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KATHLEEN KENNEDY EXECUTIVE PRODUCER • DIEGO LUNA EXECUTIVE PRODUCER
LUKE HULL EXECUTIVE PRODUCER • JOHN GILROY EXECUTIVE PRODUCER
DAVID MEANTI PRODUCER

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// Tony Gilroy's show is so gripping, so dramatically visceral, so suspenseful, the story of a man who grew into a dissident, leader and courageous fighter against the galactic tyranny is
ROUSINGLY ENGROSSING AND MASTERFUL!"
THE
PLAYLIST

ON THE MARK

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

Innovation and dedication are requisites for any producer applying for the Producers Mark. But to earn the Mark, those producers must also demonstrate that they performed, in a decision-making capacity, a major portion of the producing functions on a motion picture.

Because each project offers its own unique set of circumstances, the challenges and triumphs vary wildly across budget, talent, location, distribution and more. But the denominator common to each producer who receives the Mark is the quality of their contribution to each phase of production—development, preproduction, production and postproduction.

Here, the producers of three forthcoming features share details about their Mark-certifying work.

CHILI FINGER

Jo Henriquez, p.g.a., and Sam Sandweiss, p.g.a.

Starring Judy Greer, Sean Astin, Bryan Cranston and John Goodman, *Chili Finger* tells the story of a recently empty-nested mother (Greer) who discovers a human finger in her bowl of fast-food chili. When she blackmails the restaurant for a cash payout, the situation spirals out of control, and her life descends into chaos. The script was penned by Stephen Helstad and codirected by Helstad and Edd Benda.

FILM PRODUCTION IS ALWAYS A CHALLENGE, PARTICULARLY IN AN ECONOMICALLY CHALLENGED

REGION WITH LIMITED FILM INFRASTRUCTURE. HOW DID YOU NAVIGATE SHOOTING IN CHAMPAIGN, ILLINOIS? WHAT WERE SOME OF THE UNIQUE CHALLENGES ON BOTH THE CREATIVE AND FISCAL SIDES?

Henriquez: It has its advantages and disadvantages like anything else. On the one hand, it's true there are limited resources, but on the other hand, the resources that are available are much easier to acquire. There is less red tape to cut through, and people who are more excited to help and be a part of what we're doing. For example, when we wanted to burn down a barn, it was as easy as a handshake. The fire department was excited to bring out a crew and take advantage of it as a drill opportunity.



Producers Jo Henriquez and Sam Sandweiss (center) are joined by writer/codirector Stephen Helstad and codirector Edd Benda on the set of *Chili Finger*.

Sandweiss: The crews out there aren't as deep as they are in Chicago, but we partnered with Flyover Studios, who have invested real time and care into growing the film community in Champaign. They were instrumental in connecting us with local crew and resources, and together we built a strong mix of experienced department heads and emerging regional talent.

Henriquez: To Sam's point, finding the right local partners is imperative. We did a lot of due diligence before partnering up. Then the big question becomes who do we hire locally, who do we bring in from nearby cities like Chicago, and who do we fly in from Los Angeles? Ultimately, we ended up with a great mix of people. More importantly, everyone was passionate about the film.

Sandweiss: There were also some unique advantages to shooting in (nearby) Rantoul. Flyover had converted stage space that was previously a World War II airplane maintenance

hangar. Thanks to the half dozen industrial ventilation fans, we were able to shoot a great deal of our interior barn burn practically on their stage, while keeping the crew very safe. It ended up being a key part of what makes the scene so special.

IT'S A FASCINATING STORY AND A GREAT PREMISE FOR A DARK COMEDY. WAS SHOOTING IN THE MIDWEST ALWAYS CONTEMPLATED AS PART OF THE AESTHETIC OF THE STORY?

Sandweiss: Absolutely. The filmmakers are originally from the Midwest, and *Chili Finger* was always imagined as a Midwestern story. The tone of the film, this blend of absurd humor and grounded realism, really depends on that regional backdrop. Shooting in Champaign let us capture that authentic sense of place and the kind of offbeat humanity that defines the region. You can feel it in every frame.

Henriquez: Of course, the film credits and net budget also play an important

role in the equation. Early on, we looked at a number of cities and states. I think we ran about five budgets in different cities and even explored Canada at one point. Sam wisely pinpointed Champaign from the very beginning. Then we did a whole loop across the continent and ended back at Champaign. We eventually realized that, between the creative look and Illinois' very healthy film credit, it was the best place to make this film.

