

ONE ON ONE

SEQUEL RITES

PRODUCERS ELIZABETH AVELLÁN (*SPY KIDS*) AND
BASIL IWANYK (*JOHN WICK*) TALK ABOUT THE RISKS AND
REWARDS OF BUILDING FRANCHISES FROM SCRATCH.

Sequels offer built-in familiarity for consumers and the opportunity for filmmakers to widen their audiences by upping the ante with each successive entry.

The movies tapped from such properties as Marvel comics and the Harry Potter books have proved to be gold mines. But the two franchises for which producers Elizabeth Avellán and Basil Iwanyk are best known—the *Spy Kids* and *John Wick* movies, respectively—are not associated with previously established IPs, but created from scratch.

The first *John Wick* (2014) hailed from a simple premise: A notorious hitman (Keanu Reeves) comes out of retirement to track down the villains who killed his puppy and stole his car. The modestly budgeted film performed beyond expectations, reaping \$86 million worldwide, cleaning up in ancillary, and spawning three sequels. The latest, *John Wick: Chapter 4*, was released in March and has generated almost \$360 million worldwide.

Spy Kids, centered on two young siblings who follow their parents into the world of espionage, dates back to 2001 and became an instant hit for Miramax, with a worldwide take of \$148 million. The first three films were made in quick succession, but the last two followed their predecessors by eight and 12 years. *Spy Kids: Armageddon* is due out in September from Netflix.

Avellán lives and works in Austin, Texas, where she and Robert Rodriguez cofounded Troublemaker Studios. Iwanyk, founder of Thunder Road Films—with offices in Santa Monica and Tribeca—resides in New Jersey. The two spoke to each other via Zoom about the challenges posed by sequels. The following is an edited version of their conversation.



ORIGIN STORIES

AVELLÁN: The *Spy Kids* series was really the first time that we (Avellán and Robert Rodriguez) thought there might be a franchiseable situation.

Spy Kids was not envisioned as a series per se. Robert could feel it had a magic to it, something unique for kids. We kept running into people at festivals that had seen *Desperado* and would say things like, “Oh, my son loves your movie,” and then you find out the kid is 6 or 7. And I’m like, “Um, there’s ratings on these movies.” But Robert was thinking, “I need to create something that has that energy. Why does that 6-year-old like that?”

Robert participated in an anthology movie called *Four Rooms* (1995). His lead character (played by Antonio Banderas) was Spanish—this family of a little boy, a little girl, mom and dad. As he was filming that, he was like, “Who are these people? What do they do?”

Once he talked to (Dimension’s) Bob Weinstein about it, he told Bob, “We can’t mention the title *Spy Kids*.” So we began developing that later in the ‘90s after we had done *The Faculty* (1998).

The first one was filmed in 1999. It was the “Untitled Robert Rodriguez Project” for a long time, even as we were shooting, to keep it under wraps. Because with (a title like) *Spy Kids*, you know what it is immediately.

IWANYK: On *John Wick*, I didn’t think in a million years that we were starting a franchise. It was a spec script written for a character in his late 70s. It called for a Harrison Ford or Clint Eastwood or Morgan Freeman. But we didn’t want to go that direction, so we gave it to Keanu, without directors. Of course, he’s like, “Why? I’m not this old.” But we developed it with him, got our directors, and we made the movie.

We didn’t know if this thing was a joke or if it was going to work because of the buy-in with the dog. When I

would pitch it, people would say, “That is just so goofy and ridiculous.” And unfortunately for us, Keanu had two films come out while we were shooting that underperformed. One was *Man of Tai Chi* (2013), which he directed, and the Universal movie he did about samurai (*47 Ronin*, 2013). All of a sudden our movie felt like a distressed asset.

We were completely independent. We didn’t have any studio, we didn’t have anybody to distribute the film except internationally (Lionsgate). We decided—because people didn’t get the premise, Keanu was kind of on a downswing, and our directors (Chad Stahelski, David Leitch) were stuntmen who had never directed anything—that there was nothing we could show distributors to convince them this movie could work unless we finished the entire movie.

