



INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

FILMMAKERS ROBERT SALERNO, ROXANNE TAYLOR AND
JONATHAN WANG TALK ABOUT NAVIGATING THE NEW
INDEPENDENT FILM LANDSCAPE IN THE 21ST CENTURY.

INTERVIEW BY DINO-RAY RAMOS

Shamea Morton, Katt
Williams, and Sisse Marie in
Roxanne Taylor-produced
*The House Next Door: Meet
the Blacks 2*

JONATHAN WANG



The concept of “indie film” has changed since the '80s and '90s, and the lines that define it have blurred. Many auteurs dubbed as “up and coming” have gone on to direct gigantic comic book tentpoles and streamers, further altering the terrain as to what exactly an indie is.

To explore this shifting landscape, *Produced By* hosted a roundtable conversation with filmmakers Robert Salerno (*I'm Thinking of Ending Things*, *We Need to Talk About Kevin*), Roxanne Taylor (*The House Next Door*, *Black and Blue*), and Jonathan Wang (*Swiss Army Man*, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*).

The filmmakers have different experiences and are in various stages of their careers. Some have worked in the studio space, but all of them got their start in the indie world. In a candid discussion, they unpack the good, the bad, and the truth about how indie film is changing and where it is going.

WHEN YOU FIRST ENTERED THIS BUSINESS, WAS BEING A PRODUCER A ROLE YOU KNEW YOU WANTED?

ROXANNE TAYLOR



Robert Salerno: I don't know what I initially I wanted to be. I majored in communications and advertising, and I was interested in being an actor. I started taking acting lessons and doing commercials. Because I used to be a gymnast, I had a bit of a schtick. I could do a backflip, so I would get hired in commercials to do one.

CAN YOU STILL DO A BACKFLIP?

RS: No, I haven't tried in some time (*laughs*). Anyway, I realized acting wasn't as easy as I thought. I started seeing the people on the other side of the camera. It looked more interesting, more ability to control and tell stories. I got a job interning, and PAing and going through the process. I got inspired working with the Shooting Gallery, a New York independent company. We made movies like *Laws of Gravity* with Nick Gomez, and Hal Hartley films. The one that put the company on the map was *Sling Blade* with Billy Bob Thornton.

THAT'S A GOOD BREAKOUT MOVIE FOR AN INDIE COMPANY. WHAT ELSE DID YOU WORK ON?

RS: I had an opportunity to work with Al Pacino when I was there, producing a movie that he was directing and starring

ROBERT SALERNO



in called *Chinese Coffee*. That was one of the early times that I was really inspired. He forced you to dig. He wanted feedback on the script and story and then every single cut. I was 25. It was a pretty amazing experience. I started to fall in love with crafting and creating stories and felt like, “Oh, my God—this iconic figure is taking my voice seriously and is interested in what I have to say.” It sparked a lot of love and interest in the independent film world.

Roxanne Taylor: Very similar to Robert, I never sought out to be a producer. I was a computer science major, but always a fan of film and all the layers of it. After deciding, “Hey, I don't want to be a programmer anymore,” I packed up my house, got a U-Haul and moved to LA. I lived in a Motel 6 and worked for temp agencies and figured, “OK, I know the business.” I joined this company called All Star Agency, which placed people in film.

The closest thing I did land was a job at *Walker, Texas Ranger* as a PA. I wasn't on set. I was just in the office because I was trying to learn. I wanted to be in front of the camera, but whenever the camera

Robert Salerno
on the set of
*I'm Thinking of
Ending Things*



shines on me, I completely crumble.

I ended up landing a job at the DGA, working for the national executive in charge of theater, awards and facilities management for the New York and LA office. I was able to maneuver that world very quickly, but I found it was a totally different world than what I was used to. I learned a lot about production. It was a little overwhelming, and at that time, very abusive—which sometimes it can still be.

HOW LONG DID YOU STAY AT THE DGA?

RT: I ended up quitting. I went to music and doing concerts, which is very similar. I ended up coming back to film because my business partner wanted to do his own film. Again, I didn't know anything about it. I was winging it. That was 17 years ago, but I fell in love during that process. I was really in the trenches. This was with Rutger Hauer, which was a very interesting experience, I must say.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

RT: When you're thrown in like that,

it teaches you what filmmaking really is—being independent and having to be out there on the ground; scraping and scratching and trying to figure it out and raising your own money from 20 different people. Independent filmmaking is wearing multiple hats.

