

Navigating a **Maelstrom** of Change

**OUTGOING PRESIDENTS GAIL BERMAN AND
LUCY FISHER TALK COVID, #METOO, GOING GREEN
AND THE POWER OF THE COLLECTIVE MINDSET.**

INTERVIEW BY STEVE CHAGOLLAN

When Gail Berman and Lucy Fisher were elected presidents of the Producers Guild of America in June of 2018—the first two women to serve in that capacity in the organization’s history—Hollywood was still reeling from the Harvey Weinstein scandal of the previous fall, the #MeToo movement had become widespread, and streamers like Netflix and Amazon had turned Hollywood’s traditional business model upside down.

As if these tectonic shifts weren’t enough, the COVID-19 lockdown was already three months old as the two began their second term in the summer of 2020, when the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder forced Hollywood, and the country, to face a racial reckoning. Diversity—a long-stated goal of the guilds and studios—went from empty mantra to committed policy.

“There was a lot going on and we had a lot of challenges on our watch,” says Berman with understatement. “The industry had a lot of challenges. Society had a lot of challenges.”

What was clear from the beginning, though, was that Berman and Fisher were proven leaders. After all, they had been plucked from the top of the Hollywood food chain—perennial names in the trades’ annual power lists, with Berman already having earned the presidential seal at Regency

Television, the Fox Broadcasting Company’s entertainment division and Paramount Pictures.

Fisher—who was the PGA’s 2006 recipient of the David O. Selznick Achievement Award in Theatrical Motion Pictures, alongside her husband and producing partner, Douglas Wick—had served as vice chairman of Columbia TriStar, executive VP of worldwide production at Warner Brothers, head of production at Zoetrope and president of production at 20th Century Fox.

This is not to mention their own production shingles as they took on the PGA’s top post: Berman’s The Jackal Group and Fisher’s Red Wagon Entertainment.

The list of successful series and movies engendered under their watch is too numerous to mention here. And yet they hardly crossed paths before both serving on the PGA’s Independent Production Safety Initiative committee shortly before

occupying the Guild’s equivalent of the Oval Office.

When we spoke over the phone in early April, they were still basking in the afterglow of the PGA Awards three weeks prior—a star-studded affair that was sold out in record time after two years of remote ceremonies left members craving human interaction and mutual celebration.



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The following was edited for clarity and brevity.

PRODUCED BY: Hollywood is a vast industry, but it’s also kind of a small town, so I find it baffling that you two weren’t better acquainted prior to serving as presidents of the PGA.

BERMAN: It happens to be true. We knew *of* each other obviously, but being co-presidents made us get to know each other pretty quickly.

I like to refer to this as a shotgun marriage. One of the great parts about it, and hopefully Lucy feels the same way, was my opportunity to get to know Lucy Fisher. That’s been a remarkable part of this four-year journey for me.

FISHER: I’m blushing and saying the same. This is a job that one person really can’t do, besides the fact that we became very close friends almost immediately.

One of the nicest things about the Producers Guild is it’s a little bit of a village water well where people can talk to other people. There’s no question that talking to your peers makes things easier and less lonely. A producer’s job—as the head of anything, a show, a movie, whatever it is—can be lonely.

The Guild is designed so people can have encounters that can help make their lives more productive and fruitful and enjoyable.

PB: I’m wondering if there was a division of duties. Were there certain strengths that one of you had that the other deferred to?

FISHER: I would say not—by experience level and by our past history. Gail is an extraordinary force in the television business and has been forever. Now she’s in the movie business as well. When I took the job, I had never produced television shows. So the PGA did a bit of a pivot and the separation between movies and television became smaller and smaller.

BERMAN: Obviously as the industry pivots, the Guild must do the same. I think there was an emphasis for a long time on the feature business, and that may have taken center stage for a while. But the dramatic changes in the business over the past several years have to be reflected in where the Guild is going as well. Some of that played into my strengths. Certainly Lucy is good enough of an executive to look at the big holistic picture. She doesn’t get mired in micromanagement.

FISHER: I’d also like to say on the television front that the PGA for a long time has not differentiated between movies and television the way that other organizations have.

We decided that was becoming an arbitrary division. Some people would say if a movie premieres on television and not in the theater, it wasn’t a movie—even though it was two hours and looks, smells and tastes like a movie. The PGA did not differentiate that way.

The wind was shifting, and we didn’t want to be followers—we wanted to be leaders. So we started to tear down that wall because most of our members already had, or would soon, work in both mediums.

