

ONE ON ONE

# PRODUCERS IN THEIR OWN WORDS

IN THE SECOND OF A SERIES THAT PAIRS PRODUCERS TO DISCUSS THEIR MODUS OPERANDI, EMILE GLADSTONE (*THE INVITATION*) AND IAN COOPER (*NOPE*) TALK HORROR, AND MAX BORENSTEIN (*WINNING TIME: THE RISE OF THE LAKERS DYNASTY*) AND ERICA LEE (*BRUISED*) TALK SPORTS DRAMAS.

## HORROR WITH A SOCIOLOGICAL SUBTEXT

Producers Ian Cooper and Emile Gladstone are in the horror business, but they approach it from different angles. Cooper, with a fine arts background, is Jordan Peele's partner at Monkeypaw Productions, the company behind the recently released *Nope*, a mashup of alien invasion movie, contemporary Western and meditation on moviemaking. Gladstone hails from the talent agency world, where he was a partner at ICM as co-head of its motion picture literary department.

When he and Cooper sat down via Zoom to talk shop for *Produced By*, Gladstone was in post on *The Invitation* (August 26), a modern-day vampire tale born in the #MeToo movement. Compared to *Nope*, *The Invitation* might be considered a scrappy indie film, having shot in Budapest, where it benefited from tax incentives that shaved \$6 million off its \$21 million budget. *Nope*, photographed by Christopher Nolan's DP Hoyte van Hoytema, is composed of a series of stunning and unsettling set pieces, one of which will end up as a Universal Studio Tour attraction—pointing to the enormity of the Peele brand.



Lacking Monkeypaw's multipronged apparatus, Gladstone—whose previous credit was the well-received supernatural thriller *The Curse of La Llorona* (2019)—must piece his movies together from scratch with no safety net, a fact of life for most in his profession. Interestingly, both Cooper's and Gladstone's movies use race and class as a subtext to underscore the tensions between the haves and have nots.

**GLADSTONE:** Nice to meet you, buddy. I'm a huge fan of your movies.

**COOPER:** It's such an honor, Emile. You're still in post, right?

**GLADSTONE:** Yeah, it's the last day of the final mix. We're still approving the effect shots. I literally just left a spotting call to jump onto this call. It's a race to the finish, as sometimes they are. A good release date is worth its weight in gold, and Sony feels great about 8/26. So despite wanting and needing more time, it's just not an option, so we're working overtime to make sure we deliver.

**COOPER:** You're singing my exact tune right now, Emile. We had the same kind of situation on our movie, so I totally know what that means. But tell me a little bit about how this picture came to be.

**GLADSTONE:** The origin of this project was born in the #MeToo movement. I was thinking about romance and subverting it. For me, horror is about subverting joyful things. *Jaws* is my favorite movie, so I wanted to do for weddings what *Jaws* did for the beach.

**COOPER:** Right.

**GLADSTONE:** Weddings can be kind of archaic. In the old times, women were possessions and were given to men in these ceremonies. Since I

wanted to subvert romance, I thought, "OK, what's the worst nightmare for a woman? Well, what if they're invited to a wedding but they're the bride? And I was like, 'Oh, that sounds really horrific. I like that.'"

**COOPER:** A nightmare.

**GLADSTONE:** As you know, this business is serendipitous sometimes. I had pitched an executive a different project and the executive passed. But he whispered in my ear that he really wanted to do a Dracula movie, specifically a *Bride of Dracula* movie. I knew that Dracula was the ultimate narcissistic monster who thought he was a god and that women were lucky to be terrorized by him.

So I folded Dracula into the idea and pitched it to a bunch of writers. Blair Butler jumped on it and brought it to life. We brought it back to the executive, Scott Strauss, who thought it was great and he brought it to his boss, Steve Bersch. They bought it and we developed it.

How about *Nope*?

**COOPER:** Hearing the condensed version of that is so inspiring because I can imagine how many in-between steps and lengths of time and work went into it.

*Nope* was the seed of an idea a long time ago when we were gearing up to work on a project that we were really pumped and excited about. Then COVID intervened. Jordan and I pivoted to this other project (*Nope*) we had talked at great length about. We went full steam ahead on finishing the development, and for Jordan, the writing. His tenure as an improv comedian makes him so good at being able to make that kind of call and just fully shift.

Then it was just one foot in front of the other. A very long, soft prep with a lot of early collaborators to do design development, concept art. Jordan loves storyboarding, so we had two storyboard artists on pretty early. It

was even before he finished writing.

We also brought on our sound designer and supervising sound mixer early to do some sound development. It was a luxury, but it was so important in the end.

**GLADSTONE:** It dovetails exactly into one of my philosophies, which is fix it in prep. Everyone talks about fixing stuff in post. Well, that's too late. Having that luxury of soft prep to explore ideas and go down roads that you might not be able to afford to go down later is so beneficial.

