

# Dreams WITH FRIENDS

HOW A SUNDANCE  
DEBUT, BOX OFFICE  
CHALLENGES AND A  
PANDEMIC SHAPED  
STARZ'S NEW SERIES,  
*BLINDSPOTTING*.

WRITTEN BY PIYA SINHA-ROY





L-R: Jaylen Barron (Trish), Benjamin Earl Turner (Earl), Candace Nicholas-Lippman (Janelle), Atticus Woodward (Sean), Jasmine Cephas Jones (Ashley), Rafael Casal (Miles) and Daveed Diggs (Collin)

PHOTO COURTESY EDDY CHEN / 2020 STARZ ENTERTAINMENT, LLC

**T**he story of how two Bay Area rappers, neither of whom had written a script before, managed to cowrite and lead an indie feature on their first try may seem like one of those rare Hollywood stories of beginner's luck. But in reality, the journey of *Blindspotting* from Sundance hit to Lionsgate release to Starz series debuting in June, demonstrates a determination from producers Jess Wu Calder, Keith Calder, Daveed Diggs and Rafael Casal to create something authentic, and to persevere even in the most difficult of situations.

When *Blindspotting* made its debut at the opening night of the Sundance Film Festival in 2018, it marked the culmination of an arduous decade-long journey for the foursome that brought it to fruition. So when the television arm of Lionsgate approached the Calders, Diggs and Casal about expanding *Blindspotting* into a Starz TV series, they needed some convincing.

"We had spent over a decade working on this to tell a specific story, and we all felt like we had told it," says Jess Wu Calder. "I think that was our initial hesitancy."

As Diggs elaborates, "We told them no several times." The project was deeply personal for both Diggs and Casal, who drew on their own lives to pen the story and to play Bay Area best friends Collin and Miles. Revisiting those characters for a *Blindspotting* series wasn't of interest to the creators.

The story of *Blindspotting* begins in 2007, when Jess Wu Calder and Keith Calder, the team behind Snoot Entertainment, explored the idea of reimagining a musical. "Keith and I

were really passionate about trying to figure out a way to do what we thought was a cool different version of a musical where, instead of the characters bursting into song when they're overcome with emotion, they would burst into verse." That nugget began to take shape when Jess Wu Calder discovered Casal performing his poetry on YouTube and contacted him to meet about their idea for a reimagined musical film.

The Calderes drove up from Los Angeles to the Bay Area to meet Casal, and within hours had formed a bond. Shortly after, they invited Casal to perform at an event tied to their 2010 documentary *Thunder Soul*. Casal was unable to make it, so he suggested his friend step in. In walked a pre-*Hamilton* Daveed Diggs, who freestyled verses inspired by their documentary and "just blew us all away," recalls Keith Calder.

From then, the Calderes joined forces with Diggs and Casal to create and develop *Blindspotting*, using a poem by Casal titled "Monster" as a starting point. "It was a really beautiful piece about how (Casal) was so angry and fed up with so many of his friends dying early, and that really spoke to both Keith and I," Jess Wu Calder says.

What emerged from the collaboration was *Blindspotting*, a tale that follows Collin (Diggs), a Black man trying to stay

out of trouble during the last days of his parole despite the antics of his reckless best friend Miles (Casal). The film struck a complex balance between comedy, drama, verse, and banter, telling the carefully constructed story of two Oakland best friends contending with white privilege, police shootings of unarmed Black Americans, rapid gentrification, and fractures in their own relationship.

### EMERGING RESONANCE

After its Sundance debut, Lionsgate quickly snapped it up and released it to theaters in July that year, hoping to find an audience in a year when films such as *Sorry to Bother You*, *BlackKklansman* and even Marvel's *Black Panther* elevated the racial injustices that Black Americans experience. Still, released against blockbusters in the height of summer, *Blindspotting* performed lower than expected at the box office, capping out its theatrical taking at \$5 million.

"I think the film addresses themes that certain aspects of the world weren't ready to talk about yet and view yet," says Keith Calder. That shifted in 2020, when, during the height of the pandemic, the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police sparked a rousing resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. As more Americans leaned into educating

themselves on the realities of the Black American experience, *Blindspotting* found its audience on streaming and digital platforms. "Last year's crucible of events led to the film resonating in a way that we felt should have been sooner, but the world was ready last year," Keith Calder explains.

