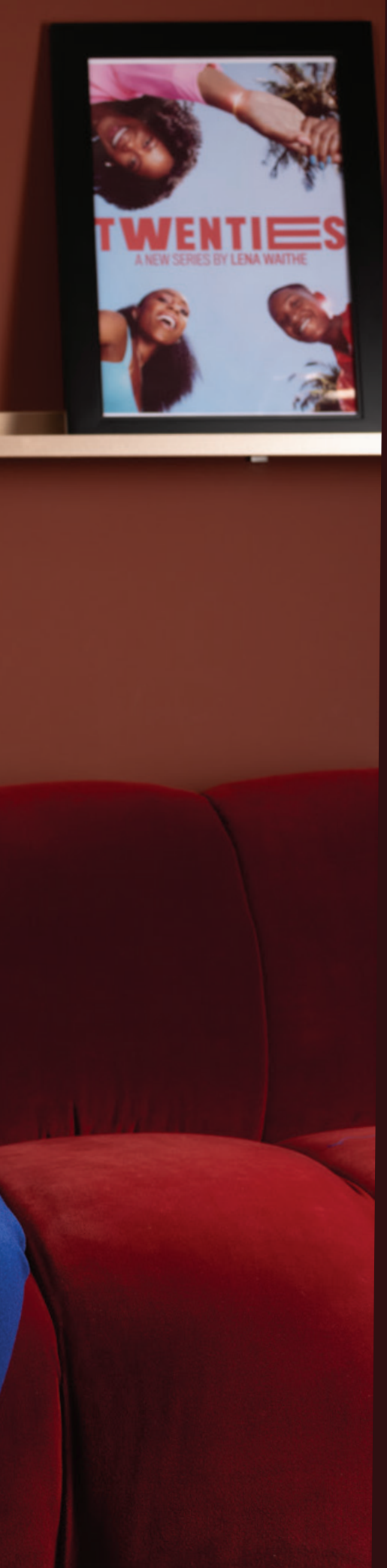

WE RISE
THE CHI
SHOWTIME
A FILM BY A.V. ROCKWELL
A THOUSAND AND ONE



The JOY of Being Needed

LENA WAITHE'S RARE COMBINATION OF TALENTS AND TRAITS MAKE HER A FIERCE AND PIONEERING CREATIVE FORCE—AS WELL AS A MENTOR AND ADVOCATE FOR UP-AND-COMING TALENT.

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WARDROBE BY WARAIRE BOSWELL

Any producer knows they must be able to draw upon an unceasing supply of inner resources to succeed. Ambition, tirelessness, ingenuity, discernment, grace, passion—the list goes on. Most people possess one, two, or a few of these traits, but it's rare to find so many in one person. Lena Waithe fits the bill.

When Waithe won the 2017 Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Writing for a Comedy Series—becoming the first African American woman to do so—the attention she received was enough to cement her brand as a writer and keep her comfortably coasting in that lane for the rest of her career.

But as one of the costars of that series, *Master of None*, Waithe was already doing double duty on the show, and her role expanded even further when she became a co-executive producer for its third and final season in 2021.

By then, the Chicago native had created, written, and produced series of her own, including Showtime drama *The Chi*—set in her hometown and about to go into its seventh season—along with BET comedy series *Boomerang* and *Twenties*. The latter show was loosely based on Waithe's experiences in Hollywood.

With that series, Waithe exhibited one of her hallmark traits: taking a chance on new talent and backing them up.

On Working With Lena

THE NEWBIE:

JOJO GIBBS

After Jojo Gibbs sent Waithe a goodie box with gifts promoting a project for which Gibbs and her friends were raising support, Waithe shouted it out on Instagram, giving their crowdfunding effort a huge boost. Gibbs was then asked by Waithe to audition for the lead role of Hattie in Twenties, *a role Waithe fought for Gibbs to land despite her lack of acting experience. Here, Gibbs describes the impact this had on her.*

"Lena chose great people to do what she needed them to do on *Twenties*, like lead writer Azie Dungey, co-showrunner Susan Fales-Hill, and director and executive producer Justin Tipping. She's a great delegator to the great people she chose to be in these positions. That's the biggest talent you can have as a producer, because that runs the machine. Everything on the show was happening fluidly while she was still able to do other things.

