

ON THE MARK

BLANCA LISTA EXPLAINS HOW BELIEVING IN MAGIC, COMBINED WITH HARD WORK, GETS MAGICAL FILMS MADE.

INTERVIEW BY LISA Y. GARIBAY

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY NADEGE PIERRE

The Portable Door
Blanca Lista, p.g.a.

The *Portable Door* is based on a series of successful novels by British author Tom Holt in which a down-on-his-luck protagonist, Paul Carpenter, lands an internship with mysterious London firm J.W. Wells and Co. While acclimating to his far-from-conventional employer, Paul uncovers the CEO's plot to control the human race with ancient magic. Together with his coworker (and romantic interest) Sophie Pettingeh, Paul combats this sinister agenda using the magic of a literal, portable door. In April 2023, *The Portable Door* debuted in the U.S. on MGM+ and was released theatrically in Australia. It also began streaming in the U.K. and Australia last spring.

Producer Blanca Lista's own career path has been as adventurous and magical as the story of *The Portable Door*, with coproducing credits including the Academy Award, Golden Globe, BAFTA, Annie, and PGA Award-winning film *Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio*. Lista was awarded a Primetime Emmy for Netflix's *The Dark Crystal: Age of Resistance* and served as a production executive on *The Star* with Sony Pictures Animation and on Disney's *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. As a producer and executive, Lista oversaw story development, production, and postproduction with The Jim Henson

Company, Warner Bros. Studios, Sony Pictures Entertainment, Leonardo DiCaprio's Appian Way, and Baz Luhrmann's Bazmark.

THIS IS THE FIRST TIME YOU'VE EARNED THE PRODUCERS MARK. WHAT SURPRISED YOU ABOUT BEING SO HANDS-ON ON EVERY ASPECT OF A PROJECT?

I had been the baby producer, so to speak, and I'd been on set seeing my peers at work and learning from that. Those experiences were invaluable in getting me to where I am. The biggest surprise for me was only having those eight weeks of production to capture (the film) and work with the cast and crew.

I always say that as a producer, I'm a little bit of a mom because I need to be very caring and very kind to everyone. But I also need to be a little bit of a psychologist and be like, "OK, what is lurking behind this? This person is having an issue that has nothing to do with a movie." You also have to be a priest and forgive.

The hardest challenge hour by hour is making sure that these human beings who have freely chosen to work together are in an environment that feels safe and protected for them to do their best work. That takes a lot of talking, but most importantly, a lot of listening and seeing things through, and compromising when you need to. But never com-



From right: Lista, director Jeffrey Walker and DOP Donald McAlpine watch Patrick Gibson and Arka Das perform a take during filming of *The Portable Door* in July 2021

COURTESY OF BLANCA LISTA



Lista and her son Solo Speed during the filming of *The Portable Door*

promise on the vision, because I think that the best movies get made because the vision is uniform. Which is nothing short of a miracle, to be honest.

HOW DID YOU COME ON BOARD THIS PROJECT?

The Portable Door had a history of complicated rights with other studios. When I worked at The Jim Henson Company, the rights were optioned, and I came on board right away. There was a personal connection with the story of the intern, Paul Carpenter. He's thrilled when he lands the job and develops into an amazing, magical, otherworldly and strange character. Who doesn't want to fantasize and believe that their boss is a goblin or some kind of dark

wizard? So while reading, I related with the character—I've been there—and the audience will see themselves reflected. It's a comedy at heart, an environmental romance, and it's timeless. Who doesn't want to go through a door that takes you anywhere?

Tom Holt, the author, is unbelievably successful and very prolific. It was also his first foray into the adaptation world, and I was motivated to make him proud.

Not every book is meant to be a movie. But when you strongly feel that it should be, you want the movie to be true to the original, but also exceptionally unique in its own right. Having Tom's approval from the beginning with his own baby was instrumental in making us want to do it.

YOU HAVE A RICH BACKGROUND IN CREATING THESE FANTASTICAL WORLDS. HOW DID YOU MAKE DECISIONS ABOUT USING PRACTICAL EFFECTS VERSUS VFX?

The movie was set to be practical and have as much as possible shot in camera without depending on VFX. When VFX are beautifully paired with what you have shot, it enhances and elevates your hero's journey, the world, and the movie experience. But VFX can also make you think, "Wait a minute, that character or that animal is not meant to be that, or this monster could never do that." As soon as we had our director, Jeffrey Walker, on board, we went through the script and spotted those areas that we wanted to pump up.

