

ONE ON ONE

PRODUCERS

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

IN THE FIRST OF NEW A SERIES, *PRODUCED BY* ASKED TWO PAIRS OF PRODUCERS TO CHAT WITH EACH OTHER ABOUT PROCESS, BUILDING BLOCKS, CHALLENGES AND FACILITATING THE DIRECTOR'S VISION.

To illustrate how elastic biopics can be, consider *Spencer*—a fictional meditation on the late Princess Diana that takes place over 48 hours beginning on Christmas Eve—and *tick, tick...BOOM!*, inspired by a three-person musical that chronicles the early struggles of *Rent* author Jonathan Larson as he tries to make it in New York as a composer and playwright. Paul Webster, a producer on the former, and Julie Oh, a key force on the latter, helped breathe new life into the biopic form, avoiding the cradle-to-the-grave formula that usually results in skimming the surface of a subject's life, not to mention the attendant hagiography that can come across like visual CliffsNotes. In their conversation, Webster and Oh discuss their mutually respectful approaches to the genre and how they navigated the crippling effect of COVID. (Webster, whose film was shot mostly in Germany, took pains to give equal credit to his fellow producers Jonas Dornbach and Juan de Dios Larraín.) Each started out by revealing their project's origins.



BIOPICS Reimagined

JULIE OH AND PAUL WEBSTER ON PROBING LIVES WITH FOCUS AND INTIMACY

WEBSTER: First I'm going to say one thing: I loved your movie. I thought it was terrific, one of my favorite films last year, and really moving. I watched it again to prep for this conversation, and it's actually much stronger on second viewing. It's always a good sign that repeated viewings reward in different ways.

This all began when (director) Pablo Larraín called me and said, "I can't keep Princess Diana out of my mind. I think I'd like to do a film about her. What do you think?" Being a producer, I did the mental gymnastics: Princess Diana was a huge brand, Pablo Larraín is an esteemed director and a serious filmmaker, and wouldn't that be an interesting intersection of ideas and brand awareness?

I was surprised Pablo wanted to make this movie, having done a film about a female 20th-century icon (Jackie Kennedy) not too long before that. But he seemed very passionate. I believe directors are a key component in the filmmaking process, and my job is to help realize their vision. We decided we would approach Steve Knight to write the script, and off we went. That was about three years ago.

OH: I also feel like so much of a producer's job is that you are constantly pitching everywhere, to everyone, an idea. What was the conversation like with Steven Knight when you first brought up the project to him?

WEBSTER: He doesn't watch a lot of movies, but he had seen *Jackie*, which he loved. Steve is driven by directors. Once he said, "OK, I think I can do something with that," it came together very easily. When Pablo was next in London, we had breakfast together, the three of us: Steven, Pablo and I. Basically, it was me being sort of the umpire in a little tennis game.

Pablo's insistence was always to find a moment in this person's life and use that to illuminate their entire life experience. They came up with the Christmas idea, which gave us the structure for the story and the idea that this person was kind of imprisoned.

As you know, Julie, as a producer, you are always pitching and you're always thinking of different ways to succinctly sum up a complicated idea. We decided that it was a jailbreak movie, which is a producer's gold dust because you can simply explain everything in a few words. As often is the case with Steve, he basically wrote one draft of the script, there were a couple of additions that Pablo asked for, and that was it. The two most difficult things were, 1) waiting for Pablo and for Steven to become available for the script to be delivered, and Pablo to be ready to make it and, 2) the actual making of it.

OH: I also feel like development is so important. When you feel like you're working with a writer and director that has been hit by that lightning, you can just tell because they say, "Leave me alone. I'm going to just go and do this and come back and show you something." What's so brilliant about

your film is that it is a jailbreak movie, but then you're turning it on its head—because anyone else going to that estate would want to stay there and be a part of all the pomp and circumstance and proximity. You're meeting Diana when she's experiencing the exact opposite.

WEBSTER: Yes. As Pablo put it very succinctly, it's a reverse fairy tale.

I find the long developments are usually much more complex when it comes to actually making the film. The ones that come together very easily in development, that sets your course for the whole process.

OH: The development of *tick, tick...BOOM!* was stretched out for a number of years. But as soon as we came upon the idea of how we were going to do it, it happened very quickly. The inception for the idea really started in 2014 when I saw a performance of *tick, tick...BOOM!* at Encores at New York City Center.

I didn't know anything about *tick, tick...BOOM!* other than I was a fan of Jonathan Larson, and just was so struck by his story, which was an adaptation of his (1990) rock monologue (called *30/90* and *Boho Days* at various points), which is shown in the film.

After (Larson) passed away, his family commissioned (playwright) David Auburn to create a three-person version in 2001. It felt so relevant to today, even though it had been written over 20 years prior. That's why I started trying to figure out how to get the rights.

The family wanted to know what our plan was going to be: "How are you going to develop it? Who is going to direct it? Who is going to play



Jonathan?" At the time, I was a very junior studio executive and didn't have the right answers. It took over two years—I had then become producer at Imagine—for me to realize that the man who had played Jon in the version I saw, Lin-Manuel Miranda, had been waiting to direct a movie his entire life. It felt cosmically right that it was going to be this one.

Even before I approached Lin, I approached the family and asked them what they thought. I got their blessing. Miranda responded to me in like two hours. I was on a plane to London a couple of weeks later to have breakfast while he was shooting *Mary Poppins Returns*. From that point onward, it was off to the races to develop the movie.

