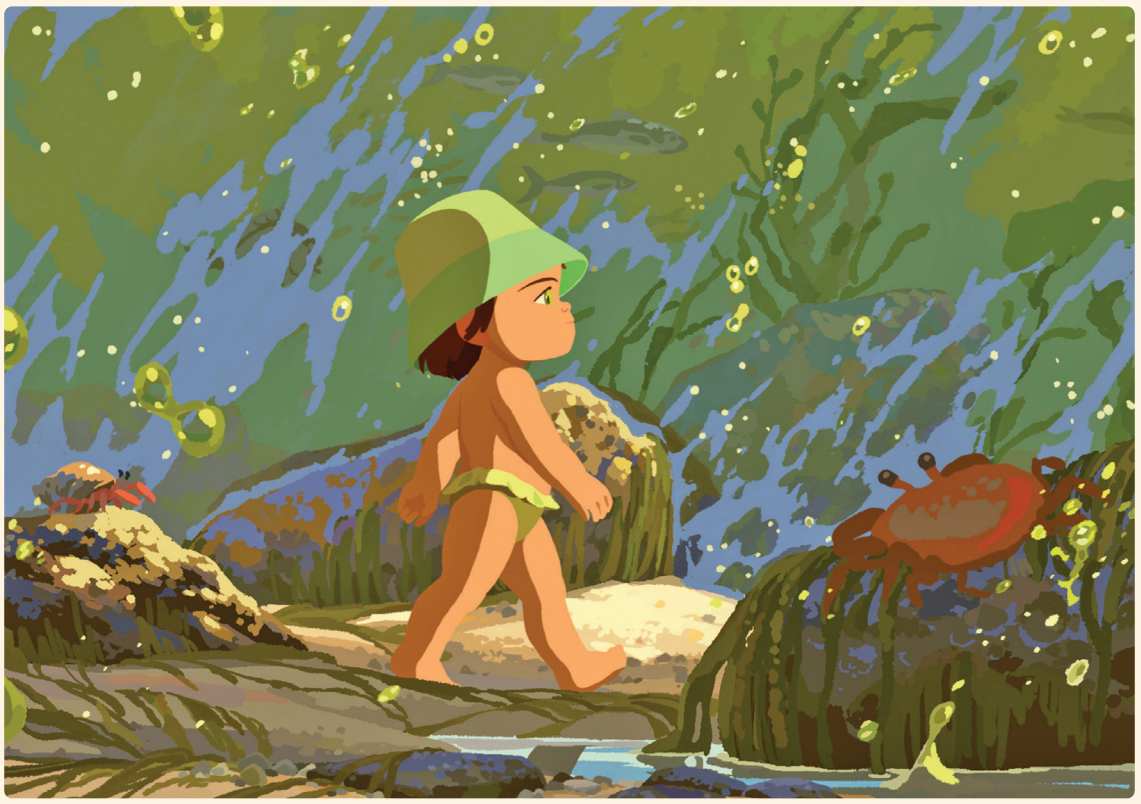


Hannah Beachler, left, did extensive research for "Sinners," right.

From left: Courtesy of Beachler; Everett Collection

Best in Show The Pixels and Pencils panel is back at SCAD with a dynamic and diverse animated lineup

By Clayton Davis



Courtesy of GKids

"Little Amélie or the Character of Rain" director Maïlys Vallade will be featured in the panel lineup.

→ *Variety* returns to the SCAD Savannah Film Festival on Oct. 27 with the fourth edition of its Pixels and Pencils panel, spotlighting six standout animated films from this year's awards season — and marking a year of historic firsts.

For the first time, the roundtable will include four women directors — the highest number to date — and one groundbreaking addition: an animated short film.

The *Variety*-moderated panel features nine directors behind some of the year's most visually inventive and emotionally resonant animated works. These include "Arco," "Elio," "In Your Dreams," "KPop Demon Hunters," "Little Amélie or the Character of Rain" and the first animated short to appear on the panel, "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Chrome Alone 2 — Lost in New Jersey."

Pixar returns to the spotlight with "Elio," helmed by returning panelist Domee Shi and co-director Madeline Sharafian. Shi previously appeared on the panel in 2022 for her Oscar-nominated film "Turning Red," making her the first filmmaker to be selected twice. Together, they join a growing legacy of female visionaries shaping the future of animation.

Also featured are Maggie Kang, co-director of Netflix's "KPop Demon Hunters," and Maïlys Vallade, helmer of poetic adaptation "Little Amélie or the Character of Rain" from GKids. Vallade shares directing credits with Liane-Cho Han Jin Kuang, further highlighting the panel's diverse global talent.

Kang co-directs "KPop Demon Hunters" with Chris Appelhans. The musical fantasy, produced by Sony Pictures Animation and released by Netflix, became the streamer's most popular movie of all time in late August. It held a record-breaking 15-week run on the Netflix Top 10, making it the longest-running title ever on the English-language films chart.

Another first this year is the inclusion of Kent Seki, director of "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Chrome Alone 2 — Lost in New Jersey." The animated short, which premiered at the Annecy International Animation Film Festival in June, enters the Oscar race this season and is screening ahead of Paramount's upcoming "The SpongeBob Movie: Search for SquarePants." Produced by Seth Rogen, Evan Goldberg, James Weaver, Jeff Rowe and Ramsay McBean, the short follows the inclusion of "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutant Mayhem" on the 2023 SCAD panel.

Other participating filmmakers include Ugo Bienvenu for Neon's "Arco," the acclaimed French film produced by Oscar-winner Natalie Portman, which was one of five finalists shortlisted as France's official Oscar submission. Also featured is Alex Woo, the director of Netflix's "In Your Dreams," who began his career in the animation and art departments at Pixar on films such as "Wall-E" (2008) and "Incredibles 2" (2018).

Over the past three years, Pixels and Pencils has become an essential stop for animated Oscar hopefuls. Previous editions have featured the filmmakers behind "Inside Out 2," "Nimona," "The Wild Robot" and Oscar-winner "Flow." Alumni such as Peter Sohn ("Elemental"), Joel Crawford ("Puss in Boots: The Last Wish") and Joaquim Dos Santos ("Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse") all launched their awards campaigns at the event.

What the panel promises is a dynamic and diverse conversation with filmmakers, held in a sold-out theater filled with enthusiastic, talented students — many of whom share the dream of elevating a medium that remains undervalued. As I say each year when opening the panel: I believe I'll be alive — and still working at *Variety* — the day an animated feature makes history and wins the Oscar for best picture. The person who makes it happen will either be on this panel or sitting in that room. Whoever it is, I'm holding on to the belief that it's only a matter of time.

For the first time, the Pixels and Pencils panel will feature four women directors.



The "Jay Kelly" casting directors will be honored at the Middleburg fest.

Artisanal Flavor Middleburg Festival honors casting directors and other below-the-line stars

By Giana Levy

The Middleburg Film Festival, a pacesetter for award-season favorites, returns with a slate of heavy hitters, opening with Noah Baumbach's "Jay Kelly" and Chloé Zhao's "Hamnet" at the centerpiece.

Now in its 13th year, the festival gathers filmmakers, industry experts, movie lovers and cinema enthusiasts for four days of screening highly anticipated fall releases, premieres, international films, panel discussions and more.

"We've hit our stride," Susan Koch, executive festival director, says. "We're known for a very curated slate. We were very careful in our selection, and we also like to showcase a variety of films. There's something for everyone to enjoy."

The festival will present the inaugural Ensemble and Casting Award to members of the "Jay Kelly" cast and its casting directors Douglas Aibel and Nina Gold following the film's screening. The awards expand their efforts to recognize below-the-line individuals.

"People are always interested in how a film gets cast," Koch says. "We've never had casting directors, and it's something we wanted to do. We thought that's a great way to highlight this new award as well as do something that we wanted to do for a long time."