We are different in that you have a producing partner and I don't. And I hire directors along the way. But we're the same in that the idea is the first big choice you have to make because you know you're going to put it on your back for three years-plus, carry it through storms, and, you know—pick your metaphor.

You're never going to stop having to sell this idea. You sell it to a writer, you sell it to the development team, you sell it to their boss, you sell it to the director, you sell it to the actors, you sell it to the marketing team, and then you sell it to the audience. You'd better love this thing and have a clear vision of it.

The second biggest joy is who's going to direct it. Ultimately that director has to be the personification of the movie.

**COOPER:** Totally.

**GLADSTONE:** Then it's about serving that vision and making sure that you do whatever you can to give that filmmaker whatever they need. So I envy that you have this (relationship). Jordan is a master of the craft and defies a lot of convention. Together, your movies are amazing.

**COOPER:** You know, this is only—this is my third movie and, you know, the movie in between *Us* and *Nope* was *Candyman*, which was Nia DaCosta's movie.





Emile Gladstone  
and Ian Cooper

**GLADSTONE:** Yet, it's cool.

**COOPER:** That was really such a different experience, and I imagine a lot more like what you are doing on each project—finding someone to, as you said, *become* the movie. Keeping them feeling supported and loved is huge.

**GLADSTONE:** Yeah, keeping that momentum is so important. It also dovetails into another story of philosophy that I have in terms of the hiring process: You look for volunteers, not recruits, right?

**COOPER:** Yes.

**GLADSTONE:** If you recruit somebody into your project, you're screwed. But if they're a volunteer, they're going to work 26 hours a day. They're going to be obsessed with the movie; they're going to be thinking about it as they go to sleep and when they wake up. It is not a job anymore. It's a calling. It's something beyond just a paycheck.

**COOPER:** It's so true. Another thing I always think about, Emile, is every little detail is as good as every ingredient in the film. We had an amazing on-set dresser whose precision in continuity was amazing. Our set was like a fucking mile-long valley. So it was him on an ATV, sweating, fighting for continuity and detail. Jordan and I would joke, "That's maybe the most important guy in the movie."

**GLADSTONE:** One of the coolest things about the gig is that you meet people who are so good at what they do that it's inspiring. Everyone's telling the story through their craft. You can't help but be inspired by the designer, the set decorator, the art directors, everybody. And, if you make the right hires, the sum of the parts is greater than each individual.

The prop master who spends weekends at thrift stores because they love it. You ask for a cane, and they bring 15 canes out of their trucks with like lion heads or a dragon head, and you're like, "I'm enthusiastic about these canes now!"

**COOPER:** I love a good prop master—especially one who can both execute on-the-fly problems and creative suggestions. Like the helmet on this guy on a motorcycle in our movie. It was fully fucking chrome, with a custom eye hole. I agonized over the diameter of the circle in the rigging of it, but he's just like, 'yes!'

**GLADSTONE:** I love it. We had a tough build because our movie's about a posh, Gatsbyesque destination wedding.

**COOPER:** Uh-huh.

**GLADSTONE:** It's stunning and beautiful and then we subvert it all. Everything that's beautiful at the beginning of the movie is by the midpoint dangerous and ugly. Even the wallpaper is predator wallpaper. The designer, Felicity Abbott, was able to stretch the dollar because we did not have a lot of money to make the movie.

Ultimately we're all in service of the audience. We're delivering experiences so they're going to get both the beauty and the danger.

**COOPER:** It's so critical, because especially with production design, it is alchemy. First of all, we are obsessed with our own visual style and that sort of high/low pop collision of our brand—the look and feel of it.

But also it's like one of the things we did on *Us* when we were looking for a designer. We were both, "We need a designer who's never done a horror movie." To avoid the tropes. I had been obsessed with Ruth De Jong's work because she had worked on Paul Thomas Anderson movies. She had worked on Malick films. She was the designer for the latest season of *Twin Peaks*. She's very into historical accuracy. The alchemy really sung because no one was operating on default.

**GLADSTONE:** Then if you spend enough time with somebody and if you observe enough, their actions are going to speak really loudly.

**COOPER:** Just to switch gears slightly, I'm going to fan out on you about a key moment in *The Curse of La Llorona*.

**GLADSTONE:** OK.

**COOPER:** The convex mirror hallway—the push-in shot on the convex mirror in the hospital hallway. That's my favorite.

**GLADSTONE:** That was day one, by the way, on that shoot—that hospital shot.

**COOPER:** Dude.

**GLADSTONE:** That mirror was not in the script. It was in the scout and we used it. You find things. That's what (producer-director) James Wan taught me—not to be so locked to your storyboard.

**COOPER:** It's like when you were in high school and you'd talk to a friend on the phone and you'd picture

their room. Then when you finally go to their house, you're like, "Oh, it's different. But this is the room now."