WEBSTER: It's really interesting to contrast your experience where you are dealing with the rights holders, the family. We didn't deal with the royal family at all. That gave us a lot of fear and trepidation going in, because normally when you adapt anything based on real-life people, even if it's fictional, you need their endorsement. Because if you get a movie out there and you get slagged

off by the novelist or the person it's based on, that's kind of poison.

But in this case, we were dealing with an institution and people who are public property in a way very few people are. Diana, of course, is no longer with us. But we were very sensitive about the impact of the film, the story, and how it would impact her sons, William and Harry. In fact, we initially minimized the presence of William and Harry in the story. Harry was barely in the very first draft, and we knew that wasn't working. We all agreed he's got to be part of it, and we actually built up their stories. That was taking a risk, but that risk is mitigated very pragmatically. It's very unusual for the royal family to comment on anything that's said about them or any portrayal. It never happens. So we kind of felt protected in that way.

OH: It sounds like the decision was made quite early to move forward on the movie, to do it as respectfully as you possibly could, but not to make the overture (to the family), which is typically what someone would do right off the bat.

REAL VS. IMAGINED

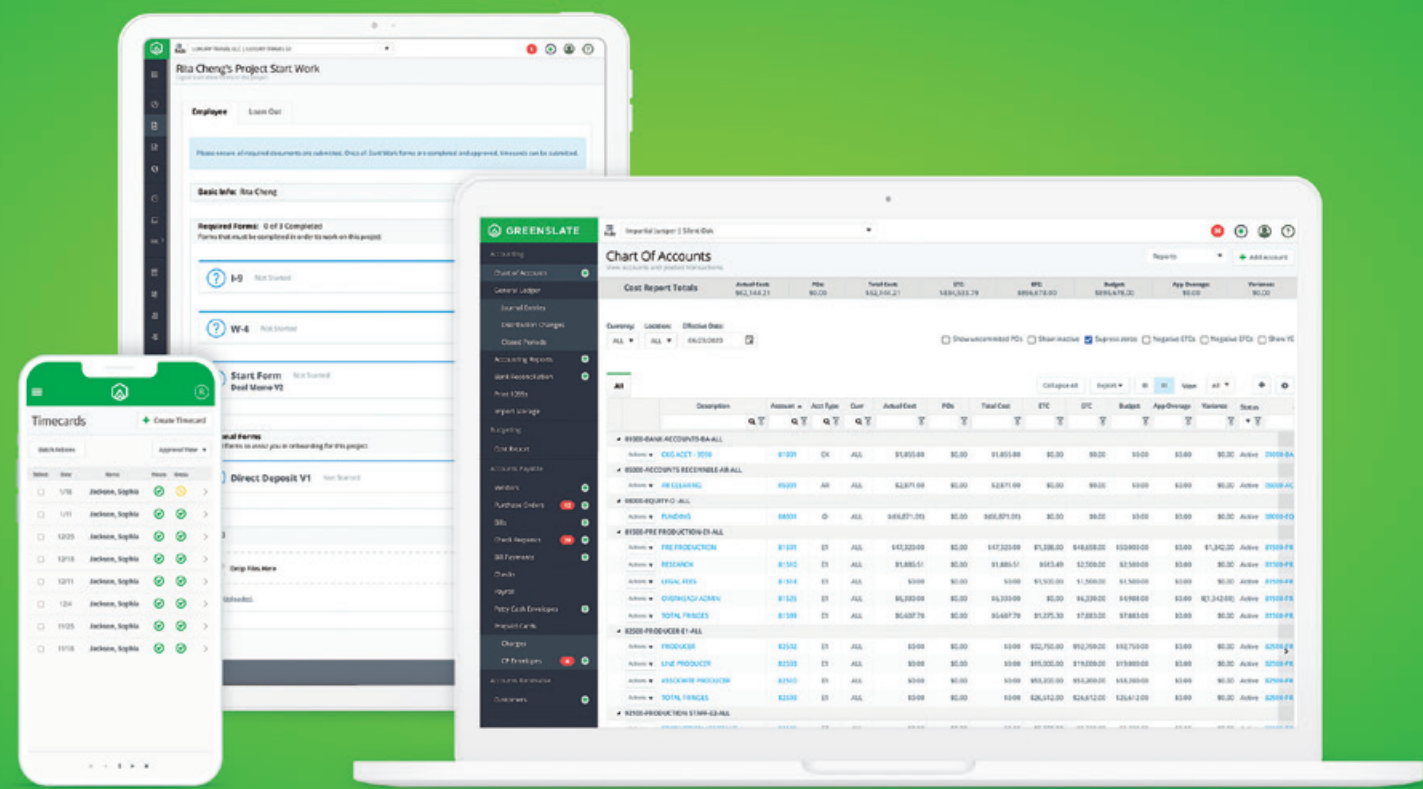
WEBSTER: That's true. I have a question about your portrayal of Jonathan Larson: How much is invented and how much is based on verifiable actuality?

OH: Even before our screenwriter, Steven Levenson, came on board, we brought on Jennifer Tepper, who's a (performing arts) historian, consultant and a theater producer.

