



# Head, *Heart,* Guts

DAN LIN AND HIS FELLOW RIDEBACK WRANGLERS APPLY THOSE THREE CRITERIA TO EVERY PROJECT THEY CONSIDER. THEY JUST HAPPEN TO ALSO DESCRIBE THE PRODUCTION COMPANY'S FOUNDER HIMSELF.

WRITTEN BY STEVE CHAGOLLAN

PHOTOGRAPHED BY MONICA OROZCO



## It's difficult to fathom what a *producer* does unless you step into their shoes.

What's clear, though, is that the attention to detail is limitless, the obstacles never-ending. Problem-solving capabilities are a must, along with the ability to effectively deal with both talent and business with equal authority and sensitivity. The hours spent getting it all right cannot be measured.

These are not attributes most viewers can see in the finished product, and Dan Lin is the first to admit that. "I only knew things that I could see in front of the camera," he recalls about his academic years, before he experienced a light bulb moment as a junior at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, where he studied finance and marketing. At Wharton, Lin heard Chris Lee, senior VP of TriStar at the time—and later president of Columbia/TriStar, as well as an executive producer—speak at a student career fair.

"I had no idea what I wanted to do," recalls Lin, "He talked about what it was like to be a studio executive in film, and that completely opened my eyes. I had obviously watched movies and TV shows, but I had no idea that there were jobs (like) a producer. I just didn't understand. That talk really piqued my interest."

Cut to 2022. With more than a handful of blockbuster theatrical credits on his resume like the *Lego*, *It* and *Sherlock Holmes* franchises—as well as outliers like *The Two Popes*—that he helped shepherd into reality, Lin runs his own production outfit, Rideback, established in 2018. It's an outgrowth of Lin Pictures, formed a decade earlier when it was based at Warner Bros. Rideback's campus-like compound, called Rideback Ranch, also houses the Warner Animation Group, Animal Logic and Margot

Robbie's production arm, LuckyChap Entertainment, among other tenants.

Built from a former post office in the heart of Filipinotown, just west of downtown LA, the 35,000-square-foot facility stands as an oasis of creative enterprise far from the entertainment corridors of Burbank, Century City, Culver City and Santa Monica. It serves several purposes: film and TV studio, production think tank, workshop for rising talent, artistic salon, special events showcase and beacon of hope for the less fortunate.

Lin didn't plant himself in a neglected part of the city for advantageous real estate prices. He has invested in the surrounding neighborhood as part of a larger goal to foster unrepresented voices and offer creative guidance to the disenfranchised. "We wanted to be part of the community," he says, "but also we wanted to create community as well."

The property's Western motif is grounded in a cowboy code of honor. "Rideback' means you have a group of cowboys that you choose to ride with in life," explains Lin, the company's CEO and "head wrangler." "As a cowboy there'll be times when you fall off your horse. The code is to ride back, get that cowboy back on the saddle and keep riding. That's the ethos of our company, because we have people that we are living life with, personally and professionally, and we're taking big risks, big swings, trying to do different things to break out in the marketplace."

### LOW-EGO/HIGH ACHIEVER

Lin's boyish looks belie his considerable experience as a studio executive, creative producer and entrepreneurial wunderkind. (He's receiving the PGA's inaugural Vance Van Petten Entrepreneurial Spirit Award, named after the Guild's former national executive director, at the Produced By conference in June.) Lin's reputation is not indexed by volatility, micromanagement or invasive meddling. Grandstanding is not in his DNA, and if anything, he prefers to deflect attention away from himself to those in

whom he places his well-earned trust.

"Dan is unique in that he really isn't driven by ego at all," says Jonathan Eirich, Rideback's president of film. "So many times, that's the thing that becomes the devil on the shoulder and lures people into bad business decisions in this town. But for Dan, it's not about personal recognition or ego. It's about the success of making great things that can be out in the world, reach their intended audience and have their desired effect. When the process works and the company wins, that's all that matters."

