FOR JONATHAN WANG, ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE

THE AWARD-WINNING PRODUCER’S SELFLESS, CREATIVITY-FIRST APPROACH TO FILMMAKING AIMS TO PUSH US “TOWARD OUR BETTER ANGELS” AND REDEFINE HOW MOVIES ARE MADE.

WRITTEN BY STEVE CHAGOLLAN
PHOTOGRAPHED BY KREMER JOHNSON
ack in early spring of 2023, when Everything Everywhere All at Once was well into its Sherman’s march through the awards season—having swept top honors from all the major guilds and heading to the Oscars as the clear frontrunner—Hollywood was experiencing an Easy Rider moment. Here was this scrappy, wacky indie film that was rocking the establishment and turning notions of narrative and audience engagement on their ears.

The film, which has grossed $141 million worldwide on a $14.3 million budget, was called “an exuberant swirl of genre anarchy” by The New York Times, and was credited for bringing art-house enthusiasts back into theaters.

Through it all, the producer Jonathan Wang, who had been working with Everything Everywhere’s directing duo Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert—known collectively as “Daniels”—for more than 10 years, was mixing with some of the industry’s biggest names. Here was this ingratiating, articulate, youthful presence who brought rock-star charisma to a discipline not necessarily known for flouting convention and questioning the status quo.

Countless panels and red-carpet events dating back to Everything Everywhere’s unveiling in March, 2022 at SXSW—where it won the Audience Award—had expanded Wang’s exposure beyond his indie niche.

“To be quite honest, I felt a little out of sorts as a producer,” says Wang (pronounced “Wong”), who entered the profession as a musician and tour manager. “I didn’t feel as if I was accepted in that community. I always felt like this weird outsider. But through the nomination cycle, and going to all these awards events with Kristie (Macosko Krieger), with Gail (Berman), with Jerry Bruckheimer, Jon Landau—that’s when I felt really accepted and at home, independent of my background. It was for the work and who I am, and it felt really good.”

Although having won a Best Picture Oscar might suggest he’s already reached the mountaintop—he admits such a milestone can be “an inspiration killer,” as in “you either have big shoes to fill or you’ve made it”—Wang is just getting started.

“I’m 38, and I feel so young,” he says. “But the thing that will never stop me from waking up is wanting to tell better stories, or rethink what a worthy story is. Or the beauty of life, the beauty of people, the beauty of this planet—the fragility of this planet. To be able to run toward that, out of the sacredness of this place and these people and this world and this chance we have to live. That is the motivator.”

If there are shades of existentialism in Wang’s thought process, it’s not an affectation. He majored in philosophy at a private Christian university in Southern California. His favorite novel is Dostoevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov, a book that delves deeply into theological questions of faith and reason, and our role in the universe.

These are big, meaning-of-life themes, the kind of issues Wang and Daniels tackle in their feature collaborations Swiss Army Man (2016) and Everything Everywhere (2022), which ponder the questions: Who are we? Why do we exist? Who might we be if we took the path less taken and followed our hearts? What is our responsibility to ourselves and to mankind?

That these questions are cloaked in movies that are aggressively peculiar, if not utterly outrageous, is the unique beauty of their appeal. Swiss Army Man is largely a two-hander involving a man (Paul Dano) stranded on an island with a flatulent corpse (Daniel Radcliffe), with whom he creates an imaginary bond. Everything Everywhere is a multiverse, cluster bomb mashup. It features a largely Asian cast led by Michelle Yeoh and boasts shades of existential angst.
NEW MEMBERS

ALEX BASKIN

Alex Baskin is a production manager at Sony Pictures Animation. He most recently served as the associate production manager for editorial on Hotel Transylvania 4: Transformania (2022) and for story on The Mitchells vs. the Machines (2021).

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

You can’t control how a film will be received, no matter how hard everyone works and how good the creative can be. What you can control is the experience of folks who work on it and the memories made, (and to) come in at or under budget with a happy crew trying their hardest to execute together—that’s in your hands.

WHAT’S ON YOUR PRODUCING BUCKET LIST?

Just keep making stuff that people watch.