Casal says the film's underwhelming theatrical performance ended up being a blessing in disguise. "What made it a lot easier for us to investigate it as a television show was that it wasn't a massive hit ... like, you don't take *Moonlight* and flip it into a series—you're not going to top it; it's Oscar-winning," he explains. What the film did demonstrate was a cast of characters in a real-world setting that connected with the people who watched it and spread the word.

### SHIFT IN FOCUS

As the foursome reunited to discuss what could work for a potential *Blindspotting* series, Jess Wu Calder returned to an idea they explored for the film. It was one scene in the film, an explosive argument between Casal's Miles and Jasmine Cephas Jones' Ashley, that planted the seed for recentering the *Blindspotting* story to focus on the women. "Something we had always tried to do was to introduce more women of color into the story, and with each incarnation of the



script, we kept trying to home in on that because we were aware it was a very male-dominated storyline,” she says.

Diggs and Casal also knew the story had to shift away from Collin and Miles, but they still wanted to capture the zeitgeist of the Bay Area and the world they had created in the film. “Immediately (we knew) that’s why Ashley has to be the center of the story,” Casal says. It has to be her friends and not just her surrounded by Collin and Miles and their friends, but that we see her in her own context.”

Two things came together quickly after that. “Jasmine Cephas Jones is incredible and we want to showcase her as much as possible,” Keith Calder says. “The second key piece was that we wanted to tell a story about the impact of incarceration on a community. We knew that that the way to do that through the lens of Ashley would be to have Miles go into that system.”

Jones, best known for playing Peggy Schuyler and Marina Reynolds in the original cast of Broadway’s *Hamilton*—she also won an Emmy for her role in #FreeRayShawn—came on board as lead star and executive producer for the series, building on her long-time friendship with Casal and her *Hamilton* co-star Diggs to create a strong arc for Ashley.

“It’s nice when you get to draw on your own real life and authentic relationships with other women, because I do think the authenticity of female relationships is very much lacking in TV,” Jones explains. “Quite often, they’re heightened or exaggerated.”

The series begins with Miles being arrested and imprisoned on drug possession charges, and Ashley must figure out new living arrangements for herself and their young son Sean. They are forced to move in with Miles’ mother Rainey, played by Helen Hunt, and his wayward sister Trish (Jaylen Barron), and Ashley has to adapt to life without her long-term partner by her side.

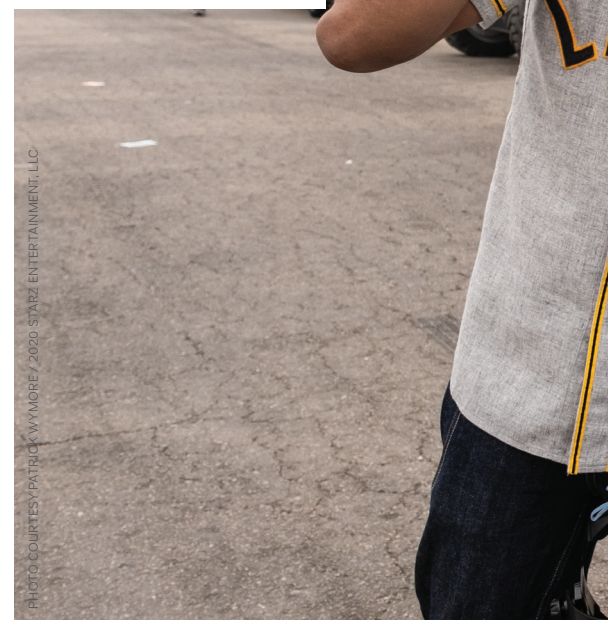
Over the course of the series, Ashley—who is often the calm in a cast of eccentric and larger-than-life characters—will start to crack and combust. She

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faces insurmountable challenges as a single parent and as a woman in a city that encompasses the vast disparity of class and wealth. Verse and performance play a key role in the series as the story weaves short dance breaks and rap segments into Ashley’s journey toward regaining her footing.

“I was really happy because I knew that they were going to give me a platform to just go off,” says Jones. “I’m excited for people to see us break the fourth wall and go into verse, which Ashley does when she is her most honest and truthful self. She gets angry and she gets sad, and she expresses herself in this creative way.”

