Spielberg’s
SECRET WEAPON

KRISTIE MACOSKO KRIEGER, WHOSE PRODUCING CREDITS INCLUDE THE POST, THE FABELMANS AND THE UPCOMING MAESTRO, HAS LEARNED FROM THE BEST.

INTERVIEW BY STEVE CHAGOLLAN | PHOTOGRAPHED BY TAMEKA JACOBS
Kristie Macosko Krieger prefers not being the center of attention. As a producer who’s spent considerable time working closely with the likes of Steven Spielberg—who has seen everything and knows everyone, and Tony Kushner, who is never at a loss for words—she prefers that her more high-profile colleagues do the talking.

“He speaks in sound bites,” she says of Spielberg, by way of contrasting her relative unease in discussing her process. Macosko Krieger relays this thought as she squirms through a photo session at her Hancock Park home in early May, clearly uncomfortable but powering through. The location, instead of Amblin’s hacienda-style compound on the Universal lot, was chosen out of sensitivity to not cross the picket line of striking writers, who began their walkout a week earlier.

With Spielberg, Macosko Krieger learned directly from the master. He has directed four films that have earned them both nominations for the PGA and the Academy’s top honors: The Fabelmans (2022), West Side Story (2021), The Post (2017) and Bridge of Spies (2015).

“To be an effective producer you need a lot of knowledge and practical training because of the unexpected challenges that often surprise even the most experienced producers,” Spielberg tells Produced By. “Kristie is at the top of that list, and I’ve been keeping that list for enough years to be able to unequivocally say she’s the best there is!”

Kathleen Kennedy has also known Macosko Krieger dating back to the latter’s early days at Amblin—a 20-something dynamo who was learning on the job.

“I’ve worked with Kristie since she became Steven Spielberg’s assistant, stepping into the shoes I once filled, and I’ve watched her grow into an exceptional producer,” says Kennedy. “Her ability to lead with an exceptional sense of humor is her gift. You’re laughing while she’s just cut 20% of your budget. I’m incredibly lucky to consider her a colleague as well as a friend.”

Currently, Macosko Krieger is in post on the Leonard Bernstein movie Maestro, on which Bradley Cooper performs quadruple duty as star, director, cowriter and fellow producer. Martin Scorsese was once slated to direct before the project fell into Spielberg’s hands. When other commitments got in the way, Cooper, who was offered the lead, suggested he take over the helming reins. As proof that he could handle it, Cooper showed Spielberg, his wife—Kate Capshaw—fellow screenwriter Josh Singer and Macosko Krieger his take on A Star Is Born before hardly anybody else had seen it. “Within the first 20 minutes, Steven leaned over to Bradley and told him the job was his,” recalls Macosko Krieger.

“Kristie has been a very hands-on producer,” says Cooper. “During preproduction, we worked together daily as it related to everything from liaising with the studio, the family, casting, schedules, locations, all of the moving parts that involve working with a real orchestra, training and rehearsals, etc. Kristie was instrumental during that process. She was on set daily during the production of the film. She’s collaborative and direct and was always ready to dig in when challenges arose—which was every day. Knowing someone is there to support your vision as a storyteller and to help move that vision forward on the business side, I felt very lucky to have her in my corner.”

Despite Maestro’s looming release date in late 2023 from Netflix, and several projects in various states of preproduction, Macosko Krieger took time to address some questions about her career.

**FIRST THINGS FIRST: WHAT DID YOU STUDY AT UC DAVIS, AND HOW DID THAT LEAD TO A CAREER IN THE ENTERTAINMENT BUSINESS?**

I graduated with a degree in sociology, which is probably the best degree to have when you are dealing with the vast universe of people and personalities I engage with on a daily basis.

**WHAT DID YOUR PARENTS DO FOR A LIVING? HOW DID THEY VIEW YOUR LONG-TERM CAREER GOALS?**

My father was an electrical engineer and my mother was a secretary-turned-human resources manager. They were supportive of any job/career that I wanted to pursue—as long as it came with health insurance. My husband, Mark, is a doctor, so maybe my parents...
really did know how important health care is for everyone.

TELL US ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE SHOAH FOUNDATION AND DREAMWORKS/AMBLIN, AND HOW YOU CAME TO BE RECRUITED BY THE SPIELBERG TEAM.

I started working at Amblin as an assistant in the publicity department in 1994 and subsequently moved over to the Shoah Foundation early in its inception in 1995. At the time, the Shoah Foundation was on the Universal lot right behind Amblin. Bonnie Curtis, who was Steven’s assistant and later became a producer, was on the hunt for a new assistant, and asked me several times if I would meet with Steven. I politely declined, because I was happy in the PR department—I thought I could be an effective publicist. But being a consummate producer, Bonnie would not take no for an answer. In 1997 I became Steven’s assistant and moved from the Shoah Foundation back to Amblin.