Wang says The Brothers Karamazov made him want to make Swiss Army Man because the thesis of that film is that “shame keeps us from love. The character of Hank (Dano) was ashamed of himself, so he had to create Manny (Radcliffe) in order to experience the love that he wanted for himself. That is an eternal truth that we all experience.”

That film amounted to a crash course in feature filmmaking for both writer-directors and their producer, if not an indication that they were meant for each other.

“The biggest thing I had to learn up to the point of making Everything Everywhere was how to harmonize with (Daniels’) creative flow,” says Wang. “They have a strong energy that has this centrifugal motion to it, and I have to be this moon that’s orbiting around their orbit. As long as I’m bolstering the things that are good, and encouraging and laughing at the things that are great, I trust they’re going to be able to figure it out. I never feel I need to cut them off at the knees.”

In just the past year, Wang has become a model ambassador of martial arts flicks, sci-fi, the films of Kar Wai Wong, and slapstick action—all dealing with love, acceptance, ethnic identity and the generation gap.

Wang, center foreground, and the Everything Everywhere team at the Golden Globes in January.
NEW MEMBERS

JACOB ROSENTHAL
Multi-platform line producer and production manager Jacob Rosenthal has produced feature films, television, documentaries, commercials and branded campaigns for Jurassic World, Disney, Madden, Marvel, The Fast and the Furious and Hasbro.

WHO OR WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO GO INTO PRODUCING?
Before I went to film school, I would watch all the making-of docs on the DVD special features discs. My favorite part was listening to the producers talk about their process. I would get so excited at the idea of being someone who brings together a multitalented team of creative people to accomplish a unified vision. After that, I started producing any film projects friends had ideas for.

FAITH-BASED FORMATIVE YEARS
Wang’s working-class upbringing shed some light on his methods and tastes. His Taiwanese-born father was Buddhist when he met Wang’s mother, a Midwesterner with Western European roots. He became an evangelical Christian when they married. “A lot of immigrant parents convert to Christianity as a way to assimilate,” says Wang, “and for its strong value systems. Christianity in our country is like part and parcel of being American.”

His parents moved from Dallas, Texas, where Wang was born, to San Diego, California, when he was 4. They ended up owning a bakery, which consumed a lot of their time. “I was a latchkey kid,” says Wang. “I had a key to the house when I was in first grade. My brother and I took care of ourselves. We found our passions largely through the church. It was a way to have a caretaker. You go to summer camp, you’re a part of a youth group, you go to church on Sundays.

“So, a lot of my private pursuits came through the church, and also from being independent and chasing my own curiosities.”

Wang got into music in his teens, joining a praise band when he was 15. One influential pastor convinced him to play the guitar “in a way that was not just mechanic, but to feel it and understand the rhythm and the soul of a song.”

When it came time to choose a path forward after high school, he was leaning toward either music, fine arts, culinary for alternative cinema, extolling the virtues of original storytelling versus preexisting IPs. “I think we’re all familiar with this Joseph Campbell reductive thinking of the hero’s journey,” he says. “That’s good storytelling. But I think what it does is focus the lens on the individual, and what an individual cares about, regardless of the impact on others.

“I think the mission statement for me is: Is this story pushing us toward our better angels? Is this story pushing us toward the kind of people we want to be that can survive on this planet for the long term?”

“It’s like (Plato’s) allegory of the cave. We’ve been looking at the shadows for so long, we should just turn around and look at the sun and start making movies about that beautiful thing over there rather than this thing over here.”

It’s taken more than a decade for Wang to achieve this seeming overnight success, but it hasn’t gone to his head. During a remote interview with Produced By, he handles Zoom glitches himself with no complaint. At a photo shoot in downtown LA, he’s fully present, focused on the task at hand—no phone distractions, no handlers hovering. He offers to help move props. He treats the photographers to lunch afterward, an unprecedented gesture for them.

Wang has a gift for reading the room. “He can wear a lot of hats and he can speak a lot of different languages, depending on the person he’s talking to, in a way that feels genuine,” says Ruan. Dr. or Scheinert puts it: “He can feel the vibe better than anyone I’ve ever met.”