"Lena is a brilliant creative, but she's very savvy as a business person as well. She's very intentional and laser-focused on giving her energy—not just because she believes in something, but also because there's potential.

"She's the epitome of 'put your money where your mouth is' because she's given so many people their first shots. What they do with it, that's on them. To be a person in a position to give someone even just an audition is so significant. It changed my life. I have so much gratitude for Lena being tenacious enough in this industry to rise to a position of influence to make those opportunities happen.

"As a masculine-presenting queer woman, you never know what people will be accepting of. She is leading the way because no one before her has presented the same way she does, nor is in the industry in the same capacity she is. Where's her blueprint? She's forging this path on her own."

BRANCHING OUT

Shortly before she started breaking boundaries on TV, Waithe started producing features. Her foray began when she joined the producing team of 2014's *Dear White People*, which billed itself as "a satire about being a Black face in a white place."

The film follows a group of African American students as they navigate campus life and racial politics at a predominantly white college. But themes and messages depicted could just as easily have been transposed onto Hollywood, as they so mirrored the experiences that many of the film's Black cast and crew have had in the industry.

It was a bold debut for a first-time writer, director and producer who was right up Waithe's alley.

On Working With Lena

THE HERALD:

JUSTIN SIMIEN

Dear White People *was based on Justin Simien's time as a film student at Chapman University. The film garnered a slew of prestigious festival slots, nominations and awards, including the Sundance Festival's U.S. Dramatic Special Jury Award for Breakthrough Talent. The feature debut spun off a critically acclaimed TV series for Netflix just two years later. Simien recalls how Waithe's support was critical to this success.*

"Lena came on board during the early development stages. We met through a writers group, and during one of those sessions, Lena read for the character Coco Conners. I was completely blown away. I remember thinking, 'Who is this crazy woman? I'm obsessed with her.'

"She got the project right away—its humor, its message and its cultural significance—and it just made sense for her to join the team as a producer.

"Her fearlessness and clarity were crucial, especially when trying to break through as a new voice in the industry. Her perspective helped shape how the project was marketed and ensured it resonated with the audience it was meant to serve.

"At the time, we were both figuring out what it meant to have our voices heard in this industry. I learned a lot from her about persistence and the importance of believing in yourself, even when the path isn't clear. I like to think we shared lessons about storytelling and

championing Black voices in a way that was nuanced but unapologetic.

"I admire Lena's ability to stay grounded in her authenticity while navigating the business side of things. She has this innate ability to communicate a vision and bring people on board without compromising the heart of the story. That's something I've tried to emulate in my work—leading with passion and making sure everyone involved understands why we're doing this.

"Lena invests her energy, insight and resources into making sure the story gets told the way it deserves to be told. If you're a producer, take a page from Lena's book—support bold, unique voices and create space for them to thrive."

ANOTHER FIRST

In 2019, Waithe produced the highly lauded drama *Queen & Slim*. It was her first feature-length screenplay. Rather than put it in the hands of a director with a number of features under their belt, Waithe sent it to the talented director of her Emmy-winning *Master of None* episode, who had never helmed a feature before.

The making of *Queen & Slim* is a prime example of how Waithe strives to show up for the creators she works with to give them what they need. This includes teaching these visionaries how to ask for help, how to be specific about what they need without apology, and reassuring them that it isn't a sign of weakness but rather an act of courage and professionalism to do so.

On Working With Lena

THE FIGHTER: MELINA MATSOUKAS

When Waithe asked Melina Matsoukas to direct an episode of Master of None, *Matsoukas was executive producing* Insecure *and wasn't interested in working on another episodic. But she couldn't resist Waithe's script and the chance to help create something she'd never seen on television. Matsoukas describes how that successful partnership paved the way for their next venture.*

"When we were doing *Master of None*, I would say to Lena, 'This story is so personal for you. Is it OK if I suggest some ideas?' She said, 'Trust your instincts.' That's something I've always admired and respected about her, but didn't really do myself.

