



A Force

TO BE RECKONED WITH

IN 2007, NINA JACOBSON TOOK HER CAREER IN A DIRECTION SHE DEEMED TEMPORARY, LAUNCHING A COMPANY SHE CALLED COLOR FORCE. THEN BRAD SIMPSON CAME ON BOARD AS JACOBSON'S PARTNER, AND WHAT WAS INITIALLY JUST A DETOUR BECAME ONE OF HOLLYWOOD'S MOST FRUITFUL COLLABORATIONS.

WRITTEN BY LISA Y. GARIBAY | PHOTOGRAPHED BY MATTHEW SMITH

Titles like *American Crime Story*, *Crazy Rich Asians*, *Pose* and *The Hunger Games* reflect a revolution in film and TV and a gutsiness embodied by producers Nina Jacobson and Brad Simpson, who partner together under the Color Force banner.

A tenet central to Color Force is to approach work from the inside-out rather than the outside-in. It's a soulfulness that the two producers bring to everything they touch, from their first collaboration together on 2010's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* up through 2023's *The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds & Snakes*.

Although they do cultivate many original scripts, Jacobson and Simpson are self-described rabid, omnivorous readers. They seek out IP not for the sake of making a buck, but with the goal of nurturing and preserving singular voices. When Jacobson and Simpson look for the common thread woven among their most successful ventures, it's that "they all felt right," precedent be damned. Ultimately, it is the uniqueness, uncommon nature, and daring of these projects that sped them to breathtaking heights.

Any semblance of a partnership might have been doomed when the two were first brought together. Simpson was developing a passion project at Dreamworks, where the indie veteran had no prior relationship.

"I knew who Nina was. She struck a huge figure in Hollywood. Everyone knows the stories of the risks she took at the box office, being the first out queer woman running a studio, giving notes to M. Night Shyamalan on *Lady in the Water* and him taking it away from Disney. So when Dreamworks called and said, 'We're going to put Nina Jacobson on your project,' I went into my bedroom and cried."

Simpson was certain that the "big

Hollywood muckety-muck" was going to freeze him out of a project into which he had poured so much love.

"But the opposite happened. She called me and just talked and talked and talked. I feel like we started this conversation about that script that hasn't ended," says Simpson.

Jacobson had come up as a "development girl" before working up to the executive suite. "But I had never produced a film from start to finish or been on set from start to finish, ever,"

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she recalls. "I realized pretty quickly that I was going to be learning on my own movie and that I would rather my movie not suffer through my education." She was excited to benefit from Simpson's production fluency

and ease on set.

In the end, the project that brought them together was not to be. "It went from a flashing green light to a solid, permanently red light through a series of tragic misadventures," Jacobson recalls. "But it allowed us to get to know each other very well because it's much easier to get to know who a person really is when things go wrong than when things go right."

"That's when you really see somebody's mettle," says Simpson. "Under pressure in an intense situation, her instinct was honesty and collaboration. That's what attracted me to her as a person and as a producer."

Prolific creator and fellow media revolutionary Ryan Murphy has known Jacobson since her Disney days. "My favorite thing about Nina during this period is that she never once bought a pitch from me," Murphy recalled when he presented Jacobson with the Human Rights Campaign Visibility Award in 2016. "Although at the time I was furious, I'm now relieved because she saved the world from so many shitty, awful romantic comedies."

Murphy continued: "Now Nina is a powerful producer with her incredibly brilliant producing partner, Brad Simpson. I think what Nina and Brad are doing with story and character at Color Force is as equally powerful and stirring as anything Nina has accomplished."

After almost a decade, Jacobson and Simpson remain committed to the spirit that has driven them to challenge the status quo, bringing blockbusters and game changers to life in the process.

About the name: When it became clear there was going to be a company and that company needed a name, Jacobson dove into dictionaries and encyclopedias for something that felt right. She stopped when she came to "color force." It's a term in quantum

physics describing the bond between quarks, the fundamental particles that makes all the matter we can see. The greater the pull between quarks, the greater the force that binds them.

"I loved the idea of an invisible force that holds together what wants to fall apart," Jacobson says. "That felt like a great metaphor for producing."

RISKY BUSINESS

RISK APPEARS TO BE A PRIMARY TRAIT OF COLOR FORCE. IS IT TOUGHER TO TAKE RISKS NOW?

SIMPSON: Of course it's tougher to take risks. On the film side, we saw the collapse of the DVD market, and now, post-pandemic, it's hard to get people to theaters. On the TV side, we see that the streaming economy has not been a great replacement for the previous TV economy. But I also feel it's a really exciting time. I think that the movies and TV that have been succeeding were counterintuitive bets by the people who made them, whether it's *Oppenheimer* or *The Bear* or a lot of the art house movies that are coming out. People ultimately respond to risky bets.