Lin's name may not stick in the mind like, say, Lorenzo di Bonaventura, the studio exec/producer who took Lin under his wing as an intern, then later as a fast-rising player at Warner Bros. That they both hailed from Wharton and Harvard added to their bond. But it quickly became clear that Lin wouldn't remain a junior executive for long.

As Lin took on more responsibility at the storied studio, ultimately rising to senior vice president of production—overseeing projects for the likes of Martin Scorsese, Oliver Stone and Roland Emmerich—people in high places took notice.

"I was very fortunate and worked on (Scorsese's) *The Departed* from start to finish," he recalls. "I think a career changer for me was Martin Scorsese thanking me and recognizing me at every awards show (the film would end up winning Best Picture and Director at the Oscars). I didn't realize how much that would change my profile. I felt like I was a very internal executive before, and just by his external blessing of me, it completely changed my career."

### RISK AND REWARD

Instead of basking in the adrenaline rush and security of a dream studio job, Lin, only in his mid-30s, experienced what he called a "mini midlife crisis." Warners intended to sweeten the pot, but Lin had other designs. "I wanted to start my own company, and I wanted to do it under the Warner Bros. umbrella—to live and die by my own sword," is what I said. I'd been an executive for 10 years. I wanted to be closer

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# THE BEATLES GET BACK



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to the creative process. I felt like what I was doing was essentially producing. I felt I could show them how I could do it, but I wanted to do it in a different way.”

To Warners’ credit, the brass signed Lin, who had two years left on his original contract, to an exclusive five-year deal, keeping him in house instead of warning him that he’d never work in this town again. That association lasted from 2008, when he formed Lin Pictures, until just before the pandemic in the spring of 2020.

Lindsey Liberatore, Rideback’s executive VP of television, says she was drawn to Lin’s vision of a community of creators from different backgrounds and the emphasis on spirited collaboration. Lin felt the studios had become “too corporate,” and the lines of demarcation too rigid.

“I couldn’t pass up the chance to get involved with something more entrepreneurial than the traditional production company model,” says Liberatore. “Dan is equal parts businessman and producer. He’s constantly studying the world, whether that be business, tech, politics or culture. I believe this is half personal curiosity and half wanting to make sure our programming is ahead of societal shifts. He’s also very interested in new ways of doing things, so our workflow is continually being tweaked. To outsiders, our working style probably feels akin to a tech startup, and that’s intentional.”

#### KILLER CLOWN = KILLER B.O.

Lin might salt and pepper his conversations with terms like “brand filter” and “incubator,” but it’s the creative process that stokes his imagination. His most successful movies seem to inhabit their own worlds, whether it’s Stephen King’s bucolic small-town America where nothing is as it seems (*It*), the steampunk version of Sherman Holmes’ turn-of-the-century London, or the phantasmagoria of the Lego universe, which, as it turns out, exists purely in the mind of a child. He won’t tackle a well-worn genre or age-old IP unless he can give it a fresh spin.

The *It* films, which raised the specter

of the killer clown to its apotheosis, expanded horror’s appeal beyond its usual fan base. The year before the first film came out in 2017 marked what was called “the great clown panic of 2016,” with lurid sightings of clowns all over the country, usually in forests or near schools, inciting a mass case of “coulrophobia” (fear of clowns). *It* rode this hysteria to box office gold, but not just because it captured the zeitgeist. It also offered the appeal of a first-rate coming-of-age story, like Rob Reiner’s Stephen King adaptation *Stand by Me* (1986), which was also an inspiration for *It* director Andy Muschietti.

(It’s no coincidence that Reiner’s production company, Castle Rock Entertainment, formed at Warner Bros. with one of Lin’s previous bosses, Alan Horn, among others, is cited by Lin as a model company, along with Pixar.)

*It* featured masterful direction, pristine production values (a through line for all of Lin’s films), heartwarming performances by its adolescent cast, and an over-the-top stroke of acting genius by Bill Skarsgård as Pennywise the Dancing Clown, who triggers demons that each member of The Losers Club has buried in their psyche.

