

SUPER PRODUCER POWERS

NOMINEES FOR THE PGA'S ZANUCK AWARD FOR THEATRICAL MOTION PICTURES DISCUSS THE CHALLENGING AND JOYFUL EXPERIENCES OF MAKING THEIR EXTRAORDINARY FILMS.

WRITTEN BY ALLISON LAMBDIN



Ben LeClair



PGA Presidents Stephanie Allain and Donald De Line



Daniel Lupi



Top: Christine Vachon and Emma Stone
Middle left: James Wilson Middle right: Bradley Cooper
Bottom left: Charles Roven Bottom right: Mark Johnson



Emma Stone, Bradley Cooper, Christine Vachon, Ben LeClair, Donald De Line, Stephanie Allain, Margot Robbie, Charles Roven, James Wilson, Mark Johnson, Daniel Lupi



Margot Robbie



Bright and early on a February morning, producers behind some of the most notable releases of the year shared their wisdom during the PGA's annual breakfast with nominees for the Darryl F. Zanuck Award for Outstanding Producer of Theatrical Motion Pictures. As in prior years, the event was held at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles, sponsored by the *Los Angeles Times* and moderated by PGA Presidents Stephanie Allain and Donald De Line.

Questions aimed at the panelists covered unique skills for effective producing, tackling roadblocks before and during production, and the origins of their films. The producers also discussed their storytelling process, and how to resonate with audiences and generate conversations.

To open the discussion, Allain asked: "What is your super producer power?" The panelists had insightful answers about making quick decisions and navigating difficulties.

"Communication is key for filmmaking," said *American Fiction's* Ben LeClair, "whether you're the PA or distributor or director, and definitely with producing." Daniel Lupi, from *Killers of the Flower Moon*, believes it's truly understanding the process and what everyone does on the film. For *Barbie's* Margot Robbie, it's "problem-solving and a tendency to deal with the most tricky and uncomfortable things first."

For *The Zone of Interest* producer James Wilson, it's all about patience, a low overhead and facilitating the director's vision. Christine Vachon from *Past Lives* said that it's important to understand that "the only real crisis is when someone gets hurt." Regarding inevitable hitches in production that every team faces, Charles Roven from *Oppenheimer* said that thinking laterally is important. "If something's not working one way, try to make it work another way."

Producing is often a feat of endurance requiring persistent nudging to move it forward. Panelists' experiences varied regarding the timeline of each stage from development through production. And each producer dealt with a different set of conditions.

"I've had movies that I've worked on for 10 years, 12 years, and have struggled to get made. *Oppenheimer* was not one of those," Roven said. The book that inspired the film, *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer*, took 25 years to be written. Compared to that, *Oppenheimer* moved at light speed.

Roven's involvement began when friends asked him to read *American Prometheus*. "Probably the biggest challenge I had was reading the 750-page book," he joked. "I realized it was an incredible book and it needed somebody incredible to come on the movie to write and direct it."

Roven then recommended the book to writer-director Christopher Nolan, who declared his commitment within three weeks. The script was finished several months later.

"It was, I think, the fastest movie that I ever put together and produced together with the Nolans," Roven said. "I wish I could tell you (about) a long, arduous journey, but it was actually a very blessed experience." For this, Roven credited the film's team, from actors to department heads, capping it off with, "We actually made the movie under budget. The rest is history."

Lupi's journey adapting *Killers of the Flower Moon* began when producers Dan Friedkin and Bradley Thomas won rights to the book in a bidding war. After director Martin Scorsese came on board, Eric Roth wrote the script and Leonardo DiCaprio joined the project.

In 2019, DiCaprio and Scorsese went to the Osage Nation in Oklahoma and began to revise the script after a studio joined.

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Revisions resulted in financing and distribution snags, and the COVID pandemic further delayed production. When Apple TV+ came on board, production resumed, but fluctuated depending on COVID conditions. “And then we were in post for 75 weeks,” Lupi recalled.

Ben LeClair of *American Fiction* started by acknowledging key producing partner Jermaine Johnson, and described how director Cord Jefferson discovered the book *Erasure*, on which the film is based, in 2020. Author Percival Everett granted the filmmakers a free option.

While Jefferson was reading the book, he had Jeffrey Wright in mind to play the lead. The actor’s sign-on “legitimized a movie that seemed hard on all sides, and it gave us just a bit of money to be able to set sail,” LeClair recalled. “An actor like Jeffrey helps cast the movie. We had this amazing group rally around the movie.” The film was made in 26 days.