"I get all these scripts I pass on because they don't speak to me. But the story of *Queen & Slim* spoke tremendously to me. So I picked it as my first film. And who better to do it with than Lena?

"We were both producing it. I'm more the on-the-ground, dig-in-every-day producer, but Lena was right there whenever I needed support to fight for my vision.

"I fought to shoot on film and to film in three cities, because the story is about a road trip. I wanted to actually be in at least three states and not cheat everything. She had my back and said, 'We're going to fight for that and make it work.' And we did.

"Postproduction was hard. I didn't realize until doing a film that how you put your film out is almost as important as making it. I wanted to have control of the narrative and how the film was put out into the world. I wanted to make sure the people it was about had access to it first, and that it spoke to our community.

"I wanted to have control of the key art. I wanted to have control of our trailer edits. I wanted to have control of where it premiered and screened. It was a very different approach than what's traditionally done in Hollywood. We fought for it together. It was really powerful to have that backing because if I had been in that fight alone, I don't know if I would have won."

> "LENA IS A BRILLIANT CREATIVE, BUT SHE'S VERY SAVVY AS A BUSINESS PERSON AS WELL. SHE'S VERY INTENTIONAL AND LASER-FOCUSED ON GIVING HER ENERGY—NOT JUST BECAUSE SHE BELIEVES IN SOMETHING, BUT ALSO BECAUSE THERE'S POTENTIAL."
>
> —jojo gibbs

KEEPING COMPANY

In 2018, Waithe founded Hillman Grad, which has generated award-winning

content and elevated the careers of creators who expand and enrich the industry landscape. The name is a tribute to *A Different World*, one of the TV shows that most inspired and shaped a young Waithe. (Hillman was the name of the fictional historically Black college in the show.)

In just six years, Hillman Grad has produced a range of content that has collected numerous awards and amassed loyal audiences. It has projects at Amazon, BET, Disney+, Focus Features, HBO, Netflix, Showtime/Paramount+, Universal and WBTV. This success is due in no small part to the young, talented executive whom Waithe brought on board as CEO when she launched the company in 2018.

On Working With Lena

THE EXEC:

RISHI RAJANI

Rishi Rajani was a young exec who'd racked up experience at 20th, UTA, and Studio 8, where he met Waithe when she went in to pitch a project. The two connected deeply on their aspirations for bringing about change in the industry and how to do it. Rajani explains how that connection has informed the way Hillman Grad is run.

"This company exists to find a sweet spot between critical and commercial success—to make things that people really want to see, and to do it from a slightly different perspective. The core idea that there are so many more human stories to tell that are not monolithic diversity Hollywood bullshit has driven us and allowed us to set ourselves apart from a quality perspective. It's also allowed us to introduce a number of emerging filmmakers to the marketplace and the world.

"Another core question for us as a company is, how do we become a launching pad not just for filmmakers from diverse backgrounds, but also DPs, costume designers, actors, writers, executives and more?

"If someone here is really excited about something, we make sure that executive has the opportunity to run with it, can find the right financing home, and has the right kind of rollout. *Chang Can Dunk* is a perfect example of how Lena did that for me, with (director) Jingyi Shao being a filmmaker I had been excited about for so long.

"When I was coming up, a lot of things were obscured for me. I wasn't allowed to know what was going on with the budget or allowed to be on a phone call with a senior individual. It's the exact opposite of how I run this team, which is if you have a question, ask and we'll talk about the knowledge gap we can fill.

"I was 26 years old when Lena hired me. She took a shot because she believed in my taste and tenacity and that if I was given the opportunity, I would figure it out. I made tons of mistakes but was allowed to learn from those mistakes. From the start, Lena was like, 'I'm not going to be on the phone with you unless Rishi is also on the phone with us.' That kind of thing was incredibly empowering for me."

THE OPPORTUNITY TO SOAR

In 2020, Hillman Grad partnered with Indeed to create the Rising Voices talent incubator. Each year, the program accepts 10 filmmakers, giving each one $100,000 and mentorship by Waithe and other industry leaders to make a short film for the Tribeca Film Festival.

Rising Voices was created to address the issue of unequal access, which, as its mission states, is particularly harmful due to the significant role film plays in shaping societal attitudes and perspectives. The incubator not only opens doors, it gives participants tactics and relationships to keep their careers going.