The project was long in the making, with Lin on board as a producer as early as 2009, and later announcing in 2014 that the massive King novel (over a thousand pages) would be divided into two parts. At the time, Cary Fukunaga was attached as the director, but disagreements with New Line, a Warner Bros. specialty division, caused him to drop out, while maintaining a writing credit on the film.

That *It* fell on Muschietti’s shoulders turned out to be a supreme stroke of kismet. Lin compares the filmmaker to the top practitioners of the genre. “He doesn’t say just because it’s a horror movie, he’s going to shoot it like a horror movie,” Lin says of Muschietti. “He shoots it like a dramatic movie, with the scary elements.



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MARKETPLACE.”

What I’ve found with the most successful horror directors—James Wan, Sam Raimi, Andy, even David Gordon Green—they take their craft very seriously.”

The film would end up as the highest-grossing horror movie of all time, earning approximately \$702 million worldwide, on a \$35 million budget, according to Box Office Mojo. Lin chalks it up to the film’s universal appeal, calling it “a story about friendship, about underdogs. I think that’s why everyone relates to it. Also, it’s not the kind of horror movie where at the end you feel badly about yourself or the people in the movie that went through the journey. It felt very redemptive and encouraging and positive.”

Lin and fellow producers Barbara Muschietti and Roy Lee wasted little time following up with the sequel, released two years later, with such stars as Jessica Chastain, James McAvoy and Bill Hader playing older versions of The Losers Club members. The younger actors also inhabit significant roles, yet look exactly the same.

“It was always a dream to make the movies back to back, but we couldn’t get that signoff,” says Lin. “As you can imagine, it’s not an easy green light because you’re making an R-rated horror film with kids in the lead. Ideally you shoot it back-to-back, but we did not do that. Luckily you didn’t notice that some of the actors are much taller, and we de-aged them through visual effects.”

Made with more than twice the original’s budget and weighing in at almost three hours, it was like *The Godfather: Part II* of horror movie sequels, and like that epic, did not receive the original’s level of praise. But its success is undeniable, topping \$473 million worldwide, only a disappointment compared to its predecessor.

#### GENRES REIMAGINED

Lin’s proclivity for reinvention of established genres was evident in *Gangster Squad* (2013), released by Warner Bros.—the company that made gangster movies its bread and butter in the ’30s and ’40s. The film plays fast and loose with the story of Mickey Cohen’s downfall in a neon-lit, postwar Los Angeles, with Sean Penn essaying the mobster with the same force as WB contract players Cagney, Bogart and Robinson did in their bad-guy heyday. But despite a





cast that included Josh Brolin, Ryan Gosling and Emma Stone, the film ended up a victim of the zeitgeist instead of riding it.

The film’s release was pushed back in the wake of the shootings in a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, a scenario similar to a scene in the film that takes place in Grauman’s Chinese Theatre, with assassins firing machine guns through the screen. Reshoots switched the setting to a restaurant in Chinatown, but the compromise to the film’s promotion cut into its commercial prospects.

“I wish that movie did better,” says Lin. “There were life factors and things going on in the world at the time, like gun violence, that really hurt the box office performance. I’m still very proud of that movie. But if you look at it, it’s all about how do we give people a shot to elevate the material. Both (directors) Guy Ritchie on *Sherlock Holmes* and Ruben Fleischer on *Gangster Squad*, these are not obvious choices. They were head-scratchers. It’s because we were looking for a nonobvious choice to direct those. We weren’t looking to do the classic Warner Bros. gangster movie with *Gangster Squad*; we were looking for a new spin on it.”

The *Sherlock Holmes* movies, directed by Guy Ritchie, with Robert Downey Jr. as the legendary detective and Jude Law as Dr. Watson, fared better. They also stand as a clear example of placing a contemporary sheen on a dusty property. Instead of the buttoned-up, flannel-clad sleuth with monocle and pipe, this *Sherlock Holmes* is informed by Ritchie’s testosterone-fueled criminal sagas, with our otherwise cerebral protagonist very much able to handle himself in hand-to-hand combat—even engaging in underground, *Fight Club*-style fisticuffs in his spare time.

