

HUSTLE ≠ HAPPINESS

PRODUCER GIGI DEMENT REMINDS EVERYONE TO PRACTICE SELF-CARE, TAKE RISKS, AND KNOW YOUR WORTH.

WRITTEN BY DINO-RAY RAMOS

In the drama *Lingua Franca*, filmmaker Isabel Sandoval tells the love story of an undocumented Filipina trans woman and a man in Brooklyn. The film premiered at Venice Days during the Venice Film Festival in 2019 and went on to be acquired by Ava DuVernay's ARRAY Releasing before it was released on Netflix in 2020.

As an executive producer of the film, Gigi Dement says that it showcased the kind of stories she wants to tell.

Dement's love for storytelling dates to when she was a 7-year-old insomniac. She would sneak downstairs and watch movies on TV like *A Clockwork Orange*, *Looking For Mister Goodbar*, *The Tin Drum*, *The Elephant Man*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *The Red Balloon*.

"Honestly, the films from these early memories were terrifying," admits Dement. "The list is endless, and one more inappropriate for a child than the last. While I didn't quite understand what I was watching, those films made an indelible mark on me emotionally and visually."

They may have not been kid-friendly, but these inventive, off-the-beaten path and wildly unconventional stories help sculpt Dement into the storyteller she is today.

"I knew I wanted to create incredible and sometimes

fantastical worlds with stories to match," she says. "I wanted to be able to draw in an audience and not only entertain them, but make them feel whatever the characters were going through."

With her childhood movie watching experiences as a foundation, Dement talked to *Produced By* about how she would navigate her career if she knew then what she knows now.

Gigi Dement and a scene from *Lingua Franca* (below).



IF THERE WAS ONE PIECE OF ADVICE YOU COULD GIVE YOURSELF WHEN YOU WERE COMING UP AS A PRODUCER, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

I would tell myself that it's not necessary to do everything all at once. That it's possible to get everything done and done well if you focus on one task at a time. This doesn't just apply to physical producing, but in every phase and every aspect of filmmaking or content creation. I would also tell myself to not succumb to the allure of "the hustle" at the expense of my mental and physical health. Putting oneself last isn't sustainable, and in the end, will not yield happiness or your best work.

Also, I'd tell myself to make sure I'm paid what I'm worth. I teach this to my students, but find it difficult to achieve personally. Most producers don't make a sustainable living, and that really needs to change considering the amount of work put in and the years invested in any given project.

WHO GAVE YOU WHAT YOU WOULD CONSIDER YOUR FIRST BIG BREAK THAT HELPED LIGHT A FIRE UNDERNEATH YOU AS A PRODUCER?

I think I'm still waiting for my big break! But seriously, it wasn't so much a fire that needed to be lit, but permission to take risks. I had taken several years to raise my two daughters, and one night before I started NYU graduate film school, my now ex-husband told me to "take risks." I interpreted that as not waiting for things to happen for me, but to make them happen by putting myself out there.

I really leaned into the collaborative process and my innate strengths and began pursuing projects to produce. I worked hard and often and made sure people knew I was good at what I did.

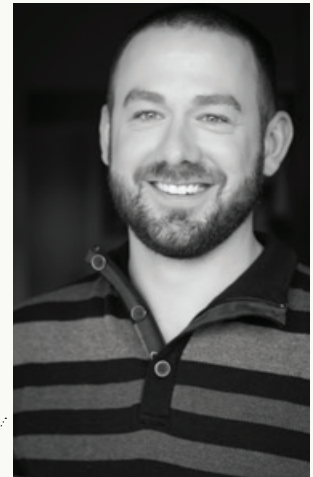
NOW THAT YOU KNOW WHAT YOU KNOW NOW, HOW DO YOU WANT TO MOVE FORWARD WITH YOUR CAREER—AND WHAT KIND OF STORIES DO YOU WANT TO TELL?

I became a producer when I realized that I loved telling stories that didn't just spring from my own imagination. Firstly, I'm going to work my way back to writing again. One of the best parts of being a producer is helping shape a film's arc along with its characters. I've been practicing story structure and character development for years on the films I produce, and I'm ready to apply it to some of the stories I've been kicking around for a while now. The second part of the plan is to try to go in-house somewhere where I can work on projects already financed and maybe even have distribution in place. Don't get me wrong—I love independent filmmaking, but I think I'd make more impact if my projects weren't faced with financial uncertainty and if the films I made didn't take quite so long to get to the screen.

As for the types of stories I want to tell, I've been trying for years to get more Asian American or Filipino American films made. I have one that takes place in Manila which is on hold for the time being, but I guess that's where the writing comes in, doesn't it? I'll always be drawn to telling stories that are glaringly absent in the current crop of content, whatever it happens to be at the time. Stories not being told, with characters who don't get enough screen time. It's amazing to be able to escape into fantastical worlds in blockbuster films, but the more humanity that comes to life on screen, the more indelible the story on the viewer and the annals of film. ■

NEW MEMBERS

A SPOTLIGHT ON SOME OF THE NEWEST MEMBERS OF THE PRODUCERS GUILD AND WHAT MAKES THEM TICK



Jeremy McGovern

McGovern fell into producing by accident. He volunteered to help a friend on a no-budget pilot as a PA in the art department. The line producer noticed how hard he was working. She became his mentor and they worked together for the next 10 years.

What's the best piece of advice you've ever received about producing?

The most valuable tool you have as a producer is an honest, respectful relationship with your crew. Above all else, your first job is taking care of them—and they should know that.