

ONE ON ONE

THE SCRAPPY APPROACH

WITH THE WORLD OF DOCUMENTARY AND UNSCRIPTED HIT BY A GREATLY DIMINISHED DEMAND FOR CONTENT, TWO VETERANS ADVISE PRODUCERS TO STAY NIMBLE, OPEN AND FOCUSED ON THE REALITY OF THE NOW.

INTRO BY LISA Y. GARIBAY

In 1986, Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato produced the debut album of a little-known performer named RuPaul. The partnership between these creators, born in Manhattan's nitty-gritty underground art and queer scene, laid the foundation for a *Drag Race* empire that has spanned 16 seasons in the U.S. along with wildly successful spin-offs and international versions including Brazil, Germany, Mexico, Sweden and Thailand. *RuPaul's Drag Race* has been lauded with four PGA Awards and 31 Emmys, and the empire seems poised only to expand.

Formally launched in 1991, World of Wonder Productions has bolstered its success well beyond the massive *Drag Race* ecosystem, which includes both spinoffs and inspired-by original programming, hit soundtrack releases, a mobile app, and annual DragCon events. The company's smash unscripted series *Million Dollar Listing* has run for 24 seasons and spun off three additional titles. WOW's unscripted portfolio includes *Small Town News* and *Catch and Kill* for HBO, *True Crime Story: Citizen Detective* for AMC+ and *Island Hunters* for HGTV.

WOW's reach also extends to acclaimed feature-length documentaries, including *Inside Deep Throat*, *Wishful Drinking*, *Becoming Chaz*, *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*, and *Out of Iraq*. And the company is no stranger to narrative features, with credits like *Party Monster* and *Menendez: Blood Brothers*, with more in the pipeline.

On top of it all, there's WOW Presents Plus, a hit global streaming service for original content.

Bailey, Barbato and WOW have more than 250 credits as producers and several dozen as co-directors. The cofounders appear tireless in their output and fearless in their experimentation, the majority of which is rooted in unscripted and documentary.

With the future of these formats shaky for everyone involved, *Produced By* turned to these veterans—whose success is rooted in the unknown, the unlikely, and the defiant—for insight into how producers might weather this storm, the size and duration of which no one seems capable of predicting.



PHOTO BY MATHU ANDERSEN

RANDY
BARBATO

FENTON
BAILEY

(This conversation has been edited for clarity.)

THE INDUSTRY TODAY

BAILEY: We're in a different world and we're not going back to the way it was. There is the financial anxiety of being out of work as well as the sense of rejection and the sense of not having a purpose. Those are really challenging things, but rather than hoping for a return to normal, we've all got to accept it's a different world. It sounds really pessimistic, but I'm not pessimistic. Because in a creative way, there is more opportunity than ever.

On the one hand, you've got an industry that is very much cutting back and slimming down. But on the other hand, everybody's a creator. Whether the platform is Netflix or Instagram or Snapchat, everybody has in their pockets the means to create content. That is a radical, profound change.

BARBATO: You're potentially not going to be able to make the kind of income you have in the past, but you might have more creative freedom.

It's an environment that's creating anxiety not just for content makers, but also for the people on the other side, the people who are commissioning. Most people don't know if they're going to have a job next week. The lack of knowing what's in store for the future is not just an us-versus-them situation. I think we're all in it together.

Everybody's trying to figure it out. The bad news is no one knows, and the good news is no one knows. If no one knows, there's a chance you might be the person to figure it out.

BAILEY: Across our industry, traditional divisions of labor and traditionally defined roles have all gone by the wayside. You are the director, the actor,



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the brand, the producer, the editor. Being a producer today is about flexibility and wearing many, many hats.

BARBATO: What it takes to make not even a great producer, but a producer who sticks around, is knowing how to pivot, how to adapt. People who can do a little bit of everything have the best shot.

Depending upon what the project is, you also need to attract a team and have the confidence and security to surround yourself with people who are more talented than you are. *RuPaul's Drag Race* takes a village, people! We, (EPs) Tom Campbell and RuPaul have a team that have been working on that project for over a decade, and they are geniuses. We are very lucky to have a project that can sustain that size of a team.

We're putting together a scripted feature film right now. We have a great script. We financed the script. We attached a great director to it. We've got names attached to it. We have two offers to finance it, a domestic and an international one. But the money doesn't quite match the budget. Maybe 10 or 15 years ago, we'd be like, “OK, we're going to make this money work.” But we're not going to make this money work. So we're putting a pin in it. If we can't get that money, we're going to find that money.

It is a movie that is drag related, and it is a movie that we're like, “We are releasing this theatrically, no matter what” because we really believe it will translate that way. It's a big, stupid, broad, fun comedy. It's what everybody wants that isn't in the movie theaters.