Costume design was paramount. It was the first element, the idea of enhancing and assuring through costume design that every character depicts their own story, either through the color palette, the fabrics, or the wardrobe changes. Everything that has to do with giving more background history to each character. The second element is the production design. We envision that harsh contrast between the world of London—which is exciting, but when you're just in the hamster wheel of going to work, it's not really fun—and then entering the door of this world, ensuring that it feels grand in different ways, intimidating at times, but intimate for the love story. We were adamant about having the portable door built, and we actually traveled with it. When we were at a tropical location, we placed the portable door on the beach to ensure that the VFX team had something true and palpable to work with. We took it to a waterfall and other places to ensure that the camera captured the beautiful rustic door we created.

The third element that worked together very well with the production



Lista on set in Gold Coast, Australia, during production of *The Portable Door*

COURTESY OF BLANCA LISTA

design was the VFX, recognizing that going through the portable door needed to give you that moment when you're like, "Oh, I'm going to Iceland. I'm going to Easter Island. I'm going to a wonderful tropical location that I could never access unless I saved a lot of money and went on a very long flight."

So it was fun to combine those elements successfully. The world felt coherent, like a single unit.

YOU SHOT IN AUSTRALIA DURING THE COVID LOCKDOWN. HOW DID BOTH FILMING THERE AND INCORPORATING COVID SAFETY MEASURES IMPACT YOUR BUDGET?

Through all the development and the process of script preparation, it was intentional to film in Australia. It happened because I attached screenwriter Leon Ford. As soon as I met him, I thought Leon was Paul Carpenter in real life!

Leon is based in Sydney, Australia, so the initial process was to set the project as a 100% Australian production, which doesn't work for every movie, but I saw an opportunity to take advantage of the 40% producer offset that Australia offered. For that, there were some elements that had to be Australian—one of them the writer.

Then I chose Todd Feldman as my producing partner, who's Australian and based there. We chose Jeffrey Walker as our Australian director. There were moments, of course, when as good producers we looked at different locations for savings. But it came back to Australia once COVID hit because it was a safe place.

There were budgetary changes for COVID protocols: a COVID supervisor, quarantine expenses and additional staff. Because there was so much willingness from our financiers and investors to film, it wasn't a fight so much as a compromise on how to get it done

but within the parameters everyone felt comfortable adding to the budget.

TODD FELDMAN ALSO GOT THE PRODUCERS MARK FOR THIS FILM. HOW DID YOUR SKILLS AND TALENTS COMPLEMENT EACH OTHER?

Todd was my brother, the greatest producing partner you can hope for. Like best friends or a married couple, it's about chemistry, and our partnership had that from the start. We have different backgrounds, skills and tools that complement each other. It was an amazing experience to learn from each other, emphasize our strengths and diminish our weaknesses.

I come from the creative side of the business and love developing original ideas, finding properties and obtaining rights, either for life rights or a book option. I love fighting and championing the talent. Like when everyone says no to this writer, I'm like, "No, he's the right



POINT OF PRIDE

HOW THE PORTABLE DOOR IMPLEMENTED GREEN PRINCIPLES

When it filmed in Australia in 2021, *The Portable Door* was the first feature film in that country to achieve sustainable production certification from BAFTA's Albert, an organization dedicated to helping the film and TV industry reduce the environmental impacts of production.

The opportunity to run a production that put green practices in place was a point of pride for Blanca Lista and *The Portable Door* team. We asked Lista how they did it.

set the tone from the beginning.

Screen Australia deals with productions at the federal level; then every state has its own constituent that deals with production. We worked with both Screen Australia and Screen Queensland. Both approached us to learn more about sustainable production, and Sarah met with them throughout the shoot to educate them.

What practices were implemented during production?

We weren't in Sydney, Melbourne, or any other big city. We were in more of a rural area. That made it harder, but everyone was great at finding a compromise. We did it in small steps. You want to be understanding of where people come from, while also needing them to be open to experiencing something new.

For example, there were always vegan or vegetarian options, but one day a week was all vegan. And then, of course, there was recycling. Everything that could be recycled we recycled, from regular day-to-day waste to anything that we could repurpose or reuse in construction, costume design, hair and makeup.

Our production designer and set decorator were very good at trying to repurpose things that the (viewer's) eye doesn't catch, or that even I might miss unless I was made aware of it. The film was uniquely stylized, so it was a good excuse to use refurbished or vintage things by reconfiguring them and rethinking them in a new context.

How did you decide to commit to sustainability on this project? What did you do to prepare?

I'm a big believer that if the producers are doing something, it starts to permeate throughout the production. Everything started because one of our financiers was from the U.K., where they have a very strong system in place. BAFTA offers a program called Albert, which is very ingrained in production there.

Todd and I aren't U.K.-based, but that didn't matter. We said, "Let's take this and adapt it to our project." We went through Albert's sustainable production training program and fully completed it before preproduction.