Lionel Wigram floated the concept as a graphic novel when Lin was still at Warners. “His whole take was, is there a *Dark Knight*-like way to approach *Sherlock Holmes* and reinvent him in a more graphic novel type of way,” recalls Lin. “Then when Guy Ritchie came aboard, he brought on Robert Downey Jr. to star, and then Robert brought on Joel Silver and Susan Downey to produce with us. That’s how the filmmaking team started. So I generated it as an executive, then stayed on as a producer.”

The 2009 film and its sequel, *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011), would

earn more than a billion dollars at the worldwide box office.

Even more out-of-the-box was the pairing of Ritchie with the Disney property *Aladdin* (2019), which seemed akin to throwing a kidney pie into a child’s Easter basket. A live-action variation of the animated 1992 Disney musical of the same name, and produced by Lin and Rideback partner Eirich under the Disney distribution banner, this *Aladdin* featured an international cast more in line with the story’s Arabian setting, with Mena Massoud, a Canadian actor born in Cairo, in the title role, and Naomi Scott, an English actor of Indian descent, playing his love interest. Will Smith played the genie, voiced by Robin Williams in the original.

“It was Dan’s working relationship with Guy Ritchie from the *Sherlock Holmes* films that helped back the unorthodox decision of giving Guy a big Disney musical,” recalls Eirich. “Dan loves putting the big pieces together to make these projects happen, and then once the movies are going, he and I are talking multiple times a day, every day, whether that’s in the office or from the set. So while I’ll be embedded a bit deeper in the creative trenches at times, there is no key decision on the film that we as producers aren’t making together.”

Although the film earned mixed reviews, it proved critic-proof at the multiplexes, grossing north of a billion dollars worldwide, and another \$345 million in ancillary revenue. (Despite talk of a sequel, the prospect has been put on indefinite hold given Smith’s current status in the industry.)

In terms of tentpole franchises, the two pairs of *Lego* and *It* movies fall more in line with Lin’s Joseph Campbell-like quest themes. The producer describes the concept as the hero having “a clear call to action,” in which he or she “enters an exciting new world. And there’s a clear aspirational theme.” That aspirational theme is about “teaming together,” Lin explains, and being “stronger as a group than you are individually.” That more or less applies to his own company.

**STRONG SENSE OF SELF**

The so-called Losers Club of brainy nerds in *It* (2017) and *It Chapter Two* (2019), as well as underdog everyman Emmet in *The*

**NEW MEMBERS**

PRODUCED BY TRAINS THE SPOTLIGHT ON SOME OF THE GUILD’S NEWEST MEMBERS, AND OFFERS A GLIMPSE AT WHAT MAKES THEM TICK.



**DAVID GRANDISON JR.**

Grandison is not afraid of applying the latest technological advances to open people’s minds to the power of possibility. He’s taught science to inner-city middle school students as part of Teach for America, documenting the work of rainforest researchers in Costa Rica and using the video footage to implore his students to produce multimedia experiences that could teach younger, cognitively challenged students about deforestation. “One thing I learned was that my students naturally embraced multimedia storytelling and most of them preferred to learn through multimedia content.” The project helped Grandison discover his passion for filmmaking and helped him find his “true calling as a producer.”

**BUCKET LIST**

“I would love to work on an immersive science fiction project one day.”

**BEST ADVICE** “The best advice I have read was Walt Disney’s advice to stay curious. ‘We keep moving forward, opening new doors and doing new things, because we’re curious, and curiosity keeps leading us down new paths.’”