**GLADSTONE:** Production is very arduous. It's very long. It's very stressful. And before you get to that stage, you're in the scout phase and you're all enthusiastic. It's such a great part of the process when you're finally seeing it come to life. It's really about creating an environment where the best idea wins.

And you'd better leave it all on the field. I quit my safe job where I was going to be paid safe money. There is no plan B. I've burnt the ships. There's no coming home. So I better land this.

**COOPER:** I have that feeling too. I came out of the contemporary art world. I was teaching art and making art, exhibiting, and was a part of that world until Jordan asked me to come to LA and start working on *Us* with him and be the creative director of his company. I'm going to give it my all. I'm also not hedging my bets.

**GLADSTONE:** "When you ain't got nothing, you got nothing to lose," as Mr. Dylan said. Because I was a writer before I was an agent, I consider myself a great observer of the human animal. I want to bring that intensity to each show because I'll never make another *Invitation* again; I might make a sequel, but I'll never make that movie.

You'll never make another *Nope* again, so it's now or never. It's that intensity.

**COOPER:** Totally—now or never.

**GLADSTONE:** I have a question for you. So *Candyman* was an astounding movie, very provocative, but everyone was standing out on that animation, that short (a shadow puppet teaser short was partly used in the movie to tell the origin story of Candyman).

**COOPER:** Oh yeah.

**GLADSTONE:** Holy cow, was that the coolest thing I've ever seen. I think it really helped your marketing. It caught everyone's eye.

**COOPER:** That came from Jordan, actually, because we're tangling with a preexisting IP. Since the conceit of *Candyman* is about storytelling, you need to have storytelling that existed in the original movie. So you need to deal with the flashback situation.

And then the whole movie exists in the art world. Our main character is a painter, so his thought process is visual. So we're like, "OK, what if the flashback is like a storybook, with a childlike quality?" The shadow puppetry just came in naturally. Jordan had actually studied puppeteering when he was in college.

Then when we were in Chicago, my production designer, Cara Brower, ended up connecting with this shadow puppet company. We all were like, "This is either going be genius or feel too didactic." Then in the edit, we were like, "Holy shit, this is working!" Then for the marketing, Jordan and I were like, "We need to do a trailer that's full of this, right?"

**GLADSTONE:** It was gorgeous, it was provocative, it was cool. It was brave. It was unique.

**COOPER:** Thank you so much, Emile.

**GLADSTONE:** People have been making weird horror movies since horror movies have been getting made. The '70s had so many fucking weird horror movies. *The Wicker Man* was the original *Hereditary* or *Midsommar*. There have always been commercial horror movies that are more scare-driven. And (others) more set piece-driven. What's so interesting and unique to yourself is that you can do both. I can't afford to do both. We have to pick a lane from the get-go.

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**GLADSTONE:** We're going to be really focused on making sure that our scares deliver. Because if it's scary, you will win.

**COOPER:** We feel so honored and lucky to be able to be that subversive. But the interesting thing about Jordan is that he's so aware and in dialogue with the audience.

**GLADSTONE:** Yeah, he is. It's clear.

**COOPER:** I think *Nope* was a long journey with a lot of ingredients that could have been far too esoteric. He made this amazing alchemy out of it. As you leave the theater, you're just like, "Wait, wow!"

**GLADSTONE:** Well, that's the hope, right? You don't want people to be thinking about the movie while they're watching it. You want them to be *feeling* it.

**COOPER:** Right.

**GLADSTONE:** So are you feeling scared? Are you feeling wonder? Are you feeling fright, the thrill, the comedy? We are in the business of creating emotion for the audience.

**COOPER:** That's wonderful.

**GLADSTONE:** Theme is so important. #MeToo and Black Lives Matter were both very big in our movie. (Director) Jessica Thompson brought so much emotion to the project. And we hired Nathalie Emmanuel to play our lead, who's magnificent in the movie.

**COOPER:** She looks awesome.

**GLADSTONE:** But the part was not written for a Black woman.

**COOPER:** Right.

**GLADSTONE:** She brought this whole other layer to it, which was magnificent.

Afterward, we really want (audiences) to think about those subjects—where you've got the feeling in the text and the thought in the subtext. That's what we all hope for.

**COOPER:** I feel like there's kind of a meta level to a lot of this because as filmmakers, there's a lot of material that we are so inspired by. Almost like we're in a lab and we're trying to extract the feeling. If you think about something like *Stranger Things*, which is predicated on the quotational, which adds reference by nostalgia. Jordan and I are always talking about it, like, "Remember that feeling you had when you were in high school watching *Strange Days* on VHS cassette?"

**GLADSTONE:** I do.

**COOPER:** With *Nope*, we were trying to make something that felt like one of those movies. In a press junket interview, Jordan was like, "I feel like this movie should be released on VHS, just so I can see the spine on a shelf." It just feels like that kind of thing.

I was watching the trailer for *The Invitation*, and the end has just the perfect promise of being totally gnarly and cathartic, like at the end of *Get Out*.