YOU’VE HAD A FRONT-ROW SEAT IN OBSERVING SOME OF THE BIGGEST-SCALE PRODUCTIONS IN PROCESS, INCLUDING SAVING PRIVATE RYAN, WAR OF THE WORLDS AND MUNICH. WHAT WERE YOUR FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF STEVEN SPIELBERG, AND WHAT WAS THAT LEARNING CURVE LIKE?

What’s interesting is that my first impression of Steven was actually an extension of knowing him through the Shoah Foundation. I was struck by his innate humanity and desire to make the world a better place. When I began as Steven’s assistant, there was a three-year period between Saving Private Ryan and AI where he was solely focused on development.

During those three years, I was able to gain in-office learning experience before I ever set foot on a soundstage. This provided me a runway to learn, and by the time Steven began production on AI, his labor of love for Stanley Kubrick, I felt like I was ready to handle the responsibilities and challenges of being on a set. It also helped that AI had two amazing producers, who turned out to be mentors for me, and both of whom were Steven’s former assistants—Kathleen Kennedy and Bonnie Curtis.


I had the best kind of learning curve because I had hands-on experience over a wide range of movies. Following AI, we did Minority Report, Catch Me If You Can, The Terminal, War of the Worlds and Munich. Every film I worked on taught me more and more, and I took on more and more responsibility. So by the time Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull happened, I was fully immersed in the world of production. Working as an associate producer was a logical next step.

YOUR FIRST LEAD PRODUCING CREDIT WAS ON BRIDGE OF SPIES (2015). WHAT WAS THAT GRADUATION OF DUTIES LIKE?
When Kathy Kennedy left to run Lucasfilm in 2013, it was a natural evolution for me to produce Bridge of Spies. I’d been working for Steven for 15 years before I got my first straight producing credit. After 15 years, in any kind of collaboration, you have a shorthand communication, and because you have a deep understanding of the way someone works and thinks, you’re able to anticipate choices and circumvent problems in advance.

AT THE PGA MORNING PANEL PRIOR TO THE PGA AWARDS A FEW MONTHS BACK, EVERYBODY WAS ASKED WHAT THEIR “SUPERPOWER” AS A PRODUCER WAS. WHAT’S YOURS?

Accessibility. I think everyone understands that I am available and approachable regardless of where anyone may fall on the call sheet.

WHAT WAS THE PRODUCTION TEAM’S APPROACH TO WEST SIDE STORY—THE OPERATING PRINCIPLE FOR CREATING AN ADAPTATION OF THE PLAY THAT STAYED TRUE TO THE STORY BUT ALSO CREATED SOMETHING NEW AND UNIQUE?

No one more than Steven appreciated, shared and understood the enduring reverence for the original stage play and 1961 film. What’s so wonderful about West Side Story, and its origin story, Romeo and Juliet, is that it can be reimagined and interpreted in so many different ways, for every generation, across so many languages and cultures.

That is the genius of the original story by (Arthur) Laurents, music by Bernstein and Felicia Montealegre that spanned roughly 50 years of their life together. I will leave it to Bradley (Cooper) to discuss his process, but my job is to take care of the business of making the movie and all that entails—liaising with the studio, other producers, the estate, etc. I hope that the way we allowed Bradley to devote his time and energy to creative decision-making as a writer, a director, and producer and one of the stars of the film as we mounted this project and while we were on set every day.

THE FABELMANS WAS CLEARLY STEVEN SPIELBERG’S MOST PERSONAL FILM TO DATE. WERE THERE ANY CHALLENGES ON THE FILM BEYOND MAINTAINING A SAFE EMOTIONAL SPACE FOR HIM TO OPERATE?

We were set to film one of the pivotal scenes in the movie, but we were shooting out of order, as it was easy on in the production and one of the first scenes on set for Michelle Williams. Mitzi (Williams) is up on a hill with Sammy (Gabriel La Belle), telling him she’s going to stay with her husband, Bart (Paul Dano), and keep their family together, even though she’s in love with another man. The conversation happens in the midst of the family’s drive from Arizona to their new home in Northern California.

Steven really wanted to see the shift from Arizona to California, but what he had seen in his mind’s eye did not match the terrain we were looking at in Palmdale. Steven walked the set for about an hour, and he said, “This is not how I see this. This is a change in setting, a change in feeling, a change in narrative, and I need to see a change in the set design.” So I looked at Steven and said, “We can’t shoot this today. You don’t want to shoot this today. It doesn’t feel right. It doesn’t look right from the story you’re trying to tell.”

We decided to punt on the shooting of that scene until later in our schedule so we had time to find a better location for the narrative of the story.