The festival typically hosts panels for attendees to hear from artisans who work in crafts. While Koch shares that audiences enjoy listening to those intimate discussions, she wanted to kick it up a notch by celebrating their achievements.

"One of the things that stands out for the festival is our attention to below-the-line people," she says. "People love to hear how the film gets made. They love to hear from the cinematographer, editor, costume designer, and this year, we're having casting folks as well."

She continues, "That makes a film so much more interesting and personal when you can hear from the people who have been involved in making it. This is something we've always done from the beginning, and the conversations are always very popular."

Founded in 2013, the festival has garnered a strong reputation for predicting Oscar contenders. Every winner of the festival's top prize has gone on to receive at least one Academy Award nomination, including "American Fiction" (2023), "Belfast" (2021), "Minari" (2020) and "Green Book" (2018). The only exception is for the 2022 audience award winner, "Devotion."

"We try to curate what we think are the strongest films," Koch says. "It's not that our emphasis is whether they'll be nominated for an Oscar, but it seems to have worked out that way. We have wonderful film press, filmmakers that attend and great films. That's a great combination. It's a win for everybody."

Oscar-nominated composer Kris Bowers ("The Wild Robot," "The Color Purple") will be honored for his contributions to the film industry. Zhao, who is set to attend, will also be recognized with the Visionary Director Award, while Colin Farrell will receive the Spotlight Actor Award following a screening of Edward Berger's thriller "Ballad of a Small Player.

Additionally, Rose Byrne will be honored with the Agnès Varda Trailblazing Film Artist Award for her performance in Mary Bronstein's A24's release "If I Had Legs, I'd Kick You." The Agnès Varda Award is accompanied by a grant for mentoring aspiring film artists.

Jafar Panahi will be recognized with the Impact Award for his Cannes Palme d'Or winner "It Was Just an Accident." Jon M. Chu, editor Myron Kerstein and cinematographer Alice Brooks will also receive *Variety*'s Creative Collaborators Award for their work on "Wicked: For Good."

"I want everyone to enjoy the experience of seeing movies together," Koch says. "It's magical when people come together in the theater. At a time when there's a lot of division, seeing films has a way of bringing people together and engaging in conversations in a way that they might not otherwise. It expands your view of the world and one another. That's always been our mission — to use the power of film to increase our understanding of the world and one another."

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Ties of Friendship Jon M. Chu, Alice Brooks and Myron Kerstein on creative collaboration, friendship and 'Wicked'

By Jazz Tangcay

It seems fitting that this year's Creative Collaborator award recipients, Jon M. Chu, cinematographer Alice Brooks and editor Myron Kerstein, are part of the team who brought "Wicked" and its sequel, "Wicked: For Good," to the big screen. The film is a story about friendship and Chu, who has known Brooks since their days as film students at USC, says, "It is really even more full-circle to be making a movie like this and explore friendship with my friends."

"Wicked" is the story of the witches of Oz before "The Wizard of Oz." Next month, "Wicked: For Good" brings the story to a close as the friendship of Glinda (Ariana Grande) and Elphaba (Cynthia Erivo) is put to the test.

The Creative Collaborators Award will be presented at the Middleburg Film Festival on Oct. 17. The festival runs from Oct. 16-19.

Variety talked to the honorees about working together on several films, including "Wicked: For Good."

Myron, how did you get involved with Jon on "Crazy Rich Asians"?

KERSTEIN: I heard that I was on the list of potential editors that Warner Bros. was considering to present to Jon for this film called "Crazy Rich Asians," and I quickly became intrigued because I was a fan of Jon's films already. I ended up using every resource I could to get in the room. That room happened to be Skype, and Jon was in Malaysia. I just had to go guns blazing and say, "I'll put 300% into this thing. I know you don't know who I am, but I love this script already." And he hired me.

CHU: He moved to Malaysia, and we were there eating chicken and rice and had a great time. We found that movie together, like, we really did. I'm changing diapers for the first time while we're editing in the room next door, and I'm bringing the baby in with headphones so she can't hear anything while we're blasting Coldplay. It was a really beautiful experience. And then I was like, "I'm never, never letting you go. You made my life so much better, and you're making our movies better."

Moving all these years forward, you're collaborating on "Wicked" and "Wicked: For Good." How would you describe this friendship and your shorthand?

BROOKS: We've been on this for four and a half years. Jon called first called while



Jeff Goldblum, left, and Jon M. Chu on the set of "Wicked"

Giles Keyte/Universal

Myron was cutting "In the Heights," and I don't think a day has gone by that not one of us has at least spoken to each other. I talk to Myron all the time. I just spent all week with Jon.

When I'm not talking with them, they're talking with one another. It's a bittersweet ending to the movie because it's been all three of us walking down the yellow brick road together for the last four and a half years.

KERSTEIN: To be each other's cheerleader, but also to express your worries without having to worry about hurting somebody's feelings. It's just an amazing journey. I've been able to grow more since I've met Jon and Alice than I had in the 15 or so years before. That trust and love is so unique in this industry.

CHU: I think trust and love is right. I think trust is No. 1. We all came at a time in our lives where we had something to prove. We have all been underestimated in our work. I love working with people who love their work more than anything and who have pride in the work. That's not always the case, especially if people have been around for a while. I think we fight for what we believe in, and we are looking for something bigger in our storytelling. We came in [as] underdogs, especially in "Wicked" where everyone around us — the studio and everyone was like, "Can these people do it?" And we're like, we already know we can. We've done it on different scales. So I think that camaraderie is really beautiful. So we're protecting each other in every moment. But I think now we've done it enough times that we trust our creative process that we can riff and find, and that's where the magic is for us.

What can we expect this time around with "Wicked: For Good?"

BROOKS: This movie is so much bigger and expansive than the first movie. It is just this epic conclusion to our story. It's beautiful, wonderful and a huge, emotional journey. The first movie is effervescent and about choices, and the second movie is about consequences, and you can feel that weight and density throughout the movie. Half of the first movie takes place during the day, and the second movie takes place during the night, and there's that. So both movies together feel cohesive.



"Crazy Rich Asians," starring Constance Wu

Myron, you've mentioned cutting the first film, you cried during the Ozdust ballroom sequence, is there a scene that made you cry this time around?

KERSTEIN: It's probably not a big spoiler to say that "For Good" is a major emotional moment in this movie, and I'm excited for the audience to experience Jon, Cynthia and Ari's interpretation of it. I'll just say that I've watched that particular number probably over 100 times. Even yesterday, when we're finishing the mix, it didn't fail to make me cry.

CHU: There are so many moments. What I love about movie two is that we have lived with this whole story for four and a half years. We have lived with this arc, and the world only knows the first half. The magic trick was to make the first half feel like a complete story, but we left a lot dangling. But the fact that people have accepted that and love it, wait until you see what the girls do in "For Good." If you thought they were great actors, then this is where the meat is. This is the reason for "Wicked" to even exist. You see Cynthia do "No Good Deed." I have never watched it with just two people who haven't applauded at the end of that number, it thrusts it out of you. I'm not sure there's a bigger number ever of a singular person singing a singular song that is more epic. It is a classic waiting to happen, and so I can't wait for people to feel that.

People don't even know what's about to happen there. Ari singing "Couldn't Be Happier." Oh, my God, that's one of the hardest ones to crack. And when you have Jonathan Bailey and Cynthia singing ...

These kids who watch the first film, they're going to grow up in movie two. It's real emotions. This is where we can really expand in the cinematic scope and not just look visual, but I'm talking emotional ways, so I love what Myron said, we get to just advance the movie, making part of it as well, because the girls have advanced in it.

By the way, we're shooting this one day after the other so it's not like they had to jump constantly. It's all crafts people really making sure it works.

Well, we can't wait to see "Wicked: For Good."

CHU: To connect it all, for a movie that's all about friendship, the hardships of friendship and the beauty of friendships, it's hard to say goodbye, but at the same time, it's just as beautiful to have that be made by friends who have gone through the ups and downs, who fight regularly, but love each other in the end.

