

THE PRODUCER AS

ENTREPREUR

ENTREPRENEURSHIP ISN'T ALWAYS A TERM ASSOCIATED WITH PRODUCING, BUT IT'S A MINDSET THAT CAN MARRY THE BUSINESS WITH THE CREATIVE—THE WORK THAT PRODUCERS DO EVERY DAY. HERE, PRODUCERS JASON MICHAEL BERMAN AND DIANA WILLIAMS SHARE THEIR APPROACHES.

Growing up dyslexic, Jason Michael Berman learned to read and write using methods that taught him to think and work outside the box, to leverage his strengths to help overcome obstacles in unique ways. This approach served him well when he decided to become a producer. Rather than fearing the challenges and amount of multitasking required by the job, the nonlinear thinking and tactics he had honed while growing up allowed him to look at the big picture of a project from a nontraditional perspective, connecting dots in innovative ways, and operating not just as a producer but as an entrepreneur.

Berman is the founder and president of A/Vantage Pictures, which he launched this year—after a decade as president of Mandalay Pictures—to develop and produce elevated, commercially driven films rooted in culturally resonant storytelling and bold, director-led vision. Underlying that mission is the entrepreneurial approach that helped him successfully produce entertaining and impactful films, including *The Birth of a Nation* (2016), *Nine Days, Air, Burning Sands, Uncorked, Little Evil*, and *Highest 2 Lowest*, a contemporary reimagining of Akira Kurosawa's *High and Low* directed by Spike Lee.

Berman earned his degree from the USC School of Cinematic Arts, where he has been an adjunct professor since 2013. For over a decade, the course he created, Entrepreneurship and Entertainment, has taught students how to apply a take-charge, entrepreneurial approach toward building a producing career.

Diana Williams' credits span indie film, studio franchises, scripted and unscripted episodic content, video games, podcasts, and location-based experiences, making her a quintessential producer-as-entrepreneur. She is the CEO and cofounder of Kinetic Energy Entertainment, a multiplatform venture studio that partners with creators at the intersection of story and technology to develop and produce story-based IP.

Kinetic's slate includes the pending TV series adaptation of *The Gatecrashers* comic, sim video

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game *Political Arena*, podcast series *Founder Hustle*, YA sci-fi adventure *Space Hoppers*, immersive/interactive experience studio Creative Aya, YouTube animated series *Guardian Rogue Rangers*, and a TV series in development at HBO. Kinetic also advises companies that are utilizing cutting-edge technologies to innovate in traditional entertainment categories.

Prior to Kinetic, Williams was the creative development and franchise producer for *Star Wars* at Lucasfilm, overseeing film and TV, mobile and console video games, and publishing. She cofounded ILM Immersive, the lab behind the Academy Award-winning VR experience *Carne y Arena*. Her producing credits include *Our Song*, *Room 237*, *Sylvia Drew Ivie*, *Method to the Madness of Jerry Lewis*; and *Dear Mom*, *Love Cher*. She was also a production consultant on BET's *Let the Church Say Amen*, *Gun Hill Road*, and *The Kenya Barris Project*.

Produced By asked these innovators about the concept of entrepreneurship as it applies to producing, and how producers at any stage of their careers can feel empowered by embracing this mindset.

INTERTWINED TERMS

JASON, WHAT DOES ENTREPRENEURIAL PRODUCING MEAN TO YOU, AND HOW DO YOU TEACH THIS CONCEPT TO YOUR STUDENTS?

JMB: Entrepreneurial producing is approaching your career in a nonlinear, outside-the-box way, thinking about how you can connect the dots in a way that will allow you to get your projects created. Creative people aren't always thinking that way, because entrepreneurship is mostly a business term. But it can apply to the creative process as well.

For me, the words "entrepreneur" and "producer" are intertwined. I don't think you can be a producer without being entrepreneurial. You're dealing with artists and the business side. You're having to get everybody moving in the same direction. Then you've got to get a lot of people to champion your cause because you're trying to bring a major asset to life that hopefully has global commercial appeal.

That's a Herculean task. The agendas and the initiatives of all these different people are not always the same. As the producer, you have to keep everyone paddling in the same direction.

A lot of people approach their desire to create art traditionally, within the systems that are the norm—whereas I've always wanted to think outside the box. I've made 32 movies, and I credit my entire career to thinking in a nonlinear way about how to approach the procurement of projects, the development process, the financing process, all of it.

A lot of changes have happened within the entertainment industry since I started at USC. The

idea of being entrepreneurial felt foreign when I first began teaching it. Now it's not, because people are aware that they need to be entrepreneurial to exist.

