

ON THE MARK

THREE PRODUCERS PULL BACK THE CURTAIN ON THE WORK THEY DID TO EARN THE PRODUCERS MARK.

It's not easy to be a producer these days. The challenges and triumphs in bringing a story to screen vary by genre, budget, talent, location, distribution and more. Since 2001, the Guild has made it a priority to recognize those producers who do the yeoman work of bringing great stories to screen. In 2012, the PGA formally codified its standard through industrywide acceptance of the Producers Mark (p.g.a.). While the making of each film is unique, the denominator common to each producer who receives the Mark is that they have met the Guild's standard: performance, in a decision-making capacity, of a major portion of the producing functions on that specific film.

Here, the producers of three forthcoming features discuss their own unique Mark-qualifying work.

KPop Demon Hunters

Michelle Wong, p.g.a.

When they aren't selling out stadiums, K-pop superstars Rumi, Mira and Zoey use their secret identities as badass demon hunters to protect their fans from an ever-present supernatural threat. Together, they must face their biggest enemy yet—an irresistible rival boy band of demons in disguise.

CAN YOU DESCRIBE SOME SPECIFIC CULTURAL AND QUALITATIVE CONTRIBUTIONS YOU BROUGHT TO THE TABLE AS A PRODUCER WHO SHAPED THE FILM AND HELPED MAINTAIN THE CULTURAL AUTHENTICITY?

Initiating a research trip to Seoul

and Jeju Island was the first step in immersing the team in cultural specificity and scouting locations for our film. Exposure to the natural environment, the smells, textures, sounds and scope influenced the design and look of our movie immensely.

Additionally, maintaining a team of Korean artists in every department was important as we crewed up the show, as they influenced not only the storytelling but the characters' expressions and movement.

Most importantly, embarking on a worldwide search for Korean voiceover talent as well as vocal talent who spoke Korean and English was a challenge that took years to accomplish. Having multiple casting directors for both voiceover and vocals, as well as casting calls in both the U.S.



and Seoul was daunting, but we are proud that the persistence paid off. Our cast speaks for itself.

MUSIC IS CLEARLY AN IMPORTANT PART OF THIS ANIMATED FEATURE. HOW DID YOU NAVIGATE THE CREATION, DEMOS, FINAL RECORDINGS AND MIXES OF SEVEN ORIGINAL SONGS WHILE ADHERING TO THE SCHEDULE, BUDGETS AND STUDIO APPROVALS? WHAT WERE SOME OF THE MAJOR CHALLENGES WITH THE MUSICAL COMPONENTS OF THIS ANIMATED FEATURE?

Creating seven original songs was one of the biggest challenges of *KPop Demon Hunters*, by far. In animation, crafting the story happens along the way and is not specific to the script alone, as iterations are made in storyboards, editorial and in voiceover sessions with talent. In a musical, this is compounded because the story is told through song, so any revisions to the story could change the structure, production and lyrics.

It was important for us to stay true to K-pop, so the songs not only needed to communicate the story, in both Korean and English, but they also needed to sound like fresh pop songs. With this in mind, we had an amazing executive music producer in Ian Eisendrath, who helped us collaborate with three music teams—hitmakers who have written for groups like Blackpink, Twice and BTS.

While amazing at writing pop hits, catchy hooks and viral choruses, writing narrative lyrics for a movie was a new experience for all. This added another layer to the budget, schedule and executive approvals that should be evaluated closely when developing animated musicals.

CAN YOU DESCRIBE HOW YOU SUCCESSFULLY BALANCED THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN NETFLIX, SONY, AND KOREAN RECORD COMPANY THE BLACK LABEL TO ENSURE SMOOTH COMMUNICATION AMONG THE ENTIRE TEAM?

I tend to be an overcommunicator, which became a mindset that I



Michelle Wong

adapted to quickly when I started on the movie. In essence, I was working with two studios (Sony Pictures Animation and Netflix) that are both involved with approvals.

With respect to The Black Label, smooth communication took more time. With that team based in Seoul, there were language, cultural, time and process differences. Balancing communication with their team took several iterations and processes until we found the right formula, which we eventually did.

Boy band?
Or demons in
disguise?



Mike & Nick & Nick & Alice

Andrew Lazar, p.g.a.

Writer-director BenDavid Grabinski's *Mike & Nick & Nick & Alice* is a buddy action comedy set in the criminal underworld starring Vince Vaughn, James Marsden, Eiza Gonzalez, and Keith David.

AS SOLE PRODUCER, CAN YOU DESCRIBE SOME OF THE CHALLENGES YOU ENCOUNTERED AS BEING SINGULARLY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE PRODUCTION AND DELIVERY OF THE FILM? WERE ANY OF THESE CHALLENGES UNIQUE TO FILMING IN CANADA?

Every film presents unique challenges, and *Mike & Nick & Nick & Alice* was no exception. As the sole producer, one of my most significant hurdles was managing the film's extensive action sequences within budgetary constraints. The script demanded elaborate set pieces, compounded by Vince Vaughn's dual roles as Future Nick and Present-day Nick, requiring meticulous planning for scenes where both characters interact or fight.

While techniques like those used in *Sinners* with Michael B. Jordan provided a blueprint, executing these sequences efficiently was critical, as they're inherently time-intensive. We relied on exceptional stunt doubles (matched to Vince's physique) and Vince's own enthusiasm for performing action. But balancing

creativity with practicality was a constant tightrope walk.