We made it an overt effort to expand the backgrounds of our board members so that we did not represent primarily as feature people.

PB: Isn’t it strange to think that even as little as a half a decade ago, theatrical features were considered one class of creativity and TV was slightly below that?

BERMAN: It is kind of crazy. Somebody could have a background in one or the other and feel like they couldn’t be comfortable crossing those lines. It seems like it could never be that way now.

PB: Ms. Berman, you were an innovator in the digital space with Berman Braun back in 2007. Could you foresee then how powerful a force streamers like Netflix and



With PGA National Executive Director Susan Sprung at the 33rd Annual PGA Awards

Amazon would become in disrupting Hollywood's distribution model?

BERMAN: I don't think I was that clever. I knew digital was something that we needed to pay attention to. At that time, Netflix was still delivering DVDs to your home mailbox. But it was clear that change was on the horizon, and we could—Berman Braun did—make tremendous headway in the early days of websites. We had many of them, and we learned a lot about where the world was headed. It was moving so quickly that it sort of went right through that phase. But it was clear that nothing was ever going to be the same.

PB: The obvious elephant in the room is a pandemic that continues to ebb and flow, despite all of us wishing it would go

away. Did you ever in your wildest dreams imagine something like this would cripple Hollywood for the better part of two years?

BERMAN: I certainly could never, and didn't, anticipate anything like this. I certainly was thrown off by it in my own personal work. Then obviously we had to deal with it as it related to our Guild membership. We had to come up with safety procedures for our members.

A lot of our membership works in independent film, and they didn't have access to some of the same research that the studios were doing. We had to get that going. Inside the Guild, we needed to try to assess and understand how to get our members back to work. Some people found themselves experiencing hard times. We needed to get an emergency fund together.

FISHER: The truth of it is, we were positively terrified, if I'm allowed to say that. We each have our own companies as well, so we had to take care of our families, we had to take care of our companies, and then we had the PGA. The weight of 8,000 people suddenly out of work pressed on us as a huge responsibility. We make most of our money through dues and through the PGA Awards.

Because so many members were hurting, we immediately put a hiatus on having to pay dues, so people who were struggling wouldn't have that burden on top of everything else.

BERMAN: We had just moved into our brand new offices.

FISHER: Which were two or three times the size of the old ones.

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BERMAN: We moved in in January, so we were there about six, eight weeks maybe? Then everything had to close, so we had a larger expense than we had prior to moving. We had to furlough some people. We had to let some people go. But we also had to figure out how to keep the organization going.

FISHER: With the help of (PGA National Executive Director) Susan Sprung, who’s pretty brilliant, we played the horrible game of: ‘If we don’t have any income, how long can we last?’ And we found out that we could last nine months. Which took a lot of hardship in terms of cuts and stuff like that.

Producers basically only get paid when a project goes into production. So there we were without the income. Some people have big overall deals, but a very small percentage of our membership had that. So it was very rough.

But I would like to say that we are now

in sounder financial shape than the Guild has ever been.

BERMAN: And one of the great things that did come out of it was we’re a national organization, and it was very difficult for some people to participate who were shooting in Vancouver or Atlanta. But Zoom came along and people could participate from wherever they were in the world, and that was kind of great. That will never go back to the way it was.

FISHER: The membership stepped up in a way that was so moving and spectacular. Leaders rose to help each of these problems and devoted huge amounts of time, energy, intelligence, foresight, communication skills—everything that they could bring to keep it going and to build on it. We have been blessed by having these members who preceded us from every avenue of the entertainment business

rolling up their sleeves and saying, “How can we help?”

PB: You were talking about Zoom being a kind of savior in those early pandemic days. But Zoom also became a source of burnout for a lot of people. I would imagine by the second time you were conducting your PGA awards remotely, you might have been over it.

BERMAN: It wasn’t the ideal, but at least we could honor the traditions of the Guild. We didn’t give out honorary awards, but we did give out awards for excellence in people’s work, and that felt like the right thing to do. In fact, a lot of good came out of that, which was we had never streamed our awards before.

When we did have an in-person show again, we kept the streaming alive, so a lot of people could tune in who weren’t able to attend. We had a sold-out event. So the good news is the technology again prevailed and we’re now using it going forward.

PB: One more pandemic question: In terms of safety measures that were implemented during that time, which ones are you keeping into perpetuity?

BERMAN: I will say the various different zones to keep people from being everywhere on a set. I felt it made things more efficient.