Sandweiss: Honestly, we were very lucky. Lucky that we found such a great group of people in Champaign, that our budget was the perfect sweet spot to shoot there, that they have this great tax incentive, and that it all happened to fit the creative so perfectly.

WAS THERE A CLEAR DIVISION OF LABOR BETWEEN THE TWO OF YOU ON THIS FILM, OR WERE DECISIONS LARGELY MADE COLLECTIVELY?

Sandweiss: Jo and I made nearly every major decision together. We didn't divide responsibilities so much as stay in constant communication—sharing every creative, financial and logistical call. There were times when one of us took the lead on something, like casting or financing, but nothing existed in a vacuum.

Henriquez: Sometimes we'd literally just split a list in two. Sam would take half the cast and start emailing agents, I'd take the other half and start emailing agents, and we'd combine notes at the end of the day. The key here was that we *always* knew what the other was handling, and we kept a very clear, very organized checklist of everything that had to get accomplished.

Sandweiss: This was my first project with Jo, and it was clear early on that we had the same sensibilities while also



Executive producer Sarah Herrman with Henriquez and Sandweiss.

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GOTHAM
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★★★★★
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STANDARD

★★★★★
★ Morning Star

★★★★★
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★★★★★
THE IRISH TIMES

★★★★★
FIRSTSHOWING

★★★★★
LOUD AND CLEAR

“AN AUDACIOUS EPIC”

Hollywood
REPORTER

“THE TESTAMENT OF ANN LEE IS A CATHARTIC, ECSTATIC
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THE
TESTAMENT
OF
ANN LEE

possessing complementary skill sets. The collaboration works because there's deep mutual trust and a shared understanding of what it means to protect a film's vision. Producing independently means wearing every hat at once, and having a true producing collaborator makes that not only possible but enjoyable.

Henriquez: I can't underscore enough how important having a great producing collaborator is. I have found that it's really hard to delineate who does what from day one, but if you have a great collaborator, you figure it out organically. There have to be qualities you admire about the other, there has to be mutual respect, there can be zero ego, and most importantly, everything is always first and foremost in service of the film. Also, it just makes everything so much better when your producing collaborator surprises you with a Nespresso machine at the Airbnb.

Sandweiss: I found the partnership functioned best after Jo had his cup of coffee.

GABBY'S DOLLHOUSE: THE MOVIE

Steven Schweickart, p.g.a.

Directed by Ryan Crego, the film adaptation of beloved children's series *Gabby's Dollhouse* sees Gabby (Laila Lockhart Kraner, reprising her role from the series) heading out on a road trip with her Grandma Gigi (Gloria Estefan) to the urban wonderland of Cat Francisco. But when Gabby's dollhouse, her most prized possession, ends up in the hands of an eccentric cat lady named Vera (Kristen Wiig), Gabby sets off on an adventure through the real world to get the Gabby Cats back together and save the dollhouse before it's too late.

WHAT NEW CREATIVE OPPORTUNITIES OR CHALLENGES CAME FROM COMBINING LIVE ACTION WITH ANIMATION IN THE FILM?

This was the first hybrid feature to ever be produced at DreamWorks Animation. It was a tremendously exciting prospect

to pioneer this effort. The challenge and opportunity laid before us was to pull Gabby out of her bedroom on a soundstage and into the real world, creating a "catified" version of San Francisco that was believable and grounded in reality, while maintaining the whimsy that our core audience from the series has come to expect.

Given that this was our first foray into shooting live action, we leaned heavily upon the expertise of our live-action production partners, Catchlight Studios, to aid in crafting a plan for the shoot in Vancouver and VFX work to follow. With the steadfast support and guidance of producers Marcei Brown, Jason Clark and Jessica Malanaphy, we were able to create a road map and execute our plan for completion.

Challenges arose every day, as they do for any film production, but we had a relatively small budget and condensed schedule compared to other animated-hybrid films. This required our constant vigilance in regard to creative problem-solving, but we were able to cast our

Laila Lockhart Kraner (center) with director Ryan Crego and crew on the set of *Gabby's Dollhouse: The Movie*.



PHOTO COURTESY LEAH GALLO / DREAMWORKS ANIMATION

stars and key talent, scout, plan and shoot a considerable amount of coverage in what felt like record-breaking time.