Then when we screened it to every studio in town, everyone passed—the same movie that came out. Lionsgate—because they needed a minimum screen guarantee to hold their foreign distribution deals—said, “OK, we’ll take *John Wick*, but we’ll give you zero money upfront and give you a big outside share at the back end.

It was like the miracle of the movie gods. We got a great trailer, and all of a sudden our film was defined as “actually pretty good.” It was directed by stuntmen, and it was Keanu, and it was an insane premise. The movie did OK, like \$43 million dollars (domestic), and got really good reviews. We got out like a failed career suicide attempt. Keanu could work again. I didn’t lose a fortune, and the directors would be able to go on to other movies.

The big shocker was in the movie’s ancillary stuff. It was a different time, 10 years ago. It so greatly out-indexed what its domestic box office was that it was a very successful movie financially.

We always mused out loud that it would be fun to do another one, but no

one was asking. Lionsgate came to us and said, “If you guys have any ideas for another one, we’d be open.” We went into that second one truly not knowing if people felt: “OK, we liked the first one, you got away with it, don’t go back there again.” Or: “OK, we liked the first one, give us more.”

AVELLÁN: That’s an amazing story.

IWANYK: Yeah, it’s nuts. Even when I talk about it now, I get anxious. I couldn’t get my wife to go see early cuts. She was like, “Honey, it doesn’t sound good.” I’m like, “Oh God.”

AVELLÁN: It’s amazing. I love the series, by the way. I think Keanu is—with the dog especially—a fit foil for that whole setup.

IWANYK: That device was used once, so we went into the second movie going, “OK, we don’t have that device—is this going to work?” I have to hand it to Lionsgate for taking a shot with us.

AVELLÁN: To me it has to do with taking a chance on the stunt guys to direct this movie. It’s always about things like that for us, because here in Austin, we were able to build our own little studio that has some stages (Troublemaker Studios, formerly called Los Hooligans Productions). It used to be an old airport. We took over a piece of it. We’ve been able to give chances like that to people and nurture them. It seems like going out on a limb, but it’s creating something that gives a lot of encouragement to others who may have that dream.

IWANYK: Often the issue with handling first-time directors is who’s going to get cast. In this one, Keanu signed off on these guys. What Chad and Dave have done in their careers transcends any expectations I had



with them. But they had an incredible take and a great point of view. I'd much, much rather go with a first-time director with a scary pair of hands than a quasi journeyman with a safe pair of hands. The upside's greater. As a producer, I think you're at heart a gambler and an entrepreneur.

AVELLÁN: That's interesting that you mentioned the entrepreneurial spirit, because it is true. Troublemaker Studios was born out of an entrepreneurial kind of mindset. You're building from within your own structure of different actors you have already worked with, and you can bring them in for a small surprise cameo, (like) George Clooney as Devlin in *Spy Kids*. People still talk about that: "How do you get George Clooney?" Well, it comes from building relationships in other projects (Clooney starred in Rodriguez's *From Dusk Till Dawn*, 1996). To have that ability is a very big deal. I'm sure you have done the same in your films.

IWANYK: Well, not on a George Clooney level.

AVELLÁN: Well, George Clooney hadn't done much (in movies) at that point (prior to *From Dusk Till Dawn*).

IWANYK: One of the things that annoys me the most is when people look at the casts of films I worked on that were really hard to get made, and in retrospect, look like no-brainers. Like *The Town* (2010). I'd go into customs coming in from London—we were shooting *Clash of the Titans* (2010) there—and they're like, "What do you come in for?" I'm like, "*The Town*." "Who's in it?" "Ben Affleck." They'd be like, "Eh!" I'd add, "Jon Hamm." They'd be like, "Who?" "Blake Lively" "What?" "Jeremy Renner." Now people say, "God, what an all-star cast!" But not at the time.

