



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF RALPH WINTER

## RALPH WINTER'S IMMERSIVE LIFE

**PRODUCING CONTENT FOR THE LAS VEGAS SPHERE IS A NONSTOP WHIRLWIND LACED WITH A CONSTANT SENSE OF CREATING SOMETHING ENTIRELY NEW.**

INTRO BY KERI LEE

Having already produced two legendary feature film franchises (*Star Trek* and *X-Men*) and many other TV and film projects, Ralph Winter waded gradually into the immersive world of Sphere Entertainment. It began with consulting gigs in between his feature films, shooting tests to help Sphere understand what it would take to capture the footage needed to bring these jaw-dropping projects to life. After a while, the opportunity to be involved in reinventing how people experience entertainment began proving irresistible.

So nearly four years ago, Winter decided to go all in as head of production at Sphere Studios. Today, he is still relishing that choice. As with most producing jobs, there is no typical day for Winter, but any given day might involve managing numerous teams, visiting sets on projects around the world, and wrangling the custom, 18K-resolution Big Sky camera's massive output of data. He also regularly visits Big Dome in Burbank, where Sphere Entertainment creates and tests content for the much larger point of all this: the Las Vegas Sphere.

Sphere's 160,000-square-foot interior display wraps

over and around audiences and includes haptic seats and environmental effects to enhance the feeling of being enmeshed in the Sphere experience. In addition to multimedia music residencies ranging from U2 to Kenny Chesney to No Doubt, Las Vegas Sphere presented Darren Aronofsky's 2023 sci-fi documentary *Postcard from Earth* and is currently presenting an immersive *Wizard of Oz* experience that includes a tornado and the scent of poppies.

The goal, Winter explains, is always to take you somewhere you've never been before.

"The 60 frames a second, the haptics, the wind, the hot, the cold, the smells, the blowing leaves, all that stuff contributes to making it feel like you're in a different place," says Winter, adding that storytelling in the Sphere blends film, theater and sensory experiences. "We're trying to invent a new way of doing this. And honestly, that's what I think gets everybody up in the morning here—you're changing the world. You're inventing something new."

Doing so is often a matter of experimenting with technology, of trial and error, and of adjusting to and taking advantage of the constraints and opportunities this expansive medium offers. Yet ultimately, Winter says, visiting a Sphere set anywhere in the world looks much like any other TV or film shoot, as does the production pipeline and timeline.

"You're doing the same kinds of things—developing a story and prepping it, shooting it, posting it. The difference is all the 4D elements and the immersive nature of it," he says, adding that they have a specific timeline for these elements: "The tornado happens here. We drop apples here. We have bubbles



**Above:** Winter (right) on the set of *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* with star Hugh Jackman and director Gavin Hood.

**Below:** Winter on set in Albarracin, Spain, for *The Promise* with producer Edward McGurn.







On set in  
Albarracin,  
Spain,  
for *The  
Promise*.

here or snow, whatever it is. We try to think about that immersive experience along with the script and the story and the shooting. So it's a little bit of 3D chess."

Winter's clear enthusiasm for this game coupled with his passionate work as a member of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences and three guilds, including PGA, makes for days that start very early and end very late, underlining his admission that: "I am a big coffee drinker."

### Morning

Our management is in New York and typically we're shooting something that's not in Los Angeles, so my day usually begins very early. I'm probably on the phone to somewhere in the world by 7 a.m. just to get ahead of the issues and see how shooting is finishing up somewhere in Europe.

So my day usually begins on the phone or with emails that

have come in overnight from various locations. Basically, I'm just catching up.

From there, I get through a shower and get into the offices here in Burbank. We're based by the Burbank airport and by our Big Dome, which we use as our testing facility. It's the same resolution as Vegas, but it's one-quarter scale. So that allows us to test materials at least visually before we go up to Vegas. Vegas runs 24 hours a day, so it's hard to get in there to look at stuff. It's easier here in Burbank.

### Afternoon

It's back-to-back meetings, just crazy Zoom meetings every hour, nonstop. Lunch is at my desk—I just keep going. Then it's a combination of that and back and forth over to the Big Dome to look at the progress on different shows.

It's also a lot of strategizing: meetings, planning and



preparation, preproduction, some postproduction viewing here on-site. It doesn't really slow down until 7 or 8 o'clock at night. So it's a long day. We try to pack stuff into weekdays, though it does spill over to weekends because our venues are open on weekends. Our best attendance is on Friday and Saturday nights.

Someone here goes up to Vegas probably twice a month. Then we'll be off for a week or two overseas on international shoots, helping with the crew or just being there to help make sure that shooting goes well.

When we're on set, it pretty much looks like anything you'd be doing on a television or feature set—similar 12-hour days, just trying to capture the storytelling and getting as many setups as you can. We're using the same traditional grip, electric tools and crews. We're doing a little more immersive audio, so our audio crew might look a little different. We also use visual effects to do cleanup. Our field of view is so wide—150 to 160 degrees—so we're frequently taking out things that we just can't move. But if you were visiting our set on location, it would look and feel like any television or movie set.

We all like being on location and getting out of Burbank. It's a good thing. It's recharging and refreshing to be out there

capturing new material and doing it in a way that maybe you haven't done before.

### Evening

I'm inspired by watching other movies, and now in Oscar season, it's a big deal for me. I take my Academy voting seriously and my Producers Guild voting seriously. So I try to get out there to see everything. It's also really inspiring to see how, even with traditional tools, everyone is pushing the limits and doing it in the stories that are told and the way they're told.

I'm big on "get to the theater and look at stuff." I've got a nice TV at home, but I like going to the theater. It's so much fun being with an audience, and I want to feel the storytelling with the audience.

So yeah, it's a long day. But when you feel like you're changing the world, it goes by fast. It feels like we're doing something no one else is doing, so that's exciting. And I work with people that I really like being with, and that makes you want to come in to work. It's rough out there for a lot of people right now. We're very cognizant of that, and that we're privileged to be working on this. We don't ignore that. We don't take that lightly at all. ■