

ON THE MARK

VALERIE STADLER SHARES THE EXPERIENCE OF MAKING HER LATEST FILM, WHICH EARNED HER THE PRODUCERS MARK CERTIFICATION.

INTERVIEW BY LISA Y. GARIBAY

Aristotle and Dante Discover The Secrets of the Universe

Valerie Stadler, p.g.a.

The feature *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* marked producer Valerie Stadler's first book-to-screen adaptation. Set in the border city of El Paso, Texas, the story centers on the tumultuous yet tender experiences of two teens facing truths about family, cultural norms and their own sexual identities.

Turning Benjamin Alire Sáenz's much-loved and lauded 2012 young adult novel took more than seven years of determination and innovation on the part of Stadler and writer-director Aitch Alberto, who in 2022 became the first trans director to make *Variety's* 10 Directors to Watch list. Along the way, the duo picked up support from such collaborators as Eugenio Derbez, Eva Longoria and Lin-Manuel Miranda.

Stadler was motivated by the opportunity to give a voice to those who often don't have one in film and TV, and to create a space in which more people could watch themselves reflected by the cast and their performances. "Everyone understands intuitively how important it is to be seen and how important it is to have representation," says Stadler, who cofounded Big Swing Productions with Meredith Bagby and Kyra Sedgwick. Prior to Big Swing, Stadler was head of production and development for Fluency, a multiplatform studio under NBC Universal.

As a member of the Outfest board of directors who identifies as queer, Stadler felt immense fulfillment bringing *Aristotle and Dante* to the screen—a singular opportunity for both personal and professional expansion.

WHAT DREW YOU TO THE PROJECT?

I was working at NBC Universal at the time, and I was looking for YA books that lived a bit outside of the typical story we're used to hearing. My assistant brought it to me and I read it in a day. I just fell in love. The irony is that when I met with Aitch to talk about a different project, I asked her if she had anything that she was working on. She brought the first draft of the script out from under her chair, and I had the book sitting on my desk. It was fated that it came together the way it did.

HAD AITCH ALREADY SPOKEN TO SÁENZ ABOUT ADAPTING HIS NOVEL, OR DID YOU APPROACH HIM TOGETHER?

Aitch had drafted a script without ever talking to Ben. Then she reached out to him. She went all the way to El Paso and read the script to Ben, and they had this beautiful moment where he said, "The boys used to be mine, but now I'm giving them to you." Soon after that trip, Aitch and I came together on it.



Reese Gonzales and Max Pelayo star in the coming-of-age story of two Texas teens facing truths about family, culture and their sexual identities.

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This is where a producer comes in. Aitch and Ben had spoken, but she didn't have the rights, there was nothing in place, she hadn't spoken to the agent. From a practical business standpoint, I was able to come in and help. There are two sides to the job of producing. One is a creative partnering where you're helping to usher the project and make it work. Then there's making sure from a business point of view that all those things are in place.

GIVEN THAT IT WAS YOUR FIRST ATTEMPT AT DOING SO, WHAT DID YOU DISCOVER ABOUT ADAPTING A LITERARY WORK FOR THE SCREEN?

It was really gratifying to understand what you need to keep and what you lose. It's a conversation we had all the time. We wanted to treat the audience with the intelligence and the dignity that folks deserve. I think it was a very elevated swing at a YA adaptation.

DID YOU FACE ANY OBSTACLES WITH FINANCING, GIVEN THE BOOK'S CONTENT AND WHAT IS OFTEN CONSIDERED MARKETABLE?

I mean, who in Hollywood doesn't want to finance a story about two queer brown boys falling in love? Not everybody's ready to throw money at that.

It's really hard to get independent films made. Then you throw a first-time director into the mix. It was challenging to put the money together, and it took a long time. When we're putting together a movie, I'm doing two things: telling a story and managing fears. What is the way to get people to feel less afraid of taking a risk on the film? Getting other people to take a risk on it.

There's a funny thing about making movies in general: You have to have an abnormal amount of hope, belief, and optimism to think you can push something through. There are so many ways films can fall apart. But Aitch and I had this almost pathological belief that we would be



Director Aitch Alberto with Gonzales and Pelayo.

able to get the film made.