"We have all been underestimated in our work. I love working with people who love their work more than anything and have pride in their work." Jon M. Chu

Sanja Bucko



A Shore Thing The San Diego Intl. Film Festival celebrates the best of cinema with community at its center

By Carole Horst

→ The sense of community drives the folks behind the San Diego Intl. Film Festival.

"One of the things I'm most excited about is really getting people back together," says SDIFF artistic director Tonya Mantooth. "I think there's such a power to that. And I think everybody's wanting that. They're wanting that sense of community."

The festival, which runs Oct. 15-19, kicks off with Luca Guadagnino's "After the Hunt," starring Julia Roberts, Ayo Edebiri and Andrew Garfield. Other films screening there include buzzy awards season titles "Hamnet," starring Jessie Buckley and Paul Mescal, and "Rental Family," with Brendan Fraser.

Mantooth says that she saw a lot of films that explored the triumph of the human spirit. "That was interesting — especially in light of everything that's going on — these stories were of individuals overcoming profound challenges, and whether it's life circumstances or having disabilities, living with disabilities," she says. "And not only were these films just deeply moving, they are a reminder of resilience and courage. I think these stories really bring the power to uplift and inspire and, honestly, I think we can use more of that these days."

Chloë Sevigny, left, and Julia Roberts in "After the Hunt," which opens the San Diego sprocket opera.

Other films in the Gala and Narrative Competition strand include Cole Webley's "Omaha," starring John Magaro, Marie-Elsa Sgualdo's "Silent Rebellion," toplining Lila Gueneau and Grégoire Colin, Max Walker-Silverman's "Rebuilding," with Josh O'Connor, Matthew Shear's "Fantasy Life," starring Amanda Peet and Alessandro Nivola, Elena Oxman's "Outerlands," with Asia Kate Dillon, Dean Imperial's "Caper," starring Dean Imperial, Kevin Kane and Sam Gilroy and Amy Landecker's "For Worse," with Landecker and Bradley Whitford.

The SDIFF's Foreign Film track recognizes the best in international cinema, and this year, the fest has partnered with the House of Pacific Relations, a landmark in San Diego's Balboa Park celebrating its 90th anniversary. Culinary Cinema takes place Oct. 19 with Shawn Styles from CBS 8's "Cooking With Styles" hosting a gourmet buffet at the Capital One Cafe, followed by a cuisine-themed film, Mads K. Baekkevold's "The Chef & the Daruma."

Party With a Purpose is always one of the festival's highlights and raises money for the SDIFF's Focus on Impact Film Library and educational program, which was launched in 2016.

"It's an educational portal with short films along with a full curriculum and a Q&A with a filmmaker. And the films are ones that have come out of the festival, and they explore a wide range of really pressing social issues," notes Mantooth. "It's designed for high school and college students to build that sense of respectful dialog, fostering empathy and also critical thinking and civic engagement."

The library is not just something that the festival leaders think about once a year. They are passionate about it. "The purpose of it is to really prepare the next generation of leaders to see societal issues not as something you just push 10 blocks away, but see them as human issues, and see that they're complex, and we need to work together to find solutions," says Mantooth, noting that they work with the San Diego Unified School District, the county office of education and "we're now in the Monarch schools, which works with unhoused students. We're in the foster youth, and we're in the classrooms inside the juvenile detention center."

Which brings Mantooth back to the purpose of film festivals and community. "I think their role is actually more significant than it used to be, especially with theaters closing and the shifting of how people are viewing things. I mean, while streaming is convenient, it's also isolating, right?" she says. "And I think film festivals bring people together and remind them of that shared energy and why we fell in love with film, and why we fell in love with the theater in the first place, and that opportunity to experience it together."

Tipsheet

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Diversity Hire San Diego Film Festival honoree Mark Hamill reflects on his long and varied career

By Carole Horst

Mark Hamill is busy.

He starred as loving grandfather with secrets Albie Krantz in Toronto International Film Festival Audience Award-winner "The Life of Chuck," as the villainous Major in the thriller "The Long Walk," has "The SpongeBob Movie: The Search for SquarePants" on deck and also a whole slew of animated voice-over roles on his plate. It's a testament to his diversity as an actor.

"I love looking in the mirror and saying, 'Mark is gone. That's Gordon Miller (of "Room Service"), or that's Albie Krantz' — you don't recognize yourself. Animation does that for you. I mean, you get to play parts you would never get on camera— if you can vocally master them," he recently told *Variety*'s Clayton Davis.

In a span of 12 months, "I did a voice in 'The Wild Robot.' I did the voice of King Herod in 'The King of Kings,' then 'The Life of Chuck,' then 'The Long Walk,' then 'The SpongeBob Movie: Search for SquarePants' — which makes me laugh, because it sounds like it's important. But it's just more inspired silliness. Five more diverse films you could not find, unified only by the fact that they all begin with the word 'the,'" he says.

Hamill will receive the Gregory Peck Award for Cinematic Excellence at the San Diego International Film Festival, which runs Oct. 15-19.

When he was notified about the award, he said, "I'm not fit to carry [Peck's] laundry. I mean, I'm so unworthy. I can't say no, because it would be an insult, but it's going to be awkward, because it's not false modesty to say people like Peck, the Golden Age of Hollywood, had some of the best actors in the world, and we're just grateful that we have them preserved on film."

He notes that he would have loved to have worked with filmmaker Frank Capra if he could have. "I went to one of those movie marathons — it started at six in the evening, and you got out at dawn at the L.A. art museum. Capra did everything in just seven or eight or nine films that we saw," Hamill says, adding that "as far as a favorite actor, there's too many to choose from. I mentioned Cary Grant — Archie Leach — effortlessly believable, whether he was in 'North by Northwest' or 'Bringing Up Baby.'"

Hamill's own contribution to cinematic history begins with 1977's "Star Wars" — it's hard to describe the impact of the films and his character Luke Skywalker has had on pop culture. Iconic doesn't come close.

"That's how you never get over the reaction of the public, because they always personalize it. They always tell me a story about the context within which they saw X, Y or Z. They personalize it. 'My dog had passed away, and I was so sad, and then I saw this, and it cheered me up.'"

Stephen King adaptation "The Life of Chuck" also plays with time, memory and embracing the person that you are (much like Luke eventually does in "Star Wars") and legacy — it's a lovely movie with complex relationships (like real life!) from Mike Flanagan, who's better known for genre and horror films.

"I'd worked for Mike in 'The Fall of the House of Usher,' and I'd seen all of his stuff, but I thought between his reputation and Stephen King's reputation, I'm expecting the epic supernatural horror script of all time," says Hamill, who adds that the script was "so unexpected."

"I thought, Stephen King doesn't get the credit for his versatility as a writer. And then I thought, how are they going to adapt it? And I think Mike just did an incredible job. Beautiful. I've only seen it three times now, and every time I've picked up something different. My wife, she says it's her favorite thing I've ever done."

"I love looking in the mirror and saying, 'Mark is gone.' Animation does that for you." Mark Hamill



Scott Garfitt/BAFTA/Getty Images



Netflix blockbuster “KPop Demon Hunters” is also a strong contender for original song kudos.

Tooned Up for a Race Animated contenders jump into Oscar season with bold stories from around the world

By Clayton Davis

As awards season gets underway, the animated feature race may not appear, at first glance, as overflowing or competitive as it has been in previous years. There’s no obvious slam dunk like former winners such as “Guillermo del Toro’s Pinocchio” or a mega-blockbuster on the scale of Disney’s “Frozen.” But what this year lacks in front-runners it more than makes up for in creative range, cultural diversity and global reach.

If Oscar voters can expand what they typically watch in their screener portals, 2025 could become one of the most varied and artistically rewarding years for animated films. With no single dominant title and a rich blend of mainstream sequels, international gems and auteur-driven indies, animation is once again proving its power not just at the box office but also on the awards campaign trail.