THE THING THAT I WOULD ADVOCATE FOR ANY PRODUCER TO DO IS TO WRITE THEIR OWN SCRIPT, AND HAND IT TO A DIRECTOR, AND THEN TO FEEL WHAT THAT FEELS LIKE, TO BE ON THE RECEIVING END OF SOMEONE’S JUDGMENT. IT WILL CHANGE THE WAY YOU GO ABOUT GIVING THEM NOTES.”
Wang and crew in Northern California for Swiss Army Man. He was paid $30,000 for four years’ work on the film, and was asked to defer half.

school or academia. “That was one of the only times my dad gave me parental advice,” recalls Wang. “He sat me down and said, ‘You can do anything you want; just don’t go into food, because it’s terrible.’ I listened to his advice, and then was like, ‘Ok, then I’d like to do music.’ They held up their end of the bargain and said, ‘We’ll support you.’”

College ended up being a kind of detour. His philosophy studies involved reading the classics. “I also took creative writing, and poetry, with some great professors,” he says. “The greatest gift of all was Dostoevsky. Then I went to Russia to do a Russian lit course for a quarter. That was what made me go, ‘OK, I just need to start telling stories.’” At the time, music felt like the best expression for that, and he ended up...
up leaving school before earning his degree. “The goal of college for me was just to become well read and have the intellectual tools to think logically and critically,” he says. “It was not so much about getting a piece of paper.”

As a musician, Wang’s forte was metal and punk, and played in bands from his native San Diego such as Thieves and Liars, a Christian rock and metal band, and As I Lay Dying, with whom he toured but was not an official member. One would be hard pressed to find an example of Wang’s music (“‘T’ was pre-Spotify, pre-MySpace,” he says), which adds to his enigmatic allure. It’s notable that Wang admires artists who’ve played no small roll in shaping their own mystique, like Nick Cave and Bob Dylan.

Wang would end up parlaying his music pursuits into stage and tour management, a role he played for Delta Spirit, another San Diego band, and Cold War Kids, whose members attended the same Christian alma mater. The gigs prepared him for the kind of artist-first support role he would later play as a producer for commercials, music videos and films, shielding the talent from complications that would invariably arise from town to town, venue to venue.

This Teflon approach to protecting the artist has carried over into his film career. “He insulates different departments from each other so there’s not a lot of drama that involves everybody,” says Scheinert. “That’s a side of him we rarely see. He has navigated the world of talent agencies on our behalf for years, has put out fires, and then shown back up with a smile on his face.”

Adds Kwan: “He’s good in particular with our situation. We’re a directing duo. We’re both aligned in a lot of ways, but we are also very different, and we have different approaches. It’s nice to have Jon who can play somewhere in the middle.”

THE SIREN SONG OF CINEMA

Wang’s path to features was sparked by a light bulb moment in 2003 when he saw Park Chan-wook’s Oldboy. Like the films of Godard or Resnais (or even Daniels) —which can evoke bewilderment, even outrage, among the uninstructed before a lingering fascination sets in—so too did Park’s film with Wang. “I was offended by the movie,” Wang recalls. “I actually left (the theater) mad at the movie. Then I couldn’t stop thinking about it.”

Another film that shook his sensibilities was Michel Gondry’s Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004). “I was still living with my parents. I went home and my mom asked, ‘Are you OK?’ I said, ‘I don’t know. I feel kind of crazy.’ I went into my room and cried for a long time. I loved that movie because on a metaphysical level, (it suggested) you can make choices in your life that will strip you and pull you away from the thing that you love the most. I felt that so deeply.

“They had told me, ‘Wow, I don’t think any art form can do that: that signaled a shift in me creatively, and it opened up a space.’” It also marked a turning point in Wang’s Christian mindset, which he was already challenging against. “It broke that sensibility,” he says, and he felt that “you can still tell really beautiful, profound, moving, impactful stories without it being in a rigid box.”

Wang’s parents were not exactly cinema buffs, but they enjoyed classic movies. TCM was a mainstay in their household. Because Wang’s father’s favorite film was The Godfather, Wang approached a friend who worked at Francis Ford Coppola’s American Zoetrope’s Directors Bureau offices in LA, hoping to land an internship there.