Part of that was our belief that Lin-Manuel Miranda was going to be a part of the movie (as a producer). He had read the audio book, and we never even entertained the idea that he would say no, which is hilarious. We tried all the normal routes to get to him. At one point, Aitch just tweeted at Lin and Lin responded. A week or two later, we were all sitting together.

When Lin comes, he's like, "Hey, it's not so scary, come over here. It's fun over here." Then Eva (Longoria) came in, and it becomes, "Both Lin and Eva think it's fun over here. You should come over here." Eugenio came in through Ben O'Dell. This notable and talented group of Latinx folks all rallied behind the project and very much behind Aitch. She is the force around this film. To produce a great movie, you need a powerful writer, director and creative vision for the film. She never wavered in her belief that this was her story to tell. Because of that, it became a little easier to bring these folks in.

Also, it doesn't hurt to have a book that's sold a million copies. At the time we were making the film, the book's sequel was coming out, which pushed the original book onto the bestseller list for the first time. So we started with a beloved piece of IP, but it was also a bit of a secret. But you can't underestimate the fans of this book.

AT UNIVERSAL, YOU RAN A STUDIO CREATING CONTENT AIMED AT THE HISPANIC AUDIENCE. DOES ARISTOTLE AND DANTE DISRUPT THE NOTION THAT THERE IS A UNIFORM HISPANIC, LATINX OR SPANISH-SPEAKING AUDIENCE?

I think it's such an unfair burden to place on a story, this idea that it can be everything to everyone. That's a surefire way to make something that will appeal to nobody. It's a ridiculous notion that *Aristotle and Dante* will speak to all Latinx folks, or even to all Mexican folks.

Aitch and I talked about how this is

a universal story for those who resonates to it. We focused on making the film the best version of Ari and Dante's story from Aitch's specific point of view, then allowed the intelligence of the audience to find themselves reflected in it.

WHAT DID YOU DO DAY-TO-DAY TO HELP AITCH, THE ACTORS AND THE ENTIRE BODY OF CREATIVES FEEL SECURE DURING THE SHOOT?

Aitch and I developed a specific routine that we did every day without fail. At the beginning of the day we would spend a moment where we would all focus as a company. It was beautiful, it was intentional, and we would get through the day.

Every night, we would go to the same restaurant and order the same food. It was one less thing to decide. We'd have a conversation: "How did this day go? Was there anything that we could learn from?" Then move on to, "What does tomorrow look like? What are you afraid of? What am I afraid of? Do we have everything we need?"

As a result of that, we were really locked and loaded with one another. We were being as thoughtful as we could about making sure that something wasn't going to sneak up on us. Of course, things sneak up on you all the time. But we were trying to avoid the obvious stuff so we could deal with the unexpected.

So we were able to make choices when the unexpected came up. We shot one scene as a single shot and we both looked at each other and said, "We're never going to cut away from this. Let's move on." It's scary to say, "We're not going to get more coverage on this thing." But we felt like we could make that decision with our DP Akis Konstantakopoulos, who was phenomenal.



Veronica Falcón, Max Pelayo, and Eugenio Derbez in *Aristotle and Dante*.



WAS THERE ANY TIME DURING POST WHEN YOU THREW UP YOUR HANDS IN RESIGNATION?

No. I am not a throw-up-my-hands-in-resignation person. I know when I start a movie that there's going to be pleasure and there's going to be pain. I care less about the specifics of the pain

and more about the way I can navigate through them. Can I navigate through them with grace, with kindness, with integrity? If I can, then I know I can navigate the ship through those waters.

It was an awesome responsibility to be part of telling the story of Aristotle and Dante. It's such an important story to tell. I am a queer person; this story

impacts my life in a very particular way. And there was the responsibility of championing a director like Aitch and giving her this first opportunity to direct. She has a voice, and she deserves for it to be amplified.

I don't take any of those things for granted. I remind myself, "This is a marathon, not a sprint. Keep your feet moving. Be a good collaborator. Get through the painful stuff and celebrate the wins." I'm a real proponent of celebrating the wins. If they're small, I don't care. Celebrate them. ■

Certification via the Producers Mark (represented by p.g.a.) indicates that a producer performed a major portion of the producing functions in a decision-making capacity on a specific project. Criteria, its definition, the process for earning the mark and other particulars can be viewed at producersguildawards.com.