Perhaps the most significant creative challenge and opportunity sprang from our need to shoot plates for our miniaturized characters to be animated and composited onto. Taking inspiration from macro photography, our DP Todd

Elyzen and VFX supervisors M. Scott McKee and Andrew Walker got our cameras as close to the ground as they could possibly go and entered drawers, purses, etc., leading to some believable yet fantastical footage.

Another challenge came from the need to marry our completely CG-animated sequences with those shot in the

real world. We owe the success of those efforts to the color script plan generated by our production designer, Marcelo Vignali, and art director, Ellen Jin. With that, in concert with color correction at Universal Post led by colorist Jason Fabbro and M. Scott McKee, we were able to achieve a seamless experience for our audience from start to finish.



WHAT INSPIRED THE CREATION OF *GABBY'S DOLLHOUSE* FROM A SERIES TO A FEATURE-LENGTH FILM? HOW DID YOU BALANCE STAYING TRUE TO THE ORIGINAL SHOW WHILE EXPANDING THE STORY FOR A BIGGER CINEMATIC EXPERIENCE?

DreamWorks launched the *Gabby's Dollhouse* series on Netflix in January of 2021, and it has grown to become the most-watched kids series on the platform. Since the studio is in the business of producing incredible films and building franchises, it was a natural progression to start exploring what a feature film version of *Gabby's Dollhouse* could be. The dollhouse is a portal to endless adventures in the show, so we felt we could expand her world and broaden the audience while creating a must-see theatrical experience for kids and their parents.

This effort began with our director Ryan Crego's story, which sets up the film with a flashback to when Gabby first receives the dollhouse, hand-crafted by her grandmother, Gigi, as a small child. This short scene provides a backstory to the magic and lays a subtle through line for what's to come. We're off and running from that point forward.

We bypass Gabby's bedroom completely and jump right into the real world and the animated, magical realm of play. It didn't feel necessary to revisit the set from the series. Gabby, played by Laila Lockhart Kraner, was all we needed



Animation meets heightened reality during production of *Gabby's Dollhouse: The Movie*. Marcei Brown, Ryan Crego, Steven Schweickart, Jessica Malanaphy, Todd Elyzen and David Klohn on set.

PHOTO COURTESY STEVEN SCHWEICKART

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— Including —

Best Comedy Series

Best Actor Adam Brody

Best Actress Kristen Bell



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to make our audience feel that they were in a familiar space and in good hands.

One key aspect we wanted to keep alive from the series was Gabby's direct communication with the audience. This was tricky and we needed to find the right balance so that it didn't pull the audience away from the adventure. Films don't often break the fourth wall, so we had to find key moments to do so without overwhelming audience members who might not be familiar with the show. I believe we achieved that balance.

Beyond that, it was important that we elevate all aspects of our CG animation for a theatrical experience. All of our animated characters and the dollhouse needed to be updated, and in some cases redesigned, to deliver on the promise of a premium moviegoing experience. We kept this promise in mind throughout preproduction, while designing our new characters and environments as well.

Camera work also played an important role in this effort. Led by our head of layout and cinematography, Scott Cullen, we were able to add real personality to the camera, creating the sweeping

and dynamic movement audiences come to expect from animated features.

Elevating the performance of our animated characters and taking them on a journey with real stakes also played an essential role in building upon the series. Ryan's story sets this up by propelling our characters into situations where they experience real peril and have to make tough decisions.

Gabby and Vera, voiced by Kristen Wiig, also have a real arc and grow throughout the story. As a result, they needed to display some real, grounded emotion, something that isn't often seen in content targeting a younger audience. Our head of character animation, CJ Sarachene, accepted this challenge and led animation teams at two studios—CGCG, Inc., and Assemblage Entertainment—to deliver exactly what was needed.

WHAT WERE SOME OF THE BIGGEST CREATIVE OR TECHNICAL CHALLENGES IN PRODUCING THIS MOVIE?

My philosophy as a producer is that of a supporting role. My job is to support the director's vision in concert with

the overall objectives of the studio and make suggestions while not tipping the scales with a weighted finger, all while making everyone on the crew feel valued and encouraged.

There was no shortage of opportunities for me to add creative input, all of which I feel are represented and beautifully executed in the final product. But the real creative and technical challenges for me stemmed from the delicate balance of driving an aggressive schedule while making the crew feel that they've been provided a safe space to create.