Jonathan Wang: I didn't ever want to be in front of the camera, so I guess I'm unique there (*laughs*). Like you, Roxanne, put a camera in front of me and I have no brain function. I was a touring musician. I was in bands, and I really didn't like the experience of songwriting. I was self-aware, always asking, "Am I cool? Is this a good song? Is this going to be a hit?" I wanted to step away from that. I started doing tour management and the business side of entertainment. Then I realized that the film industry is the one that I really love.

HOW DID YOU SET FOOT IN THE FILM INDUSTRY?

JW: I reached out to a friend and asked. He was working with American Zoetrope. They didn't have an internship, but they created one for me. Somehow I made my

way into work with Roman and Sofia Coppola. I used that name a lot, even though I was an intern. I was like, "Yeah, I work with the Coppolas." (*laughs*)

I asserted myself as a producer and jumped into the deep end. I called all my music contacts and started producing music videos, being the PA, art director, everything in one, because I didn't know any better.

From there, I worked on bigger and bigger music videos, learning more until I became friends with the Daniels. We made a bunch of music videos, got Grammy nominations and MTV Music Video Award nominations. Studios started calling to ask, "Do you guys have movie ideas?" and we answered, "Yes, we do." Then we made movies and started to figure it out. You fake it till you make it and then you keep on faking it, right?

RT: Yes! Fake it till you make it!

THE INDIE FILM LANDSCAPE HAS CHANGED SINCE THE DAYS OF KEVIN SMITH'S *CLERKS* AND THE TARANTINO ERA.

HOW DO EACH OF YOU DEFINE INDEPENDENT FILMMAKING?

RT: For me, independent filmmaking is doing it all on your own, literally—from raising the capital, the equity, financing, all the nuts and bolts of the production, finding distribution, putting the film out—everything from concept to delivery.

You don't have studio backing, a negative pickup deal, or all of these other things. Sometimes I have disagreements with people in the industry when they say they're independent, but they have all of these backings and all of these things in place before the films have been made. I'm like, "OK, well, then what's independent about you?"

I struggle with that because I am truly an independent filmmaker. We literally raise our own financing, write the scripts, and hire the crew. We make the movie and then go find a distributor. Then there's the P&A. To me, that's real independent filmmaking.

JW: I totally agree that there's this thing that's happened within our culture where indie music and indie film have become a genre in and of themselves. Indie producing is a different thing than an indie film. I think there's a certain kind of auteur story that gets broken as soon as you put it into a big studio.

It's true there is the indie producing side where we talk about finance, but when you talk about an indie story, there's something there that could happen within a small studio. It's an interesting, amorphous thing: indie storytelling versus indie producing.

RS: I think it's two things. Now you're finding more streamers and companies taking the gamble and going for something that would be classified an indie film. But there's the indie producer, which is more than ever, during COVID, such a struggling place to be. It's almost impossible. I've worked in both worlds. I've worked with full-on studios. I've worked fully independent, raising every dime and dollar and had credit cards maxed out.

What that means is that the producer is shouldering all of the responsibility and all of the problems.

I just finished a film with a studio that was like heaven. For every single thing, there's support. I'm normally setting up the signatory companies for the Screen Actors Guild and for the DGA or the WGA and having to do all that and all the financial assurances. Then you're stuck with this for years after everybody's gone. With the studio, all that gets parsed out.

On top of that, you as the independent producer are focused on working with the filmmaker. You need to have a good story—something that's entertaining, that works. But you're pulled in 5,000 different directions and you're shouldering all of the burden creatively, fiscally and legally.

COVID GREATLY IMPACTED THE INDUSTRY. HOW DO YOU THINK IT HAS IMPACTED THE INDIE FILM SPACE?

RS: It made everything more heightened and hyper to handle. We have so many additional costs for COVID protocols. It's difficult for an independent film to shoulder. And we also have the liability. If we shut down, where is that coming from? There's no big brother. It's usually a bank or an independent equity person who is not in it to keep throwing money toward helping out.

Now there's also more independently minded stories that streamers and studios are making. I think that's where indie film is blurred. I did a movie with Charlie Kaufman, *I'm Thinking of Ending Things*. Thank goodness Netflix was there. They did a great job supporting and helping get that financed, but that would've been really difficult if it were truly independent.

