

OPTIMISTIC AND UNFLAPPABLE

NOMINEES FOR THE ZANUCK AWARD EXPOUND ON CHALLENGES OF COVID AND MAINTAINING HEALTHY EQUILIBRIUM FOR CAST AND CREW.

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Jon Landau, Graham Broadbent and Nate Moore



PGA Presidents Stephanie Allain and Donald De Line



Rian Johnson, Todd Field and Jerry Bruckheimer



Kristie Macosko Krieger



Darren Aronofsky



Gail Berman



Jonathan Wang



L-R: Todd Field, PGA National Executive Director Susan Sprung, Jon Landau, Jonathan Wang, Rian Johnson, Graham Broadbent, Stephanie Allain, Nate Moore, Donald De Line, Darren Aronofsky, Katie Macosko Krieger, Gail Berman, PGA General Counsel Susie Casero, Jerry Bruckheimer

There were plenty of insights and a sprinkling of surprises when producers behind the 10 nominees for the PGA's Darryl F. Zanuck Award for Outstanding Motion Picture gathered for a panel discussion on February 25 at LA's Skirball Cultural Center.

For example, who knew that *Elvis* was the first live-action film produced by Gail Berman, the storied studio executive and recent two-term PGA president? Or that Jerry Bruckheimer (*Top Gun: Maverick*) was a first-time nominee?

The gathering, sponsored by *The Hollywood Reporter* and moderated by PGA Presidents Stephanie Allain and Donald De Line, stood as a reminder of both the eclectic nature of today's feature film landscape and the resilience of the filmmakers, whose productions across the board were affected by the COVID outbreak and its lingering aftermath.

"The most difficult part of the film for me was the day we got the call that Tom Hanks (who played Colonel Tom Parker in *Elvis*) and Rita Wilson had the coronavirus, which is what it was being called at that moment," recalled Berman about the film's early stages of production in March 2020. "We didn't know that much about the coronavirus at the time, or what their health was like, and then Warner Bros. said they were shutting the movie down."

Filming resumed in August of that year, when Hanks received a clean bill of health, and wrapped the following spring. But other productions did not have the luxury of weathering such a lengthy hiatus, or sustaining an extended production period.

"Working with an ensemble cast, we really couldn't shuffle their schedules a lot," said Rian Johnson, producer-writer-director of *Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery*. "A lot of them had a hard out, so if we had someone go down and had a delay, we could have really been in trouble. But luckily we were able to keep everybody safe."

Juggling the availability of an all-star cast is one thing, but when your movie hinges on the participation of one key player, it's no less risky, COVID or not. "Cate (Blanchett) had a hard out," said Todd Field, producer-writer-director of *Tár*. "She's in every frame of the film. If she went down, that was it. There were no contingencies."

The primacy of writing was not lost on the group. Two of the producers on hand, Field and Johnson, earned a solo screenplay credit on their nominated projects.

"The hardest thing for all of us up here, and for *Avatar: The Way of Water*, was the script," exclaimed Landau, who with Cameron won top honors from the PGA and the Academy for *Titanic* (1998). "I think we're overshadowing that in our conversations about the production and all the things that we solved. We were faced with the challenge of doing a sequel that we wanted to be a stand-alone movie that stood on its own merits. That comes down to the script."

The gap between *Avatar* (2009) and its follow-up was exceeded considerably by *Top Gun: Maverick*. Principal photography commenced 33 years after shooting started on the original, even though a sequel was announced in 2010. Part of the delay had to do with the death of Tony Scott, who directed the first *Top Gun* (1986). But when preproduction resumed in 2017, the gap in time figured into the story—a blueprint that Bruckheimer cited as one the project's biggest hurdles.

"It's always the hardest thing," said Bruckheimer. "How do you get a

great script? How do you highlight Tom's journey through this movie? It was (director) Joe Kosinsky who came up with an idea, and we flew to Paris where Tom was shooting *Mission Impossible–Fallout* (2018) and pitched the idea. That hooked Tom. We worked all the way through the process and even through editing to make it as good as it could be."

Darren Aronofsky talked about the 10-year process of bringing *The Whale* to the screen, from the time he first saw the play by Samuel D. Hunter in 2012 at New York's Playwrights Horizons. "The most obvious challenge of the piece was figuring out who should play Charlie," he said. After considering many actors and non-actors, he "stumbled on a trailer for a really low-budget film with Brendan (Fraser) in it, in a foreign language, and thought, 'Wow, we never thought of him.' It was just a gut feeling that we had finally found Charlie, and it all worked out."