**GLADSTONE:** I do think that the audience wants that lift at the end. I am a sucker for a happy ending.

**COOPER:** Me too.

**GLADSTONE:** There is a cost for the victory, but you know, there still is that triumph, and I think the audience is desperate for that triumph because this

world is really fucked and everyone's walking through shit all day long.

I'm a writer at heart, so what do writers want to do? We want to complicate, so we can solve.

**COOPER:** I always think about movies like *Let the Right One In*...

**GLADSTONE:** I love that movie.

**COOPER:** Or *It Follows*. Just simple; perfectly executed. Like, I wish I had made that. Or even like *Goodnight Mommy*.

**GLADSTONE:** I love *Goodnight Mommy*.

Also, you mentioned this sort of low-fi thing that you and Jordan like, especially with *Nope*. I love low-fi. There's something so powerful about that. Like *The Babadook* (2014), right? That monster is so basic, yet so terrifying. Visual effects are important. For example, the mirror cracking in *La Llorona*. But ultimately, the best villains are practical villains.

**COOPER:** Totally, man.

**GLADSTONE:** You know, *La Llorona* is just an actress in some makeup. The less low-fi, the more complicated the villain, the less scary it is. We're struggling with a piece of the movie now where one of our antagonists is crawling on a wall toward the hero, trying to get her. That wouldn't have been too hard to shoot practically. But we just didn't have the time, so we kicked it to visual effects, and now we regret it, because it doesn't sell as well. There is nothing better than an actual actor, than the feeling of that evil presence through an actor. Visual effects are really important; don't get me wrong. But creating shit from whole cloth in visual effects is a trap.

**COOPER:** I've had some moments like that recently. And obviously, as I'm sure you can guess, our antagonist is...

**GLADSTONE:** Not human.

**COOPER:** ...not practical. So it's a very different kind of picture in that respect. We spent an enormous amount of time grounding it in the design process, and in the practice of shooting—trying to make that feel as seamless as it can be with a thing that's clearly not there when you're shooting. You get crunched into a production schedule, and you're trying to make it all work. Then that thing that always happens where it's, "Oh, well. It's cool. We'll fix it later."

**GLADSTONE:** Yeah.

**COOPER:** Oh my god, it's like, if I can just have that extra half day to have shot it instead of...

**GLADSTONE:** And then you regret it, over and over and over again. Because through editorial, through the test process, you're living through it. We watch these movies hundreds of times, and all you see is what's wrong. We don't give ourselves credit for what's right. I'm like, "Why didn't I fight harder to get the time to shoot that guy?" So on the next picture, I'll fight harder.

**PRODUCED BY:** There's a parallel between *Get Out*, which I know you didn't produce, Ian, and *The Invitation*—these scary bastions of white privilege where nothing's as it seems.

**GLADSTONE:** *Get Out* is brilliant on many levels, but for me, because I'm a white, 53-year-old guy, through my lens it's a version of *Meet the Parents*. Even though it's about white people who want to inhabit beautiful Black strong bodies so they can use

their white privilege to live forever.

**COOPER:** Totally.

**PRODUCED BY:** There is also an element in *Nope* as well. You've got these Black animal wranglers who are not treated as equals on the fictional film set. They're kind of invisible in a way.

**GLADSTONE:** Right.

**PRODUCED BY:** That creates a tension that can be seen by the viewer but not by the antagonists. They have no idea what kind of subtle transgressions they're committing. Can you elaborate on that a bit, Ian?

**COOPER:** Yeah, definitely. It's interesting because this movie is a real rumination on moviemaking.

The thing we were really excited about, without being too inside baseball, is giving the general audience some sense of what it's like to be below the line. That you could be literally right there next to a movie star or former movie star—what you may imagine Donna Mills' character is like in our movie in this one scene—but you're also essentially invisible. Even though the thing you're doing is pretty crazy. You're bringing a giant animal to a set that could be dangerous, and everyone's like, "Yeah, yeah, whatever; you're fine."

I think the film itself is like an unpacking of the very origin of making a motion picture—who gets remembered and who gets forgotten. Even the archetype of a cowboy in Westerns being a stolen archetype from a slave, you know? So it's the origin of motion pictures, the origin of Westerns, the erasure of Blackness in those origin stories, and a revisionist unpacking of those.

It was the overarching, thematic

fabric of the film, which is crazy for a UFO movie. But also not so crazy in the way Jordan crafted it.

One of the things I love about *The Invitation* trailer is how Nathalie becomes increasingly alien in that environment, and I didn't even read it as her being a Black woman in that space, but more a relatable contemporary woman. Even just by wardrobe, tattoos—just the vibe of trying to dress up when you're not even a person who does that.

**GLADSTONE:** Ian, you're 100% getting it. We absolutely have an *Upstairs, Downstairs* theme that runs throughout, sort of a classist theme. It's also very much a movie about the patriarchy and burning down the patriarchy, and exploring that through this very relatable young woman.