That allowed us to have an environmental manager, Sarah Tosone, throughout production. She was there every day, meeting with every head of department, even the people who prepare the food, to make sure we used recyclable materials. For instance, everyone was given a refillable water bottle to use throughout production. It

person. I'm going to prove it to you." So that's the joy of my life—connecting the dots to get the green light and putting the team together, working very closely with the director, being on set daily, and being there through post is very important to me.

Todd has a line producing background. He's extremely good at budgeting and production schedules. Nothing was impossible. Everything could be worked out, even through COVID and things that don't depend on us, like, "There's a way to get Christoph Waltz to Australia!" Also, getting all the parties that are on three different continents to agree to terms and close the financing of the movie takes diplomacy. Todd is proficient with relationships in the foreign sales world.

It was great to have that combination; honestly, that's a full producer! To do it together and learn from each other along the way got us to a very strong position on the first day of production.

It's funny—everyone was asking me, "Are you nervous? There is COVID, you're a producer for the first time..." and all these things. But we had prepared for so long that I had no nervousness at all.

THERE ARE SUCH BEAUTIFUL AND MOVING PROJECTS ON YOUR RÉSUMÉ. WHAT PLACE DO STORIES WITH MAGIC AND UPLIFT

LIKE THESE HAVE IN OUR WORLD TODAY, ESPECIALLY COMING OUT OF DIFFICULT TIMES LIKE COVID?

There's something truly timeless about creating a movie like *The Portable Door* that makes you feel good and makes you want to live the life of that film through the characters and through the story that is told, not once, but many times. And that's unique, right? We have films that we've watched like last year's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which is an amazing film. But on a Friday night I don't want to go to my husband, "Hey, let's make some popcorn and watch this movie again." Every movie has its time and space.

Having the ability to create films like *The Portable Door* that give hope, that create joy and a safe space for everyone—the grandparents, the parents, the children—to see something magical that makes your imagination bloom, is what shapes our dreams. I think at heart, we're all dreamers. So even though you might think you don't need it, every so often, we all need to be reminded of that.

Movies are magical because it's hard to make them! I work in an industry where my every day, every week of the year is, "No, don't do this. No, you're not going to get this money. No, you're not going to get this help. No, you're not going to get this actor." So many people say to me, "That's so disheartening. Why do you keep doing this?" Because when you finally get a yes—and you only need one—it's the greatest feeling in the world. Like a domino effect, everything falls into place.

I am a believer in fate, what's written in the stars, and, of course, magic. It was time for *The Portable Door*. We had put the work in. We had made a lot of sacrifices and it had to be done. Even COVID wasn't going to stop that. All the parties rose to the occasion, including our cast, who said, "It's COVID, but we want to make it. We'll be there." ■

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.

SUSTAINABILITY IN AUSTRALIA SINCE *THE PORTABLE DOOR*



Sarah Tosone with set decoration and prop donations for charity

"I have very fond memories of working on *The Portable Door*. It was a wonderful film and I'm proud to have been a part of it," says Sarah Tosone, who was the environmental manager on the project and continues to consult on productions in Australia. "Unfortunately, I've worked on other films where environmental sustainability wasn't a priority, which made for a less pleasant experience. It's a testament

to Blanca and fellow producers Todd Fellman and Matt Pearson for setting a positive tone from top leadership."

Below, Tosone provides an update on the support that environmentally minded productions can find in Australia:

- BAFTA's Albert has entered into an international partnership with Sustainable Screens Australia (SSA) to reduce the screen industry's environmental impact.
- Docklands Studios in Melbourne has transitioned to 100% renewable energy through GreenPower, a government-accredited provider that sources energy from the sun, wind, water and biofuel. This is Australia's first major film studio to make this switch.
- Aggreko hybrid generators have been used on several large feature films, successfully reducing diesel fuel and costs.
- Hybrid and EV vehicles and charging stations are becoming more popular in Australia. Productions are finding value in renting hybrid vehicles, especially for crew on the road.
- Reducing fossil fuel usage is the biggest challenge. There is a reluctance to take risks on new technologies and systems due to the high pressures inherent in the filmmaking process.
- Waste management in Australia has taken a step backward, as soft plastic is no longer collected for recycling but is still widely used. Certified compostable packaging, including for beverages and food, is no longer accepted at many compost facilities due to PFAS chemicals and microplastics found in tested soils. There is now a big push toward reusable solutions.

"Overall, the industry is more eager for environmental changes, but there is still a long way to go. If a producer or show creator implements just one sustainable practice, it should be the core principle of reduce, reuse and recycle in creative decision-making," Tosone says.

"I'm keen to work on and watch a film made with the tiniest footprint ever. Now, that's a creative challenge."