

# CASTING FOR GEMS

**WHEN IT COMES TO RECRUITING THE RIGHT ACTORS FOR A FEATURE, AESTHETIC CONSIDERATIONS AND COMMERCIAL APPEAL SHOULDN'T BE AT WAR WITH EACH OTHER.**

INTERVIEWS BY STEVE CHAGOLLAN

In narrative features, if story provides the foundation, character forms the building blocks. In this regard, the importance of casting cannot be overstated. After all, for audiences, “Who’s in it?” is just as important as “What’s it about?”

Or, as producer Grant Heslov puts it: “You’ve gotta have the right script and you’ve gotta have the right actors. If you don’t have those two things, it doesn’t matter what you do. It’s not going to be successful.”

The role of the producer in this process is just as varied as the movies we see in any given year. Like the medium itself, it’s collaborative, with directors, producers, casting directors and the studios and financiers who put up the money all weighing in to one degree or another.

*Produced By* spoke to three pros known for their work in different realms: Marvel’s Nate Moore (blockbuster franchise properties), Smokehouse Pictures’ Grant Heslov (studio-backed specialty features), and Killer Films’ Pamela Koffler (art house indie fare) about the role of the producer in casting, how to balance aesthetic and commercial considerations, the viability of “bankable” stars, what casting directors bring to the table, and how streaming has affected the equation.

The following excerpts were edited for clarity and brevity:

## THE PRODUCER'S ROLE IN CASTING



**NATE MOORE**

VP of production and development, Marvel Studios

Producer on *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (2022), *The Eternals* (2021), the upcoming *Captain America: New World Order* (2024)

As a producer, my role is to be the surrogate, real-time audience (member) who asks the questions an audience would ask, and be there in the room, and say to a Ryan (Coogler) or a Chloé Zhao or a Joe and Anthony Russo, “Hey, I’m seeing this, too” or “I agree, that will work,” or “You may think this but I think this other thing.” And just **BE A PARTNER IN THE PROCESS AND NOT TAKE OVER THE PROCESS.**

Our other role, obviously, is a little more practical—figuring out from a deal standpoint what makes sense and what doesn’t, because obviously part of the producer’s role is being mindful of what a budget is. You don’t want to spend all of your money on casting, so sometimes you have to make hard choices—like not being able to get someone because their quote, which they’ve earned, is too much for a certain role to bear.

So you’re wearing both of those hats and hopefully those are not in competition with each other. I think if you can have an honest dialogue with your filmmaker, both of those perspectives are important and hopefully embraced.



**PAMELA KOFFLER**

founding partner, Killer Films

Producer: *Dark Waters* (2019), *Wonderstruck* (2018), the upcoming *She Came to Me* (2023)

The producer’s role varies so much from project to project. But I would say it’s to **KEEP A VERY BIG-PICTURE VIEW OF HOW CASTING CHOICES CAN INFLUENCE BOTH THE ARTISTIC SUCCESS OF A PROJECT AND ALSO ENABLE IT TO MAKE SENSE IN THE MARKETPLACE.**

Those are two tensions that are always engaged with each other, and that I think the producer must really keep an eye on while guiding the process. You don’t want to cast the wrong performer in a role just because it becomes more “bankable.” But you also don’t want to ignore the reality that a certain kind of film, depending on how it’s being financed, does depend on a level of casting.

Those things can live in a healthy relationship with each other so that the movie gets made, and the movie succeeds creatively.



**GRANT HESLOV**

founding partner, Smokehouse Pictures

Producer: *Argo* (2012), *August: Osage County* (2013), *The Tender Bar* (2021)

It varies, depending on the situation—the relationship the producer has with the director, and how the material was developed. So there are a lot of ingredients in getting to that point. I can tell you that when George (Clooney) and I work together, which is often, when we’re writing, we’re thinking about actors.

In other (instances) where I’m just producing, there’s probably more discussion around casting than anything else. Sometimes there are battles and sometimes it’s easy. A lot of people want to weigh in as well. Creative executives at the studio—if you’re making it outside of a studio and there are financiers, they have feelings about it. **SO THERE ARE A LOT OF BALLS TO JUGGLE, BUT USUALLY WHAT WE DO IS FIGURE OUT WHO IS BEST FOR THE PART AND GO AFTER WHOMEVER WE HAVE TO.**

## DOES STAR POWER MATTER?

**Koffler:** Honestly, for truly independent films—which are typically adult dramas, very original material, stories that are typically not studio films—the way those get financed, the degree to which an actor still has some value in foreign markets, for independents, it absolutely still matters.