RT: I agree 200%. It is so hard to be able to support the filmmaker 100% and be creatively invested when you are doing it independently. You don't have enough time in the day. You have no infrastructure. I'm still doing movies from six years ago. There are so many layers, but people don't understand. The backing that a studio gives you is priceless. It's so important

"I THINK THAT WITH HIGH COMPETITION COMES INGENUITY, RIGHT? WHEN YOU HAVE A SATURATED MARKETPLACE WITH THOUSANDS AND THOUSANDS OF STORIES EVERY DAY, WHAT'S GOING TO CUT THROUGH? IT'S UNIQUE, FRESH STORIES."

—JONATHAN WANG

to have that sometimes to tell that story, as Robert said, and get what you want from those actors on the screen—not having to rush through every single take. Every single setup is super hard.

We shot a film in July 2020, right after the country shut down in the middle of the pandemic. It was a million-dollar film, but the reason I did it was really, as an independent, to figure out how to shoot in this landscape. I went to Tahoe, where there were no COVID deaths. The population was low, the mandates weren't there, and it was in one location with minimal cast. I still have about six projects set up at other studios as work for hire. They're twiddling their thumbs, trying to figure out if they have the budget and the means. All of the other layers are coming into play now, and everybody's trying to go "the independent way," right? Because the world has turned upside down.



They're not doing many co-fi or negative pickup deals. They're not doing developing much at all. They want you to come in there with a finished project. They want to buy it out and say thank you and put it out. Content is king. All these streamers are looking for content, and it makes it a viable business for the YouTubers and the influencers. There's an outlet for people who used to beg to try to find a place for them. Now there's a home for anyone. But yeah, not to get off track, but that's super hard—being an independent producer and trying to manage and take on that liability and carrying that through for the life of the film. It's very challenging.

JW: Yeah. I put an exclamation mark on what Roxanne and Robert said. It's not any one specific thing. It's the cumulative effect of all the small decisions. If you think about COVID and the risk you

have to take on as an individual person without a health and safety team, without a full legal department—you as an indie producer have to make informed decisions on testing protocols and union rules. You have to figure that out yourself. Now, if you go to Disney or Netflix, you might be like, "Oh, this is so restrictive. I wish I was in the other corner." So you have the two extremes.

It's really hard parsing through the COVID protocols, not to mention SAG, financing, cast deals, all that stuff, plus creative.

WE'VE TALKED ABOUT STREAMERS, BUT WE ALSO HAVE NEWER COMPANIES LIKE A24 AND NEON THAT CAN BE CONSIDERED A HALFWAY POINT BETWEEN BIG STUDIO AND INDIE FILMMAKING. HOW HAS THAT IMPACTED THE

LANDSCAPE OF FILMMAKING? THIS IS PROBABLY MORE FOR JONATHAN SINCE HE HAS DONE EXTENSIVE WORK WITH A24.

JW: I think A24 is great because they understand the size that they are, and they're also growing very rapidly. There's this organic process where it still feels like you're an indie producer. They have the resources to help you, but they're not saying, "Here's our specific way it has to be." There is a more organic process.

The first movie that we did with them, they picked up. From that, I've seen their office grow exponentially. I used to know everyone in the office. Now there's hundreds and hundreds of people in there. It's an interesting time for them to see that sort of growth, where they are still indie but have the reach and an HR team to give you real production support. It's a good home currently to be at.

WE'VE SEEN FILMMAKERS LIKE TAIKA WAITITI, CHLOE ZHAO AND PATTY JENKINS, WHO WERE MORE ON THE INDIE AND ARTHOUSE SIDE, DIP INTO HUGE BLOCKBUSTER MOVIES. BUT DO YOU THINK THERE ARE CERTAIN INDIE FILMMAKERS WHO AVOID ENTERING THE BIG STUDIO SPACE LIKE THE PLAGUE?

RT: Everybody's different. Everybody's going to have a different perspective, but everybody starts somewhere. You have to go from nothing to get to something. I think most filmmakers probably dream big, but at the end of the day, they're storytellers and they want to make the movies they want to make.

I personally think that yes, you want to get to that studio level or that Marvel level. You want to have that experience and the infrastructure that you wouldn't normally have. In that same sentence, you are restrained in the flexibility of what you get to do because you have to answer to so many different layers of people.