While the Animation Is Film festival, which runs Oct. 17-19 at the TCL Chinese 6 Theatres in Hollywood, offers a showcase of many of this year’s contenders, the conversation is now stretching far beyond Los Angeles as studios position their films for Academy voters and guild members alike.

Leading many watchlists is Netflix’s “KPop Demon Hunters,” a high-octane musical fantasy blending pop spectacle with monster-hunting action. Directed by Maggie Kang and Chris Appelhans, the film has been a breakout global success since its late-summer release, dominating the Netflix Top 10 chart and earning praise for its cultural specificity, kinetic animation and genre-blending creativity.

While its Oscar campaign is just ramping up, “KPop Demon Hunters” stands out as both a commercial juggernaut and a representation of the evolving scope of animated storytelling — one that resonates with younger audiences while embracing distinct creative voices. It also seems like a strong candidate to break out beyond the animated feature category, especially with its chart-topping original song “Golden,” written by EJAE and Mark Sonnenblick, already a blockbuster hit.

Walt Disney Studios enters the race with two very different offerings. The still-unseen “Zootopia 2,” sequel to the 2016 Oscar winner, could be one of the most commercially viable entries to the race. Returning to the bustling, species-spanning metropolis of Zootopia, the sequel reunites fan-favorite characters while expanding the franchise’s social commentary and worldbuilding. Though sequels often face hurdles in major awards categories (see “Monsters University”), “Zootopia 2” benefits from the goodwill of its predecessor and Disney’s formidable campaign infrastructure. It could follow the path of the billion-dollar-plus grossing “Inside Out 2,” which landed an Oscar nom earlier this year.

Netflix

At the other end of the tonal spectrum is Pixar's "Elio," a sci-fi coming-of-age story about a lonely boy mistaken for Earth's ambassador to an intergalactic society. Directed by Adrian Molina, Domee Shi and Madeline Sharafian, "Elio" leans into emotion, visual surrealism and intimate storytelling. While its awards prospects have fluctuated, its heart-first approach could strike a chord with voters seeking more personal fare in an increasingly franchise-heavy landscape.

European animation continues to deliver adult-oriented stories with emotional and artistic depth, and two French entries are gaining traction. "Arco," directed by Ugo Bienvenu and produced by Neon, is a dystopian visual poem that challenges the boundaries of traditional animation. With graphic novel-inspired aesthetics and existential undertones, it's a bold artistic statement that may find its strongest support among critics' groups and international voters. Notably, it was one of five finalists for France's Oscar submission in the international feature category, a slot taken by Palme d'Or winner "It Was Just an Accident" by Jafar Panahi.

Meanwhile, "Little Amélie or the Character of Rain," released by GKids, is a lyrical adaptation of the bestselling novel by Amélie Nothomb. Directed by Maïlys Vallade and Liane-Cho Han Jin Kuang, the film follows a precocious Japanese-Belgian child as they navigate identity and loss. With painterly visuals and an introspective tone, it stands apart from more traditional-looking contenders. It also could appeal to voters who favor emotional nuance and cross-cultural storytelling.

Asian animation continues to make waves on the global stage, with major releases from China and Japan drawing attention. China's "Ne Zha 2," a sequel to the 2019 fantasy hit, reimagines ancient mythology through high-stakes action and vivid CGI. It arrives with a slate of jaw-dropping achievements: the highest-grossing film in a single box office territory, the highest-grossing animated film of all time, the top non-English-language film ever and the first animated film in history to cross the $2 billion mark globally. It also holds the record for most tickets sold for an animated film. With A24 handling U.S. distribution, "Ne Zha 2" could emerge as a serious contender.

From Japan comes "Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba — The Movie: Infinity Castle," the latest cinematic installment of the wildly successful anime franchise. The film broke multiple records, grossing $620 million worldwide and becoming the highest-grossing Japanese film of all time, as well as the seventh highest-grossing film overall in 2025. Known for its fluid action sequences and emotional storytelling, "Infinity Castle" may face the genre's usual challenges at the Oscars, as well as being a Japanese animated film that's not from Hayao Miyazaki.

This season also includes a group of original films that may not dominate headlines but carry significant artistic weight. Netflix's "In Your Dreams," directed by Alex Woo, is a dreamscape adventure that melds hand-drawn animation with 3D textures to explore childhood memories. Quiet and visually rich, it's a sleeper pick that could find support among critics and animation guilds.

Sony Pictures Classics is juggling two dark horses: "A Magnificent Life," an existential exploration told through minimalist, abstract animation, and "Scarlet," the latest from Oscar-nominated director Mamoru Hosoda ("Mirai"). The latter offers a grounded historical narrative, using animation sparingly and poetically. Both films could resonate with festival audiences and cinephiles who appreciate experimental or auteur-driven animation.

Netflix and the Roald Dahl Story Company are back with "The Twits," a new animated take on Dahl's classic tale, featuring a quirky, exaggerated visual style. While early reactions have been mixed, the film's distinctive aesthetic and beloved source material may help it stand out in a crowded field.

DreamWorks Animation returns to the world of smooth-talking criminals with "The Bad Guys 2." While sequels often struggle to break through in awards races, the original was lauded for its sharp art direction and slick tone — qualities this follow-up aims to recapture.

As voters begin screening contenders and fall festivals reveal their lineups, the animated feature race remains fluid and thrillingly unpredictable. This year's contenders span mythologies, continents, genres and budget scales, underscoring the animation medium's unmatched storytelling versatility.

It's also a reflection of where the industry is headed: toward broader representation, deeper emotional complexity and continued innovation in visual style and narrative structure.

As always, the Oscar race for best animated feature won't be determined by box office numbers alone. Voter sentiment, critical momentum and surprise word-of-mouth hits will shape the outcome.

While it may not be overtly competitive, animation has never felt more alive.

This year's contenders span mythologies, continents, genres and budget scales, underscoring the animation medium's unmatched storytelling versatility.



Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures

Walt Disney Animation Studios' "Zootopia 2" is a sequel to the 2016 Oscar winner.





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Puppet Masters As Laika celebrates 20 years of animation domination, the studio expands into live action and more

By Jazz Tangcay

Twenty years ago, Laika decided to reinvent stop-motion animation from its boutique-style studio in Portland, Ore.

"Here we are 20 years later, and during that period, we've transformed ourselves into a global storytelling powerhouse," says David Burke, the studio's chief marketing officer and chief operating officer.

Laika's lineup of beloved and innovative stop-motion features started with 2009's "Coraline" and was followed by other handcrafted delights such as "ParaNorman," "The Boxtrolls," "Kubo and the Two Strings" and "Missing Link."

But things are changing at Laika, as the studio has set its sights on expanding. It's ramping up development in both the animated and live-action spaces. Its live-action division was launched in 2023. Laika has also expanded into television, exhibitions and publishing ("Laika: The Magic Behind a Stop-Motion Dream Factory" will be released in March), and they've dropped merchandise on their newly redesigned website.