JACOBSON: It has always been true that there are no sure bets, so you might as well take risks. In this marketplace, there's really nothing you can do to ensure success other than try to make the best possible show or movie you can make in a way that is exciting to you and would make you perk up and turn on your TV or pack up for the theater.

Conventional wisdom may be conventional, but it is rarely wise. I think that when the writing is good enough, taking risks to break some of the rules is appealing. An example is *Crazy Rich Asians*. We loved that book. We didn't even bother with the conversation about how we were going to get anybody to make a movie with an all-Asian cast. We knew it couldn't be a traditional development deal. It never occurred to us to talk ourselves out of it when we had both fallen in love with it so much.

SIMPSON: I wish I could say we sat down at some point and came up with a mission statement for the company, but I don't think that's how it works. I think you start making stuff based on your tastes and your instincts, and then you figure out what your mission is. With a lot of the stuff we take on, we only realize that it's counterintuitive when people are like, "You can't make that. No one's going to go see a movie with kids killing kids. Nobody's going to see a movie with an all-Asian cast. No one's going to watch a show that centers trans people."

Producing is a crazy, insane business that can be very lonely. When the writer or director or an actor or the studio is mad at you, there's something about leaving set at night and being able to look at somebody else you trust and ask, "We're not crazy, are we?" When you meet somebody that you feel you can do that with, you want to keep doing it.

PETER HEDGES AND 'THE LITTLE FILMS'

Peter Hedges was rewriting scripts for Jacobson at Disney when she sent *Dan in Real Life* his way for revision. "She really liked my draft and said that I could cast whoever I wanted," says Hedges. "I asked, 'Why would a writer cast a film?' And she said, 'You're going to direct it.'" *Dan in Real Life* became Hedges' second project as a writer-director, cementing an invaluable foundation that grew stronger for Hedges when Jacobson launched Color Force and partnered with Simpson.

When Hedges finished the script for *Ben Is Back*, a powerful drama centered around a mother's agonizing struggle to save her son from drug addiction, he sent it to Jacobson first. "I said, 'There's no vision of you ever wanting to produce this movie; I just want you to know what I've been working on and what I'm passionate about.'"

Hedges recalls that Jacobson called him less than two hours later saying, "I have to produce this. I'm giving it to Brad to read, but I'm pretty confident he's going to feel as I do."

"It gives me chills telling that story," Hedges says. "I've been doing this for 39 years and that doesn't happen."

During the production of *Ben Is Back*, Hedges felt like he was working with a team rather than two different people—"really smart, good people who believe in you when you don't even believe in yourself." He recalls a conversation that the trio had after the release of *Ben Is Back*, during which they spoke about what they could have done better. "It wasn't a conversation born out of some crisis, but one you have when you're talking with people who are really interested in growing and learning," Hedges says.

"They're just good people, and we can't have enough good people in our crazy business."

Joining Forces

ARE THE STRENGTHS EACH OF YOU CULTIVATED AS A STUDIO EXEC AND AN INDIE FILMMAKER STILL IN PLAY NOW? DO YOU OCCUPY THOSE ROLES TO SOME EXTENT WHEN WORKING ON A PROJECT?

SIMPSON: I think that when Nina started her producing career, she was thinking, “This is what I’ll do for two years before I go back and be a studio executive.”

JACOBSON: Two years tops, worst-case scenario.

SIMPSON: But I’ve watched her fall in love with producing. I’ve never been inside the system, and Nina grew up inside the system. I started in independent film in the ‘90s in that crazy moment where you’d walk through the East Village and there was a low-budget movie shooting on every corner.

My assumption from working on indie movies is that something is always going to go wrong, that something is not going to show up, that you’re not going to have enough time, that somebody is going to fail at their job, and that you need to be braced for disaster. Maybe because Nina came up through the studio system and is also a more optimistic person than I am, she approaches things with the idea that of course they’re going to go right. There’s an order to the world, there’s justice, and people are going to be great at their jobs.

THEIR AIM IS TRUE: A HUNGER GAMES TIMELINE

THE ODDS SEEM FOREVER IN NINA JACOBSON’S FAVOR.

WRITTEN BY WHITNEY FRIEDLANDER

Jacobson became the woman on fire when Color Force, the company she founded in 2007, purchased the film rights to Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* book series in 2009. That series was adapted for the screen by Jacobson and Jon Kilik. The 2023 prequel film was produced by Jacobson, Simpson and Francis Lawrence.