I do think that wearing masks when you’re in a close environment—when you’re helping people with makeup or hair or dressing them—is not a bad idea, and a pretty wise thing to do going forward. But we also have to be aware that our unions are going to set some examples and rules going forward. We want to make sure that we’re leading the way as we have been in terms of safety protocols, and doing it in concert with the various unions that we work with.

FISHER: I agree with everything Gail said. But there’s also the sense of community that’s harder to achieve when everybody’s going off in their own

directions and not able to congregate. I look forward to a time when we can be together in person and the serendipity that happens when you can bump into somebody without a mask and sit down and have a conversation.

Just to segue back a little bit to the PGA Awards: They were scheduled for February and we pushed them back about six weeks. We had incredibly strict protocols. The response to gathering in person was so extreme—the people we felt would never show up because they hadn't gone anywhere, really did.

And the response—we sold out faster than we ever had. People wrote us letters beforehand—the nominees and the honorees—saying, 'We can't wait to be with each other.' We just came out of it a few weeks ago, so we're still having a little afterglow.

PB: Tell me about the Independent Productions Safety Initiative, which I understand was implemented under your predecessors' watch.

BERMAN: It was a training program that was put in place to help our members deal with sexual harassment and safety issues on their sets. As producers, we are in a unique position to set the tone and standards on our sets. The PGA and its leadership put together a program funded by CBS to help qualifying independent productions and provide them with free anti-harassment training and legal advice.

If you were in independent film or television or a digital production company with 20 or more individuals, you were eligible for free training in this area. You could get a lawyer on the phone, ask questions, and have safety and harassment briefings for your cast and crew prior to starting your productions.

That was the initiative that took place as we were getting started. Lori McCreary and Gary Lucchesi were the presidents as that stuff broke. It was a great idea. Susan (Sprung) put the program together and it is alive and well.



With Brad Pitt at the 31st Annual PGA Awards

FISHER: If your production is with a major studio or network or streamer, they provide legal and HR help. But if you are an independent production, you are completely on your own to try to deal with this. People didn't have road maps of how to do it, or how to conduct the training. The fact that it was free, and anybody could take advantage of it, was a really big deal. I think bullying is also in there now too.

That was what we dealt with first. Then we had Black Lives Matter. So even before the pandemic, there were a lot of social issues where we realized we wanted the PGA to be a front liner on it, and we hadn't been.

PB: I think it's way more dramatic than a lot of people think, because bullying just seemed to be part and parcel of Hollywood culture, whether it was on sets or in studio suites. That's just no longer acceptable, and it just seems like it happened so quickly. Suddenly it's not OK.

BERMAN: Correct.

PB: Can you pinpoint some of the most lasting lessons you learned as co-presidents of the PGA?

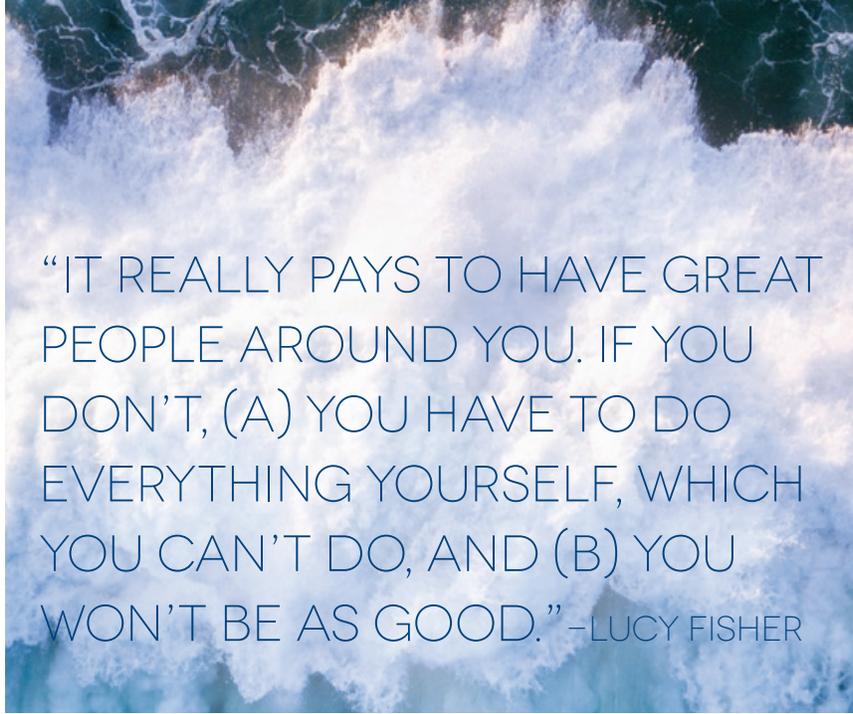
BERMAN: We still have a ways to go. The lesson I learn all the time is that leadership

counts. And that it's really important that if you're going to take a position like this, or be voted into a position like this, and agree to do it, that you take it seriously and understand that people are looking to you for leadership. As producers, we're leaders to begin with. You know, we know how to assess situations and make a plan and execute the plan.