Same with *Sicario* (2015). Emily Blunt was the fifth or sixth person we went after. Now people look at that and are

like, "Oh my gosh!" We put Ian McShane in like seven movies. Jon Bernthal we've put into a bunch of movies. He's another good-luck charm. Sam Worthington we've put in four movies.

I think a lot of it is we like them, we've had luck with them, let's keep it going. Now I feel bad for actors on movies that we worked on that were, you know, catastrophes.

AVELLÁN: But we created careers, and like you said, they weren't well known at the time. That's the beautiful thing about films: (people) get discovered.

ON TECHNOLOGY

AVELLÁN: One of the things I want to talk about is technology. How has it helped *John Wick* throughout the years? Or not at all?

IWANYK: We were able to pull off some stunts and some action scenes that back in the day would have cost

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—BASIL IWANYK

us a fortune or killed the stuntman. A lot of it is just safety.

By the way, there are also times where we actually do throw people down 10 flights of steps, and that’s not technology. That’s a stuntman who’s insane falling down a flight of steps.

AVELLÁN: Who knows how to do that.

IWANYK: Not to sound like a schmuck producer, but I love technology that makes things cheaper and easier. Whether it’s the visual effects pipeline in post or new camera rigs, everything that makes things cheaper and easier, I will embrace. If the end result is cool and emotional and compelling, I don’t think anyone cares how we got there.

AVELLÁN: I agree, because I feel a movie can get lost in the visual effects. It becomes perfunctory versus emotional.

With *Spy Kids*, the first one was shot on film. That was 1999. Robert was already (leaning toward) the Sony 900s (digital cameras) and HD. We were able to transition. We shot *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* with those, and then a month later we shot *Spy Kids 2*.

IWANYK: I’m working on a film (*Relay*) right now with director David MacKenzie, and he has a really interesting way of working. He doesn’t have any monitors on set—like zero.

But once a week he screens the cut dailies to the whole crew, to anyone

who wants to see the week’s work. To be in the room with the DP and production designer and costume designer and David and commenting on it is like, I’m under the hood.

I think it hurts the process when everybody watches dailies on their phone or their iPad or laptop. It’s individualized. You’re not in that room anymore. To me, that was such a big part of the filmmaking experience that’s now pretty much gone.

BECOMING FAMILY

AVELLÁN: Miramax did not say, “Yeah, we’re going to go into a second one” until that first 10 days at the box office. It did extremely well, opening in March, and blossomed from there. It was the first Latino kids’ movie that was given a McDonald’s (product placement) deal.

When McDonald’s showed up to tell us what they might do, we already had designed the toys.

On the third one (*Spy Kids 3-D: Game Over*, 2003), Robert wanted to get Ricardo Montalban, because Ricardo was the *Wrath of Khan* guy. It was in Robert’s brain to get grandparents in it. Besides its being a fun movie and in 3D.

IWANYK: *Spy Kids* and *John Wick* have something in common: They’re not based on any underlying IP. But there’s a perception that they are. As if *Spy Kids* was based on a series of children’s books, or *Wick* on a series of graphic novels. But we make it up as we go

along. There’s great freedom in that, because you’re building the plane while it’s in the air. It’s based on the brains of the people who did it, and we have no idea where we’re going.

AVELLÁN: [LAUGHING] That’s right. By the way, how did you come up with doing *John Wick 4*? Was it always planned?

IWANYK: At the end of 2 and 3, Keanu was like, “I’m done, I’m never doing this again, I’m beat up, I’m getting old.” Then we all think to ourselves, “Did we go a bridge too far? We’re tired.” The *Wick* movies are soul-crushing to me. Then we see a cut and it’s too long, and then it’s still a pain in the ass. And we fight, fight, fight. It was like 3 hours and 20 minutes.

Then we get to a place where it’s good enough to show somebody. We show it to an audience and we see their reaction and we’re all happy again. It reminds us why we do it.

Putting aside the obvious commercial and financial incentives, we all want to be relevant. We’ve been making *John Wick* movies for 10 years. We started from shit, and we’ve been through good and bad times. We put ourselves on the line for it, so it is a family. A dysfunctional family, but we’re all rooting for each other.