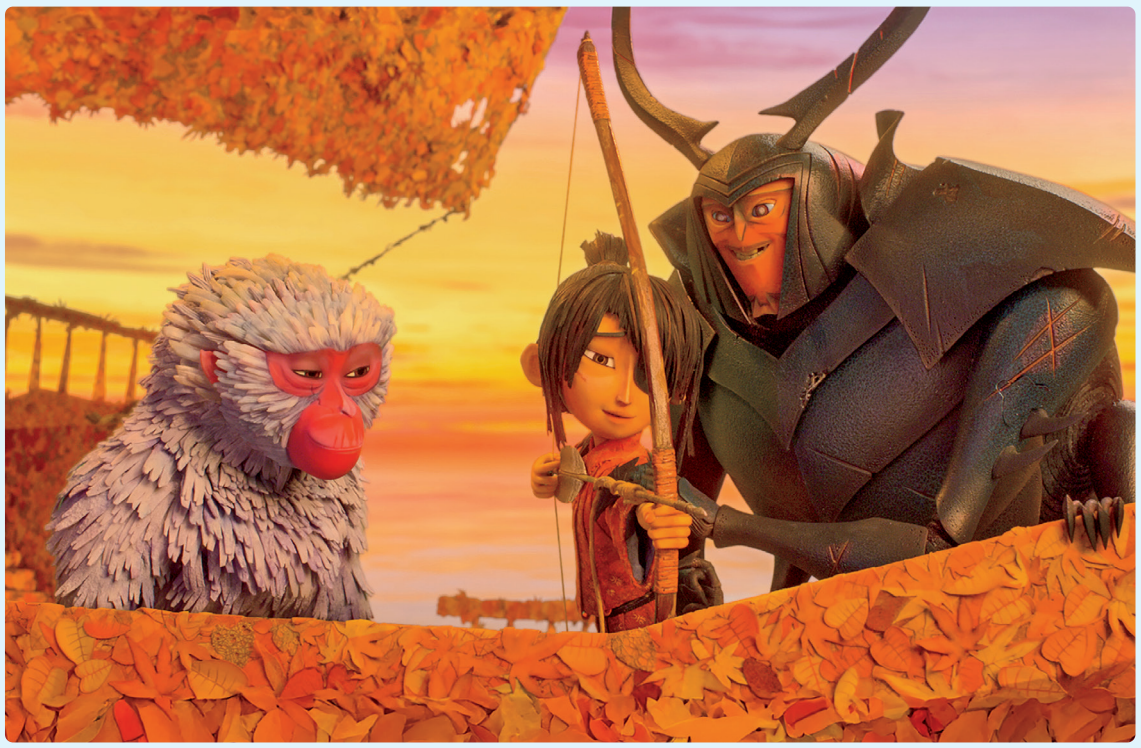
"That's how it's evolved, so audiences don't have to wait years between projects," Burke says.

"Wildwood," their sixth animated feature film, will be released next year and is currently in the final stages of production.

Among other projects in development are "The Night Gardener," which will be directed by Laika CEO Travis Knight. Described as a gritty neo-noir folktale, the film is set in rural Missouri and turns on a young man who struggles to keep his family together in the midst of a tragedy. When the news of the film was announced, Knight said, "'The Night Gardener' is a beautiful and timeless story that quickens the pulse as often as it breaks the heart." "Ozark's" Bill Dubuque is on board as screenwriter. Said Knight,

"Coraline" set the tone for Laika's innovative storytelling.

Focus Features



"We're always going to be telling stories that have heart. All our films are going to be deeply human and emotionally resonant." Peter McCown

"He's crafted a lyrical world layered with complex characters, provocative ideas and keenly felt emotion."

There are several other projects greenlit in the live-action space. Phil Lord and Christopher Miller, Lulu Wang and Jon Spaihts are some of the filmmakers attached to projects.

"We're always looking for new talent. We're working with and looking for people who want to bring unique, bold, original stories," says development lead producer Peter McCown.

Seeking those projects as a development team means looking for books to adapt or unique spec scripts. Says McCown, "We're turning over every stone to find these unique and impactful stories."

Laika's stop-motion films have paved the way for this expansion, and those films still resonate with fans. Last year, "Coraline" was re-released in movie theaters, and grossed $56 million, and this month, "ParaNorman" returns to theaters in a RealD 3D remastered print.

On the film's lasting impact, Burke says, "That's something we reflect on quite a bit. Ultimately, it's the beauty of stop motion. It's got the beauty of stop-motion and has the warmth of something that's built by hand. I think audiences can sense that authentic connection."

Laika's epic action-adventure "Kubo and the Two Strings" pushed the studio's art and tech departments to new highs.

He adds, "Laika has nurtured that art form, and brought it into the 21st century through innovation. And it's the warmth that comes from the tactility of the artist and having a timeless appeal that is sensed and received by the viewer."

The re-release also heralds the studio's shift into the short film space.

Short "ParaNorman: The Thrifting" is directed by Thibault LeClercq and written by Chris Butler. Anna Kendrick reprises her role as Norman's older sister, Courtney, while "Stranger Things" star Finn Wolfhard adds his voice talents to the cast.

McCown says "The Thrifting" also marks a move into the medium of CG. "It was a fun new challenge that everybody leaned into. We got to have a really good time getting back into this character and his world that we haven't been into for a dozen years."

He adds, "It was such a great opportunity to tie it into the re-release of the film, so that we could work with a partner studio, Passion Pictures and start to exercise what else can we do, and how else can we tell these stories."

Laika manages to remain inherently unique by telling bold and original stories. "That's the crux of what we do and what we put out," McCown says. "Even if we switch into a different medium, we're always going to have the handcrafted DNA and the artistry that comes with that."

How have they managed to stay relevant in a competitive space? "It's by never standing still," Burke says. "We've managed to fuse the timeless artistry of stop motion with constant innovation like 3D printing."

Regardless of medium, McCown notes the throughline of Laika projects is simple. "We're always going to be telling stories that have heart. All our films are going to be deeply human and emotionally resonant. The films coming up expand upon that risk taking way of storytelling that we're already known for. We're just building upon that and taking that even further, with the goal of standing out from the mainstream."

Laika hasn't just made its footprint in the world of stop-motion animation, it has also done wonders for Oregon, turning the state into their identity. "We've built [an] over-half-a-million- square-foot studio here that sustains hundreds of highly skilled local jobs. It nurtures craftsmanship. It brings global recognition to the Pacific Northwest as a hub for bold and handcrafted storytelling," says Burke.

As a result, Portland isn't just synonymous with Nike and Columbia Sportswear, Laika now factors into that equation. They've also established partnerships with Portland State University and Portland Community College to foster the next generation of artists, and "Wildwood," is what Knight has called his "love letter to Oregon."

Looking ahead, McCown says the goal is telling more stories. "We want to find the best way of telling those stories. And cement Laika's role as a global leader in cinematic storytelling." He adds, "We just want more of that."

With "The Thrifting" set within the ParaNorman universe, and "Wildwood" based on a trilogy of YA books, the studio has not ruled out the possibility of sequels.

"I think ultimately it's worth considering," says McCown. "I don't think we're ever going to say no to any piece of existing IP or anything like that. I think what we lean towards, though, is where's the original story? I did read Travis say he's typically averse to sequels because you want to focus on the most singular, important moment of a character's journey. And usually one film is what's going to do that. It doesn't mean that it's off the table."

Focus Features

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Roots Revolution Portland-set epic 'Wildwood' pushes Laika into more innovative techniques and bigger scope and scale

By Carole Horst



Laika's next feature, "Wildwood," features the beauty of Oregon's outdoor spaces.

For its next feature film, Laika gets back to its roots.

"Wildwood" is based on Colin Meloy's novels and directed by Travis Knight from a script by Chris Butler. Meloy is the frontman of Portland-based band the Decemberists, and the book is set in Portland, so the material is a natural for the Portland-based Laika.

"Colin's book 'Wildwood' is really inseparable from place," says producer Sam Wilson. "Forest Park, which is one of the largest urban forests in the U.S., is actually the Wildwood of the book. So it's rooted in the real world."

Wilson adds, "Travis has himself described the film as a love letter to Portland." In the film, young Prue must leave her home in Portland to venture into Wildwood on a quest to save her brother, who's been stolen by a murder of crows. The voice cast includes Peyton Elizabeth Lee, Carey Mulligan, Mahershala Ali, Jacob Tremblay, Awkwafina, Angela Bassett, Jake Johnson, Charlie Day, Amandla Stenberg, Jemaine Clement, Tom Waits and Richard E. Grant.

The scope and ambition of the project, set for a 2026 release, matches the starry cast. Burke says that's because Laika likes to top itself every time it creates a feature. It has added almost 200,000 square feet of floor space since it produced 2016's "Kubo and the Two Strings."