There are many complications with that. Your schedule is spended, and you’re shooting something completely different. We scrambled, scouted a new location, and decided we would shoot it way deeper into the schedule up in Los Olivos, in wine country where there was a lot of changing landscape, and you can see that you’re on your way up to Northern California.

It was better for the scene and it was better for the actors, because Michelle at that point was four additional weeks in front of the camera as Mitzie Fabelman. We absorbed the cost, and we kept the movie on schedule.

YOU’VE WORKED ALONGSIDE KATHLEEN KENNEDY IN AT LEAST A COUPLE FILMS, INCLUDING AS A FELLOW EXEC PRODUCER ON THE BFG (2016), AND AS A COPRODUCER ON LINCOLN (2012). HOW HAS SHE INFLUENCED YOU AS A PROFESSIONAL IN THE INDUSTRY AND IN NAVIGATING A WORLD THAT’S STILL MOSTLY POPULATED AND RUN BY MEN?

Steven has always championed female producers and executives. From the earliest founding days of Amblin, Steven had, in hiring Kathy and Frank (Marshall), insisted on a woman at the highest level of executive leadership. And, as I stated before, I had world-class mentors in Kathy and Bonnie. Women have always held positions...
of power and influence at Amblin, including Laurie McDonald, Stacey Snider, Leslee Feldman, Holly Bario, Terry Press and more.

TELL US ABOUT THE VFX IN READY PLAYER ONE AND RECREATING THE VR EXPERIENCE. HOW DO YOU WORK WITH TECHNOLOGY THAT’S ABOVE MOST PEOPLE’S HEADS AND NOT BE INTIMIDATED BY IT?

You hire amazing department heads. Steven has taught me that you hire the best people for the job and get out of their way and let them do what they do best. It was no different in this case. We worked with ILM and Digital Domain. Steven has always been a groundbreaker in visual effects—films like Jurassic Park, Close Encounters and War of the Worlds, among others. Most of this technology Steven helped to create by constantly pushing the envelope. He encourages his team to innovate and experiment.

WHEN YOU PRODUCE FOR TELEVISION, SUCH AS THE FILM OSLO (2021) FOR HBO, DO YOU GO ABOUT THINGS DIFFERENTLY?

We tackled this exactly how we would tackle any film. Adapting to scale for television, whether that’s casting, budget, design, crafts—the most important thing is to do justice to the material. The mandate to produce quality is the same whether we are doing films or television.

YOU AND STEVEN SPIELBERG HAVE WORKED WITH CERTAIN ROLE PLAYERS IN THE CRAFTS REPEATEDLY: DP JANUSZ KAMINSKI, EDITOR MICHAL KAHN, PRODUCTION DESIGNER RICK CARTER, AND THE LIST GOES ON. WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF DOING REPEAT BUSINESS WITH TOP-FLIGHT ARTISANS? AND WHEN IS IT APPROPRIATE TO VEER FROM THAT DYNAMIC AND WIDEN THE TALENT POOL?

Obviously, when doing West Side Story we needed a choreographer. The material dictates when and how you widen the talent pool. We added Jeanine Tesori, Justin Peck and Gustavo Dudamel because we were doing a musical. On a movie like The Fabelmans, it was better to stay with Steven’s long-time family of collaborators due to the deeply personal nature of the film. There have been a few times where scheduling conflicts necessitated expanding the inner circle. For example, on Bridge of Spies, (composer) John Williams had a conflict, so we brought in Thomas Newman—and were very pleased with the results.

DO YOU SEE YOURSELF TRANSITIONING FROM PRODUCER TO ANOTHER DISCIPLINE AT ANY POINT?

I’m uniquely suited to producing—I cannot write and I cannot direct!

ADVICE TO UP-AND-COMING PLAYERS WHO’D LIKE TO DO WHAT YOU DO?

My advice? Put in the time. I spent 15 years absorbing and learning before I was ready to be a full-fledged producer. Ask questions—even at the risk of appearing like a rookie. Embrace and learn from mistakes. Love what you do. And understand that in the end, there is no substitute for doing the work.

NEW MEMBERS

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

JAMES SHIN

As executive producer of film and TV at Scooter Braun’s SB Projects, Shin helps shepherd the diversified media and entertainment company’s various ventures that integrate music, film, television, technology and philanthropy. He’s an executive producer on the series Dave for FX, and Neon for Netflix.

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

Working on productions early in my career as a music supervisor and seeing what a producer does first-hand.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO GO INTO PRODUCING?

Watching Jerry Bruckheimer and Brian Grazer movies growing up.

WHAT’S ON YOUR PRODUCING BUCKET LIST?

Producing a large-scale action movie with a killer soundtrack.