The first thing we did as a group is Lin, Steven and Jennifer went down to the Library of Congress where the family has preserved every piece of paper that Jonathan ever touched. We went through old drafts, through demos. They interviewed (Larson's) best friend Victoria Leacock, and Matt O'Grady, who's the character of Michael (in *tick, tick...*), and asked, "Was he a good friend in this case? Was he a bad friend? What was important to him? What was complicated about him? What mattered?" We never wanted to put forth this person as St. Jonathan, because he wasn't. That was also something that Lin never wanted to do in terms of the movie.

And this a man who is Lin's

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hero, whom he credits for giving him permission to write musicals. What was really beautiful was that the family was on board with that, because they wanted him portrayed as the complicated, living, breathing human that he was. With all the research, we were able to start to piece together some things that are true, some things that aren’t.

WEBSTER: We had an interesting challenge with Diana. We had no way of knowing what went on over the purported weekend that gave us the structure of our story. We did research, mainly by Steven, who spoke to people who worked at Sandringham House during that time. The chef, Darren McCready, was very important to us. But Diana was a very public figure, and we’ve seen her many, many times on camera before. So there was an anchor. Kristen Stewart doesn’t physically resemble Diana much on the face of it. But she learned enough character traits, movements, that she was able, with her own process, to absolutely merge herself into that character, and I think gives a very convincing version of Diana.

OH: I would agree. I think she is absolutely fantastic.

WEBSTER: Thank you. You know, I love the contrast between these two stories. Jonathan wasn’t a particularly public figure. Obviously, *Rent* was hugely successful, but it was a posthumous success. Diana was arguably one of the most public figures of the 20th century. But we arrive, I feel, in the same place.

OH: What I also really love about both films is that they’re both intimate. You get to know the person and spend time with them in a way that is a little bit unconventional. It’s not about the moment where she is on a

red carpet or she’s attending an event or she’s at a big gala. For Jonathan, it’s about the moments when he’s in the rehearsal room, alone in his apartment—moments of intimacy that I think reveal who they are as people. But the biggest question was always for us, who’s going to play Jonathan Larson? That was probably a similar question for you with Diana.

WEBSTER: We had some very cursory conversations with a couple of people Pablo met, which didn’t come to anything. Then we were looking at the British-Australian acting pool as our basis. Then Pablo just called one day and said, “What do you think about Kristen Stewart?” I said, “Well, I think she’s a brilliant actress. But she’s from LA, from the Valley. There’s no cultural connection between her and this character. Does that matter to you?” He said, “No, I think she can do it.” I think there was just one conversation with Kristen. Pablo spoke to her, and I believe she was more or less committed before there was a script. She’s absolutely fearless, and I think that’s the quality you’re looking for from an actress.

Our movie is a quintessentially British movie starring an American playing a Brit. Yours is a quintessentially New York movie starring a Brit playing an American. I am always amazed by an actor’s ability to transform themselves. It’s about a willing suspension of disbelief, and I think these guys just make it so easy for us as the audience.

OH: Because they embody these characters. Or in our case, real people who lived on this earth to a point that you feel like they are channeling them in some realm that is beyond us. Andrew Garfield came on board very early. We got our first draft, and all of us being musical theater creatures, the first thing we said was, “We need to hear it out loud.” So how do we get in

a room and do a weeklong workshop as though we would be workshoping a musical that we would be taking to Broadway? After that, it forced the question of who we were bringing into the fold to play the role of Jon.

WEBSTER: Yeah.

OH: This is a movie where there were never any plan Bs. I had no plan B if Lin-Manuel wasn’t going to direct it. He was the only person that could, and thank God he said yes. I asked Lin who he was thinking about to play Jon, and he said Andrew Garfield. I said, “Is there anyone else you’re thinking of?” He said, “Absolutely not. I think he can do it.” At the time, Andrew was on stage in *Angels in America*, which is a master class in endurance and acting. We set the workshop for—this is horribly cruel, but we had to because of scheduling—for the day after his last performance of *Angels in America*.

WEBSTER: Oh wow!

OH: So he finished his run, which he never missed a performance of, and in the morning, he got up and came to our workshop where we handed him a binder and said, “Can you sing?”

WEBSTER: [Laughing] Yes, I was going to ask that. How was his singing? He sings well in the film but was there a process you had to undertake to get there?

OH: The way Lin had described it to me is that Andrew had this beautiful instrument his entire life that he had never played. We had no idea what was going to happen when he finally sat down and devoted himself to it in that first workshop. We said, “Don’t worry. You don’t have to sing.” Lin did the singing through all the Jonathan parts on the first day, and Andrew did the speaking

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ANIMATION for All Ages

JEREMY DAWSON AND YVETT MERINO TALK ABOUT THE FORM'S METHODOICAL, TIME-CONSUMING PROCESS, AND HOW IT'S BROKEN OUT OF ITS SANITIZED, FAMILY-FARE BOX.

As producers of animated features, Jeremy Dawson and Yvett Merino represent a study in contrasts. For Dawson, animation is an exception to the norm, having worked mostly in live action as a producer, graphic artist and VFX supervisor. He's best known for his collaborations with the auteur Wes Anderson on such films as *Moonrise Kingdom* and *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, as well as the stop-motion offerings *Fantastic Mr. Fox* and *Isle of Dogs*. The latter two tout voices from Anderson's usual repertory of players, including Bill Murray and Jason Schwartzman. Merino, on the other hand, is a longtime employee of Hollywood's most revered animation factory, Disney, and has worked her way up the ladder from temp to tentpole producer. For *Encanto*, her debut p.g.a. mark credit, she won a PGA Award and an Oscar for best animated feature, alongside Jared Bush, Byron Howard and Clark Spencer. Anderson's animated movies—about a thieving fox trying to go straight and a dog flu pandemic that banishes all canines to a bleak, garbage-infested island—are not exactly geared for tots. *Encanto*, set in Columbia, is a magical-realist ode to individual empowerment that doubles as a full-on musical in the most lavish Disney tradition.