BAILEY: Everyone says, “People don't want to go to movies anymore.” That's not true! They want to go to something that's going to engage them, that they can feel a part of. That was a great thing about *Barbie*, right? That was a great thing about Taylor Swift's concert movie. You can, like, be in it! It's almost like the *Rocky Horror* model of theatrical is still alive and kicking.

BARBATO: For all the doom and gloom, it's important for everyone to know their value. That might mean holding on a little to create the kind of deal (you want). There's something about queerness that gets people to lowball.

World of Wonder has its own streaming network, WOW Presents Plus, which is a way for us to explore producing content on our own and to build a community. We're cheaper than all the other streamers, and we don't intend to give them a run for their money, but we do intend to create an opportunity and to build a community, not just for ourselves, but also for young producers and directors and talent.

That business opportunity is really our team seeing what's going on in the landscape and trying to not always rely on other people for our livelihood.

BREAKING INTO DOC AND UNSCRIPTED

BARBATO: Celebrity and true crime are what so many outlets want because everybody wants something marquee; everyone wants something that they can go big with. But the reality is, the way to bring an idea to someone is access, access, access.

There are still outlets that are turned on by an idea and are successfully playing the game and delivering marquee subjects, but also taking big creative swings and risks. They aren't just working with big established companies or names. Their door is open for ideas. But it has to be more than the idea. It has to be some kind of access.

BAILEY: The barrier to entry is how far you're able to develop something before you take it out. It used to be that you could just pitch an idea with some access, but it could all be an idea on paper. Then it became, "You've got to have tape." And we're now entering an era where the sizzle is not enough.

I think the model going forward is much more you have to just start producing it for real yourself. The work-in-prog-

ress model is more likely to be successful because you're not taking around an idea saying, "Please invest in this, please buy this." You're like, "We're doing this. Do you want to be a part of it?"

It also points to the evolving, collaborative, coproduction, cofounded model, where it's a little bit of anything from everywhere, rather than just going to one place that says, "OK, we'll buy all the rights; we'll take this."

Also, if you are a creator, why would you want to give your idea over to someone just because they're paying for it—give up all ownership and interest in that so-called work-for-hire model? It isn't entirely fair for the person who's coming up with the idea and doing the development and getting the access.

BARBATO: For young people who really don't have an enormous amount of experience or track record, it's about thinking of creative potential partners—whether it's other talent, or talent with a production company that makes sense. It is that scrappy thing of saving your money and shooting some stuff if you have the access and you have someone who's agreed to sit down.

At World of Wonder, we have maybe four feature docs right now in some state of development-slash-production. We do things so cheap. I mean, we come from the East Village. Our whole method of production is the starving kitty method. We've rarely had a huge budget, so we try and produce stuff in-house as long as we possibly can before we take it out to market or pitch it around to outlets. Then theoretically, we might have some leverage with a deal.

One thing a producer should know is how to read a contract, because it really helps! Yes, we have lawyers, but they're so expensive. Especially early on, it's really helpful to be able to figure that stuff out yourself and to be able to build a deal.

It's great that there's a global market, but someone has to make those connections and relationships. Very few of us can hire a team of lawyers and agents.

The scrappy approach is useful, even in times of success.

PLAYING THE GLOBAL FIELD

BAILEY: We learned early on with *Drag Race* that if the audience in Australia had to wait six months to see the U.S. show, they were really mad about it. That was one of the key factors in launching WOW Presents Plus. The idea that you have to wait to see something that's been released in another country is over and done with.

Also, I think the biggest successes will often come from a very specific market and be a very specific kind of show. They're not being created by a research-and-development machine to be globally appealing. They're very specific, like *Squid Game* the drama and *Squid Game* the reality show.

It's not easy, but it never was and never will be. But there are more places to find funding, and there are a lot more models to explore. WOW Presents Plus will produce *Drag Race Philippines*, and then we'll do a license to a global streamer, but it's a local license. HBO has *Drag Race Philippines* streaming in the Philippines, for example.

In every country where *Drag Race* has appeared so far, oftentimes we are dealing with all sorts of assumptions by executives that maybe drag doesn't belong on TV, or maybe there aren't that many drag queens in that country, or that it just doesn't exist in that community, or that the audience isn't ready for it.

BARBATO: It's "culturally inappropriate."

BAILEY: That is an often years-long process of persuasion, and hopefully riding a climate of cultural change, which can go in both directions. On the one hand, we've seen great strides and progress in our careers. There was a time when we ourselves would never imagine there could be a show like *Drag Race* on MTV, winning 30 Emmys.

Really, seriously, never!

Then there are still places where culturally it's a real challenge. The safety of our participants is absolutely paramount. We take great efforts to make sure that everyone who participates in the show is safe, and that their families and loved ones are safe. But we're very optimistic, perhaps naively so. *Drag Race Russia* may be a few years off, but I believe it will happen. And *Drag Race China*, too.