The Hunger Games is a story of defiance—not just for its protagonists, but also for the team that adapted the books for the screen. At the time of the first film in the series (2012), young adult (YA) fiction was seen as a liability in terms of screen adaptation. Pushing forward seemed counterintuitive, especially when the landscape was rife with cautions like “A woman can’t anchor a franchise,” “Boys won’t see girls in this kind of a role,” “Girls will identify with boys, but boys won’t identify with girls in turn,” and “Young adult protagonists don’t work.”

Here’s a short timeline of how Jacobson’s work on *Hunger Games* helped change the arena of Hollywood.

» Former Buena Vista Motion Pictures Group president Nina Jacobson founded Color Force in 2007. Two years later, the company paid \$200,000 for the rights to Collins’ planned book trilogy, the first of which had been released and became a hit after authors Stephen King and Stephenie Meyer publicly praised it. Two weeks later, Lionsgate came on to handle worldwide distribution rights.

An allegory on, among other things, fame and exploitation, the *Hunger Games* story centered on Katniss Everdeen. A

Nina Jacobson with cast and crew on the set of *Mockingjay – Part 2*.



young archer from a poor district in the nuclear state known as Panem, Katniss volunteers to represent her district in an annual battle royale to spare her sister from that fate.

“The suspense of *The Hunger Games* is heightened by its spirit of moral inquiry, and Suzanne has entrusted Lionsgate and me to bring that moral perspective to the adaptation—a charge we fully intend to honor,” Jacobson said at the time.

The first film, released in 2012, would gross nearly \$700 million worldwide.

» Also in 2012, film producer and former Appian Way president Simpson joined Color Force as a partner. Simpson had worked with Jacobson on the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* franchise that began in 2010. But he also brought some indie cred, having worked on titles such as Kevin



Nina Jacobson on the set of *The Hunger Games*.



Connolly’s *Gardener of Eden* and the flashy crime drama *Party Monster*.

“This really is a seminal moment for us at Color Force,” Jacobson told *The Hollywood Reporter*. “I want to stay focused on *Hunger Games* but also taking this opportunity to grow. Brad, who has great relationships with writers and directors and who is very capable on set, makes that possible.”

» The second film in the franchise, *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*, was released in 2013. It was the first film of the series to be directed by Francis Lawrence, who would go on to direct the final two movie adaptations of the book series as well as the 2023 prequel *The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds & Snakes*. It was also the most profitable, with a worldwide box office of \$865 million.

“I think she (Jacobson) is and has been one of the more vigilant producers that I’ve worked with over the years,” Lawrence tells *Produced By*. “She’s one of the producers that’s there from the inception and every step of the way of the development process.”

» The final book in Collins’ trilogy, *Mockingjay*, was broken into two parts for the screen: one released in 2014 and earning \$755 million worldwide; the other in 2015 and earning \$661 million worldwide.

Jacobson was frank about the decision to split that book into two films, telling *The New York Times* in 2014 that “We felt we needed two movies to tell the story. But it would be disingenuous to say that there isn’t a benefit to getting four movies out of a trilogy instead of three.”

She also said in that interview that the most important thing to remember when producing an adaptation of a hot literary property is to “always remember what made you love the book. The movie can’t and doesn’t have to be just like the book, but it should feel like the book—it should make you feel the way the book made you feel.”

The year the last film came out, Jacobson wrote an essay in *Variety* that implored Hollywood to look for diverse stories.

“If you want the industry to be more diverse, you can’t sit on your laurels,” she wrote. “The people who come to you will likely be people of privilege who know somebody. You want to bring in fresh faces and let the cream rise to the top. The people who make movies should be as diverse as the people who watch them.”

» Prequel film *The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds & Snakes* was released in November 2023. Opening weekend global box office was \$108 million.

In a tribute shared on the film’s official Instagram page, author Collins wrote that “producers Nina Jacobson and Brad Simpson have meticulously overseen every detail from soup to nuts, once again bringing a faithful adaptation of the book into a spectacular version of Panem.”

JACOBSON: I assume people are competent until proven otherwise. Brad assumes people are incompetent until proven otherwise—and he’s often right. When we’re chasing a piece of material, I love the hunt. I love the heated bidding, the wooing, the wondering who’s going to get it. Brad finds that whole part gives him a stomachache. He can’t stand it. He just wants it to be over.

SIMPSON: Nina was such a trailblazer both as an out queer executive and as a woman in the industry. She was also known for her honesty and her relationship with the filmmakers. That’s a currency I get to ride on. I’ve never had to look at a P&L spreadsheet or walk into a staff meeting to defend how much money I’m spending on something that most people think is insane.