DAWSON: Do you want to talk a little bit about how *Encanto* came to be?

MERINO: Sure. A little background on myself: I've been in animation for about 25 years. I started doing administrative stuff, then transitioned to the technology side a few years into that. Then I started out in

production, working as production supervisor on *Tangled* and *Wreck-It Ralph*, and then moved up to production manager on *Moana* and *Big Hero 6*. After *Moana* I started working on *Encanto* as a producer. Here at Disney, our films come from our directors, and as the film starts to take shape (in development) they get the producer on.

So Byron (Howard) and Jared (Bush), our two directors, worked on it for about five, five and a half years, and I was on it about three and a half years.

DAWSON: Wow. And it was all done inside the pipeline there?

MERINO: We are a vertically integrated studio, so everything from initial pitch all the way through final rendering is done in-house.

What about you? You've had such a grand career...

DAWSON: I guess mine was sort of backwards because I didn't really start in animation. When I started working on *Mr. Fox* with Wes, it was the first animated feature that either of us had worked on, so we were flying blind, which allowed us to kind of do things the wrong way, but maybe that gave us a leg up in other ways.

I had a background in photography and visual effects, and I'd done some bits of animation—stop-motion, specifically—with Wes on *The Life Aquatic*. He had this idea for *Mr. Fox*. He came to me and really didn't know what to do, so we brought in another producer, Allison Abbate (*The Iron Giant*, *Corpse Bride*), and others who knew about stop-motion. But we did our own reckless way of trying to make the thing. Stop-motion is a very old process, probably as old as pictures. The amazing part is you can make everything, but you also have to have it there in front of the camera and show up within the frame. You get into strange

situations with scale and all this stuff.

MERINO: Yeah.

DAWSON: So that was my path. Then I rejoined Wes for another stop-motion feature, *Isle of Dogs*, four years later, which brought a lot of the same team back together again. In that case, it was a lot less painful, because we knew what to expect.

MERINO: I can imagine trying to bump your way through the process and trying to figure it out and get it done is probably very, very, painful. But I guess coming back for a second time you had some idea, right?

DAWSON: Exactly. I think one thing about Disney, which obviously has been making animation for so long, there are all the departments and the pipeline and the systems for it.

MERINO: We're fortunate because we have that history. One of the things I love about working here is that people are constantly trying to improve the process and make sure it's a meaningful and deeply emotional story. Our amazing team of artists are constantly trying to push the envelope of what they can do and try to do it better.

DAWSON: One thing that I found is a big difference between live action and animation is in live action, I'm so used to the experience of being on set and seeing almost everything happen. So when you see the movie, you're remembering every little bit: like that was the take where he dropped the glass, or that was the day it was like 3,000 degrees out. So the thing becomes an assemblage of all these experiences you've had.

With animation, especially stop-motion, you have these people go behind a dark curtain, then they come out six weeks later with a shot.

I think as part of a filmmaking process



there is something about animation—which is both the fact that you can see there’re no rules in what you’re seeing, and there’re no rules regarding the physics and the time and the scale. You can make anything you dream up because you’re building every single thing. I think I have a bigger appetite for something wacky to happen, which is sort of freeing. It’s also kind of exhausting.

MERINO: I totally agree. It goes on here in story rooms: Someone has an idea, and they’re like, “Oh, what if we do this?” or “What if this happens?” There’s some-one sketching it out, and literally you’re watching it go through the process.

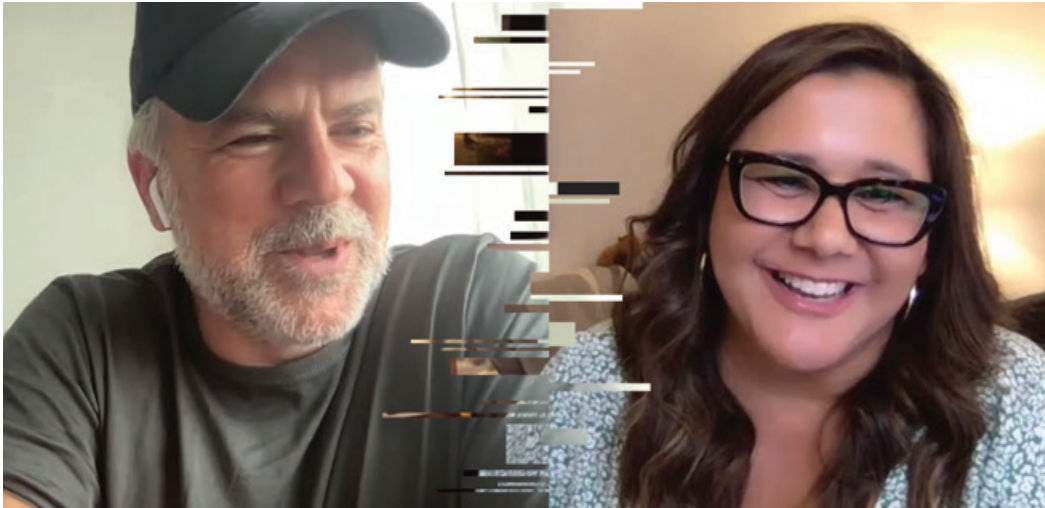
So when I watch one of the films that I’ve worked on, on every single shot I’m remembering all of the stories behind it. Because everything is so planned and thought out that by the time it gets to the artist, they know the idea and the intent behind the scene. Then they’re able to put their take on it. You’re just watching it grow and grow and grow—all the way until you get into post with score and the music and the sound effects. It’s fun and exciting and also challenging because it’s limitless, and you’re trying to get it done and make sure that it all flows together.