On Working With Lena

MOVERS AND SHAKERS:

DEONDRAY AND QUINCY LENEAR GOSSFIELD

Deondray and Quincy LeNear Gossfield were already trailblazers in LGBTQ+ TV programming with their GLAAD Award-winning anthology series The DL Chronicles *and Daytime Emmy-nominated* The Chadwick Journals *when they were selected for the Rising Voices class of 2021. That year, they also joined season 5 of* The Chi *as directors.*

"Before we began on *The Chi*, Lena sat us down with the rough cut of season 3 of *Master of None* to let us know how far outside the lines we could paint. That season was very existential in tone and style, something rarely seen in a TV show format, much less in a Black hourlong cable TV drama. We applied some of this daring aesthetic to our first episode, hoping Lena would dig it. She did, and she offered us the job of producing directors for the next three seasons.

"Lena knows the vibrations of her viewers, and because of that knows what she wants—the most valuable asset of any producer. She'll present something to us that we meet with immediate skepticism and she'll say, 'Trust me on this.' When the season airs, the audience responds in the exact way she suspected they would, and it propels the show in a new and fresh direction.

"She'll re-break a story midseason if she feels like the audience needs to be shaken up, but it's usually an easy pivot that blends well with what we've already been shooting. If it doesn't, she takes all precautions ahead of time so we're ready for the shift.

"Producing is an elixir of good judgment, talent recognition, superb communication skills, organization, creativity, stamina and foresight. The best producers not only create work that elevates genres, but create new ones.

"Lena is on a mission to move the needle with filmmaking and to escort

a whole family of new artists of color to ratify that charge. She's why we, A.V. Rockwell, Jingyi Shao, James Adolphus, Melina Matsoukas, Little Marvin and Radha Blank have been given a chance. That should always be the legacy of an effective and consequential producer."

AN ENGINE OF INGENUITY

Since *Master of None* wrapped in 2021, Waithe has accomplished even more across the film and TV spaces. She's also ventured into book publishing, establishing a Hillman Grad imprint with independent publisher Zando. In November she debuted a podcast, *Legacy Talk with Lena Waithe*, in which she talks one-on-one with icons whose legacies have had an impact on her including Sheryl Lee Ralph, Gina Prince-Bythewood, Jada Pinkett Smith, Mara Brock Akil, Jenifer Lewis and Debbie Allen.

Waithe has also eagerly pursued opportunities to produce for the stage, and it comes as no surprise that she's seen success in that arena, too. As part of the star-studded producing team of *Ain't No Mo'*, Waithe received a nomination for Best Play at the 76th Tony Awards in 2023.

"We're diversifying our portfolio," Waithe says. "I love film. I love TV. But I always want to be sparring with myself and making sure that I don't get complacent or comfortable, but rather still scared."

Waithe has garnered many awards since that groundbreaking Emmy in 2017, including the 2023 PGA Vance Van Petten Entrepreneurial Spirit Award. Waithe has been continually celebrated in other ways for the impact of her work. Her *Vanity Fair* cover in 2018 was the first featuring an openly queer Black woman. That year she made *Time* magazine's 100 Most Influential People list, for which then-Senator Kamala Harris composed Waithe's profile.

Across a media and social landscape broader than most people are capable of imagining, Waithe is a trailblazer who shows no sign of slowing down anytime soon.

Rishi Rajani and Waithe during a Hillman Grad company retreat in 2023.

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Deondray and Quincy LeNear Gossfield's film *Flames*, executive produced by Waithe and Rajani, debuted at Rising Voices in 2021.

"PRODUCING IS AN ELIXIR OF GOOD JUDGMENT, TALENT RECOGNITION, SUPERB COMMUNICATION SKILLS, ORGANIZATION, CREATIVITY, STAMINA AND FORESIGHT. THE BEST PRODUCERS NOT ONLY CREATE WORK THAT ELEVATES GENRES, BUT CREATE NEW ONES."