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## NEW MEMBERS

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### NADIA SARMOVA

Visual stories played an important part of Sarmova's childhood in Sofia, Bulgaria, and even more so after her family immigrated to the U.S., where films and TV shows helped her "escape the ridicule and ostracism" she faced at school for being "different." She also viewed such programming as "sources of reflection, insight and motivation" that helped her assimilate into a foreign culture. Sarmova says she's drawn to "unexposed stories and diverse, multicultural perspectives," with producing credits that include *Joseph* (2020), about a Jamaican doctor who travels to Ghana to study alternative forms of medicine. Devoted to social change through visual storytelling, she calls her brand of producing "impactainment."

**BEST ADVICE** "The ambience behind the camera will find a way to show up on camera. Therefore the experience of making any piece of content is just as important as the final product. I honestly don't remember who passed this nugget of wisdom on to me, but it has stayed with me and propels me to create production environments where crew and cast alike can truly thrive."

### BUCKET LIST

"A limited scripted drama series inspired by the life of C.S. Lewis; an uplifting, second-chance docuseries about homelessness; and a gritty, scripted drama exploring the grimy sewers and glittering palaces of international human trafficking."

*Lego Movie* (2014), in which the real villain is the death of imagination, embody these themes. It's not a stretch to draw parallels to Lin's own life. In a way, he's an insider with an outsider's perspective, having moved as a toddler from Taipei, Taiwan, to Canaan, Connecticut. His was one of two Asian families in what he describes as an "all-white community." His father, who worked for Kraft General Foods before starting his own company, encouraged both a sense of pride in their heritage and assimilation into their adopted country, just like many immigrant parents.

"I grew up with them instilling in me a strong sense of self, remembering and knowing your own mother tongue and culture," says Lin. "So we would go back to Taiwan almost every year during summer vacation. But at the same time understanding American culture and exposing myself to that and learning that way. So in many ways I consider myself what I call a 'third culture' kid. I wasn't straight American, I wasn't straight Taiwanese, but I was a combination of the two."

He says his parents were great at exposing him to American TV and motion pictures. "I remember watching (Richard) Donner's *Superman* (1978) and like, wow, I was in a totally different world. That's how I always envisioned movies—that you're transported to a different world."

### LEGOS' META UNIVERSE

Those worlds in *The Lego Movie* and *The Lego Batman Movie* (2017) are seemingly built from plastic toy bricks. Although the look is inspired by stop-motion animation (it was pitched to the Warners brass as a "stop-motion hybrid"), everything was achieved through computer graphics—aided and abetted by Animal Logic, the Warner Animation Group, the Lego System AS, and others—with the kind of cinematic lighting, rich mise-en-scène and superhero score flourishes one might expect from a DC, Marvel or *Star Wars* property, all of which are referenced

in some shape or form. The films constituted a massive undertaking, each averaging three years in production, and spanning three countries, with teams working in Australia, Canada and Los Angeles simultaneously. As Lin points out, "at some time of day, *The Lego Movie* was always being made."

The effort was well worth it. The Lego films might be the most witty, arch and ingenious product-placement movies in the history of cinema, while the humor and the metacultural references fly so fast and furiously, they can be missed in the blink of an eye. The first film mirrors characters ranging from Walter Mitty to Obi-Wan Kenobe, while *Lego Batman* resurrects every monster/baddie dating back to King Kong, including the Wicked Witch of the West, the skeleton warriors from *Jason and the Argonauts*, the great white shark from *Jaws* and *Harry Potter's* Voldemort. For the most serious cineastes, there's a play on the funhouse mirror scene in Orson Welles' *The Lady from Shanghai*.

"It's one thing to make a big family movie for all the kids to go see, but you want the evening show to be full as well," says Lin. "Luckily, we were able to do that, and I really credit (director-writers) Phil Lord and Christopher Miller. Their sense of humor, their design, their vision of how they wanted to make the movie, was even grander than the one that I initially brought to them."

*The Lego Movie* team also proved you could make commercial entertainment that was multilayered, multigenerational, a critical darling, and kill it at the box office. The two films combined earned north of \$780 million in worldwide theatrical receipts.