So what does your crew look like on a stop-motion project?

DAWSON: The biggest is model makers and construction people. As far as crew, you start small and probably max out at around 200 or so. Animators, we started with very few and we ended up with maybe 30, including assistants. Some were junior or assistant animators. We probably had 10 lead animators and an animation director.

MERINO: In stop-motion—this may sound like a very ignorant question—they’re the ones actually posing it, taking a picture, posing it, taking a picture?

DAWSON: Yeah. Those guys are doing it, and they’re basically quite self-sufficient. Some shots are much faster and some shots with a lot of characters are much



more complicated. We’d probably budget like 10 seconds a week—something like that—for an animator.

What about for you guys? You have animators in the dozens or hundreds or what?

MERINO: Well, like you said, it starts small and grows. We have our designers, modelers and our riggers, who have to allow the characters to move. Once we get into production, we’ll hit a peak of about 450 people.

DAWSON: OK.

MERINO: Our two biggest departments are lighting and animation. Lighting will have about 60 to 70 people. We had about 100 animators for *Encanto*, maybe 110.

DAWSON: So like three times the animators we had. Our lighting, we had four, something like that.

MERINO: Oh, wow.

DAWSON: But they’re pretty good. We were shooting on little mini stages, so we basically had these curtains dividing up the soundstage, and we probably had around 40 shooting units. Ours were each based on about a year of prep and then a year of animation.

MERINO: Our production pipeline is

probably about a year from when we start layout, setting up the cameras and stuff like that. We want to plan for like a year and a half, but because the story changes and different things develop, we do it in about 12 to 13 months. Our animation runs about six or seven months.

There’s always that moment, right, where you’re wondering, “Well, maybe this is the one that’s not going to finish. And what are we going to do then?”

DAWSON: It’s like when you’re on the treadmill and you’re running and you’re looking at the time and it’s been like eight minutes, and you just put a towel over it and then when you look again, you’ve made it.

CASTING

DAWSON: In terms of casting, we probably had more household names than you guys had. One thing I found interesting was I really thought about voices. F. Murray Abraham had this crazy voice. Or Tilda Swinton or even George Clooney in *Mr. Fox*, who had the perfect pal-like attitude for it.

MERINO: We have an amazing casting department. I think everyone assumes, “Oh yeah, just put them in there.” But really, you have to listen to the voice and look at the character, and ask yourself, “Does that really work?” Even with Stephanie Beatrice (who played lead character Mirabel Madrigal),

NEW MEMBERS

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



MANJARI MAKIJANY

A native of Mumbai, India, where she hails from a family of actors and filmmakers, Makijany set her mind on directing from an early age, eventually achieving visibility on the fest circuit with such shorts as *The Last Marble*, *The Corner Table* and *I See You*, which she also produced. She was subsequently selected for the AFI’s Directing Workshop for Women. She credits her husband and producing partner, Emmanuel Pappas, for nurturing her “natural instinct to produce.” She made her feature production debut with *Skater Girl* (2021), about a rural teen in India with dreams to compete as a skateboarder, for Netflix. “I wasn’t going to wait for a big producer to believe in me,” she says, “I wanted to go off and create my first production as a testament to what I was capable of achieving.”

BEST ADVICE “Be slow to hire and quick to fire. I believe it’s important to assemble a harmonious group of talented creatives and technicians who can elevate each other’s work. But when you have a bad apple in a crew, it can quickly spread or disrupt the harmony and shift the focus from what’s being created to managing people’s egos.”

■

BUCKET LIST

“Creating an engaging and visually compelling animated project that can help children’s development and education while inspiring and entertaining the four quadrants would definitely be #1 on my bucket list as a producer.”

whom we had known from *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, she does that character (in the series) of Rosa Diaz in this very low speaking voice. Her normal speaking voice is high-pitched and has so much energy, and it’s bouncy. So she just fit into Mirabel from the very start, but it’s not something that we ever expected.

DAWSON: For us it’s mostly people doing their own voice. Wes tends to keep it quite natural, and mostly does the casting himself. In *Isle of Dogs*, we had a bunch of Japanese actors and we had a good friend in Japan who helped us cast.

I just was curious, do you guys have the characters designed and then do the voices? Or are you designing the characters with the voice already determined?

MERINO: Typically in development, we’ll start thinking of who the characters are and what they look like. So we’ll start designing early before we even start talking casting. Then once we cast, we definitely record them and pick up little movements or something that they do, and the animators will watch that. Do you guys do that?

DAWSON: Yeah, yeah. On *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, we acted the whole thing out and ran around on a farm and recorded it. So that was like location sound. Also, Wes acts out a lot of the parts as a reference for the animator.