“That was the single luckiest thing in my life—going from music and then getting this internship,” says Wang. “At the time, Mike Zakin was the executive there with Roman Coppola. We were developing Mozart in the Jungle (2014–18) and Roman’s other feature film that he was developing (A Movie Inside the Mind of Charles Swan III, 2012).”

Poring over books and short stories and thinking about how they would translate into film, Wang had a front row seat in witnessing and absorbing the preproduction process and engaging in what he calls “utility artistic support.”

“Mike Zakin would go, ‘Can you help build out this pitch deck for Mozart in the Jungle?’ So I drew this picture of Mozart with punk hair and it said, ‘Sex, Drugs and Classical Music.’ It was the cover of a pitch deck, and we’d build out these image suites.”

The American Zoetrope experience emboldened Wang to approach bands to produce their music videos, which led to some gigs with such production companies as Doomsday and then, Prettypixels, the latter with a roster of talented filmmakers that included Melina Matsoukas, Justin Chon and, at the time, the Daniels.

MUSIC VIDEO MEISTER

Daniel Scheinert describes their first encounter as the “perfect meet-cute.”

“He had been working at Prettypixels, a company where we made commercials,” recalls Scheinert, “and had told them I really want to work with those guys, Daniel and Daniel.” He found out we were all going to be at the LA Film Festival that year. Our mutual friend Candice Dragonas (an ex-producer at Prettypixels) set it up. So we met each other at an after-party. We got along well and instantly made a stupid short film (shot on an iPhone) that we sent to Candice where Dan and I run at each other full force, and right when we collide, we explode into Jon, who’s half Chinese and half white.”

Adds Kwan: “The funny thing is, we already had a producer at the time that we’d been working with pretty closely, and it didn’t make sense for us to work with (Wang). But within a few months,
something came up and our producer got pulled away to a completely different life path. So we hit up Jon. We hired him for two music videos back-to-back. They both ended up being some of the hardest videos we’ve ever made (Foster the People’s “Don’t Stop” and The Battles’ “My Machines,” featuring Gary Numan). He went through the wringer and came out the other side intact, with two videos we’re proud of still. We’ve been working with him ever since. This was back in 2011.”

But the video Wang produced that really got people’s attention, including Paul Dano, was DJ Snake’s and Lil Jon’s “Turn Down for What” (2014), starring Kwan himself, who’s so pumped up on testosterone that his penis seems to have a destructive mind of its own (foreshadowing Radcliffe’s penis-as-compass in Swiss Army Knife). The video also features the actress Sunita Mani, who plays a role in Scheinert’s solo directing effort, The Death of Dick Long (2019), which Wang also produced.

“Turn Down for What,” with its collapsing floors and frenetic, handheld aesthetic, gives “sit on my face” a whole new meaning, and has attracted more than a billion views on YouTube. Wang and Daniels also collaborated on videos for Passion Pit, Tenacious D, and the Shins, among others. Wang would also work with directors like Hiro Murai, known for his partnership with Donald Glover on Atlanta and an executive producer on The Bear.

Music videos might not have the same exposure as they did in MTV’s 1980s heyday, but they continue to be the best platform to let the imagination run wild. And Wang appreciates the form for its anything-goes spirit and as a vehicle for putting creativity first. It also allowed Wang and Daniels to hone their skills as storytellers.

“I do think there’s something about playing within a small, confined playground that leads to a longer creativity,” he says. “I don’t know who this quote is from, but it’s a quote I say often: ‘With concision comes profundity.’ I think that if you’re concise with your words you’re able to write poetry. The gaps in between the words lead to a certain emergent beauty that I think is that eternal thing that you can’t really speak to. In music videos you have a confined timeline— you have three to five minutes and a confined tone, whether it’s brooding or aggressive or sappy or sentimental. You then have to have visuals that either go in harmony with it, or in counterpoint, or some dissonance. I think those constraints lead to something really special.”

Needless to say, music plays a major role in Wang’s work with Daniels, and the producer has taken full advantage of the relationships he’s formed in that community.
“TV’S BEST SHOW. ABSOLUTELY PERFECT.”

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Chicago Tribune

“Everything Everywhere” was a solo directing effort to the few.