Finding helmers proved difficult, however; even Lord and Miller were reluctant to come aboard at first. "There's a long list of directors that passed," says Lin. "Ultimately you only need one." Or in this case, a tandem.

"We were worried the film would seem like a toy commercial rather than a film, so we were wary of making it," said the two filmmakers, speaking as one, in an email exchange with



*Produced By.* “But Dan eased us into the pool—he had the same goals as we did for the film, and asked us first to just write a treatment, then to write a script, and by the time we were midway through the script, we knew we had fallen in love with it. We felt it would only work with a particular stop-motion style that Dan was very supportive of, despite the studio’s unease.”

Lin would always go the extra mile, revealing an ironclad determination beneath his seemingly placid demeanor. “He will do whatever it takes to make the movie as good as it can be,” say Lord and Miller. “When we wanted to build a basement set to shoot the live-action ending of the movie but didn’t have the budget to do it properly, Dan found a way. He presold the basement set to Legoland as an attraction, which got us enough money to get it done.”

**NOTHING LEFT TO CHANCE**

Lin’s powers of persuasion cannot be underestimated. As he gathered his Rideback posse, he exposed a vetting process that might be considered beyond the call of duty at best, and extreme at worst. He spent months courting Eirich, from friendly exchanges over coffee as a sort of mentor

figure to more formal overtures.

“Even then,” recalls Eirich, “he had me join a full company staff meeting and meet every exec at the company individually before I was given an official offer. I had a few job offers come up during that time. However, Dan’s diligence to both recruit me, but also to really put me through the wringer to make sure this would be a good fit, was something I respected greatly. It made me confident this was going to be an ideal situation for us both.”

Ironically, for all the Western paraphernalia that adorns Rideback’s headquarters—mini stagecoach, weathervane tower, mounted antlers, vintage dinner bell, saddles atop barstools in the “saloon”—Lin isn’t interested in making a traditional Western unless he can update it in some way that would appeal to new audiences. The closest proximity would be *Walker* on the CW, on which he acts as executive producer alongside partner Lindsey Liberatore, showrunner Anna Fricke, star Jared Padalecki and pilot director Jessica Yu.

It’s a contemporary action soap opera dressed in western duds that’s a spinoff of *Walker, Texas Ranger*. *Yellowstone*, on the Paramount Network, proved that TV audiences are enthralled by the wide-open

range, steely patriarchs, sibling rivalries and strong female characters.

The project was conceived with CBS Studios. Anna Fricke is also a participant in Rideback Campfire, for which she acts as a mentor. “It’s a collaborative process where we work with writers who have not created their own show, but they’re mentored by big writers who act in a nonwriting, producing capacity. Essentially, they’re mentored by big showrunners.” Also in the works is yet another spinoff, *Walker Independence*, a prequel that will have a female lead played by Katherine McNamara. The series also has secured a commitment from the CW.

When pressed to differentiate his role as an executive producer on a feature film versus a Produced By credit, which makes you eligible for the producer’s mark (p.g.a.), Lin uses the upcoming *Dear David*, a supernatural thriller for Lionsgate based on a Twitter thread by Adam Ellis, as an example. “I secured the rights with my team, and we hired the writer,” he explains. “It ended up being too small for us to be day-to-day on, and we let Lionsgate and other producers play the day-to-day role of making that film. Once we got the rights, hired the writer and got the draft, we then handed it off to a different team to make a low-budget



President of Film Jonathan Eirich and Lin strategize in the Rideback Ranch courtyard.



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RIDEBACK SPREADS  
THE WEALTH

When Dan Lin planted his production company in the heart of Los Angeles’ Filipinotown with the idea of fostering a community of underrepresented creatives both inside and outside Rideback Ranch’s walls, he didn’t just talk the talk.

“We took a walk and tried to understand the needs of the neighborhood,” says Lin. Just across the street is the Union Avenue Elementary School, which Lin describes as “the largest elementary school for first-time immigrants in Los Angeles.” When Lin offered donations for computers and special-ed programs, the school principal instead asked Lin for his “superpower”—storytelling.