MERINO: Are your animators in the reviews with him, or do you guys just look at dailies separately and send notes?

DAWSON: We have an animation director in the reviews,

and then some of the animators will definitely join in the reviews. We’d do that every morning.

I’m curious about one thing with *Encanto*: For instance, with Mirabel’s character, did you use any emotion capture, or was it all hand-animated?

MERINO: It’s all hand-animated. We have our animation supervisors, and they really oversee characters. But no, we cast out our shots and they just go in there and animate them all. But they’ll use references from the recording sessions.

DAWSON: The animation was excellent. That’s why I was wondering, because it didn’t have that motion-capture feel. There was a realism to it.

MERINO: Thank you for that. And I think a lot of credit obviously goes to our amazing animation team, but also our consultants who talk to dancers and animators. They really focused on body movement.

DAWSON: Well, that makes sense. Everybody always says all moviemaking is storytelling, but animation is even more so. The visuals are so intermingled that the storyboard artists are writers in a certain way, right?

Did you start out thinking of the story as like a family story? Or who were you thinking it was being made for in terms of age or the audience?

MERINO: We try to make these films for everyone. I think early on Myron and Jared and Lin-Manuel (Miranda, who wrote the songs), they really just wanted to tell a story about family, right?

DAWSON: Right.

MERINO: They'd gone to Colombia, this research trip, and they came back and really wanted to tell a story about family, about the complexities of it. It just grew from there.

Even with your films—*Isle of Dogs* and *Mr. Fox*—people look at them and they're like, "Oh, it's animation." I think they automatically want to put it on a shelf somewhere. But there's so much work that goes into the story.

DAWSON: Yeah.

MERINO: With *Encanto* it's about displacement. It's about a family that has to leave their home, and losing their home, and building a home, and all this generational trauma. It's kind of deep. People were like, "Oh yeah, I saw it." But I was like, "Well, sit down and actually *watch* it. You might actually enjoy it."

DAWSON: We sort of got the same thing. Like with *Mr. Fox*, was it going to end up as Searchlight or Fox Animation or Fox? (It was distributed by Fox proper.) Ultimately it ended up hurting us in terms of how we did in its first release. But luckily it lived on, and that movie gets referenced more than any of the others I've worked on. But I think that people are not sure if it's a movie for kids or not. It can be problematic from a marketing point of view because a lot of people will probably say, "Look, I don't watch animation. I don't like animation."

MERINO: Yes.

DAWSON: But I think animation is kind of a filter for reality. It also provides a different way to experience stories. You've got things like *Flee* (2021, about a political refugee's escape from Afghanistan) or *Persepolis* (2007, about a young girl's coming of age during the Iranian revolution), and all these movies that deal with heavier subject matter in a way that has poetry and emotion without being as difficult.

MERINO: Yeah, there's almost like a filter to separate you a little bit, but also to allow you to watch it. I wish people would just take animated features off the kid shelf. Because they truly are for everybody.

DAWSON: Yeah.

MERINO: I'm so excited to see where the industry is going with animation. You mentioned *Flee* and films that are so deep and so meaningful. It allowed people to experience adult themes in a different way.

DAWSON: Were you using any live-action films as reference points?

MERINO: Yeah, *The Grand Budapest Hotel* was one we talked a lot about.

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NEW MEMBERS

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MAXX TSAI

Taiwanese-born Tsai credits director Ang Lee, for whom he worked as the Taiwanese production office coordinator on *Life of Pi* (2012), with inspiring him to pursue a producing career. He cites Lee's early "Father Knows Best" trilogy (*Pushing Hands*, *The Wedding Banquet*, *Eat Drink Man Woman*) with changing his perspective on movies. "Although (Lee) is telling stories that describe traditional values, modern relationships and family conflicts about Chinese," says Tsai, "he can make it accessible and enjoyable for people around the world. He made me realize cinema knows no borders." Most recently, Tsai was a coproducer on *Memoria* (2021), starring Tilda Swinton, which won the Grand Jury Prize at Cannes.

BUCKET LIST

"I am a great admirer of Terrence Malick. Working with him is on the very top of my producing bucket list!"

BEST ADVICE "Many years ago, a producer told me that to be a competent producer, (you must) 'understand the job responsibilities for all the positions/credits.' This advice has been so profoundly rewarding that I have been able to make films with people of different nationalities, languages, colors and cultural backgrounds anywhere in the world, and could always work in a respectful, friendly and pleasing environment."



THE Hollywood REPORTER

SALUTES THE PRODUCERS GUILD OF AMERICA

AND

THE 13TH ANNUAL PRODUCED BY CONFERENCE

BIOPICS Reimagined

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scenes. By the end of it, you could just feel him dying to sing.

And by the end of it, he sang a couple of songs—enough that (Larson’s sister) Julie, after our first reading, turned to me and said, “I feel like he is channeling my brother.” I said, “We’re five days in and you’re already feeling that way.” We set Andrew up with vocal lessons, and every time we did a workshop, he would come back and he would be singing a little more confidently. By the time we all convened in New York in January 2020, and he got his first Jonathan Larson perm, it was as though Jonathan was in the room. It was really an amazing thing to witness.

WEBSTER: Wow, that’s very moving. I guess the similarity with our film was instead of singing, it was the British accent—a very, very particular, aristocratic English accent. We all thought, “Can she do it?” She got a fine dialect coach very early on, William Conacher, who ironically also does *The Crown*. So he’s a world expert on Princess Diana and accents.