"You hear people say, this is our most ambitious film yet," says Burke. So, what does that mean exactly? "It means that we've got 136 locations in the feature, and many of them are so large that the crew can walk through them. We've really moved from that tabletop world into a grand, sweeping, kind of mythical epic. ... There's 231 practical puppets, 54 hero characters, and each and every one of them has been engineered and costumed like a bespoke work of art."

Six-time Oscar-nominated cinematographer Caleb Deschanel was recruited to shoot "Wildwood." "There's epic battle scenes in this movie, and obviously he's well known for 'The Patriot,' and he brought that knowledge, and his knowledge gained ever since, to the project to realize Travis' vision."

Laika has innovated with each film, including making advances on faces using 3D printers and now, armature and musculature for the puppets.

"They've perfected a process that allows them to print the kind of skeletal form that enables the animators to coax even more lifelike, impactful performances," says Burke. Wilson adds, "You can see the tension in the characters because often, if you think of a stop-motion character, you think of basically an action figure. But these are more human and realistic than anything anybody's ever done."

He notes that repeatability is an important part of the craft. "When we started using 3D printed faces on 'Coraline,' every time we did it, on every feature, we learned something new and then found different ways to apply it. So it's not just confined to the characters' expressions anymore. It's part of how we design the puppets themselves. It's part of how we design our props. It's how we can simulate the liquid activity in the film. We have these bubblers all over Portland, where they're just water fountains in the cityscape, and we printed out a water cycle to simulate what the water looked like.

"So, it's become part of how we explore the 'Wildwood' world space and how we try and achieve practical effects for the film, rather than using VFX — although we do a lot of VFX touch-up work as well. It's part of the complimentary aspects of how we accomplish this film."

Both Burke and Wilson single out the General, a huge eagle, as a special character. "There are like 9,000 feathers on each [General] puppet — hand installed," marvels Burke. "We also have a really terrifying antagonist in Maxim, played by Tom Waits, and just a still image of Maxim is terrifying," laughs Wilson. "He's an incredibly graphic, intense character."

"Wildwood" really does seem to embody the Laika brand and Pacific Northwest location. "Our motto is that we walk a different path. And each one of our values is informed by each one of our films," says Wilson.

"Travis [Knight] has himself described the film as a love letter to Portland."
Sam Wilson

Courtesy of Laika

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Laika's Short Cut The stop-motion studio used CG for its seven-minute delight 'ParaNorman: The Thrifting'

By Carole Horst



Animated short "ParaNorman: The Thrifting" resurrects beloved characters.

→ Laika went small for its latest film — the short "ParaNorman: The Thrifting."

Directed by Laika's lead character designer Thibault Leclercq and written by Chris Butler, the CG short (a first!) will be shown with the re-release of the studio's 2012 classic stop-motion animated feature "ParaNorman." They both hit theaters Oct. 25 in partnership with Fathom Entertainment.

"The Thrifting" sees Norman (voiced by Brayden Gleave) and his sister Courtney (Anna Kendrick, reprising her role from "ParaNorman") and his best buddy Neil (Beckett Maillard) enter a spooky thrift shop, where Courtney flirts with the edgy, cute clerk Chad (Finn Wolfhard) while Norman encounters a mischievous young spirit looking to make a whole lot of trouble. It's a colorful, propulsive story that's full of horror movie Easter eggs.

Butler, who wrote and co-directed "ParaNorman," says that while converting the 3D characters of the original film to 2D was a "gargantuan undertaking," doing the short in CG was "an easy choice."

"And even though I think Laika is first and foremost a stop-motion studio, I think we've always had an interest in animation in general. And, certainly for me, I came from a 2D background, so when I first started imagining 'ParaNorman' — probably like last century, in fact — in my head, it was a 2D thing, the first sketches. Because that's just how I think of things," Butler says. "But also, we did already dip our toe into 2D with the credit sequence in the original movie, which was in the style of horror movie posters, really kind of gaudy primary colors, the big, dripping letters, and we had a lot of fun doing that. It was a really painterly aesthetic. And so it seemed like that was our starting point. It was like, let's have some fun with this."

It was important for Leclercq to preserve the hand-made and graphic look of "ParaNorman" in the short.

"No matter what the technique is going to be, I knew that we're going to have this kind of 2D organic, handmade feel that's going to reconnect to the original stop motion," he says. "And then there was the idea that 'ParaNorman' is a very cinematic, a very immersive world that they've built in stop motion — the lighting, the camera approach to it feels extremely real. And I wanted to make sure that we're going to preserve that even though we're not going to be stop motion, we're not going to have a real camera, real light. I think the medium" that was the closest to capturing that stop-motion look is "CG to help me build things that feel dimensional and immersive."

Butler says that doing a seven-minute-and-some-change short was challenging, but drilling down on certain characters and telling a short story — not a gag-filled reel — helped distill narrative choices. Setting it in one building also set off ah-ha moments. "I thought, OK, this is a potentially really cool location to set a short in, because it's finite, but it's also full of cool stuff. It's basically like the cellar in the 'Conjuring' movies. It's a building full of potentially haunted, creepy objects. So, you know, plenty of fun to be had there," Butler says.

Leclercq knew he was responsible for a continuation of the "ParaNorman" world, and that was important stylistically. "We didn't want it to step on the movie, story-wise, but also, in terms of style and look, I wanted to make sure this is more of an homage to the original feature," he says, adding that "the film, at its core, is a love letter to horror movies."

Leclercq adds that they also went back to look at original horror movie posters and create a stylistic connection. The result is a "bold, painterly style," he says, with the artists leaning into a singular direction "that feels connected to the original, but doesn't step on what the film is, and live on its own."

"The film, at its core, is a love letter to horror movies."
Thibault Leclercq

Expansion Plan Laika launches into live action with a new tribe of talent

By Jazz Tangcay

Filmmakers Phil Lord and Christopher Miller, Lulu Wang and Jon Spaihts have one thing in common — they've all got projects lined up at Laika's live-action division.

For 20 years, Laika has been synonymous with stop-motion projects, creating animated features such as "ParaNorman," "Coraline" and "Kubo and the Two Strings," but 2023 heralded a new change for the studio, the move into live action.

Matt Levin, president of Laika's live-action film and series division, joined the Oregon-based studio in 2023 to build on its legacy and contribute to this next chapter. "It's all coming from this very pure place of wanting to tell stories that are pushing boundaries and emotionally resonant and timeless, and advancing the craft and advancing the medium in some way," Levin says.

The studio first announced plans back in 2021 after acquiring rights to adapt John Brownlow's novel "Seventeen" for the big screen. Back then, Laika president and CEO Travis Knight said, "For the past 15 years, Laika has been committed to making movies that matter. Across mediums and genres, our studio has fused art, craft and technology in service of bold, distinctive and enduring stories. With 'Seventeen,' Laika is taking that philosophy in an exciting new direction."

Production is ramping up along the live-action pipeline. As of now, there are no release dates for its live-action productions, but Spaihts is set to make his directorial debut with an untitled sci-fi thriller about a woman investigating a mystery that took place during a week she cannot remember. Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck are adapting and directing a live-action film based on the novel "Atmosphere" by Taylor Jenkins Reid. And Wang is on board to adapt and direct "Audition," the novel by Katie Kitamura.

Levin explains, there's a formula to the projects they get behind, and it remains the same as Knight's messaging: "We're looking for things that are bold, emotional and inventive."

From meticulous crafting of its puppets to the painstaking detail in its production design, the team integrates new technologies and innovations into the century-old technique of stop-motion animation. It's something the studio prides itself on and hopes to thread into its live-action films. "That's going to be a big part of how we approach the live-action space as well, a focus on craft, artistry and championing strong creative voices and creative authorship," Levin says.

The films may vary in genre and story, but Levin hopes audiences "can feel the through line. All of them are bold, emotional, inventive in some way."