The resulting mentorship program, called Young Storytellers—started during COVID—pairs 10 Rideback employees with 10 fifth-grade students, who are charged with writing a six-page screenplay over the course of each semester. Rideback then enlists its actor friends to perform this short one-act in front of classmates, friends and family.

“The giving-back philosophy extends to the Rideback TV Incubator program that was initiated with film and TV studio MRC (*Ozark*, *Baby Driver*), which is now in its third year.

“[RTI is a] similar model that we do across the board. We hire writers who show great talent, who have staffed on TV shows before but never created their own show,” explains Lin. “We pair them with big showrunners who mentor them, and we work on those projects and take them out to market.” Five writers participate in a six-month residency, for which they are handsomely paid, to create “market-ready material” (pilot script, format and pitch), that Rideback/MRC would ultimately produce.

One recent example is a drama being developed from a *New York Times* bestselling book, which Rideback and MRC are keeping under wraps. The book’s underrepresented writer is being paired with Susan Stanton, who has written episodes of HBO’s *Succession* for each of its three seasons. Stanton was then paired with a well-known actress, also yet to be announced. It’s part of a process that Lin refers to as “stacking the deck” to form a “Justice League of diverse talent” for each of Rideback’s projects.

Rideback has a similar partnership with CBS Studios and Thinking Hat founder Craig Turk called Rideback Campfire, which focuses on broadcast television.

Lin also joined the board of the nearby Good Shepherd Center for Homeless Women and Children, a shelter for women who are victims of domestic violence. Lin helped bring in a restaurant to the facility that’s open to the public, HiFi Kitchen, which specializes in Filipino fare.

“We’re basically producing,” says Lin, “but we’re not producing film; we’re trying to produce a community.”

horror movie. So we weren’t involved in every step of the way. Whereas when I’m a producer, I’m involved in every step of the process.”

TELEVISION’S NEW FRONTIER

Television is where Rideback’s biggest expansion lies, with Lin and his TV team poised to extend their sphere of influence into viewers’ living rooms, which is where most Americans ingest their entertainment anyway. Liberatore says their mission is to “challenge accepted conventions—both on the page and in the development and production process. It’s our tech mindset at work to some degree. We’re constantly asking ourselves: Is there a better way?”

She adds that in evaluating material, Rideback looks for three attributes: “Does the story create a conversation that no one is having? Does it move us? Is it disruptive in some way? Internally, our shorthand for this is ‘head, heart and guts.’ This is our north star for whether a project is Rideback-ready.”

She cites *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, a live-action adaptation of the Nickelodeon animated series for Netflix, as one of Rideback’s upcoming titles she’s most excited about. “It’s a story with Asian and Indigenous heroes, plus we’re shooting it on the Volume, so it’s the most cutting-edge tech for filmmakers available,” she says. “It’s the perfect marriage of challenging how things are normally done and telling a story that reflects ‘head, heart and guts.’”

Also on tap for Rideback is *Easter Sunday*, a family comedy starring Filipino American comedian Jo Koy. The film, being released August 5, is in post for Universal, where Lin now has a first-look deal for theatrical features. The pact includes the next Lego movie, on which Lin and Rideback are in development. Also in post is Disney’s *Haunted Mansion*, based on the Disney ride and directed by Justin Simien, due out in March 2023.

If Lin’s expectations are high, he has the patience of a saint. Who else would offer their time and resources to underprivileged kids in the neighborhood, where Lin equates enterprise with community? But when he talks about fostering underrepresented voices, he’s using mainstream entertainment as a vehicle. He also sees it as the surest path to success.

“We’re not a charity. We are a business, and our strategy is to make diversity mainstream,” he asserts. “We’ve done that with *Aladdin*. It was the most diverse Disney movie that became north of a billion-and-a-half blockbuster. We’re doing it now with *Avatar: Last Airbender*—making diversity mainstream and showing that it is good business.” ■