It was very challenging for Kristen because she knew she absolutely had to nail it. We knew that all the practical details, the etiquette, were very, very important to get right, so we had two royal advisors on set.

At the heart of it was Kristen’s ability to do this accent. We checked in with William, and sure enough, on day 1 she had it down. There was no doubt about it.

OH: I feel like locations are so important, especially for actors as they are getting into character. How did that kind of thinking go into where you decided to shoot the film?

WEBSTER: We were all ready to film the movie in Britain in houses

which are similar to Sandringham. But along came COVID, and because of Kristen’s and Pablo’s availability, we had only a limited window in which we could shoot, which was basically starting in January last year.

GERMANY DOUBLES FOR THE UK

WEBSTER: Because COVID was out of control in the UK and in Germany, things were under much greater restrictions. We were already working with a German coproducer, Jonas Dornbach of Komplizen Film.

So we ran budgets on shooting the movie in Germany or England. The key thing was that the houses exist in Germany which mirror those in the UK. The architecture is the same, generally speaking. Sandringham doesn’t look anything like the amalgam of the two houses where we shot in Germany, but the sense of them architecturally, the authenticity, is there at the core of it.

So we shifted the whole production to Germany and shot all but one week there. Then we shot key location exteriors in England in and around the area where Sandringham is, in Norfolk.

So it came together. The German crews were fantastic. There was a sense of camaraderie that we’re all in this together.

In Schlosshotel Kronberg, a castle built in the late 1800s where most of the interiors were shot, we lived in the hotel. It was closed because of COVID but we lived there so people would come out of their rooms, walk downstairs, and be on set. There was a kind of immersive quality to the experience, which I think really helped the final version of the film.

OH: It sounds like method producing.

WEBSTER: Yeah, completely

by accident [laughing].

But tell me about your experience and tell me about New York. What was on a soundstage and what was real?

OH: Well, our biggest challenge was trying to present a New York City that no longer exists. How do you do that with locations like the Moondance Diner in SoHo and Jon’s apartments, which are no longer actual places where you can go and film? And at the same time, Times Square is completely changed.

WEBSTER: Yes, absolutely.

OH: We started shooting on March 3, 2020, and on our first day, we shot all of our hospital scenes. Ironically, as part of the props, all the actors had face masks on because they were going into an AIDS/HIV ward. Then we were disrupted due to the pandemic.

But we had a week and a half where we got to shoot at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park, which hasn’t really changed since the ’90s. We got to shoot at the Strand Bookstore, which I don’t think we would have been able to do post-pandemic.

On our 10th day, we were shut down. March 12 was our last day. All of our crew that wasn’t local got flown out the next day. It was a lot of wait and see and hunker down and weather the storm and be safe. I remember walking through Times Square, and it would be completely empty except for me—one or two people on their daily sanity walk. Andrew Garfield stayed in New York until summer because he was hoping that we would go back into production.

It wasn’t until June or July when we said, “Go back, go to England for a couple of months.” We spent those six months having to come up with a safety plan. I made color-coded grids about

the risk that each scene would have.

WEBSTER: Wow, that’s extraordinary. And did you do any stage work at all? Or was it all location?

OH: It was a lot of stage work. The Moondance Diner was already being built. Jonathan’s apartment was already being built. But the greatest silver lining for the entire experience was that our plan for New York Theater Workshop was to build it in that abandoned factory in Bushwick because New York Theater Workshop should never be available. It has a vibrant theater program and you can never go in there and shoot. But theater wasn’t happening in fall 2020, and the actual location was available. So we didn’t have to try to recreate those brick walls or that space. We got to spend a week and a half there.

WEBSTER: And the big shot where we pull out and go up and out of the Moondance, and we see SoHo—how was that shot realized?

OH: In the 10 days of production before we shut down, we had shot at Duarte Square, which is right across the street. All the footage of Jonathan on his bicycle cycling past we had done with a green screen across the street where the diner would be.

Then we shot plates, then superimposed the diner into that section and created SoHo all around because that doesn’t really exist anymore.

WEBSTER: We had no green screen in *Spencer* at all. We shot the film on Super 16. And there’s very little in the way of visual effects in the movie—removal of a few details and stuff. But we were aided by the fact

we were dealing with period houses with basically period furniture.

FIRST-TIME DIRECTOR EQUATION

WEBSTER: Can we talk about Lin, please? I’m not mistaken in saying that’s his first film he’s directed, right?

OH: Yes.

WEBSTER: So assured in direction. I mean, you feel it. If you have experience watching a lot of films, you sense the directorial hand on everything. Did he grow in this experience?

OH: The thing that I appreciate the most about Lin is, with everything that he has accomplished, one of the first things he said to me is, “Please treat me like a first-time filmmaker.” As a producer, that tells you that you are now working with a collaborator.

He wanted to know, “What am I not asking? What do I need to do? Who do I need to talk to? How do I do my research so that when I’m on set and I’m in charge, I know exactly what I’m doing?” Because we had such a prolonged development period of several years, he took different jobs so he could shadow directors. Being on the set of *Mary Poppins Returns* was, I feel, a master class in directing for him from Rob Marshall. *In the Heights* went into production in the summer of 2019 and he shadowed (director) Jon Chu.