AVELLÁN: I know.

IWANYK: And we miss each other once too much time goes by. We miss

getting to make those movies. As hard as they are, we're playing with house money, and we all know it. So there's an emotional component of, "Let's get the band back together." But we're not there yet for 5 [LAUGHING]...

AVELLÁN: Well, you know, it's interesting because Bob Weinstein asked us to do a fourth one, and it was great. The fifth one was really interesting. The pandemic happens, right? We had never really thought about making a fifth one. The neat thing is that through the years, our children have gone from being little guys to being older and being around the set more.

I have two sons (Marcel and Racer Max) who were in their early 20s when the pandemic began. They spent a lot of time working together and writing and doing things on their own. Robert wrote *Spy Kids: Armageddon* with my son Racer Max, who's now 26. He's also a producer on the project.

But the beautiful thing for me in *Spy Kids 5* was being able to produce it with one of our sons, and the writing happened with him doing it with his siblings. Robert gave them the ideas, and they figured out the script.

SCALING UP

IWANYK: On *John Wick 1* we had a ton of deferments. Keanu deferred much of his fee. On the second one, it was more about the line payments. Ultimately, we were like, "OK, we need to get out of New York. Let's go to Rome." Between the above-the-line payments and the Rome sequence, that was really the increase. Everything else was pretty much the same. It's a big difference when you're working on a purely independently financed movie and a Lionsgate movie in terms of crew rates. But in terms of size and scope, it wasn't that big.

(Between) *John Wick 2* to *3* is where it really took the big step up. There are things that are not under our control,

like people getting raises. HODs love to work on franchises because that's where they get a raise themselves. Stuff that the audience wouldn't even notice increases the cost of these films. And we wanted to expand the world a bit. That's really what a lot of our expenditure was. It's a little bit more of the world.

The trap you fall into oftentimes is, I think, twofold. One, on the action, where it becomes impersonal and frankly too visual effects-driven. The second mistake people make is all of a sudden your cast seems unwieldy. In other words, you bring names in for the sake of bringing names in. It almost imbalances the cast. It's hard to explain, but you see it because it gets more expensive and studios are like, "Oh God, well, we've got to put Liam Neeson and Morgan Freeman as the bad guys." And you're like, "What?"

Spy Kids and *John Wick* were hits, but they weren't *The Avengers*. It wasn't a movie where it was so gigantic that you're like, "OK, we can do whatever we want." Even though you guys were at the Weinstein company and we were at Lionsgate, it still came from an independent spirit.

AVELLÁN: By the way, I also love the recurring characters in the *John Wick* series. That was kind of awesome to put Laurence Fishburne in there.

I also thought it was brilliant that you brought in Halle Berry (on *John Wick: Chapter 3 – Parabellum*). She was so bad-ass in the movie. Yeah, the actors get more expensive. Even the kids get more expensive, but you still kind of maintain the same budget for the below-the-line stuff. Maybe more visual effects when we're doing 3D, but the budgets are similar, like you were saying, in their scope.

IWANYK: It's funny you say that because that was a tortured conversation. "Who are the characters that maybe don't justify their own film,

but are so beloved in the context of this franchise that by not having them, it upsets the audience?" We've had a lot of debate about not bringing certain people back that we really liked in the films.

Did you ... of the five movies, is there any actor that survived through all five?

AVELLÁN: Obviously Danny Trejo has been a recurring person in our movies. Much like in yours, you have those people who are good-luck charms. He has been I think in four of them. Mike Judge was in the first three.

Alan Cumming I think is in three of them as Floop.

But I have liked bringing other actors from other movies that had nothing to do with *Spy Kids* along the way. Salma Hayak played Mike Judge's wife, Cesca Giggles (in *Spy Kids 3: Game Over*). Salma was willing to come down even though she was in the middle of *Frida* doing all the publicity and Academy Awards press.

IMPORTANCE OF TONE

IWANYK: We probably talk about tone more than anything else in the franchise, because tone to me informs every decision you make, whether it's casting, wardrobe, action, everything.