In my experience, they will sometimes go to the more green filmmakers to give them that next opportunity in a Marvel or



Director Daniel Kwan, actor Ke Huy Quan, and Jonathan Wang on the set of *Everything Everywhere All At Once*

whatnot, because they can micromanage them. They can mold them on how they want things to go. Sometimes, if you get a more experienced filmmaker, it's going to be more pushback on how they want to move and the vision that they want to see. But for my personal opinion, who wouldn't want to do a Marvel film or go to that next level?

If you're a true filmmaker and a true storyteller, you will go around and flip-flop and still do an independent movie because it's about the story that you want to tell.

RS: I think that's true. It's also the reality of the business. There's a lot of money at stake. If you're independently wealthy and able to pick out your specific artistic vision of a script that is smaller and you know is not going to have a major audience, it might be a major critical success, but you may not make that money back. If that's what you want to do, then you should go for it. But a lot of people aren't able to do that.

A smart filmmaker is probably taking

that indie film and then going for the bigger-budget film that they can direct and try to make a name for themselves. All that does is help them to go back and do their more personal art film. Somebody's more apt to give you money if they've seen a big-budget success or more apt to grab that A-list talent on your little million-dollar movie if you've had success elsewhere.

Alfonso Cuarón was brilliant at that. He's gone from *Y Tu Mamá También* to *Harry Potter* to *Roma*. He was able to do that because of his track record and his background. You've got to do the big studio thing sometimes. It's a balancing act.

JW: Maybe I'm a bit more punk rock, but I think that we are 100% in a business, and we can't be foolish and just think, "Oh, we're going to make whatever and who cares whether or not we make money." Because then you're never going to get money again, or it's going to be harder.

In that same breath, I don't want to confuse the visions. If the goal is to make money and make a big movie for the sake of making money, then I'd say don't do

it. But if the goal is to make a good movie and it also so happens that you're inspired by the script and you want to level up on the studio level, then great.

Sometimes these big tentpole features feel like they've thrown a lot of money at it, but maybe didn't have enough passion for the story and enough passion for what the actual vision is. I think that that's why God blessed us indie producers who will always put story first and always be fighting to tell the best story, rather than "Let's just throw ungodly amounts of money at a thing to fix a thing."

You have to check yourself to ask, "Why do I want to level up?" Is it because you want to make more money? Fine, but make sure you're not going to make something that's bad for the world just because you wanted to make a bunch of money.

RS: It's true. As an indie producer and an indie filmmaker, it's easier to be punk rock in your 20s. There's a lot less riding on things and you can go for it. But as you age up, you have a wife, kids, responsibilities. So it's trying to find that balance

of doing the projects you're passionate about that have real personal meaning that you want to get out into the world, with having to make an income.

FROM COVID TO THE ADVENT OF STREAMERS TO BOX OFFICE INSTABILITY TO THE CALL TO ACTION FOR MORE INCLUSIVITY IN FRONT OF AND BEHIND THE CAMERA, WHAT DO YOU SEE IN THE FUTURE FOR INDIE FILMMAKING?

RS: The reality is that it's more complicated between the streamers and the studios. They're making so much film right now. They're sucking up the crew and actors, and it's really difficult attaching your cast because there's so many things happening at once. These people are getting paid, and why shouldn't they? For sure. But with independent film, it's a lot more complicated to keep crew inspired to want to do this when they're getting offered a bigger studio film. In the indie film world, you have to remember we're asking for lots of favors. It's difficult to accomplish that.

There is a bit of a breaking point happening because there are also studios that are giving negative pickup deals. I think that's happening because they can't get insurance for COVID anymore, so it gives them a step removed from the project and it puts it all onto the producer to figure out how to self-insure and take all the liability on. And then you're finished and you deliver that to the studio, which says, "OK, they've successfully gotten through this."

A ton of challenges are happening for the independent producer right now, in part because there's so many movies and shows being made. But I'm also encouraged because I think there's a lot of new young voices coming up and the world is in a bit of turmoil. I think there'll also be stories that will come out and help resonate and continue.

JW: I agree. I think that with high

competition comes ingenuity, right? When you have a saturated marketplace with thousands and thousands of stories every day, what's going to cut through? It's unique, fresh stories. So this old model of "let's stack a cast of traditionally white characters" is kind of stale now, thank God. Now we are going to see diverse characters and stories. We're going to have interesting, unique voices. Seeing the kind of young artists that are out there right now and knowing that there's so many stories, it's not stifling; it's more inspiring.