When we’re meeting with the decision-makers, they can’t look at us and say, “You have no idea what I’m going through,” because Nina does, and she can meet them as a peer. That’s been really helpful for us at critical moments.

DO YOU DIVVY UP RESPONSIBILITIES ON YOUR PRODUCTIONS BASED ON YOUR INDIVIDUAL BACKGROUNDS?

JACOBSON: We tag-team a lot. It comes down to who needs to be where when and for how long. The year we were doing *Crazy Rich Asians* and *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* at the same time, I went to Malaysia and Singapore, and Brad was in Miami and LA.

Both of us are very involved from the very beginning until the very end. We’ve stayed a boutique on purpose. I don’t think either one of

us really knows how to *not* try to make every page, moment and scene better. Ultimately, the only way you can do that is through immersion. I kind of envy the people who figure out how to do it minus the immersion, because they would probably not have to be away so often.

When there's a competitive situation, people will bring us things because they know that we will actually produce it. We've also had a big jump on competitors because we actually read the book that somebody gave you. You would think that everybody who's trying to compete for the (book's rights) has read it. They have not actually read the book!

Whether we have different strengths, so much of it is about being there with your creative partner on set when that person needs support and guidance. You stand in front of them only when things are bad, and behind or beside them the rest of the time.

SIMPSON: One of the things that has always appealed to me about working with Nina is her first instinct is honesty. Early on in our partnership, we had to cancel a meeting with an actor. Nina called the manager and said, "We just want you to know we're canceling this meeting because the studio wants us to meet with another other actor instead." A very powerful studio executive was also calling the actor's manager at the same time and lied about what was happening. The manager said to that exec, "I know that's not true. I talked to Nina. I know that you're meeting with another actor."

The executive got us both on the phone and said, "What have you done? You've humiliated me. I don't understand! Why did you tell them that we were cancelling this meeting to meet with another actor?" Nina said, "Because it's the truth." And this executive said to us, "Who the fuck told you to tell the truth?"

Choices, Choices, Choices

HAS THERE EVER BEEN ANY DISCUSSION BETWEEN YOU ABOUT STICKING TO ONE FORMAT, I.E., FILM OR TV, OR SERIES OR FEATURES?

JACOBSON:

As a studio executive, you are either for the most part a television executive or a film executive. It's rare that you would get to do both on the executive side of things. As a producer, I love having the creative freedom to read something, fall in love with it, and think, "What is the best format for this?" It gives you so many more opportunities to tell a story that you love and to learn a new form of storytelling.

SIMPSON:

We were both film people who grew up in the snobby film world. Out of creative jealousy and survival instinct, when we partnered in 2012, we said, "We better get a TV deal. We need to learn how to produce TV." We met with every place possible and FX offered us the smallest deal. But we said to John Landgraf and his team, "We're only going to bring you things we believe in, and we want you to teach us TV." When we moved into TV, we found that a lot of our skills were transferable.

SIMPSON:

It was an exhilarating process to do movies and TV. With *The People v. O.J. Simpson*, it was the first thing we brought to FX, and we had the joy of saying, "We can take this rich tapestry, tell this 10-hour movie, and really stick with these characters." It's been incredible not to be pigeonholed in either one.

SARAH PAULSON ON WANTING TO IMPRESS

Actor Sarah Paulson came to work with Jacobson and Simpson for the first time on *The People v. O.J. Simpson*. She was very, very nervous.

"I was terrified of Nina because she is such a formidable presence, but also because she had been one of the few women who had been in such a position of power in our town for so long," Paulson recalls. "I know that in order to achieve that status in that position, you have to have a particular kind of backbone and skin density and brain."

When Paulson met Brad for the first time, her nerves doubled. "I was a little frightened of them both, not because they were power-wielding megalomaniacs, but because I had enormous respect for them, their point of view and their taste."

Paulson came to treasure the dedication Jacobson and Simpson brought to the table, which was far beyond previous experiences with other producers. "I never had to worry about going up to them with a question about the script, the timeline or orienting myself in the story. Either one of them would be able to tell me exactly where I was at any given moment as it pertained to the story," Paulson recalls.

Paulson describes the partners' investment as emotional, spiritual and intellectual rather than financial. She recalls how attentive Jacobson and Simpson were to a positive experience for everyone, from the people running craft service to number one on the call sheet.

"It was important to them that they were creating a family-like atmosphere that allowed some of the work I'm the most of proud as an actor," says Paulson. "It's a very different set I walk onto when they're not there. I feel much less seen and protected. Working with them feels like home to me."