When asked about their superpowers as a producer, the importance of establishing a tone of calm and assurance on set emerged as a common refrain.

"Part of our job is to believe in the movie more than anyone, and to be the most optimistic and the least flappable," said Nate Moore (*Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*). "Because movies are constantly very close to falling apart. I think a lot of times the crew looks to us for, 'Is this OK? Is the movie still going to be good despite what's currently happening?' And you have to believe that it will, even if inside it's, 'Man, I don't know how I'm going to figure that out.'"

Jonathan Wang (*Everything Everywhere All at Once*) likened his job to being "the vibes police on set," or a "summer camp counselor."

"We all got into this business to have fun," he said. "I'm just trying to make sure I don't bring any stress to the equation. Just try to make it really pleasant, like a fertile garden for creativity."

Whatever the circumstances, cynicism cannot enter into the equation, asserted Berman, who calls that attitude "the killer of creativity."

On *The Fabelmans*, a coming-of-age story inspired by Steven Spielberg's formative years as an aspiring director, special care was taken to give the filmmaker the space to navigate what turned out to be a highly emotional shoot.

"We formed a very close-knit family on set, and we just allowed him space to think and feel safe and comfortable and vulnerable," recalled Kristie Macosko Krieger. "He was having memories flooding back to him of his childhood while he was making the film. He told the cast before we started, 'I'm done freaking out, I had all my therapy in writing the script with Tony Kushner. We're good. I got this.' Then on set he broke down quite a bit. Sometimes it was tears of joy and sometimes it was tears of sadness. Sometimes it was just him being able to have his parents back for a little bit of time."

Through careful nurturing, Graham Broadbent (*The Banshees of Inisherin*) has enjoyed the producer's vantage point of watching Martin McDonagh evolve from a playwright into a full-fledged feature director over the course of four films.

"When we made *In Bruges* (2008), McDonagh had made a short (*Six Shooter*, 2004), which he won an Oscar for, so he was a precocious talent, but he hadn't made a full-length film," recalled Broadbent. "On *Banshees*, we'd all had that additional COVID preparation time, but he had absolutely gone to the point where he storyboards every scene, he knew where the locations are going to be, he knew why he required inside-outside builds beside a bit of sea—because it was a very particular image he wanted and he knew how it was going to be shot."

"A lot of our jobs as producers is, 'What's the priority?'" Broadbent added. "If we have a real sense of what those priorities are, let's make sure we're always working towards those. I think the nice thing about (repeated collaborations) is to never be on set looking across the camera going, 'How the fuck did we ever get into this situation?' Because you always know what's going on."

One of the things that came out of

the pandemic, moderator Allain noted, was more sensitivity to the well-being, or mental health, of those within the production bubble, and having somebody on set who's dedicated to that process. "A spiritual coordinator," as she called it. Whether it was processing the grief over actor Chadwick Boseman's recent death entering into production on *Wakanda Forever*, or simply creating "a welcome environment to share and process feelings," as Moore put it, it was clear that there was no going back to business as usual.

"That sense of awareness," explained Field, "of knowing who you're working with, is everything. I think that you've known the productions you've worked on where that hasn't been the case. No one is paying attention; people are objectified by their jobs. I think the danger in filmmaking often is we all get these 'kick me' signs attached to our backs, and we all get ghettoized as 'you're this, you're that.' And at the end of the day, yeah, there's hierarchy, but we all have to lock arms together. We have to care about each other to get our work done as a practical matter, but also as human beings."

Another thing everybody agreed on was that the collective experience of seeing a movie in theaters is still alive and kicking. Bruckheimer noted that *Top Gun: Maverick* was put "on the shelf for two years so audiences could enjoy it in theaters. We waited, and it worked out great for everybody."

"I learned that the movie business is not dead," added Landau when asked what knowledge he gained from producing *Avatar: The Way of Water*. "We as artists still have an opportunity to entertain people around the world and tell stories that have an impact on the world and the people who see them. I think that's the power of films. I think we forget that. We think of it just as this entertainment. But we actually have the ability to educate. We have the ability to inspire people to look at our world differently, to treat people differently, and people will still come to the movies. We have to preserve that." ■