Once Jones’ Ashley became the subject of the *Blindspotting* series and Casal took the reigns as showrunner, the four producers looked to actively hire more women and people of color into the process, both on screen and behind the scenes in the writers room and director’s chair. The supporting cast includes Black and Latinx regulars including Benjamin Earl Turner, Atticus Woodward and Candace Nicholas-Lippman, and producers include Chrisann Verges and Taja Perkins as associate producer. “Having a more representative group of people making the stories is something that the Hollywood machine is not very good at yet,” Diggs explains. “Everyone falls back on the things that you’re used to that work, and there are so many barriers to entry to all of these various different unions that keep them from being representative of the population.”



## PANDEMIC CHALLENGES

While the Calders have ushered more than a dozen independent films to screens—they’ve earned the Producers Mark for 2016’s *Blair Witch*, 2018’s *Blindspotting*, 2019’s *Little Monsters* and 2020’s *One Night in Miami*—the *Blindspotting* series marked the first time all four producers had ever made a television show. Every day presented new challenges, and then just as production plans for the series were getting off the ground, Hollywood came to a grinding halt when the pandemic swept the world last March.

As the producers contemplated the future of the series, the network gave them a 10-week window in November 2020 to film. “We had no idea how



L-R: Diggs, Jones and Casal, who starred in the *Blindspotting* film, reunite for the series, this time all three producing. Here, they're on set for the show's pilot episode.

to produce television and we had no idea how to produce television in a pandemic," says Casal. "But I do think there was a little bit of a high—if we pull it off, no one can tell us s---, because we've charged through something that is unprecedented." It also presented an opportunity for the team to provide much-needed jobs for cast and crew.

The first step was to adjust the filming locations, given COVID safety protocols. While the film was able to rove through Oakland given Miles and Collins' jobs as movers, the eight-episode *Blindspotting* series had more static locations. The team decided to shoot only essential exterior shots in Oakland over the course of two weeks, and build the rest of the

sets on sound stages in Santa Clarita. And then there were the additional stringent measures to keep everyone safe, with strict testing and distancing and movements on set.

"At the beginning, we wanted to be sponges, learning about how television is made. At a certain point, a big realization was that that we've come up through the process of making independent films and we figured out our own approach to things," Keith Calder says. "I think people do their best work when they're comfortable."

With a tight schedule on set and scripts evolving during filming, everyone made themselves available to adapt as quickly as needed. "Sometimes I had to learn a verse

in a very short matter of time, but the great thing about it is that everyone is so damn talented so we'd all get together and create something on the spot," Jones says.

For Diggs and Casal, the logistics of running a show presented many lessons. "The scripts, it turns out, are really important," Diggs quips. "I don't think we'll ever go into production on something while we're still writing scripts again," Casal adds. "We learned that the biggest part of our jobs, the multiple jobs that we're running on set, is to be hyper present and ready to engage with everyone in their department."

But there were also huge perks to being producers; Diggs relished being able to come and go without the

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responsibilities of an actor, while Casal just appreciated having someone to bring him monitors. “Rafa always needed a bigger monitor. He doesn’t see well and he refuses to wear glasses,” Diggs says.

### TRIBAL COLLABORATION

Diggs and Casal have come far as artists and storytellers since they first wrote *Blindspotting* in their early 20s. On social media, they often use the hashtag #DreamsWithFriends when promoting their projects because that’s what they do—create their dream projects with their talented friends. It’s a sentiment that Jones valued greatly as she stepped into her first lead role, working on a show driven by two close friends and where even her real-life partner, Anthony Ramos (also from the original Broadway cast of *Hamilton*), pops up on screen in a supporting role.

“I trust these people more than anything, because I know that they have my back and I have theirs,” Jones says. “It’s really important to have your tribe and constantly have those people surrounding you that you believe in, they believe in you, and that can call you out and can help you grow as an artist.”

If *Blindspotting* doesn’t get a second season, its creative team has made sure the eight episodes present a complete and cohesive arc for the show’s characters. “The four of us crafted this season in a way that if we, for whatever reason, don’t get a future, we don’t have any regrets,” Jess Wu Calder says.

But if it gets the coveted renewal, the team have big plans for the *Blindspotting* series.

“If we get to season two, we can introduce new characters to live with, because as much as we love these five or six voices, they’re still a small fraction of the kinds of people that shaped our lives,” Casal says. “We’re excited to introduce those folks and dig a little bit deeper into each of their trajectories. I think we’re always like, two seasons would be great and three seasons would be amazing.” ■

**Top:** Showrunner Casal chats with Jones while filming in Oakland.

**Bottom:** Woodward, Barron, Nicholas-Lippman and Helen Hunt, who plays Miles’ mother Rainey, on set in Santa Clarita.



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