—DEONDRAY AND QUINCY LENEAR GOSSFIELD

Q+A with Lena Waithe

HOW DOES YOUR BACKGROUND, AND THAT'S IN EVERY SENSE OF THE WORD, INFUSE THE WAY YOU PRODUCE?

The most important part of producing is connecting people, building teams, and putting the right people in positions that lend to their strengths. My background is very much about doing things as a community. Any set—TV, film, theater—is a community of people working toward a common goal: to make something special for us, something timeless yet timely, which is a very unique thing.

I treat whoever's project it is as a partnership. I need to know how you need me to show up for you. That's the most important question I can ask a writer-director whose movie or TV show we're helping to birth. If you need me to lean in more with execs because they're giving you a tough time. If you need me to help navigate some stuff with you and the cast. If you need me to talk about how you need to be working with your DP or your editor.

HOW DO YOU TEACH PEOPLE NOT TO BE AFRAID TO ASK FOR HELP?

I always say it makes you really good at your job to ask your producers for help. Treat us like a resource, someone to lean on, talk to, vent to. I'm often dealing with women of color, and I think we are taught to take it all on, get it all done, and be strong and resilient. But I'm saying, "You don't have to be strong. I'm not someone you have to fight," because oftentimes in this business, your dukes are up.

I know a lot of people on the studio side don't want to feel like they are your enemy either. We are all trying to figure out ways to build a bridge. They also have someone they report to and sometimes they're like, "I'm just as frustrated as you and I want to figure this out."

I'm often working with a director who is making a movie for the first time. That's a huge honor, and I have to be a support system. Sometimes you have to be a listener or a soldier or you just have to be there.

That's what I really enjoy about being a producer. I enjoy being needed. And because these are all different people with different personalities and sets of traumas, they're going to need different things at different times.

PHOTO BY JC OLIVERA/GETTY IMAGES FOR FOCUS FEATURES

Gina Prince-Bythewood, A.V. Rockwell and Lena Waithe at a screening of Rockwell's debut feature *A Thousand and One*.

Waithe with Jenifer Lewis, who appeared in the series *Twenties* and on Waithe's podcast *Legacy Talk*.

AND THAT GOES FROM PRODUCTION THROUGH TO RELEASE, AND EVEN BEYOND, RIGHT?

Absolutely. A lot of times people get caught up in making the thing, which they should do. But this is a business, so we have to sell it. I ask, "How do you want the premiere to feel? Who are you hoping comes to see this movie?" If I can get a sense of who that is, then we can ask, "Where do we find those people? How do we market to them?"

The TV world is unique because of what's happening in our business—so many different streamers and mergers. We all get those emails saying, "Your subscription's going to go up a few bucks." And no one says, "Well, I'm canceling it." You just kind of go, "OK, got it." Then that audience demands more of their entertainment. The people at these companies then ask, "What can we do to make sure you keep paying that $14.99?"

Before, we would see Nielson ratings. Now, we see how many minutes people watch. That's even more pressure on writers rooms. Every scene, turn and character has to be interesting, or else you'll lose people's attention.

Oftentimes, people have their phone in their hand when they're watching television. When I'm watching cuts of *The Chi* before we turn them in to lock, I watch with my phone in my hand. If I turn away to look at my phone, we need to turn up the heat and figure things out.

HOW DOES HILLMAN GRAD BALANCE FILM AND TV IN ITS BUSINESS MODEL?

We are in an overall five-year TV deal at Warner Bros. That's the bulk of how we pay for executives. Before that, we were at Amazon.

TV is hard to invest in, but we want to start investing more in film, raise funds to spend $5 million and try to make $10 million. I got to invest my money in a film for the first time with *The 40-Year-Old Version*. That was really exciting because we were kind of our own studio until we were screened at Sundance and Netflix bought it. We love making small films and having them do really well.

HOW CAN SOMEONE WHO'S TRYING TO GET FILM OR TV PROJECTS OUT THERE BALANCE CREATIVITY WITH COMMERCIALITY?

Creatives make the content that audiences gravitate toward, yet we also have to have our finger on the pulse. Sometimes it is about timing. It is about stars aligning. And it's about you mining your own life and experiences to put on the page, which more often than not people will relate to, because it's honest and vulnerable. That's where I live anyway, whether it be on *The Chi* or *Queen & Slim* or with my new play, trying to find things that people can't help but lean into.