**COOPER:** I think the biggest subversion of *Us* was that Jordan Peele could make a really fun Spielbergian movie with Black leads playing an upper-middle-class family. And everyone's like, "Wait!"

**GLADSTONE:** And I didn't see race in *Us*; I saw the duality of man. I was like, we are all good, and we are all evil.

**COOPER:** Totally.

**GLADSTONE:** We are all hero. We are all villain. That's what *Us* was to me. I was so into it for that reason.

**COOPER:** Thank you, Emile. Dude, this has been so fun talking to you.

**GLADSTONE:** You too. ■

# SPORTS as Metaphor for Life

## MAX BORENSTEIN AND ERICA LEE GO TOE-TO-TOE ON THE HIGHS AND LOWS, TRIUMPHS AND TRAGEDIES OF SPORTS PROJECTS.

Sports-centered productions are often vehicles for tackling the trajectories of larger-than-life icons like Muhammad Ali and Lou Gehrig. But such stories can just as often underscore more sweeping, societal issues such as racism (*42*, 2013; *King Richard*, 2021), gender bias (*Battle of the Sexes*, 2017) and even mere survival (*Unbroken*, 2014; *The Survivor*, 2021). In the case of our two One on One subjects, their projects couldn't be more different from one another. Max Borenstein is the co-creator/writer/executive producer of the HBO Max series *Winning Time: The Rise of the Lakers Dynasty*, a freewheeling, occasionally debauched saga set in the go-go '80s and filled with colorful, real-life characters—some of whom have cried foul over their on-screen portrayals. ("*Winning Time* is not a documentary and has not been presented as such," states HBO.)

Erica Lee served as a producer on Netflix's *Bruised*, a gritty, low-budget fictional drama about a mixed martial artist (Halle Berry), who finds redemption with a title shot and a chance to make amends as a mother. Both culminate in a climactic contest that amounts to a battle of wills—a trope that's often part and parcel to the genre.

Lee admits sports is not her thing, but that it can stand as a metaphor for overcoming adversity. Borenstein

describes sports as a "secular religion—it's utterly irrational, and that what's beautiful about it." The following exchange was conducted via Zoom, with an occasional assist from *Produced By*. They started out by talking about their respective projects' origins.

**BORENSTEIN:** Jim Hecht, one of our executive producers, optioned this book (Jeff Pearlman's *Showtime: Magic, Kareem, Riley, and the Los Angeles Lakers Dynasty of the 1980s*). He's from LA and loves the Lakers. He makes my fandom look absurd, because he fell in love so young and so fully that it's a formative thing for him, and he desperately wanted to tell the story. He found his way to Adam McKay's company, Hyperobject Industries, which is McKay and Kevin Messick, and they brought it to HBO.

HBO wanted to find a writer they knew who could adapt it. Jim, who is rightfully proprietary, didn't want it to go to just anybody. We had mutual friends, and he found out that I was a Laker fan. So we sat down and talked about it and I sat down with HBO and talked to them. They waited a long time for me to write it because I was doing some other stuff for them. For a while I just assumed it would be a yearlong miniseries. When I finally started working on it, I realized that it could be so much more—that it has this potential to be a great American epic. It's a dynasty story. It's a window into this incredibly rich cross-section of American characters, all of whom are bonded by this ambition of trying to use

this particular athletic achievement as a source of fulfillment in their lives.

**LEE:** Well, you find other entry points. I'm not a sports person.

**BORENSTEIN:** I think sports can be an allusion and a very clear metaphor for life. To me, the big access point for understanding the characters in my show is that they are like us in that way.

**LEE:** To do what we do (as producers/filmmakers), and to be a professional athlete—they're not normal careers. There's something in the DNA.

**BORENSTEIN:** Even for people who don't have those careers, sports is such an externalized idea. There's clarity, it's something that everyone else can experience vicariously, and it's great on film.

**LEE:** Yeah. And people just want to win. I mean, it's nature.

*Bruised* was a spec script that Michelle Rosenfarb had written. Her manager sent it to us in 2017. When we got it, Blake Lively was attached to it and the script was written for a 27-year-old Irish girl.

But Blake hurt her hand shooting (revenge thriller) *Rhythm Section* (2020). She called and said, "I can't play a fighter; I can't physically do it."

We had been working with Halle (Berry) on *John Wick 3*. We had started training her, so we knew she had this voracious appetite to train; fitness had become an incredible work ethic. Her agent,









Warren Zavala, the same agent as Blake, gave Halle the script and she read it and called us and was like, “I know this sounds crazy. I know it was written for a 27-year-old white girl. But this is my movie.”

**BORENSTEIN:** Wow.

**LEE:** So she pitched us this very compelling story about how it was an older woman who had a kid later in her life, had given him up because she had come from cycles of abuse, couldn’t be a mother, and this was her last shot as a mixed martial artist—one last attempt to get herself together to raise her son.