Having once been an actor and artist myself, I try to pull from that experience to lead with empathy. There was no shortage of opportunities for me to do this while creating this film. Every day presented new hurdles to leap over, and I needed to keep a calm and steady demeanor through each and every one, while remaining firm on the overall objectives. I believe that this is the primary challenge for every producer who receives the Producers Mark. In my opinion, every challenge and opportunity falls under that specific umbrella.

State of Firsts chronicles Sarah McBride's triumph as the first transgender person elected to Congress.



COURTESY OF STATE OF FIRSTS

STATE OF FIRSTS

Jenna Kelly, p.g.a., and Justin Lacob, p.g.a.

State of Firsts is an all-access documentary following Sarah McBride's historic run to become the first transgender member of Congress. Throughout her campaign, she navigates the complex terrain between activist and electoral strategies for change, confronting mounting pressure from her constituents. On the night that Sarah wins, so too does Donald Trump, underscoring a nation intensely divided and sending Sarah to an increasingly hostile new workplace.

YOUR FILM FOCUSES ON SARAH MCBRIDE'S VICTORY, BECOMING THE FIRST TRANSGENDER CONGRESSPERSON. ARE THERE UNIQUE SECURITY

AND ACCESS ISSUES THAT COME INTO PLAY WHEN THE SUBJECT OF THE FILM IS NOT ONLY A MEMBER OF CONGRESS, BUT ALSO THE SUBJECT OF THREATS AND PUBLIC BACKLASH?

Jenna and Justin: Filming an elected official, particularly the first openly transgender member of Congress, came with heightened scrutiny, and that meant safety was always top of mind. The access we were granted—inside the halls of Congress, behind closed doors during meetings, during election events, at the DNC, and within Sarah's personal circle—was built on a foundation of trust that was established since Jenna and Sarah went to college together at American University over a decade ago. This allowed us to coordinate closely with Sarah's team throughout production and plan our security needs accordingly.

Sarah has faced consistent public backlash ever since she ran for her first public office as a Delaware state senator, and we had to be extremely mindful about how and when we filmed. We intentionally used a small and nimble crew to avoid drawing extra attention, and we would switch to shooting from a distance when necessary.

WAS IT IMPORTANT TO YOU TO HAVE REPRESENTATION BEHIND THE CAMERA AS WELL? WHAT ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF MEASURES YOU TOOK TO BE INCLUSIVE AND SUPPORTIVE IN THE ACTUAL FILMMAKING PROCESS?

Jenna and Justin: Representation was a core value of the project, not just in front of the camera but behind it. We made a strong effort to assemble a team that reflected the story we were telling, bringing in LGBTQ+ crew members, women, nonbinary and underrepresented voices in key creative

and production roles. For example, our director Chase Joynt and editor Chris McNabb are queer and trans creatives who brought a deeper understanding of Sarah's experience and the broader implications of her journey.

YOUR STORY WAS UNFOLDING IN REAL TIME AS YOU WERE GATHERING FOOTAGE. DID THAT PROVE CHALLENGING FOR OBTAINING FINANCING IN TANDEM WITH THE ACTUAL MAKING OF THE FILM? WHAT WERE SOME OF YOUR BIGGEST OBSTACLES AND SUCCESS STORIES IN OBTAINING FUNDING?

Jenna and Justin: Yes, the story was unfolding in real time, from Sarah's campaign trail to her swearing-in and early days in Congress. In fact, our original vision for the documentary was centered on the campaign and was set to end with her winning and being sworn in. But when the bathroom backlash began, we realized that was going to be central to the film. So we adapted our plans to keep filming, while editing simultaneously. Because these events were developing so quickly, traditional doc financiers couldn't keep up.

Many potential partners wanted to see a completed arc before committing, but history was being written in real time as we filmed. We had to be scrappy, self-fund key shoots, and piece together grants and investments as momentum grew. Our biggest obstacle was convincing financiers that this wasn't just a political film, but a deeply human story about courage, identity and resilience. The real success story is that persistence paid off. As footage came in and the scope of Sarah's win became undeniable, we were able to attract backers who believed in the importance of preserving this moment in history with care and nuance. ■



Justin Lacob and Jenna Kelly at Tribeca FF premiere.

PHOTO BY JAMIE MCCARTHY FOR GETTY

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