For folks who are trying to figure it out, don't take it personally if the industry isn't responding to the material you're bringing to it. The industry is in a fearful place. They're betting on what they feel is a sure thing. But I don't think there's any such thing. The things that tend to work and pop are always surprises. Always.

For example, I've always loved pairing a fresh face or a name you might not know with someone you may be familiar with. *Queen & Slim* was a prime example of that with Daniel Kaluuya and Jodie Turner-Smith. I loved working with Angela Bassett, who everybody knows, in the *Master of None* episode, and putting Kim Whitley, who I know and love but everybody may not know, next to Angela. Combining the expected with the unexpected is my favorite thing to do.

WHEN SHAPING PROJECTS FOR TV, HOW DO YOU ADDRESS THE DEMAND FOR BINGEABLE CONTENT?

The Chi would not still be on if we were bingeable. Because you have to wait every week and you have to wait a year between seasons, it helps us as creators, because the audience is hungry. There's a fear they might go away and find new shows. But we've been pretty blessed with our show. People come back every year and they also bring folks with them. Every season, our ratings go up.

It's hard to get people to remember an episode if they're watching five in a row. I appreciate the fact that folks have to be on the same page. No one has seen more than anyone else. I don't mind having to parse it out. It gives us a beat, too, to make another season.

YOU AND HILLMAN GRAD ARE CONTINUALLY INVESTING IN UP-AND-COMING TALENT. WHAT DO YOU TEACH THEM ABOUT BREAKING INTO THE INDUSTRY AND MAKING A LIVING?

Here's the truth about this industry: I don't advise anyone to get into it unless they have a spirit of stone. Because it's hard, and it's more difficult if you're othered, queer or not the norm. A lot of times our industry has been tasked with improving society and teaching people how to be better. As artists, all we can do is make a statement about where we are as a society.

But I do think our industry is white leaning. If you look at Emmy and Oscar winners, the numbers of (non-white) winners are just dismal. And those awards count for something in our industry. *The Chi* is a very popular show, but it's not going to get mentioned at the Emmys because the cast is predominantly African American. They're like, "Maybe the NAACP Image Awards will give you guys something." Our industry is still very segregated.

A lot of Black and brown folks watch shows with white people on them. I watch *Succession*. I watch *Game of Thrones*. But I don't know if white people in the industry are going to be watching *Power* and *P-Valley* and *The Chi*. I think they're like, "That's for y'all. But when it comes to our (white) shows, you should watch them and know them if you want to exist in this industry."

PHOTO BY MIKE COPPOLA/GETTY IMAGES FOR THE TRIBECA FESTIVAL

(Clockwise from top L) Hannah Bing, Joey Xeutong Zhao, María Alvarez, Candace Ho, Miguel Angel Caballero, Justin Riley, Larry Owens, Ana Verde, Jackie! Zhou, Constanza Casto, Domenica Casto, Chris Hymans, Rishi Rajani, Lena Waithe and LeFawn Davis attend the Indeed Rising Voices premiere at Spring Studios on June 12, 2023, in New York City.

That's not a criticism. It is a fact. And until we acknowledge these things, I don't know how we plan on changing them. Our industry is smoke and mirrors, and you have to be an exceptional chess player to get through. But most artists of color are just trying to figure it out, like the folks I'm trying to help. They don't have the luxury of just being good. They also have to be good at reading a room. They have to be good at not making someone uncomfortable.

The playing field here is not level, yet we all still want to play. For a lot of us, we don't know how to do anything else. So, we're going to play on an uneven playing field with hopes that at some point we'll make a touchdown in spite of the fact that the playing field isn't level. When we do win, when you do have a Quinta or an Issa or a Donald or me, we are seen as unicorns because the fact that we made it was almost quite impossible.

With our Hillman Grad mentorship lab, I say, "It's not just helping y'all out by getting some instructors and making sure y'all know what you're doing. You're also meeting each other and you're building community." That's the only way I can help these motherfuckers survive.