CREATING CHANGE

ARE THERE ISSUES WITHIN THE PRODUCTION PIPELINE OR ABOUT THE INDUSTRY OVERALL THAT KEEP YOU UP AT NIGHT THINKING, “I WOULD LIKE TO OPTIMIZE THIS PROCESS. I’D LIKE TO CORRECT THIS DYSFUNCTION. I WISH THAT THIS WAS BETTER AND THAT WE WERE ALL GETTING BEHIND IT”?

SIMPSON: I have two. The first is a lifestyle issue. We’ve been shooting *Say Nothing* in England, where recently they have moved to much shorter days. I wish that for the sake of the crew, for the sake of everybody, that the number of hours (for U.S. productions) could be capped. The work-life balance for people on crew is prohibitive to parents who want to be involved with their kids. It’s prohibitive to just having a life. It wouldn’t totally solve them, but it would correct some of the class and racial imbalances across the crews to have that (hourly cap).

The second thing is that I came up in a system where there were tons of pods of pure producers. A lot of my peers got to be employed and have health insurance and learn to produce because Jersey Films or Killer Films or one of these companies had a patron at a studio and they could train these young producers. You could have a regular paycheck, you could learn, and you were given a baby movie to produce.

That pipeline has gone away. It is much tougher to be a young producer now. We’re not training young producers. People are acknowledging we need more women, people of color, or queer people in the system, and there’s not a way to train them in a way that gives them the financial underpinning to exist.

JACOBSON: I agree. It’s the job collectively of the creative team as well as the studio to make creative or budget choices that are not solved by the exploitation of people’s bodies and time. The concern and familial protectiveness that we ought to feel toward each other is lacking. There’s a lot of room to do better.

Then there’s the question of apprenticeship and young people being given opportunities to learn a skill, a trade, a craft, and then get a chance to try it, to realize it is or isn’t for them. Now, people stay in their jobs forever. So many of the people who were studio executives when I was a studio executive, which is a long time ago now—I left Disney in 2006 and started producing in 2007—are the same people who were there when I was there. Because there’s more insecurity, people stay in their jobs longer, and because people stay in their jobs longer, there’s less room.

Another issue is the erosion of the producing role—who is the producer on the show. There might be many people with producer in their names and many of them are doing critical roles. But generally speaking, the producer is usually the only person who is asked to cut their fee.

SIMPSON: When they come to you and ask you to cut your fee, that’s the sign that you’re the lead producer. “You really want to green-light this? Unfortunately, you have to pay a price for that.”

JACOBSON: It’s the devaluing of the producing credit and the role. You would never go back to a writer and say, “You have to give me back some of the money I said I was going to pay you.” But people come to the producer all the time saying, “If you really want to get this made, how about if you cut your fee in half?”



Simpson (right) behind the scenes on *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Long Haul*.



With the cast of *Crazy Rich Asians* at the 2018 Color Force Emmy brunch: Henry Golding, Nina Jacobson, Nico Santos, Jimmy O. Yang, Brad Simpson.

HAVING IDENTIFIED THE NEED FOR MENTORSHIP AND CREATING PATHS FOR FORTHCOMING GENERATIONS, WHAT EFFORTS ARE YOU MAKING TO HELP ADDRESS THE ISSUES YOU'VE MENTIONED?

JACOBSON: Well, on *Pose*, we were adamant that we couldn't have trans representation only on screen. We need to have trans and queer representation throughout the ranks. It's being mindful of the fact that it's not about ticking boxes. I worked on the ReFrame stamp to encourage being mindful about looking around the table and asking, "How are we doing and what are we doing about it?"

SIMPSON: I give credit to Ryan Murphy for really making a sea change in terms of the directing ranks on our TV shows with his HALF Initiative. He came to us and said, "I want to make an initiative where half of the director slots are going to BIPOC

people," and we followed along with that.

One of the things I'm really fearful about right now is that the big (diversity) push that began a couple years ago was just cosmetic, and as the reality of financial constraints come in, it's become less of a priority for financiers. We've been trying to make sure that it's not less of a priority for us.

The other push for us has been with below-the-line crew. It's as simple as saying, "Why are we not meeting with people of color for these roles?" and push beyond the initial stack of résumés. It's been a big focus for us.

On *Pose*, we wanted Black and Latinx hair and makeup department heads who understand how to do hair and makeup for brown and black skin. You have to search for these artists wherever they've been working. You call people of color and ask them for recommendations. You call queer people to ask them to recommend other queer people.