I think everyone in the industry—filmmakers, financiers, agents, actors—understands that for the survival of the smaller independent films that we love and we don't want to go away, everyone has to acknowledge the economics. I think that is starting to happen. There's a more transparent conversation about what everyone can get paid, what the budgets can bear. As long as it's equitably allocated, I have found that everyone is understanding that that's what it takes.

On *She Came to Me* (upcoming, with Oscar winners Anne Hathaway and Marisa Tomei), stars made sense. It's a comedic romance. The characters are vivid and charismatic and specific. The actors we were lucky enough to cast are real stars, and have star quality. So that effervescence and that thing stars have really worked for this story. (Director-writer) Rebecca Miller is like a pied piper for artists, actors and everyone. The casting was very mindful of not just financing, but whether it worked creatively. We needed to cast these people correctly.

**Moore:** In the Marvel universe, presales are not as much of a factor in casting. I think Marvel is more about the property than the stars, but that doesn't diminish the innate importance of your actors and actresses. For us it's not about who brings star power; it's about who can breathe life into these characters and make them feel like *your* characters.

From the beginning, we have been fortunate for a million reasons to go for what at the time would have been considered nontraditional stars like Robert Downey Jr., (*Iron Man*, 2008),



Julia Roberts  
and Meryl Streep  
in *August: Osage  
County*

who was sort of coming out of a slight slump, or Chris Evans (*Captain America: The First Avenger*, 2011), who had already been the Human Torch (*Fantastic Four*, 2007). Or Chris Hemsworth (*Thor*, 2011), who for American audiences had only been in the beginning of the *Star Trek* movie (2009). To anchor these characters who had become iconic, we used actors who were incredibly talented but were not the most famous people at the time.

We're very lucky in casting. We don't have a green-light committee who needs X amount of stars to say yes to anything. Disney has always been very supportive. They never forced us to hire (anyone) or said, "Can you get somebody who is more commercial?" I think they understand, because we road-tested it, audiences just want to come out and see the best movie. If that's with somebody already incredibly famous, fantastic. If it's somebody they get to meet for the first time, also great. As long as our movies work, we've had luck with audiences embracing them.

**Heslov:** *Ticket to Paradise* (2022) is a perfect example (of the star system at work). You have Julia (Roberts) and George (Clooney) up there—a pairing where people know what they're going to get. It's not like the film was breaking any new ground. It was never intended to. It's a vehicle to get George and Julia up on screen and have fun. I think it's 100% successful, and the box office (\$169.5 million worldwide as of January 27) shows that.

But we both know there are tons of movies with movie stars that tank. And vice versa, movies that don't have stars. A lot of alchemy comes with making films, and a lot of luck. You can have a great script and a great director and actors, and for some reason the movie doesn't succeed. I don't know of anybody who sets out to make movies that are not good or that won't make money, but the truth is it happens all the time.

On *August: Osage County* (with Meryl Streep and Julia Roberts) there's a version of that. You could literally take the actors who did the play, which was spectacular, and put them in the movie.

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I think George and I would have been happy with that. Unfortunately, that's a movie that can't get made. In order for it to get financed, that's how we had to cast it. I think we were lucky.

## AVOIDING STICKER SHOCK

**Heslov:** Some actors just care about the material, and then they'll make a deal based on what the production can afford. They're looking more holistically at 'We want to get this movie made.' Then there are some people where the money has gotten to a certain point in their career and this is what they demand. For the most part, we try to work within that.

We've never lost an actor (because) we couldn't make a deal.

**Koffler:** It's true that big movie stars don't suddenly turn a difficult project into a big-budget project. What they do now is make it possible at a low budget.

Just because you have Tom Cruise in a dark, challenging, original story, you don't get \$50 million. You might get your \$10 million. I'm being a little glib, but that's how I see the bankable stars working in this ecosystem.

## MAKING STARS VS. CASTING STARS

**Moore:** On *Wakanda Forever*, Ryan (Coogler) had some great ideas on the narrative swings we could take, including the character of Namor (Tenoch Huerta), Riri Williams (Dominique Thorne) and Aneka (Michaela Coel). Ryan is very smart and worthy of everything people say about him. So for Michaela Coel, it was being part of this property specifically that got her excited.

Dominique Thorne was no secret. We had her audition for the first (*Black Panther*) film and sort of kept our eyes on her. She ended up in *Judas and the Black Messiah*, which Ryan Coogler produced. So when we were talking about Riri Williams, it was a one-person conversation. The same with Michaela for Aneka.