She met with the writer and they worked on the script and handed it back to us and it worked.

**BORENSTEIN:** Oh, cool.

**LEE:** In the Halle version, massive amounts of changes were made to the script. Then when we started looking for directors, we weren’t finding the right

person. One day we were in a meeting and (fellow producer) Basil Iwanyk was like (to Berry), “You should direct it.” We’ve worked with a lot of first-time directors, a lot of actors-turned-directors, and she had a very clear point of view.

Then she came on and made tons of changes creatively.

So with her as director, we made the movie pre-pandemic in November-December of 2019 in a gnarly fashion—30 shoot days in New Jersey. The movie fell apart close to 17 times. Then we sold it to Netflix for double the cost of the movie, which was great for everyone. Netflix really believed in Halle. They wanted her on the platform and have since given her a deal. Then we worked on cutting the movie.

But the movie was really Halle’s.

**BORENSTEIN:** That’s so cool.

**LEE:** What’s interesting, or challenging, about *Bruised* is that it’s half sports movie, half drama. And it’s really her vision.

Thematically, it’s not about her win-

ning or losing; it’s about her being back in the game, believing in herself.

**BORENSTEIN:** There’s healing that’s gone on.

**LEE:** Right.

**BORENSTEIN:** I’m excited to watch that. Not every producer can support a first-time filmmaker like that. Most producers would not have the courage to say, “Let’s take that risk.” But you got great rewards from that.

**LEE:** Yeah, and it’s been amazing. Although the story is all fictional, we always knew we wanted real fighters in the movie, so she approached (UFC flyweight champ) Valentina Shevchenko to play one of the roles (Lucia “Lady Killer” Chavez, whom Berry’s Jackie Justice faces in the film’s climactic fight).

Halle lived with the part. She would go to all of the matches. She went to Vegas many times. She trained. She had started

training for *John Wick 3* and then continued with our fight coordinator, Eric Brown, who is a jujitsu-martial arts specialist, and he helped her find her way into it.

**BORENSTEIN:** She could star in any movie, particularly one where there's so much extra commitment physically. It has got to be incredibly difficult.

**LEE:** The logistics required that we start with the end fight, which was the first thing we shot because she had been in the best shape and was the most energized.

**BORENSTEIN:** Sure. You know you're going to be exhausted at the end of the shooting.

**LEE:** Exactly. She had also broken ribs and fingers on *John Wick* and in training for the movie. So we were really playing with fire.

The other thing we did that was super helpful was the *John Wick* director Chad Stahelski came and directed second unit, basically for the final fight. He came out to Atlantic City, where we were able to shoot.

So Chad came up for two weeks and helped direct that and kind of set the tone for the fighting, and that's how we pulled it off.

**BORENSTEIN:** That's brilliant. That's a great idea. All really smart, produciorial moves. Were any of the fighters that you guys cast, the nonactors, did they have to act much or was it mostly just fighting?

**LEE:** Mostly fighting. Valentina had a couple of lines here and there.

**BORENSTEIN:** We had the challenge of how to cast unknown actors as these famous basketball players.

**LEE:** I saw that. The guy who plays Magic Johnson...

**BORENSTEIN:** Yeah, he had been an

athlete in college—not a basketball player but a football player, Quincy Isaiah. We were desperately trying to find someone to play Magic, which is an extremely challenging role. Everyone knows what he looks like, but Magic also has a particular personality that people are aware of, like a charismatic movie star.

**LEE:** Yeah.

**BORENSTEIN:** So it was difficult. We knew immediately that there wasn't going to be anyone we knew that would fit the bill. So it was all on Francine Maisler and the casting team to find someone. Quincy had never acted professionally. We got his tape, and we were like, "Wow, he's got that smile," and he's a fantastic actor. He was able to play at a movie level. Suddenly he was thrown in with John C. Reilly and Jason Clarke and all these guys, and he holds his own in an incredible way.

In the case of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Solomon Hughes had never acted before at all. We found him because a mutual friend heard about the search and knew he might be interested. He has a Ph.D. in higher education, had played on the Cal team. He was a good player, but didn't want to go pro. He was an academic (teaching at Stanford and Duke), which fit the bill perfectly for Kareem. Now his life is utterly transformed in a way.

He's done amazing work. But it was a big question mark for us.

That meant these guys who have not acted much are going to do some heavy material that's as demanding as the stuff we're giving Sally Field or whomever, and they really pulled it off.

**LEE:** The logistics of working with real athletes and their schedules is challenging.

**BORENSTEIN:** Oh, yeah. When you've got guys who are in the major leagues it's extremely difficult. A lot of our stunt doubles and other actors are guys who retired or were playing with one of the various (minor) leagues, but

not linked with NBA careers. This kind of opportunity was exciting for them because they were entertainers.