As for the filmmakers, Levin says the division is "building its tribe." That means finding the people who share the same values. "When we find them and there's a story that they want to tell that really resonates with us, we're off to the races. I don't think it's much more complicated than that, but it really does come down to finding people who really have that shared sense of value and in the types of stories they want to tell and how they want to tell them."

Brian Duffield, who will write and direct "Crumble" with Lord and Miller producing, says, "I'll never forget seeing 'Coraline' on opening night at the AMC Burbank 16 and wondering who these wonderful new geniuses were. I can't wait to make a movie with them and hopefully live up to their banner, and I couldn't be more excited to get to go on a new adventure with my friends at Lord Miller."

Lord and Miller add, "We have long been fans of Laika and Travis Knight's groundbreaking work in animation and could not be more excited to join forces with them in live action." It's a sentiment shared by all the other filmmakers who are joining the Laika "tribe."

Looking ahead, Levin feels the "real sense of responsibility in helping to take the company into this next chapter." He adds, "You want to do justice to all the incredible work that's come before. We're going to be very curated and selective, and hopefully that's reflected in some of the projects we've announced so far."



Courtesy of Laika

Matt Levin leads Laika's live action efforts.

Beaver State of Mind Shooting in Oregon is about more than just the numbers

By Todd Longwell



Jennifer Jason Leigh, left, and Vanessa Kirby in "Night Always Comes"

The Netflix crime thriller "Night Always Comes" was always going to be set in Portland, Ore., like the Willy Vlautin novel from which it was adapted. But it wasn't necessarily going to shoot there.

"A lot of the early discussions are like, 'Where's the biggest bang for the buck?' And Canada came up a lot," admits the film's executive producer Chris Stinson ("The Holdovers," "Sound of Metal"). "In the northwest ... they're constantly contending with 'let's just go to Vancouver,' and a lot of times they do go to Vancouver," where they can take advantage of experienced crews, a favorable exchange rate and a healthy production incentive.

But Stinson says he was able to point to the 2018 drama "Leave No Trace," a good-looking movie he made in Oregon on a very low budget, and "convince the powers-that-be that Portland would not only be the best place, but also the cheapest for a number of reasons."

Those reasons don't necessarily jump out when you glance at Oregon's decent-but-not-great film and TV incentive. It offers cash rebates — not the more common transferable tax credit, the bulk of which must be sold to third parties for 85 cents to 95 cents on the dollar — of 25% on local goods and services and 20% on in-state payroll for projects with a minimum spend of $1 million. The latter can be stacked with the Greenlight Oregon Labor Rebate for an additional cash rebate of up to 6.2% of Oregon payroll.

The Beaver State has a long history of attracting iconic projects ranging from Buster Keaton's "The General" (1926) and the best picture Oscar-winner "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" (1975) to the coming-of-age drama "Stand by Me" (1986). This past June, the adventure-comedy "The Goonies" (1985) celebrated its 40th anniversary with a weekend-long festival in the town of Astoria, where the old jail, which was used as a location in the movie, has been turned into the Oregon Film Museum.

In the past decade, Oregon's most high-profile productions have been TV series such as NBC's "Grimm" (2011-2017), the satirically self-mythologizing "Portlandia" (2011-2018) and, most recently, the upcoming Amazon series "Criminal," starring Charlie Hunnam. Besides "Night Always Comes," starring Vanessa Kirby and Jennifer Jason Leigh, the state has also recently hosted the independent films "Horsegirls," starring Gretchen Mol, and writer/director Logic's "Paradise Records," both of which premiered earlier this year.

But as "Dirty" Harry Callahan (Clint Eastwood) said in "Magnum Force" (1973), "a man's got to know his limitations," and so does a state like Oregon.

"We're not big and we don't have as much infrastructure, but we're a really good alternative for medium-sized projects, mostly because we're very production friendly, we're very responsive, and it's a cash rebate," says Tim Williams, executive director of Oregon Film (aka the Oregon Governor's Office of Film & Television), a former film producer whose credits include 2001's "In the Bedroom," an Oscar nominee for best picture. "And a lot of times you get paid quicker than most other places and you can utilize that to finish your movie, and that helps the medium-sized projects a great deal."

To hear Stinson talk, the No. 1 reason to shoot in Oregon might actually be Williams.

"You can send him your budget, and he'll go through it and tell you exactly how much tax credit you get, what qualifies and what doesn't, and give you a total. That's a lot of work for him," says Stinson. "On top of it, he does the pictures of locations, and he'll tell you what's coming to town and make sure it's not too busy. When there's been a problem, he's spoken to [people in] locations that were hard for us to get. He's a fighter, and he's on your side."

"A lot of times you get paid quicker than most other places and you can utilize that to finish your movie."
Tim Williams

Allyson Riggs/Netflix

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reviews



Jared Leto's Ares is 3D-printed into the real world.

Leah Gallo/Disney

FILM REVIEW / PETER DEBRUGE

A Buggy Upgrade

The new installment looks and sounds cool, but its best ideas get overwhelmed by a fetishistic focus on classic 'Tron' mythology

Tron: Ares

Director Joachim Rønning

Screenwriter Jesse Wigutow

Cast Jared Leto, Greta Lee, Evan Peters, Jodie Turner-Smith

Distributor Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures

There's more than one paradox built into the program of "Tron: Ares." Whereas the 1982 Disney film on which it was based felt ahead of its time — both conceptually and in terms of its cutting-edge visual effects — Sean Bailey's latest attempt to franchise-ify the "Tron" brand reads mostly as an exercise in nostalgia. Like lead actor Jared Leto's high-def cheekbones, it looks great, but the movie is saddled with callbacks to the earlier film (and the 1980s at large) that suggest it's aimed more at Gen X than the Alpha kids who could launch the property into the future.

Directed by Joachim Rønning, who previously made overcomplicated sequels to "Pirates of the Caribbean" and "Maleficent" for the company, "Tron: Ares" introduces two great ideas. The first feels alarmist: What if things conceived in the virtual realm (what's known as "the Grid") could be trans-



Encom CEO Eve Kim (Greta Lee) hopes to use the "permanence code" for good.

Leah Gallo/Disney

ferred over to the real world? So instead of Jeff Bridges' character, Kevin Flynn, disappearing into the digital arena, all those sleek vehicles and fancy Programs (like Leto's Ares) could be 3D-printed into existence.

Compared with such a trite fear of where technology is taking us, the second theory is a refreshing alternative to the kind of anti-innovation hysteria that fuels so many sci-fi movies: What if AI could actually be a force for good? Or, as Encom CEO Eve Kim (Greta Lee) puts it, "What if its major malfunction is just benevolence?" The villain in "Tron: Ares" is not Ares — the new Master Control security software designed to defend the Grid — but his creator, Julian Dillinger (Evan Peters), the unscrupulous head of a rival tech company who's trying to develop Ares as an (artificially) intelligent, obedient, fully expendable super-soldier.

Though Leto looks cool as Ares with his dark Thor beard and long, slicked-back hair, the part requires the actor to dial down the humanity to such a degree that he reads like a Manichean mannequin: almost one-dimensional in a film that makes increasingly sophisticated use of 3D technology. (See "Tron: Ares" in stereoscopic 3D if you can, as Rønning clearly recognizes the potential of the format. He also makes the most of Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross' bassy electro score, attributed here to their band, Nine Inch Nails.)

The same goes for his second-in-command, Athena. In that role, "Queen & Slim" star Jodie Turner-Smith seems to be channeling Grace Jones: confident and devoid of emotion, on the surface at least. Ares, Athena and the other Programs appear in skin-tight black bodysuits, with luminescent red or blue accents, according to which company they work for: Dillinger or Encom, respectively.

In a demonstration to military clients, Julian uses bright scarlet lasers to render Ares and an intimidating SWAT truck in his private hangar. There's a strict 29-minute cap on how long anything brought over from the Grid can last in the real world before it disintegrates. For his business plan to work, Julian needs to find the "permanence code," a hack Flynn hid somewhere before his disappearance.