We have a saying at World of Wonder that *no* is the beginning of *yes* because you only need one person to say *yes* and the whole conversation changes. There are countries that we're in negotiation with to bring *Drag Race* where there's a tremendous amount of opposition. But we found that everywhere it's gone, it's done phenomenally well. France Television was skeptical that it would work. Then they got a 15% share, and they're like, "WTF?" or whatever they say in French.

Once you can get past that barrier and air the show, people love it. It's made by queer people and features queer people. However, it is not just for queer people! It is an entertaining show that everybody fundamentally can relate to because it's about outsiders, and everybody, gay or straight, at some point feels like an outsider.

BARBATO: *Drag Race* goes beyond the perceived marginal LGBTQ community, which isn't that marginal. The Q part is way broader than people understand.

BAILEY: Queer is the human condition. It's not a sexual minority. I think that's what people are beginning to recognize, which is good, because we're fighting this endless struggle of prejudice and people trying to turn the clock back, when in fact we are all essentially one.



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BREAKING OUT OF THE BOX

BAILEY: You have to fight being boxed in every step of the way. Working with Ronan Farrow has been a great

inspiration. The first project we did with him was *Catch and Kill*, adapting his podcast and book into a TV series. Randy and I knew of Ronan as this award-winning reporter. So, when he expressed a desire to go on *Drag Race* as a judge, we were like, “What? You’re a *New Yorker* reporter!”

But that’s what’s so inspiring about Ronan. He won’t be boxed in. He can be a judge on *Drag Race* telling jokes, but it doesn’t in any way undermine his ability to do hard-hitting, really important reporting.

BARBATO: I think sometimes people expect us to show up in pitch meetings in heels and a wig and they get a little disappointed if we have a flannel shirt and jeans on. But we bring our queer perspective to everything we do, like *Million Dollar Listing*. Back when we first started, there wasn’t a lot of real estate on TV. Real estate is queer, I tell you! We’ve been obsessed from a certain perspective, and I think we bring that to the way we produce that show.

BAILEY: An audience is made up of individuals. Even though there’s always this research talking about demographics and the 18-to-25, I think that there’s a consequence to thinking of the audience as some block that can be programmed. They can’t be, because it’s a mass of completely individual people. I also think the algorithm is misleading in the sense that it tells you what people have watched, but it doesn’t tell you what people *will* watch.

Everybody’s freaking out about AI, right? Artificial intelligence is not really intelligence. It’s just the massive amount of stuff that has been done. It fundamentally does not innovate. It does not rob us of our future. It is like anything else in media—video or film or word processors or typewriters or printing

presses. They've always been seen as dire threats, but they're tools for us to express ourselves and communicate with each other in different ways.

BARBATO: The difference with the climate right now is how much many outlets and executives are slaves to the algorithm. Many things that have been hits in the past or sleeper hits would not have the opportunity to break through. We know that because there have been movies and TV series that take off in the second season. Those opportunities will potentially not exist in the future.

BAILEY: Like, explain *Suits*. How come? It's exciting because there is a magic. It isn't something that can be bottled.

BARBATO: A hundred years ago, we did a series for Trio called *Brilliant But Canceled*. There should be a streaming service with all the canceled shows!

Why make *Suits* a hit for the second time when there are huge warehouses full of these shows that are shelved that are so good?

BAILEY: This is the other interesting thing: What defines a hit? Everybody thinks it's just ratings, but some things that never were hits had huge cultural influence and were touchstones. David Bowie didn't sell any records until *Let's Dance*. Even though pop music was seen as something that had no real cultural weight, *Let's Dance* fundamentally changed everything!

It's not all about hits. It is about doing it and finding ways to do it.

I have a little story about *The Zone of Interest*. The producer, Jim Wilson, worked at World of Wonder on our first TV commission, *Manhattan Cable*, which was collecting all these clips from public access. One thing I especially love about the film is that they filmed it in

a house they rigged with cameras *Big Brother* style, and within the house, the cast had the freedom to improvise.

I love that, because to me, that speaks to the fact that we tend to think in silos. We tend to think, "This is a Hollywood movie. This is an Oscar-winning movie." Or "This is a TV show" or "This is unscripted," and that there's this sort of disparity that one is culturally valuable and the other is not. Yet the genius of *The Zone of Interest* owes so much from a production point of view to the tropes and ideas of reality television.

People act as if they're two different worlds, scripted and unscripted. They're not. There is such a range of means and methods to tell a story that are valid. That will include rigging a place with cameras, or that may include using AI. I see it as another tool in our creative toolbox, in the same way that unscripted can be a tool, all in service to the story we are telling." ■



Barbato and Bailey in World of Wonder's booth at 202 DragCon L.A.

PHOTO BY JENNIFER GRAYLOCK