**LEE:** And was it from like the minute you wrote the script to the (start of) shooting? Was it that fast once you actually wrote it?

**BORENSTEIN:** Yeah, it was crazy fast. I had never met with Adam McKay in person, because he was going to produce it but he wasn't necessarily going to direct it. That was the dream, but with a filmmaker as in-demand as him, the odds are always low.

**LEE:** Yeah.

**BORENSTEIN:** Within a week, maybe even a few days later, McKay calls—he and Kevin Messick, his producing partner—and he said, "I want to do this as my next thing. I love it so much." He is an enormous basketball fan and had always wanted to find a great, unique basketball story. And so we shot the pilot pre-pandemic in the summer of 2019—shot it, cut it in the fall, got the green light to make the series at the end of the year, and then we were writing scripts and getting ready to go into prep in March 2020 when the world shut down.

It was the biggest blessing for the show in the long run because it gave us a year to perfect scripts, to write, to do all the work you never get to do in TV because you're under the gun timewise.

We were able to spend all that time really discovering the characters. By the time we started production, we had a pilot that we loved and nine really solid, mature scripts. They were what we wanted the show to be. There were things set up in episode 2 that pay off in episode 10 by design, without having to make it up as you go along—the way that you almost always do in a TV show, because you're running as if the train's behind you in the tunnel.

**LEE:** Are you guys writing a season 2 or where are you?

**BORENSTEIN:** We're almost halfway through writing season 2, which is going to be great, but it's full of its own challenges.

**LEE:** Yeah.

**BORENSTEIN:** It's ambitious because it's shot on a soundstage where we built our own basketball court and about 12 rows of seats. It looks amazing in the final cuts, but it's as complicated visually in terms of VFX and complexity as a scene with dragons in *Game of Thrones*.

**LEE:** Yeah.

**BORENSTEIN:** The bar is high because people remember what the (Fabulous) Forum looked like. That asset was extremely time-consuming but very cool when you see it come together.

**LEE:** But you didn't expect to have a second season, right?

**BORENSTEIN:** No. But if you want to see these characters and watch them grow and evolve over the course of a decade, you've got to put in the time. You've got to really sink into them.

It's stuff that's behind closed doors and it's underneath rather than moments that people expect. It's a sweeping epic and we know where it goes. It takes 10 years, so it may take 10 seasons. But it's not going to be two seasons. Maybe, but that's only if we fuck it up and no one wants to watch anymore.

**LEE:** Well, you've got to take a big swing to penetrate these days because there is so much out there, so much material, so much content.

**BORENSTEIN:** Definitely.

**PRODUCED BY:** Erica, Halle Barry's a seasoned actor, maybe the elder statesman in the cast. But as a first-time director, who did she lean on for guidance?

**LEE:** At different stages, there were different people. In the beginning, we were definitely helping with the script, and we hired another writer to help actualize her vision and make it feel more like it was Halle's world.

Then along the way, we had this first AD, Gerard DiNardi, who was like her right hand to try to help make the days.

I mean, it was really a village that helped. Halle was very smart about her coverage, very smart about how many takes it would take within the shots, because she could rely on herself as an actress. And also because the movie was like a \$10 million movie, which amortized is not very much, so we were always rushing. She didn't have a lot of time or resources or bells and whistles. It was really run and gun for most of the movie.

She found Danny Boyd Jr., the actor who plays her son. She really shepherded all of them as a seasoned actress and someone who has been on sets for 25 years. She knew the ins and outs of it. But places like editorial were harder, where you're cutting your own performance and staring at your own face day after day.

I think it's also hard for actors-turned-directors, because as actors they (normally) come into the process much later. They get a finished script and are told to be there a week before. But now, as a director of an independent movie, they're seeing how the sausage is made, and that can be very unpleasant and heartbreaking. We pushed many times—she was training, she was acting, she was directing...

**BORENSTEIN:** Right.

**LEE:** So I think it was a very frustrating process. It was long, and there was COVID involved, so we didn't have a traditional editorial process. She was editing at home with an editor in New York on Zoom. There was a lot that was lost. There were things that hindered us even more—that made it harder for her as a first-time director. So it was really a labor of love.

**PRODUCED BY:** Max, in terms of the style of the series, did Adam McKay, who directed the pilot, create the template for the look of it? Were there certain things like the breaking of the fourth wall that he initiated? Or was that in your script?

**BORENSTEIN:** No, all that stuff was from the script. I didn't even have a conversation with him. All I heard from him prior to writing the script was a message passed down that was like, "Oh, just be creative. Be free. Do whatever you want to do to tell the story."

I took inspiration from a lot of his work, and then just took the freedom to do whatever felt like a fun, freewheeling, showman-like way of telling this story about entertainment and sports.

We shot the script word-for-word. But when Adam shot a scene, I'd sit next to him and, at the end of a scene there'd be an idea. He would pitch me, like, "Hey, what about this line?" And I'd be like, "Oh, that's great." Or I'd pitch another line, and started realizing that this is a great method.