It was always important for us that the audience would know we were in on the joke. We knew what we were showing you was crazy, fun, absurd. We knew reality was being thrown out the window, but it still felt like it was grounded. Then on the flip side, let's also make sure we don't become a parody of ourselves.

We look back to the Bond franchise. Like, don't want to turn into *Moonraker*, but at the same time don't be so dour where people go "God, this is really violent." Let them know that they're in for a ride.

AVELLÁN: I love those kinds of action films. But I also think that in yours specifically, there's something about Keanu that's very childlike, and at the

same time a worn-down child. He knows this is just another mountain. The mountain will lead to another mountain and at the same time, he walks through it and survives. He gives the tone its center.

In *Spy Kids*, Robert is very into unique—he was a cartoonist before filmmaking. He did a cartoon for the paper at the University of Texas, and he was always drawing. So there's a certain amount of a child inside Robert Rodriguez that's deep and fun because he always had little siblings, and then we had little kids. You see things through the eye of a child. It's just so much fun to see their innocence and the things they say and how they express themselves and how they take an idea.

The Floop world came from that childlike sensibility, and having Alan Cumming made Robert go out and make it something that a kid would dream about. That Floop castle was like a dream. Robert is always tinkering with things.

But the tone for me is always about family and what you accomplish as a group together. Helping each other using your best talents.

IWANYK: Yeah, I think that's an interesting point because we obviously couldn't use the device of the dog on 2, 3 and 4. If you look at the movies, it's always people yearning for family or the anxiety of a family. You have Donny Yen who cut his eyes out to save his daughter. You have Halle Berry who's banished herself to Morocco to not go near her daughter because it would bring her daughter danger. John Wick is yearning for his old life and his wife.

That's something that we really, really focus on—those human elements of loss and yearning and people being damned. And as they're damned, they realize, "Oh my god, I'm bringing my damnation to everybody around me." It's fathers and daughters, fathers and sons. That'll always be an element of the John Wick movies. The humanity of it.

MOMENTUM AND THE GAP BETWEEN SEQUELS

AVELLÁN: A lot of times we'll do back-to-back because you have the crew and just keep working. And the postproduction's happening on a parallel plane. But we were doing other things. Because of the pandemic and Robert having done *We Can Be Heroes* (2020), which did extremely well for Netflix. That's why they (Netflix) are involved in the release of *Spy Kids 5 - Armageddon*.

Things have changed quite a bit in how much you can work the kids on a set. The rules have gotten very different, and then the pandemic, with COVID restrictions, added to the amount of time we could do certain things. It was an interesting new structure that I had to produce under.

IWANYK: But also, I think years and dates are not the same for nonproducers. I'm working on movies that are going to come out in Q1 of 2025. On a personal level, that feels like a universe away. But on a producer level, that means you're getting the movie financed and getting it ready in the summer, you're prepping it in the fall, you're shooting it all next year, and then you have post. By the time it comes out, it's March or April of 2025. That's like right around the corner, even though it's a year and a half from now. ■

NEW MEMBERS

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



CLAUDE J. EASY

A New York City-based producer with over a decade of experience in digital storytelling, content creation and video production, Easy is the founder of KultureHub.com, an organization dedicated to providing underrepresented communities with resources and opportunities they need to succeed in their respective industries.

WHAT ATTRIBUTES ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF?

My ability to connect with people from all walks of life.

WHAT IS THE BIGGEST MISCONCEPTION PEOPLE HAVE ABOUT THE PRODUCER'S ROLE?

It's not just about having good ideas; you need to be able to navigate complex environments and earn the trust of executives and other decision-makers who hold the keys to getting your projects made.

WHO OR WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO GO INTO PRODUCING?

Growing up with parents who emigrated from Jamaica, I was exposed to their love of cinema, particularly spaghetti Westerns and 007 movies. The stories my parents shared about the sacrifices they made to give me a better life in America helped me to understand and appreciate the struggles of black and brown creators in the production industry.