My takeaway is it's a very hard job. And it takes much more time than we ever anticipated, based on all of the things we just talked about. But if you take the job on, you've got to step up.

FISHER: It really pays to have great people around you. If you don't, (a) you have to do everything yourself, which you can't do, and (b) you won't be as good. Because the whole being greater than the sum is something that I learn over and over again with every production, every organization. How to make people feel included is a very big part of it, because with everybody rowing the same boat in the same direction, you're going to go a lot faster.

BERMAN: Susan Sprung and (Associate National Executive Director) Michelle Byrd, who lead the organization, are two examples of excellent leaders that the membership can really depend on. It's been a tough



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couple years for everyone, and these folks really have risen to the occasion.

PB: You two have played such huge roles as studio executives and independent producers, with dream resumes that almost couldn’t be made up. How do you impart some of that knowledge to PGA members?

BERMAN: We have all kinds of workshops dealing with exactly this stuff. All year long we have programming. We have a Produced By Conference that we do in June where we bring together a thousand people. We have this huge mentorship program pairing more experienced people with newer people. We have PGA Create, which launched last fall, a program for emerging and mid-career producers from underrepresented backgrounds. We just do as much as we can in whatever spare time we have, which isn’t that much. But as an organization, it’s the mainstay of our stock in trade to try to do exactly that. A lot of producers were studio executives at some point or another, so we’re not alone in that.

PB: Obviously, climate change is a scientific fact and we’re experiencing it every year with raging fires and long, hot summers that drift into winter. And there’s a lot of waste that’s killing the oceans. So I love the fact that you have put this foremost in your mission statement with

the PGA Green initiative.

BERMAN: It’s important to note that it’s been around since 2008, prior to our tenure. So the Green initiative, which was started by (PGA members) Mari Jo Winkler, Lydia Dean Pilcher and Katie Carpenter, was way ahead of its time. And we have our Green Production Guide—you can go on our website and find out how to handle lots of situations on sets, etc., so this is an area that this Guild has led in for many, many years.

I think it’s an amazing thing that these women were prescient enough in 2008 to know that something had to be done.

PB: Will this be enforceable at some point or is it always going to be voluntary?

BERMAN: We can lead by putting this forward as a very, very important part of our mission. I don’t know that you ever get full participation or can force participation, but we can make sure that our members know that we take this very seriously and that we have a guide to help them take it very seriously.

FISHER: And we partnered with the studios early on with our guide.

BERMAN: And they’ve been supportive.

PB: What is the biggest misconception

about a producer’s role and how do you disabuse people of this notion?

FISHER: That’s a tricky one. I think the biggest misconception is that producers don’t do anything. We try to explain that we do *everything*.

PB: At the PGA Awards, George Lucas said something I wasn’t sure how to interpret: He said executive producers don’t count; that they raise the money, make the deals, hire the people, then sit back and watch television. How much truth is there in that?

FISHER: It really goes case by case. In television it’s the highest title you can have. Part of the answer is the PGA Mark. It codifies the definition of what a real producer does, so that you can apply those benchmarks. The studios all said, “What’s in it for us? It’s your problem.” They didn’t disagree that the titles were given out like candies instead of money to everybody’s brother-in-law or somebody that they didn’t want to pay.

Every few years we go through it again: “Are we doing it well enough? Should we change the definition? How do we protect (the credit)? How are we making sure that everybody who deserves it gets it? And how do we make sure the people who don’t deserve it can’t game the system?”

Our great pride is that not only does our film vetting go to the Producers Guild Awards, it goes to the Academy Awards and the BAFTAs. So it’s becoming the gold standard for the entire industry—the actual real definition. People really, really want the PGA Mark because it says, “You did the work.”

I think that has done more for recognizing the actual work of the profession than anything we can say. We’re not a union, for better or for worse. But we can move with a greater speed than some organizations. It’s the same skill set as making a product of entertainment: What are we lacking in our business that we can do better at? There’s a lot of things. So we keep trying. ■