So I would pitch him lines. He has a voice-of-God-like (demeanor). He rarely gets up from his chair. He just sits at the monitor and everyone hears the line, and it keeps everyone engaged and involved in the process in a joyful way.

John C. Reilly (who plays Lakers owner Jerry Buss) is one of the great improvisers, period. He'd throw in a little line here and there; wonderful stuff. But essentially it was just the script and all that wall-breaking, animation, the text on screen—it was all part of the script.

Adam hired incredible people. He expected them to do their best work and be free to come up with interesting stuff. So in the case of the visual aesthetic, there's three parts to it:

There's that aspect in the script where I felt free and knew no one was going to tsk-tsk me if I broke the fourth wall or animated a logo or whatever it might be.

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# SPORTS AS METAPHOR FOR LIFE

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**BORENSTEIN:** Then when it came to shooting it, Todd Banhazi—this incredible, beautiful soul who is one of the great DPs and just a genius—had this idea of shooting on period cameras and period stock (Mihai Malaimare was co-DP). And mixing the stock so that it would have that aesthetic and textured, layered feel that you get in documentaries. So he found old Ikegami video cameras, like a pre-Beta camera, and we shot a ton on those.

We shot the rest on film, 8mm and 35mm. The video and the film were meant to be just bit of texture. The video in particular was meant to only replicate TV footage, but it was such a cool aesthetic. It brought me back instantly. It's like looking through a time machine. You feel like you are looking at something taken 40 years ago, like a sense memory, like smelling something from your childhood.

We all fell in love with it and Adam encouraged Banhazi to use it more.

So all that footage went into the mix (to be edited by) Adam's editor on his last three movies, Hank Corwin (one of six editors on the series; Corwin cut the pilot), truly one of the great editors of this generation—he did *The Tree of Life* and *Natural Born Killers*. He's extremely freewheeling and creative. He takes risks and follows the emotion.

That became a huge part of the template and editorial style. We ended up with an aesthetic for the show that feels not like anything I've ever made.

**LEE:** The world changed also. Like, from the day we wrapped versus the day when *Bruised* aired, the environment was different. Audiences wanted something different and that's something you can't get on a timeline.

**BORENSTEIN:** You never predict success. It's a crapshoot. You aim for quality and then you just hope people like it.

**LEE:** I think the world was ready for Halle as a director, and to bring us back to *Bruised*, the world was ready to see that story.

**BORENSTEIN:** Yeah.

**LEE:** Or more willing to, where maybe in 2017 or 2015, it wouldn't have...

**BORENSTEIN:** It's not ready until people like you take a risk, make it happen, and then suddenly it seems like the smartest thing in the world. So I think there is an element of that. I think this town always chases what happened last. There's always going to be that first person to do it. Sometimes it's luck; sometimes it's bravery.

**LEE:** Well, sports movies are always challenging to make independently because they're a very domestic play. There's no quote-unquote "international value." So something like *Bruised*, where we're selling the international and financing independently, it's already breaking the model.

**BORENSTEIN:** Then it comes out and people love it and then this conventional wisdom changes, right? The thing about conventional wisdom is it doesn't change until you break the mold. We've all done things that are less risky. But the ones that are more exciting or make a bigger splash are always the ones that had a bigger chance of drowning.

**LEE:** Yeah, for sure. And being a producer is fine because you can sort of mix it up, you know.

**BORENSTEIN:** Definitely.

**LEE:** For every *John Wick 3*, there's a *Private War* or *Hotel Mumbai* (both 2018).

**PRODUCED BY:** Your biggest challenge in a nutshell?

**BORENSTEIN:** When you think about the process, it's like constant out of the frying pan into the fire, one thing to the next.

The biggest challenge in a way was COVID when we were shooting, because first it delayed us and then we started shooting and it was right after the vaccines. We had everyone testing every single day for most of the production. They were like hour-long tests. People had to wait, and everyone was masked.

We're in a business where everyone was working really long hours and putting in incredible, intense work. Then to add extra hours on top of that and the uncertainty of danger, fear of COVID—it was a testament to the incredible fortitude of crews in Hollywood.

We did our best as producers to provide a safe environment by having everyone test. We never shut down, remarkably.

You felt like you were in *The Matrix*, constantly dodging the bullet. And some people didn't.

**PRODUCED BY:** Erica, what about you?

**LEE:** The financial aspect of the movie—almost falling apart and pushing so many times over a year and a half. The ups and downs emotionally—the rev up, the rev down. We closed the door on the financing very late. The movie was wrapped. So just the on-set drama of that.

And I think when Halle broke her ribs when we were less than a week in. There's no double for her. So we went down for two days so she could rest, and then she went back at it. Which was insane. I had never experienced that before. I mean, we had always hurt people on the *Wick* movies and most action movies, but not to that degree. She just dealt with it. ■