Emma Stone described her part in *Poor Things* as very much a creative role, not just as the lead actor but as one deeply involved in developing the world depicted in the film and the movement of the story. She credited producers Andrew Lowe and Ed Guiney for their help: “I learned so much from them on a daily basis. They really were the integral part ... doing all of the grind work that every producer in this room knows and that I now know, having a production company for films I’m not in.”

Adapting to different directors and developing those relationships is crucial to the success of a film. The producers described how collaborating with different stakeholders shaped their projects.

Vachon said “it was a challenge and a joy” to work with the first-time director of *Past Lives*. During the pandemic, Vachon’s business partner Pamela Koffler reached out to a few agents asking them to send the best script they could regardless of whether someone else already had it. After she read *Past Lives*, Koffler called Vachon and said, “I just read something fantastic. I don’t think it’s available,

but you need to read it.” A few months later, A24 called about a script in need of a producer. It was *Past Lives*.

Vachon was then asked, “How do you consistently churn out critically acclaimed movies on a budget?”

“It’s just one of those ‘If I told you, I’d have to kill you,’” Vachon joked before getting to the point. “Some of it is just recognizing all the elements—that this is a story we can tell with what the market will bear. That collision of art and commerce is really where we live.”

“The producer’s most important mission is to understand the director,” said Mark Johnson of *The Holdovers*, “because ultimately, it’s going to be the director’s movie.” After previously working with writer-director Alexander Payne on *Downsizing* and currently in development on a new project, Johnson has spent a lot of time with Payne. “Every now and then, I think I know what Alexander wants or how he’d approach something, and more often than not, I’m wrong,” Johnson said.

After Johnson realized how important casting, script development, editorial, and location scouting were to Payne, Johnson grasped the value of patience. The academic setting in *The Holdovers* was shot using six different schools. This specificity was critical to Payne. “I’m trying to move things forward, but I have to be careful that it’s not at my pace,” Johnson explained. “It’s a process that the director, with the help of the producer, has to dictate on their own.”

“Cinema history shows us that when you pair a visionary director with something recognizable, you can win big,” Robbie explained about *Barbie*. Alongside her partners at LuckyChap, Robbie fought hard for the rights to develop a film about the iconic doll. “James Cameron and the Titanic, Nolan and Batman, Spielberg and dinosaurs—and now, Greta Gerwig and Barbie,” Robbie said.

Barbie got the green light, but was tested with negotiating the budget and convincing others that it would be a four-quadrant movie, not just a “girl mov-

ie,” Robbie recalled. Without that, the budget wouldn’t have been enough to execute Gerwig’s vision. *Barbie* went on to be the highest-grossing film of 2023.

Recognizing the factors that make a project exceptional is key for a producer. A large part of the job is convincing others that audiences will resonate with the story, which involves incorporating a layer of authenticity.

James Wilson of *The Zone of Interest* recounted how director Jonathan Glazer used the perspective of Martin Amis’ novel as a “frame in which to pose some interesting questions and look at the subject in a different way.” After discovering the true story that it was based on, they sought to depict that instead of a more straightforward adaptation.

Wilson said, “Johnnie Burn, our sound designer, was struck by this shocking proximity to the camp of this household and garden. That became an epiphany.” Glazer and his team used photos of the original dwelling adjacent to Auschwitz to faithfully recreate it for the film.

To fully depict the performance of Gustav Mahler’s Symphony No. 2, “Resurrection” in his film *Maestro*, Bradley Cooper conducted extensive research. Along with relying on many collaborators including conducting consultant Yannick Nézet-Séguin and the London Symphony Orchestra, Cooper referenced a 1973 recording of Bernstein’s interpretation.

Cooper explained that one of the greatest things about Leonard Bernstein was his ability to connect with Mahler. In doing so, Bernstein led a revitalization of Mahler’s music. Filming live and on location with some of the same people who played on that 1973 recording was challenging, Cooper recalled, but also “so joyful because everybody was in alignment. When you have 450 people all aiming at the same bull’s-eye, that’s powerful. That’s very exciting.”

“The creative part of this process is so beautifully rich and rewarding, and truly the point of all of it,” Stone said. “Getting to do this job with storytellers is the best part.” ■