I think the executive ranks is where you see the biggest deficit. You still are

mainly pitching to the same people, people who look like me—balding white men with glasses.

JACOBSON: I also think there's still an attitude of, "You're lucky to get your foot in the door." No, we're lucky to bring new voices into our field!

And we don't recruit. Any other competitive business is out there recruiting and making the opportunities. It's asking a lot of somebody who's gone through college with student loans to go into a completely uncertain field that has very few proper training opportunities; knowing that if they get work as a PA, four months from now they're going to be out of work again. We ought to be recruiting.

A lot of that has to come from people who have the resources to do it. I hope to see the studios, the networks and the streamers going out and recruiting the way any other competitive field does—instead of acting like "You're so lucky to have this low-paying job."

SARAH BURGESS ON MAKING HER TV DEBUT

Sarah Burgess’ writing drove Jacobson and Simpson’s *American Crime Story* serial *Impeachment*. It was Burgess’ first big TV experience. She was terrified to be on set, but credits Jacobson and Simpson for creating an apprenticeship that helped Burgess make the leap from acclaimed playwright to head writer, showrunner, and executive producer over the course of shooting 10 episodes.

“I saw all the work that goes into their movies and shows, and how much each project meant to them,” Burgess recalls. “As a writer, there’s nothing more important than a producer caring that much and being emotionally invested. It liberates you to go as far as you need to go.”

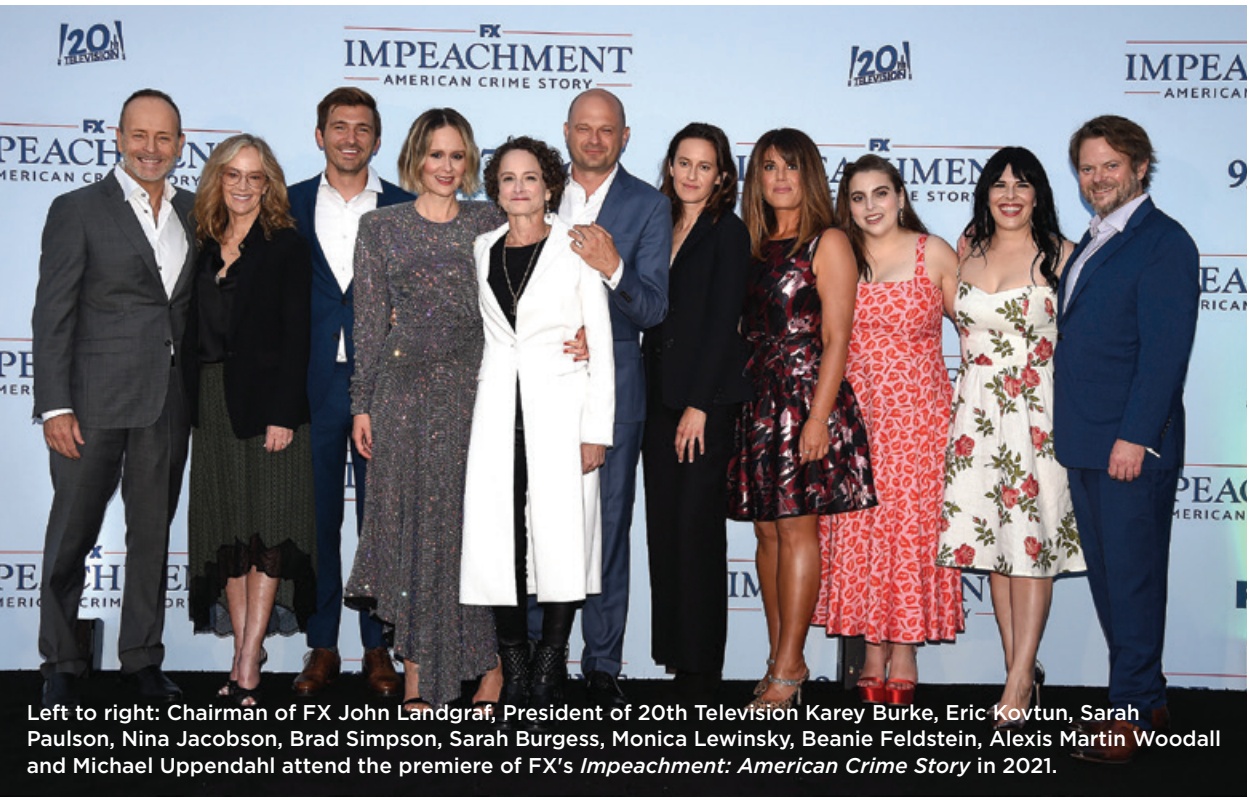
Burgess values the distinct qualities that Jacobson and Simpson each brought to their collaboration with her, describing Simpson as zeroing in on intensive details whereas Jacobson lent a big-picture mode of thinking,

particularly when it came to the emotional responses that a script may or may not be bringing to bear—which can be tough input for a writer to receive.