Lin, I think, has been a storyteller his entire life. By the time we got to the first day of shooting, we had done several workshops where he was in the director’s chair. And I think he realized that he actually had the answers to every single question.

Because not only had he grown up in New York during this time, but his and Jonathan Larson’s life had

so many parallels. So when you talk about sitting at a keyboard, erasing your writing—he’s done that. He can speak from personal experience what it’s like to press the backspace key in frustration in that way.

WEBSTER: I’ve worked with quite a few first-time directors, and directors who’ve come from other mediums. One of the things that for me is absolutely key—along with understanding the story and being able to work with actors—is the technical side of filmmaking. You’ve got to understand lenses and light at the very minimum.

It’s always that challenge when you’re with a first-timer, because they’re not going to know. You have to trust. I think it was extraordinary work that Lin did. It’s so assured. There’s a theatricality to the piece. But because you’re grounded in real New York, real people, it doesn’t feel theatrical at all, even at its most theatrical, which is astonishing.

OH: Well, I think as soon as we started talking about the movie—and it sounds like Pablo is the same way—Lin had a vision. You can tell when a director is already cutting a movie in their head.

WEBSTER: Pablo did everything he said he was going to do, and that’s what you want. That’s why I’m not a director. I can make suggestions to a director, but, in a way, I want them to come back and say, “No, you’re wrong. We should do it this way.” My ideas are usually only going to be catalytic.

Well, it’s lovely to be here and spend time with you, Julie. This has been great.

OH: Likewise. Thank you for loving the movie and for this conversation. ■



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ANIMATION for All Ages Continued from page 62

DAWSON: Oh really? The colors?

MERINO: The colors and the overall feel of it. Very, very early on, it was one that we looked at and watched and talked about a lot.

DAWSON: That's interesting. Because I think definitely in terms of *Mr. Fox*, a lot of the influences from the stop-motion side were the classic Christmas specials and the things that we saw as kids, like *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* (1964).

But when we get to *Isle of Dogs*, it was like things got more cinematic, so there are certain ones from '70s animation like *Watership Down* (1978) where there was a dark side. But also because of the Japanese side to it, there's a lot of (Akira) Kurosawa references in there and different things we sort of just picked up along the way.

That's one of the fun things about animation—you can take a reference and put in an animation filter and it becomes something new.

MERINO: Charise Castro Smith, who was our co-director and one of our writers, wrote that whole scene about leaving home and losing Manuel (the family patriarch, who is killed by renegade soldiers). We knew once that was locked in, it was like, "OK, that's a big part of the film." We played with it, on where it lands: Is it going to be at the end of the film? At the beginning?

It was a big discussion. We were thinking, "Is it too much?" Because you're in storyboards, and then as you start making it, it becomes more and more real.

We did play with it, as in "How much are we going to show? How much do we need to show?" Of course, we want people to stay in the film. We don't want them to pull out and think, "Oh my gosh, they're going to kill him, and this is how they're doing it."

DAWSON: Right.

MERINO: It explains how (Manuel's widow and family matriarch) Abuela changed and it kind of threads throughout the story. But it is one of those things where you're like, "This is a serious moment in the film," and kids in life have serious moments also.

BIGGEST CHALLENGE

DAWSON: There were so many. The thing with stop-motion is it's not just like you can draw it and it exists; you have to physically build it.

MERINO: Yeah.

DAWSON: The biggest challenge we had on *Mr. Fox* starting off was how to make the faces. And then the fur. Because you've got a drawing that says here's what the guy's supposed to look like. But you put fuzziness on it, and you lose all the character and all the ability. So that was the kind of thing we spent a lot of time on, and it was just trial and error. That's the kind of thing with stop-motion that you don't think of when you're watching.

MERINO: I've never really thought about it, but because we build our characters, even the ones with fur, always the expression in mind, right? We're able to manipulate it in the computer, and the emotions come through in the film. But when you're building all these characters and you maybe put a layer of texture on top of it...

DAWSON: It's like wearing a thick sweater so you can't see the outline of the body anymore.

MERINO: Yeah, we've lost the silhouette.

DAWSON: I think just the biggest challenge of all was scheduling programs and software. Our scheduling

system is like an entire room full of boards everywhere.

When one thing goes wrong with an animator, he's holding up everybody else. So that whole traffic jam of scheduling assets, physical assets—we had like one person whose entire job was figuring these out and moving these slips of paper around this room all day long.

MERINO: That's a whole set of logistics that I never even thought of.

DAWSON: We made multiples (of each main character). And as time goes by, you're like "We need another one."

MERINO: For *Encanto*, one of the things we committed to early on was the number of characters. It was important to the story that we were going to have this family of 12, and we wanted to make sure that each character earned their place in the film and that they had depth. We would screen the dailies, and people would be like, "I don't really think we need him or her." Because they weren't doing anything. Then we'd go back again and say, "OK, how can we make them a deeper character?" Because it's very easy when things get going and you're like, "Well, maybe if we cut down characters, then the animators are only animating three characters in a shot, not five."

DAWSON: Right.

MERINO: But we were all committed from very early on that we wanted to keep these characters, because it made it more real.

The biggest and most unexpected challenge was the pandemic. When the rest of the world said, "We'll go home for a couple of weeks," we had story meetings that went on and on, and it became, "Oh shoot—we're going to make this at home now." We ended up doing every single frame from home. ■