That's the optimistic view. As Roxanne was saying, as an indie producer, there is a need for content. Even though I don't like that word "content," people need to buy stuff. So if you can find unique stories that cut through, there's going to be a marketplace for it.

It's different right now because of COVID, but I'm not fatalistic. A lot of people think, "Oh, cinema's dead." I don't think that at all. I just think we're in a lull that's going to lead to creativity and ingenuity and new future voices. But it definitely makes everyone's life harder. Trying to, as Robert said, overpay for everyone because you can't compete with these big streamers—it's hard, but as indie producers, we just put our boots on and get to work.

RS: It's tough. You might get a DP, a designer who's willing to take a cut in order to do that amazing tier-one thing they're inspired by. But I find that they have a tough time getting the swing gang and the grips and the electrics, because those are all people that are amazing and creatively adding to the film, but they also work in a more labor-intensive position. If they can do the same job and get paid a much higher rate and have better protocols, then they're going to go and do that. It is a challenge. It's not impossible, but we're in a challenging time for an independent producer.

JW: That is where the ingenuity comes

NEW MEMBERS

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



Toni Kamau

In 2013, Kamau attended a talk by Roger Ross Williams at the IDFA. He talked about the process of directing and producing *God Loves Uganda*, and its incredible impact on combating LGBTQ discrimination. It was the first time that Kamau had met a producer of color at a major festival. After hearing the talk and meeting other producers of color at Hotdocs, Sundance and Durban Film Festival, Kamau began to realize that as a young Kenyan female writer/producer of color, she wanted to produce and release stories of impact on a global stage.

What's on your producing bucket list?

Social justice documentaries are my first love. *Softie*, directed by Sam Soko, and *I Am Samuel*, directed by Pete Murimi, will always have a place in my heart. I would love to work on a historical heist documentary feature or series, though! They seem challenging, and fun to work on.

in. You hear about companies taking points and doling it out to positions like that—where suddenly a third grip is sharing in ownership of a film. Well, those people are going to be excited to work on your movie because now they're taking ownership in it. They have stock in it. This is the creative thinking that indie producers have to do, but that's cool. I think that's exciting.

RT: There's a couple different pieces for me, but it goes back to the question of "What is an indie producer?" and "What does that mean for everyone?" Everybody's at a different level of independent filmmaking and it's changing a little bit for the better, because it's creating more opportunities. Even streamers throwing astronomical amounts of money at these films is changing. They're restructuring, retooling and rethinking their approach. From my experience, they want the independent producer who can come in and make a movie for a smaller budget, like making five movies for \$20 million instead of one movie for \$20 million. That's where an independent producer can come in, and because of their background, be creative and figure out how to work with different teams of people. I've been very blessed—I have the loyalty of my crew because I'm consistently working and employing them. They're OK with sometimes taking that lesser cut because they keep working.

From film to film, there's leverage there. Being a Black woman, I create diversity in front of the camera and behind the camera and give opportunities that most people wouldn't normally have. I think the crew is loyal to you if you take care of them.

A lot of these networks in these studios are looking for independent producers for original programming and content because there's no new ideas or storytelling. Independent producers are the ones who bring that fuel. We're going to see it change for the better for us. We come from a different world than most people. That gives us the one-up opportunity to be great and shine through—to build more opportunities and more projects that will live forever.



Roxanne Taylor
on the set of
Fear with AD
Walter Perry

“BEING A BLACK WOMAN, I CREATE DIVERSITY IN FRONT OF THE CAMERA AND BEHIND THE CAMERA AND GIVE OPPORTUNITIES THAT MOST PEOPLE WOULDN'T NORMALLY HAVE. I THINK THE CREW IS LOYAL TO YOU IF YOU TAKE CARE OF THEM.” —ROXANNE TAYLOR

Instead of every generation trying to re-create the wheel and bring people up on the ladder to mentor, I am trying to create generational wealth. That might be an extreme, but that's exactly what I'm trying to do. Right now I own 15 IPs. If I can get another 15 in five or six years, then I'll have 30 and maybe I can go option another 15 from third parties that

would never have a chance to have their projects made. In five years, I will own a library of 60 films. Maybe I can go have Lionsgate acquire that library. There are so many worlds to independent filmmaking. If you figure out where you want to be and what you want out of it and stay on track, the opportunities can be much bigger than working for a studio. ■