Further to the production budget, executive producer Richard Middleton and I did many different budget scenarios, and shooting in Winnipeg, Canada, was by far the most cost-effective location with the exception of Sydney, Australia, which was slightly cheaper.

However, the local crew market was stretched thin by concurrent productions in Winnipeg, forcing us to bring in additional labor from Vancouver and Toronto. This introduced complexities with Manitoba's tax credit, as there is a cap on out-of-province hires, a key consideration for mid- to large-scale productions. Navigating these logistical and financial nuances, while



Andrew Lazar on the set of *Mike & Nick & Nick & Alice*.

PHOTO BY HEATHER BECKSTEAD.

ensuring that the film's ambitious vision remained intact, was a defining challenge of the production.

CAN YOU DESCRIBE SOME UNIQUE CHALLENGES THAT ARE INVOLVED IN THE LIFE CYCLE OF SPEC SCRIPT TO GREEN LIGHT? HOW LONG WERE YOU DEVELOPING THE SCRIPT BEFORE IT WAS SET UP AT 20TH CENTURY FOX?

The journey from spec script to green light is always a challenging journey. Writer-director BenDavid Grabinski and I had wanted to collaborate for over a decade, and when I first read the script during the early days of COVID, I knew immediately it was special. I specifically remember that during my first read of the script, a particular

scene had me laughing uncontrollably, and I thought, this is exactly why I want to make this film. That scene not only survived every draft but became one of the film's standout moments.

Given that BenDavid's prior film was much smaller in scale—and *Mike & Nick & Nick & Alice* represented a significant budget leap with him attached to direct—financing required a strategic approach. Fortunately, I had strong relationships at 20th Century Fox, not just with creative executives Steve Asbell and Sarah Shepard, but also with Ravi Mehta and Richard Middleton, key figures on the physical production side who I knew would champion the film's ambitious vision. Richard and I had worked together successfully multiple times in the past, and he ended up leaving his position as

a 20th exec to line produce the film.

Twelve months after reading the first draft, we secured a deal with 20th, but only after ensuring their unwavering commitment to BenDavid as director—a nonnegotiable for me, given the script's singular tone. While other studios were very keen on the project, I prioritized a partner who fully embraced our creative alignment.

Now in postproduction, the film has tested exceptionally well during our preview process, but the work is far from over. As any producer knows, marketing and distribution are their own battlefield, so while we're proud of how far we've come, the next phase is just as critical. Fingers crossed, but so far, so good.



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Freakier Friday

Kristin Burr, p.g.a.

Freakier Friday is the sequel to the beloved 2003 body-swapping film with Jamie Lee Curtis and Lindsay Lohan reprising their roles as Anna and Tess in a story with a multigenerational twist.

WE HEARD THE IDEA FOR THE SEQUEL CAME FROM JAMIE LEE CURTIS WHILE SHE WAS DOING PRESS FOR ANOTHER FILM. IS THAT TRUE?

Yes, Jamie had told us that in almost every interview she ever gave, she was always asked about a sequel. (Disney did a fun marketing reel of the cast being asked about a sequel repeatedly.) So she finally called Disney and asked them! Meanwhile, I believe Disney was already discussing it internally.

WHAT HAPPENED BETWEEN THAT INITIAL COMMENT AND GREEN LIGHT?

That's a big question! Jamie called Bob Iger and Alan Bergman from Disney, and then Disney called me. I was the junior exec on the 2003 film. So (producer) Andrew Gunn, (executive producer) Ann Marie Sanderlin and I, along with Disney execs Allison Erlichman and Maria Ascanio, began looking for a writer and trying to figure out an idea worthy of a sequel.

We knew that we wanted Jamie and Lindsay to be on the same team this time so that they could be in a lot of scenes together. And we wanted Jamie to get to play a different type of teenager. The process was a real testament to everyone working together toward a common goal. The time from the original call to

completion of principal photography was under two years. There are always challenges with schedules and timing, but everyone was very excited to reunite.

WHAT WERE THE CHALLENGES TO DEVELOPING THE SCRIPT FOR THE SEQUEL WHILE MAINTAINING THE INTEGRITY OF THE UNDERLYING IP?

Sequels are tricky. You want to be able to provide a new conflict with characters that have evolved, but you also want to be able to tap into the nostalgia that made the last film a classic. It might be bold to say, but I think we did it.

WAS THERE HEAVY RELIANCE ON FELLOW PRODUCER ANDREW GUNN, GIVEN



Jamie Lee
Curtis and
Lindsay Lohan
in *Freakier
Friday*.



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HIS INVOLVEMENT IN THE ORIGINAL FILM?

Andrew, Ann Marie and I became friends on the 2003 film and have remained friends. I cannot imagine working on this movie without them. They were invaluable.

WAS ALL PRODUCTION KEPT LOCAL TO LOS ANGELES, INCLUDING POST?

Yes. Jamie's schedule only allowed her to shoot in LA. We were thrilled to get the California tax credit. We had shot the 2003 film in LA, too. Because of timing, we had almost no builds, and

we shot all on location. You get to see a ton of the city. And it's beautiful.

We shot in both the Palisades and Pasadena. Several locations are no longer there because of the fires in January, including the hero house. I'm so glad that we got to capture LA before the fires. It's a loving tribute to our great city. ■

Clockwise from left: Kristin Burr, Ann Marie Sanderlin and Andrew Gunn on set; Burr and Sanderlin with costume designer Natalie O'Brien; Jamie Lee Curtis with Burr and Sanderlin; Walt Disney Studios SVP of Physical Production Diane Sabatini, Kristin Burr, and director Nisha Ganatra.