Hilary Swank in  
*Boys Don't Cry*

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With Namor, when Ryan decided to anchor (the underwater kingdom) Talo-kan in the mythology of Mayan culture, then it was, "Who are actors from that region who would make sense, and who are powerful?"

One of the things that makes Namor compelling is that there is a charisma, a humanity and a vulnerability to a guy who is incredibly powerful. There's a soul in there. So we knew there was an actor who could breathe life into this character, because if Namor doesn't work, the movie falls apart.

**Koffler:** This is what's called casting, and really, in auditions and callbacks and that whole process, there's the element of "Is this actor exactly right for this role right now?" I think in the case of (newcomers) Hilary Swank (*Boys Don't Cry*, 1999) and Dane DeHaan (*Kill Your Darlings*, 2013), they were fantastic, and they served the movies incredibly well creatively.

## CASTING DIRECTORS EARN THEIR STRIPES

**Koffler:** Casting directors are really important. A lot of the directors I work with, when we are in the world of making offers, (casting directors) are really doing their homework. They're watching everything.

And (directors) are talking to their casting directors about strengths and inclinations and natural temperament, and everything about an actor that you can discern from watching their body of work, and interpreting that as it relates to what the character is and how that actor can then interpret that character. It's a real discussion.

It's not like working off of a grocery list at all. So I find casting directors can really participate creatively in that analysis.

In terms of casting the 10 or 15 or 20 or 30 parts that are not the leads, it's as it ever was—just a great casting director who filters through choices and presents them to the director and they narrow it down from there. And they keep looking if the right person hasn't been found.

And then there's the producorial side, which is also to interpret the logistics and pragmatics of a very busy movie star being able to fit (a project) into a schedule and attaching to a movie that may not have a start date. All that brings to bear on how feasible a choice is.

Casting directors also have their finger on that pulse, so it really becomes a big-picture discussion.

**Heslov:** What Ellen Chenoweth (casting director on *The Ides of March*) is so great



Paul Giamatti and Grant Heslov on location for *The Ides of March*.

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at is finding new faces. I love watching a movie and seeing an actor I've never seen before, and I know George does too. So we're constantly saying, "Find us those actors."

She goes out, and there's a lot of auditions. And when we're talking about acting, we talked to her about Philip (Seymour Hoffman) and Paul (Giamatti). She's involved from the beginning.

There were a lot of medium roles, in *Ides of March* in particular, and she finds those actors. That's one of the fun parts—when you do an audition with an actor you haven't seen before, and they nail it, or do something with the part that was way more than expected.

**Moore:** We found both Letitia (Wright) and Winston (Duke), as the Shuri and M'Baku characters (in *Black Panther*), with the help of (casting director) Sarah Finn. We did a reading and went through the whole process. Both fantastic actors. That was a little bit

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more of a mind meld of getting on the same page and then deciding to move forward together.

### STREAMING VERSUS THEATRICAL

**Heslov:** I think casting is equally important in both mediums because you've got to cast the best actors. The best streaming shows have the best actors. The only difference is that in streaming, they don't necessarily need stars to make their shows. Which is why in streaming you see actors who probably would nev-

er have become movie stars 10, 15 years ago because there were only so many movies made. There were only so many people who could fill those slots.

Now you have streaming, and so much good shit out there. I think it's a renaissance for actors. You could get on one of these shows and your life changes.

A lot of stars are working in the steaming world because there's so much good material. The thing you can do in streaming that you can't do in features is get to explore a character over time.

What people often forget is that

## NEW MEMBERS

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



### ANTHONY SALAMON

Anthony Salamon is co-CEO of LA-based Picture Business International and its subsidiary, Studio+, a hybrid production facility that opened in 2022. He has served as executive producer on the sci-fi feature *Without Ward* (2022) and the docu series *Access All Areas: Erebus Motorsport*, which aired on Fox Sports. Salamon's other credits include serving as a writer-director-producer on the Australian TV series *Davo DiY* (2016) and producer on the feature *Birth of a Warrior* (2012).

#### AT WHAT POINT IN YOUR LIFE DID YOU DISCOVER WHAT A PRODUCER BRINGS TO THE TABLE?

I always wanted to be a producer since I was 17 years old. I didn't know what it truly meant to be a producer until I had made several disastrous projects and I realized exactly what it is that a producer brings to the table—and how not to produce.