“It was always one of the most effective things about their partnership, the way they give a writer notes,” Burgess says. “I’ve had enough experience to see how valuable and rare that is. I got into that great place where I could push back and have an argument, and then we’d all move on in a healthy, working way.”

Impeachment began filming in October 2020, when the COVID pandemic was in full swing, a tumultuous U.S. presidential election race was coming to a head, and society was in upheaval over racial injustice.

“Brad and Nina’s connection was so valuable when there was such tension in the world. I was so happy to be with people who were there to help get the work done. After working for three years during a catastrophic global pandemic on a story about a messy national scandal, it says a lot when you can say that you’re happy to hear from those people years later.”



Left to right: Chairman of FX John Landgraf, President of 20th Television Karey Burke, Eric Kovtun, Sarah Paulson, Nina Jacobson, Brad Simpson, Sarah Burgess, Monica Lewinsky, Beanie Feldstein, Alexis Martin Woodall and Michael Uppendahl attend the premiere of FX’s *Impeachment: American Crime Story* in 2021.

COURTESY OF KEVIN WINTER/GETTY IMAGES



“I hope we’ve made some good stuff and that we’ve given opportunities to people who wouldn’t have had the opportunity.”

WHAT IT ALL BOILS DOWN TO

HOW DO YOU HOPE THAT THE EFFORTS YOU'RE MAKING VIS-À-VIS THE PROJECTS YOU'VE SELECTED HAVE HELPED THE INDUSTRY GROW? IS THERE A PERSONAL MISSION YOU'RE ON THAT'LL LEAD YOU TO BE ABLE TO LOOK BACK AND SAY, "WE'RE SO PROUD THAT WE CHANGED THE INDUSTRY IN THIS WAY"?

SIMPSON: You hope that you make an impact. I do believe that TV and movies are big empathy machines, and they do give you the best opportunity to walk in somebody else's shoes. To know what it's like to exist and be somebody else and to create empathy for people who are different than you. It also is an opportunity for you to see yourself sometimes.

When I look back, I hope we've made some good stuff and that we've given opportunities to people who wouldn't have had the opportunity. We love to feel that throughout the crew. There's nothing greater than seeing somebody who was your PA and now they're an AD; or a baby writer becoming a writer you can't even work with anymore because they're so expensive. I would love to say that we also made some differences in the structural imbalances and that we've made a stab for representation.

JACOBSON: I hope that because of our work, more people will see an ad or drive by a sign and say, "I see myself in that person." That spark of recognition of seeing someone like you on screen in an aspirational way. The longer I do it, the more profound the power of it appears to me, of what it means to people—that moment of recognition.

I always think about the little girl who's driving to school with her mom and sees a Katniss Everdeen or a Lucy Gray Baird, or what it's like to see this incredibly glamorous, beautiful cast of *Pose*, or *Crazy Rich Asians*. John Chu told me there had not been a Hollywood romantic on-screen kiss between an Asian man and an Asian woman that anybody could think of.

So if more people feel seen or inspired to think, "If that story works, maybe my story would work," and if more people feel seen, I feel like that would be a good accomplishment.

THE FX CHIEF AND THE LITTLE DUO THAT COULD

A 2012 first-look deal with FX brought about Jacobson and Simpson's first TV project, *The People v. O.J. Simpson*—the first installment of the *American Crime Story* anthology. The limited series garnered 22 Emmy nominations, winning nine.

"It was clear to me that from the very beginning that it was going to be a really fruitful partnership," says FX Chairman John Landgraf. "And it has been. I don't think we've ever had a fallow period in our relationship."

Following that triumph, Color Force inked an overall TV production deal with FX Productions in 2016, leading to two more critically acclaimed, multiple-award-winning series for the anthology, *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* and *Impeachment*.

At the heart of these triumphs is what Landgraf describes as a beautiful partnership between Jacobson, Simpson, and fellow series producers Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk. "Their alchemy and the way they construct these stories is done with such care, such clarity and such dimensionality."

Color Force has more projects in the FX hopper, including a limited series based on the Patrick Radden Keefe book *Say Nothing* chronicling the vicious history of the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

What makes Landgraf most proud about the partnership between Color Force and FX? It's simple: well-made storytelling. But that simplicity belies the laborious process behind well-made stories in television or film.