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“The Daniels are very synchronous in that way, where they view the edit and the filmmaking through the lens of tone and score and music first. It’s all through that feeling. I’m the same way. If I hear it, and I can feel it, then I know how to film it.”

JONATHAN WANG

PIECING THE PUZZLE TOGETHER

Given the barrage of styles, smash cuts, setting switches and alternative universes in Everything Everywhere, one would imagine that getting the proper coverage for all these elements might have been overwhelming for all involved. But Wang viewed the challenge with the attitude of an independent filmmaker needing to maximize resources.

“We knew our anchor universes had to be classic scene coverage,” says Wang. “We’re going to shoot our wide; we’re going to go in for close-ups, we’re doing cross coverage, etc. Then there’s a lot of stuff where the Daniels were just like, ‘Trust us. We don’t need that. We can just shoot in one direction. We’re going to get this one shot. That’s all we need in this universe.’”

“If you look at the coverage, it’s actually really simple. That’s where Daniels and I like to think within a small model. We would rather find a location where 80% is good. There’s no way you can prioritize every single one of these universes and fully flesh them out and shoot all this stuff conventionally. So it was about prioritizing coverage and shooting for the edit, and knowing exactly what we needed. And not about overshooting out of fear.”

Wang is a big proponent of positive reinforcement, which seems like the most logical thing in the world in a business and an art form built on collaboration. That is, until you realize how rare it is in Hollywood. For example, he’s a big advocate for a light touch in the notes department. One can only imagine how the first draft of Everything Everywhere read to the few who had seen it.

“When I got that first draft, it was 270 pages,” recalls Wang. “It was way too long, and there were scenes in there that I knew they just wrote to be funny for the sake of being funny but weren’t going to be good for the movie.”

“The last thing I wanted to do was say, ‘This will never fly. We’ve gotta shorten this thing.’ They knew that, so it’s really me giving them the positive feedback of, ‘This scene really worked for me. I want more of this.’ Give them another smart set of eyes to give them some guardrails.”

This open-mindedness and generosity of spirit stems from Wang placing himself in the writer-director’s shoes.

“I would advocate for any producer to write their own script and hand it to a director. Feel what that feels like to be on the receiving end of someone’s judgment. It will change the way you go about giving them notes. You’ll have to consider their emotions. You’ll have to consider the work that went into it and where it’s at in the process.”

This attitude was not lost on Daniels.

“He does a lot of positive reinforcement notes,” says Scheinert. “He knows that we’re pretty hard on ourselves, so it’s like, ‘Oh, that’s working? Great, we can hold onto that.’”

Addh Kwan, “To Jon’s credit, he started writing his own screenplays during the pandemic because he’s a very creative person. After he came out of that process—he’s still in it, actually—he came to us and said, ‘Guys, I’m so sorry. I feel like I would give you completely different notes. Now that I’m writing, I see how vulnerable and how hard it is.’ It’s fun to have a relationship with someone who can grow in that way.”

“The Death of Dick Long (2019), a solo directing effort from Scheinert. A friend of Schein...
Wang on location for Everything Everywhere, which was made for $14.3 million and ended up grossing $141 million worldwide, A24’s top moneymaker to date.

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JONATHAN WANG

urt’s from college in Alabama, Billy Chew, wrote the film. Like Scheinert’s other feature collaborations with Kwan, Dick Long, which sounds like a porn name, is more linear—leaner, meaner and Coenesque. Wang calls it “this weird, noir farce of a little thriller romp.” They shot it in Alabama for $1 million dollars.

The film was made for A24, the art-house darling behind such films as Moonlight (2016) and Midsommar (2019), with whom the filmmakers have enjoyed a longstanding relationship.

“After we made Swiss Army Man, I pitched it to A24 and said, ‘View this as the pilot for a TV show where it’s Coenesque hijinks in the South. There’s a newspaper called theAdvertiser-Gleam (based in Guntersville, Alabama) and we were going to make this show called Gleam. It was going to be about these odd headlines that you read, like a man whose farm exploded due to a leaky gas line that sent a pig flying. We thought, ‘Why don’t we just pitch this first episode as a movie and do it as a proof of concept?’ A24 loved the script and suggested we make it as a movie and not as a pilot.”