#### WHO OR WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO GO INTO PRODUCING?

Two influences made me want to be a producer. Firstly, Robert Evans. What a producer! He inspired me to keep pushing and striving to be a producer. Secondly, the classic sci-fi film *Blade Runner*. When I saw that film and realized someone had to produce it, that was the push I needed to go learn what a producer does—and then do it myself.

these studios and streamers, they're putting up a lot of money. It's not insignificant. But the casting equation is the same: You want to cast the right person.

**Koffler:** If you're with a streamer, perhaps the business model is different. Maybe the range of creative casting is a bit wider and more connected to other factors—subjective creative suitability. I imagine the economics are less clearly tied to the international marketplace, where you're selling territory by territory to build a budget for a film. Actors' bankability in those territories really is something sales agents try to quantify.

In the kind of work we make, which is very character driven, very director driven, often very original takes on stories, the casting is still absolutely central to the fabric of it. I don't see that shifting in the kind of work we're making.

## CREATIVE COMPROMISE

**Heslov:** There's the thing of "We're going to cast the movie with exactly the actors we want," and sometimes the actors you want aren't enough to get the movie made at the level that you need to make it at. So then you have to ask, "Who is the actor who's right for the role but also meaningful enough to a distributor or a financier to actually get the movie made?" That's a line that all producers have to deal with. That's just reality. It's just the economics. Unless you write your own check, which I don't know many producers who do. You've got to make compromises sometimes. When I say compromises, I mean not just that you're not getting great actors, but you also have to realize it's a business.

**Moore:** Marvel may seem like a big place, but we're really a small group of people making these movies. There's a comfort in knowing that it's not a place where you get lost in the shuffle. It's a place where you can walk into the room with me and (president) Kevin (Feige) and (copresident) Louis D'Esposito and (president of VX, post and animation) Victoria Alonso, and we talk about it and decide together.

I think the benefit we have as a studio is that we're small and nimble and it doesn't feel corporate.

**Koffler:** If you are a studio film, and you're one of those movies that are unusual—dramas, serious films, adult dramas, whatever you want to call them—sometimes the casting is a little bit less from a list and more of a "The studio really likes this actor." Or for whatever reason, this actor works for this project. That's just another signal to read and understand and integrate into the creative process.

## IT'S NOT PERSONAL

**Koffler:** I think the biggest shift is that in-person auditions are over. I can't imagine the industry going back to that. We have done chemistry reads in person once we have narrowed a role down to two or three performers. We'll have the lead who's working with those actors to help a director make a final decision.





Angela Bassett in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*

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But since COVID and since Zoom, digital auditioning is standard. I don't see it going back unless a director is very, very attached to the in-person process.

**Heslov:** We used to do auditions in person. We don't do them so much anymore.

## DIVERSITY

**Moore:** I think diversity is not a goal in a vacuum. Diversity is about telling really interesting stories people want to hear. In *Wakanda Forever*, people in Mesoamerica who are Mayan or of Mayan descent are probably going to feel seen, maybe for the first time in a big way. And I think people who aren't Mayan will want to know more.

One of the things I will say about the first movie was not only that *Black Panther* and the world of Wakanda resonated with African and African American audiences, it resonated with all audiences, because people felt, from every nation in the world, hopefully, that embracing your own culture was cool. It was about how rich our shared culture is. I think one thing Ryan is interested in as a filmmaker is looking at old cultures and saying, "Look, there's great stuff over here." It's not just for (one) culture; it's for everyone to enjoy. If at the same time people feel seen, how great to do both.

But it really is narrative driven for Ryan, not agenda driven. I hope audiences feel that. ■

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### LAURA LEWIS

Laura Lewis, CEO of Rebelle Media, touts such theatrical producer credits as the period romance *Mr. Malcolm's List* (2022)—and the 2019 short it's based upon—and contemporary romance *Long Weekend* (2021). She also served as exec producer on the documentary *For Walter and Josiah* (2022), about a rash of suicides in a small Native community, and the dramatic thriller *An Acceptable Loss* (2018).

#### WHO OR WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO GO INTO PRODUCING?

One of my earliest jobs was working for producer Ed Saxon. Watching how he'd get so passionate about getting a story told or a voice he wanted to support really inspired me. Also what gets me up every morning is knowing that we have the power via the stories we make to open hearts and minds, create empathy and change the world. I truly believe that.

#### WHAT'S THE BEST PIECE OF ADVICE YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED ABOUT PRODUCING?

I feel so lucky to have such a great support system of fellow producers and executives in this business. Here are a few pieces of advice they've given me: Every project is its own experience, so you can't solve one problem the way you may have handled it before. Be patient—everything takes longer than anticipated. Listen, listen, listen. Also, especially for indie films, keep your Dropbox very organized!