"It starts with ideas and themes and research, then good, solid dramaturgy and good editorial skills, working with writers and developing written material. The meticulous process of casting, and building a production all the way through to postproduction," Landgraf says. "Nina and Brad are perfectionists. They're very good at it and they're wonderful to work with, because they're so ambitious, self-critical, curious, modest and all the things you'd want in a partner."

Landgraf also sees in them an underrated quality among collaborators: asking hard questions that cut to the core of challenges that

a project is facing.

"I've never had a conversation with Brad and Nina about anything where they didn't challenge my own perceptions and expectations or bring a question that was really, really useful to refining what we were trying to work on."

When Color Force brought *The People v. O.J. Simpson* to FX, many were wary how the project could move beyond character tropes and well-worn clichés about a moment in history that had already oversaturated the media landscape. Landgraf was impressed by how Jacobson and Simpson challenged those perceptions via the research and questions they presented to him and his FX team. "I was seeing these characters in a different way than I ever had," he says.

For all the glory that Color Force has helped bring to FX, Landgraf has also found value in projects that did

not attain the same heights. "With *Y: The Last Man*, though I'm very proud of the show that resulted, it wasn't successful," he says. "Part of being a good producer is aiming really high, being willing to take risks, not playing it safe. Nina and Brad are challenging in what they bring and what they love."

With the sharp increase in the volume of TV content, Landgraf has observed that many programs have been brought to the screen before they were ready—when getting it made trumped making it well.

"One of the things I admire about Nina and Brad is they work really, really hard on the material. It's very rare for a great television show to be made that doesn't start with a great script," Landgraf says. "We could use more producers who are rigorous and ambitious about working on and getting the scripts right in the way Brad and Nina are."



Brad Simpson, Ryan Murphy, John Travolta, Cuba Gooding Jr., Nina Jacobson and Sterling K. Brown at *Vanity Fair* and FX's 2016 Primetime Emmy nominations party.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL KOVAC/GETTY IMAGES FOR VANITY FAIR



At the season 2 premiere of *Pose* in 2019: Jason A. Rodriguez, Indya Moore, Eric Schrier, Janet Mock, Brad Simpson, Dyllón Burnside, Alexis Martin Woodall, Steven Canals, Dominique Jackson, Michaela Jaé Rodriguez, Ryan Jamaal Swain, Angelica Ross, Our Lady J, Sherry Marsh and Billy Porter. Front: Hailie Sahar, Angel Bismark Curiel and guest.

MICHAELA JAÉ RODRIGUEZ ON LEADING THE WAY

During the first days of filming *Pose* in 2017, Michaela Jaé Rodriguez was riding in an elevator with Brad Simpson and Nina Jacobson, whom she had just met. *Pose* was the first series to star five transgender women of color, including Rodriguez in her first lead role. Simpson asked her, "Are you ready for this?"

"I said, 'I think so,'" Rodriguez recalls. Simpson replied, "Well, here we go. Your life is about to begin."

In 2021, Rodriguez became the first transgender performer to receive an Emmy nomination in a major acting category. And in 2022, she became the first transgender actor to win a Golden Globe. Rodriguez credits Jacobson and Simpson with helping her dig deep to embody the character of Blanca Evangelista, an adoptive mother caring for young LGBTQ+ people who have been rejected by their families and communities and left to subsist on the streets. *Pose* was a beacon of hope then and now, its success fueled by heartfelt dedication.

Rodriguez was unfamiliar with the weighty responsibility of carrying a show. "Brad and Nina

were very hands-on with teaching me and giving me pointers, always instilling words of confidence and encouragement," Rodriguez says. "I've developed a great relationship with the producers on the show that I'm on now. It all stems from Brad and Nina instilling in me the information that they did."

The show was a learning curve for every community involved, whether trans, queer, people of color, cisgender or heterosexual. It entailed learning a new style of communication that respected the breadth of backgrounds and identities, especially that of trans people.

"It was a learning process for all of us," Rodriguez says. "Trans women and queer people are not exempt from fault or mistakes. I think they (Jacobson and Simpson) helped hold space for that."

By lobbying for trans women to be seen in roles that had never been accessible to them, the legacy laid down by the creators of *Pose* continues today. Rodriguez is currently costarring alongside Maya Rudolph in the Apple TV+ comedy *Loot*. "I don't play a trans woman. I am just a woman. You can make the assumption that I'm trans or not. That alone shows progress," she says.

"Brad and Nina set it up for us to move forward. Now we can have full, fleshed-out conversations instead of being pigeonholed or caricatured." ■