This is what we do as Black women. We've always been a part of forging community, figuring out where we can help. That's why for me it's really about tangible help, not just, "Here's an internship." But more tactical, like, "This is what you got to know to make it."

WHAT ARE SOME INDUSTRY-SPECIFIC ISSUES THAT RISE TO THE TOP FOR YOU?

We need to look at who is in charge. Who really has the green-lighting ability? Where does the buck stop? We may feel we're doing a good job because we have people of color working in these offices, but who they answer to often doesn't look like them.

If you're an exec and you're a person of color, you're going to be put in a tough position because you're going to get placed on a person of color's project as a way for (the studio) to say, "Look, we have a person of color on your project advising you." It presumes that we have the same experience because we're both Black women.

That person is now giving me notes on a show about Black people, but they had a different experience than I did. It may not be helping the creative process. It may be hurting it.

IF SOMEONE OFFERED YOU A VP POSITION AT A STUDIO, WOULD YOU CONSIDER TAKING IT TO HELP BRING ABOUT CHANGE?

Yes, but only if it's real. Don't offer me a job to make you look good. Can I actually get something green-lit? Give me the opportunity to make three or four films, put a couple shows on the air, and if they do well, then you can say, "Maybe there's something to this. Let's continue."

I'm not completely against it, but it would be a unique journey for me to enter that space. I don't know if I've seen that career path, where somebody went from being on the creative side to the executive side. But you're right: Who better to help advise a creative than another creative?

But oftentimes, the sensibilities of

COURTESY OF HILLMAN GRAD

The Hillman Grad team at its company retreat in 2023.

creatives don't lend themselves to being an executive. That's why I have wonderful execs in Naomi (Funabashi, president of film and TV at Hillman Grad) and Rishi—because my brain doesn't necessarily work like theirs.

Half the time, Rishi will have conversations with the executives on my behalf. You need somebody to help translate because executives and creatives speak very different languages. Yet we're forced together to create art.

YOU RECEIVED THE PRODUCERS MARK AND A PGA AWARD NOMINATION FOR *BEING MARY TYLER MOORE*. HOW DID THE MAKING OF THAT FILM DEFINE FOR YOU WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A PRODUCER?

The tricky thing about the word "producer" is that nobody can define it. If you ask a million people, "What does a producer do?" you're going to get a million different answers. *Being Mary Tyler Moore* started with me wanting to write a biopic. Then I went to sit with her widower and quickly changed my mind to turn it into a documentary, which then meant, "OK, I'm not going to write it, but I need to step back and hire a person to come in and direct. I'll be producing it, and we're going to figure this out."

It took me five years to get that whole thing together. I mentioned it in *Vanity Fair* on purpose. Dr. Robert Levine (Mary Tyler Moore's widower) read it and invited me over. The project was initially at CNN. But they said, "You can't do it if her widower is involved because we're a journalistic (outlet)." So I said, "Well, then I can't do it with you." Then HBO Max raised their hand and I said, "Great. That works."

It was probably the most producerial type of project I was on every step of the way. Like asking James (Adolphus) to direct. He had just done this thing with me for Quibby, and I said, "I think you'd be great because you're super intentional and layered, and that's what I need for this." He wasn't familiar with Mary Tyler Moore, so I said, "Go watch her show. Read her memoir. If you're as fascinated with her as I think you will be, let's do this together." He came back and he said yes.

I wasn't on set when the interviews were being done, but it was my decision to cover up the speakers (with archival footage). That was a tough day in the editing room with James. When we were done watching the cut, I said, "OK, I got a big note." I think he left that day dizzy, like, "What the fuck? We worked on this for so long." After we added more footage, he said, "Oh wow, there it is. This is the movie."

My job is to be creative. Not just administrative, but to also say, "Let me step back from this and be an audience member. What do I want?" And what do I want as a producer, as a person who came up with this? I was like, "I want to see Mary. That's the point of this." Now you get more Mary. I think that's why the doc is so wonderful.

That's why this is such an honor for you all to see me and to see what we're doing and what we're building. People don't always think of me as a producer because they see I have a TV show or they've seen me on a TV show or movies. But I really feel most comfortable with a producer's hat on because I like to just be helpful. ■