Like Swiss Army Man, the film toys with perceptions of masculinity and intimacy between seemingly heterosexual males. (Scheinert has stated that he and Kwan are not “aggro manly men.”) Despite the almost unspeakable aspect of the film’s premise, it’s a rather tender tale about sensitive souls, even ones who sport mullets, own guns and play crappy, garage-band rock.

More importantly, Dick Long established a pattern of sustainable filmmaking that Kwan continues to champion.

“The greatest thing about it was that it was a way for us to experiment with the process of filmmaking,” says Wang. “There’s no difference to us between content and the way we make it. It was a testament to sustainable, local filmmaking. Daniel Scheinert’s partner, Stef (Stefanie Lynch), is credited as the sustainability and community outreach producer. She’s the one who piloted this whole thing and helped us think about finding local partners for the coffee and the craft (service) and the food—really pouring back into the community and schools. And trying to partner with farmers to have a closed loop system with our food so we could feed the pigs. That was all developed there.”

Wang practices what he preaches. He drives an electric car and bikes to work from his house in LA’s Highland Park to new offices in nearby Eagle Rock, which he shares with Daniels, with visits from frequent collaborators: DP Larkin Seiple and production designer Jason Kiwandy, who hail back to their music vid days. Scheinert credits Wang with helping to preserve...
a community of artists they’ve worked with repeatedly.

“I lived in Highland Park first and I don’t like to commute, so I just bullied them both into buying houses and living near me,” says Scheinert. “We just got an office space in Eagle Rock, which is like a five- or seven-minute bike ride from where we live. We’re trying to do LA in a completely different way. I don’t know if it was intentional at first, but it’s become more intentional as we are getting older and realizing how important it is to have a good life. We’re not just driving everywhere all the time and getting exhausted by traffic.”

This creative community model and commitment to green filmmaking are among the ways Wang would like Hollywood’s movers and shakers to think differently, even if change comes at a greater price.

“The toughest part of my job is to think about how to do what we do without first causing harm,” he says. “I think our industry is very wasteful. It’s very egotistical and very greedy. We have a tendency to virtue-signal, to say, ‘Look how great we are.’ But in reality, we have a lot of catching up to do.

“It’ll take a little more resources and time to think about how we can repurpose sets. It’s going to cost us a little more money and time to integrate green crew members. But what if we say, ‘OK, the default is to have a vegan meal and one meat option?’ What if we don’t have 30 trucks on standby just in case we need 10 different lights? What if we don’t have the luxury trailer? What if we don’t have a perfect location, but a sufficiently good location to help dictate the coverage and actually be more creative?

“We can keep burning fossil fuels and wasting as much as we want forever and it’s someone else’s problem down the road. Just externalize all those harms to someone else. But I think we’re all increasingly waking up to the fact that no, you can’t have your cake and eat it too.

“That limiting factor is a beautiful box, because from that comes ingenuity. From that comes creativity.”

GOING FORWARD

In August of 2022, Wang and Daniels signed an exclusive, five-year deal with Universal. “They hear what we want to do,” says Wang. “They are able to empower us to do what we want creatively while also putting their money where their mouth is procedurally. They have green initiatives, they have diversity inclusion—they were actually doing (the work) long before we came along. Now we’re in good company with Christopher Nolan and Jordan Peele. We’re seeing the kind of thing that Universal does—supporting artist first storytellers versus IP first franchises.

I think that is so fascinating and wonderful at this scale. The deal doesn’t necessarily mean they’ve lost any love for A24. Wang and Daniels have TV projects lined up with A24 Television, the company behind Beef. “We’re doing three TV shows with A24 right now. Nothing but love for them.”

One of these projects is titled Mason, which, like Dick Long, is a play on names. The logline on IMDB Pro reads: “Nathan, who is often misunderstood as ‘Mason,’ is looking for connection in a noisy world.” But production has been halted indefinitely due to the ongoing strike by writers and actors.

“We already have a pilot written,” says Wang, “However, we went pencils down and are waiting on the studios to make a fair deal before we polish and get ready to go.”