Wearing a visored helmet and blue-and-white snowsuit (in stark contrast with Ares' more Daft Punk-looking red-and-black motorcycle gear), Eve is actually the first one to find the permanence code, which she wants to use for good. With it, she can render crops to feed the hungry and houses for all who need them, whereas Dillinger wants only power and profits.

Artificial intelligence is so easily corrupted in the "Tron" movies that Julian should know better than to place so much autonomy in Ares' hands (his mother, played by Gillian Anderson, clearly understands as much). His new Master Control starts to rebel almost immediately, resenting that Julian treats him as "100% disposable." That calls to mind another kid-targeted '80s movie, "Short Circuit," in which war machines disobey their programming.

We should consider ourselves grateful that screenwriter Jesse Wigutow wasn't forced to invent a child character for Ares to befriend, trusting instead in a grown-up connection between Eve and Ares. Technically speaking, Ares has an infant's emotional maturity at first, but swiftly develops empathy and other sophisticated feelings.

The script references both "Frankenstein" and "Pinocchio," exploring the rise of AI vis-à-vis those two archetypes — an existential journey wrapped in "Tron" drag. While it's exciting to see what this world might look like in the 21st century, the franchise gets in the way of Ares' internal evolution. However fascinating it might be to watch Ares "level up," what audiences expect — and what Rønning delivers — is cycle races and dynamic gladiator battles.

The new, wider Light Skimmers look amazing racing through real city streets, while the sight of a red-trimmed Recognizer hovering toward Encom Tower is every bit as thrilling as Patrick Jean's three-minute "Pixels" short (released the same year as "Tron: Legacy"). But there's a sense that "Tron: Ares" has too much nostalgia to service, from the cobwebby re-creation of Flynn's arcade-basement office to Bridges' extended cameo (as a drawling, laid-back Dude who sounds less like Flynn than his "Big Lebowski" character).

The thing Bailey too rarely dared was hatching original IP, where this film might have actually been more effective as a non-"Tron" original. After all, Tron himself — as in Bruce Boxleitner's character — is nowhere to be found. Then again, audiences are mostly interested in seeing how Disney has upgraded the franchise in the 15 years since "Legacy," so maybe it's best to make like Eve Kim and get with the Program.

The script references both "Frankenstein" and "Pinocchio," exploring the rise of AI vis-à-vis those two archetypes — an existential journey wrapped in "Tron" drag.

REVIEW / CHRIS WILLMAN

Highways Not Taken

Outtakes and electric versions suggest 'Nebraska' could have been completely different, but still a masterpiece

Nebraska '82: Expanded Edition

—

Artist Bruce Springsteen Label Columbia

→ Boxed sets celebrating classic rock albums offer the joy of discovery — in all those abandoned alternate versions being brought into the light as bonus tracks — but usually also some simultaneous historical relief: How interesting these early arrangements sound ... and thank God they didn't ultimately stop there. For the most part, though, Bruce Springsteen's "Nebraska '82: Expanded Edition" isn't like that. Hearing all the versions of songs that appeared on "Nebraska" or his next album, "Born in the U.S.A.," there's rarely any sense of "Glad *that* road was not taken." Nearly all the takes put on view here are pretty great; it's easy to start imagining a multiverse with completely different versions of "Nebraska" as wonderful as the one we got 43 years ago.

What those theoretical other versions wouldn't have been, though, is *influential* — or at least impactful enough that somebody would have been making a feature film about them in 2025. In the run-up to Scott Cooper's "Bruce Springsteen: Deliver Me From Nowhere," some wild claims have been made for the homemade, rough-hewn "Nebraska," like *Bruce invented lo-fi!* Not quite, but in spirit, close enough. In 1982, there was not yet a four-track cassette demo machine in every garage; "Unplugged" had not yet been invented; synths and garish, gated drum sounds were on the way in ... and not many arena rockers were thinking, "How can I make a record that sounds like 'Folkways meets Sun Studios' — but with more murder?" Springsteen made a stripped-down aesthetic something that could forever after be defended in a corporate suite (if not always as successfully as in the slightly corny Columbia Records scenes in "Nowhere").

Ultimately, we wouldn't have wanted "Nebraska" any other way — but listening to the two discs of outtakes in this new set, you get glimpses of how it could have been executed differently and perhaps turned out just as good, just not as culture rattling. The most long-awaited component here is the disc labeled "Electric Nebraska," which offers band versions of six songs that wound up as solo tracks on "Nebraska," plus two that would go the opposite way and end up bigger and slicker when finally heard on "Born in the U.S.A." The disc titled "Nebraska Outtakes," meanwhile, includes solo recordings of nine compositions that didn't make it onto "Nebraska," making the case it could've been a terrific double LP.

Buyers also get two other discs — one a remastering of the original album (wouldn't a *de*-mastering seem more apropos?), the other a decent enough fresh live performance of the album's tracks filmed in stark (Starkweather?) black and white for Blu-ray.

But it's those '82 outtakes you're here for. "Electric Nebraska," which also includes early versions of "U.S.A." tracks, is worth the wait: Although Springsteen made the right overall call in not making "Nebraska" a band album, you can hold the opposing thought that some of these songs really do feel superior in band format. A few suffer from being too fleshed out, like "Johnny 99" and "Downbound Train," both sporting roadhouse-piano parts that make woeful tunes sound altogether too jolly. But the real keepers are a trio of songs Springsteen recorded with just two E Streeters as a "rockabilly punk" power trio: "Open All Night," "Born in the U.S.A." and "Reason to Believe." If he'd gotten around to recording all the "Nebraska" songs with that unit on that day, the resulting album would probably be a very different masterpiece in its own right.

The "Outtakes" disc includes discarded solo recordings that have more early-Elvis energy than those that made the album — imagine a "Nebraska" with "Pink Cadillac" on it! But no one should regret that the final LP was streamlined to be more of a downer. The Reagan years demanded it, to fully consider the power outage in that shining city on a hill — or that mansion on the hill — before Springsteen lit everything up again with "U.S.A." After his simpler-sounding one-off, we would never feel so simple again.

Springsteen made a stripped-down aesthetic something that could forever after be defended in a corporate suite.



David Michael Kennedy



Everett Collection

‘I’ll Be Right Here’

→ “E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial” is remembered as a feel-good cinematic fantasy, overflowing with whimsy and wonder. Perhaps it’s because the most iconic image from Steven Spielberg’s masterpiece remains that of a boy and his alien friend riding a bicycle through the night sky while silhouetted against the face of the moon. But that overlooks the festering pain and alienation that gives the story its indelible force.

For Spielberg, film is often a very expensive form of therapy. And nothing impacted the director like the dissolution of his parents’ marriage when he was 19. “The world collapses,” Spielberg said at a 2022 TCM fest screening of “E.T.” “The sky falls on your head.”

So many of Spielberg’s movies — from “Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade” to “Catch Me If You Can” — are about broken families. But few feel as autobiographical as “E.T.” Early in the film, Elliott (Henry Thomas) explodes at his family for making fun of him when he tells them about seeing a mysterious creature, insisting that his father would have believed him. When his mother suggests Elliott call his dad, he informs her that he’s in Mexico with his new girlfriend, prompting his mom to leave the dinner table, fighting back tears.

It’s the kind of blowup that would have been recognizable to many viewers at the time. Two years before “E.T.” opened in 1982, divorce rates in the country reached their highest levels. For Spielberg, the point of the film is that E.T.’s arrival allows Elliott and his family to replace the shock they feel over the destruction of their domestic life with compassion.

“A divorce creates great responsibility, especially if you have siblings,” Spielberg noted at that same screening. “We all take care of each other.”

Ultimately, Elliott and his siblings think they’re saving E.T. by helping him return to his home, only to realize that this stranger from a strange land has saved them — showing them that empathy is more powerful than anger.

— *Brent Lang*

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