USC is more of a studio-focused school because that's where most of the professors are coming from—the LA studio world. When I approached the dean of the USC film school and the head of the entertainment business division back in 2012 about starting my course, I'd made five independent films. I said, "I think there needs to be a class at USC that really focuses on getting your first project made and what it takes to do that in an entrepreneurial way."

The curriculum, which my co-instructor and I built from the ground up, teaches a skill set based on the desire to be in charge of the destiny of a project and your career—not relying on other people's approval. At first, this mostly lent itself to independent film. But it ultimately ended up being applicable to everything having to do with Hollywood. A lot of the skills I've been teaching are now applicable to more than just making an independent project.

Everything now needs to be done more entrepreneurially. Even studios have to be more entrepreneurial in terms of how they're putting their projects together.

I tell my students that if they want to stick out and create something that's all their own that can help launch them, don't do it within a system. If you're doing it within a system, you're always relying upon somebody else saying yes to you to be able to move forward. I try to inspire students to think entrepreneurially about what they can create. Be the controlling force behind it without having to rely on anyone else. To start, I encourage them to think entrepreneurially about what they could accomplish when they got out of film school. What is the type of project that you can make? What is the budget size? How can you promote yourself?

Diana Williams credits her *Gatecrashers* comic book series (below, at Comic-Con) for leading to the launch of her company, Kinetic Energy Entertainment.



DIANA, WHAT DOES THE CONCEPT OF ENTREPRENEURIAL PRODUCING MEAN TO YOU? GIVEN THE ECONOMIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL CLIMATE WE'RE IN, SHOULD MORE PRODUCERS BE OPERATING ENTREPRENEURALLY?

DW: I really do equate the words "entrepreneurialism" and "producing." I've always considered myself an entrepreneur because the definition is someone who starts and runs a business. Part of the issue people have with that term is this forced separation between





Jason Michael Berman (right) on the set of *Nine Days* with first assistant director Evan Lai-Hipp, writer/director Edson Oda, director of photography Wyatt Garfield and executive producer Mark C. Stevens.

creative and business in this industry. I think that has led to the self-inflicted wound we're suffering from right now.

Producers are part of the creative team. We need to stop fighting against the word "entrepreneur" just because you think it only means business. We are in a world where everyone needs to be a self-starter, which producers have always been.

I don't know how many producers think of themselves as businesses. That's a problem. A business is an ongoing concern. It is something that allows money to come in that you are able to then spend on the next thing. That's a business.

Being an entrepreneur is just about how you look at the thing in front of you and organize it. If you are a producer who leans toward financing, you have to understand all the tax codes, find the financiers, work with the investor groups and always be gathering information about it all. If you are someone who is great at development, you are finding the material, the writer, and you are putting it all together. If you are someone whose strength is more in production, you are asking who to put on set who is wildly creative and understands the mission—the mission being, let's get this movie done, let's get this game done, let's get this podcast done, let's get this TV show done.

I think where it gets a little confusing is when you're within a system where someone else has said, "I need these things

done." So maybe you don't feel as entrepreneurial, but the spirit is always there. You are still trying to organize and put things together, managing them, and being creative in that management to get to the end product.

Some producers might never have thought of themselves as being entrepreneurial because this is what we're told to do: Find material, develop material, and bring it to a studio. Steps that don't feel entrepreneurial. Finding the material is entrepreneurial, but the well-worn path of going to the studio is where you can feel like you've lost that spirit. But once you get into that studio, man, you gotta bring the entrepreneurial spirit back.

It's a different type of navigation that we need now. First-look deals are going away. Finding money and distribution has become more challenging. When things get challenging, entrepreneurial spirit is what wins.

So how does that happen today? How do we, as producer entrepreneurs, start to rethink how we are in this next era of entertainment?

Being entrepreneurial is looking at who you are, what skills you have, where you want to be, and how to pivot toward that area. It's looking at many factors and deciding how you put them together to create a brand or a mission. Mission is the internal, and brand is the external. Your external has to reflect your internal.



FORMS AND FUNCTION

JASON, YOUR CLASS WAS DEVELOPED AT A FILM SCHOOL, BUT IS PART OF BEING AN ENTREPRENEURIAL PRODUCER REMAINING OPEN TO WHATEVER EVENTUAL FORM YOUR STORY TAKES, WHICH MAY NOT BE A FEATURE FILM?

JMB: I teach that you may start out thinking that your story should be this, but as you explore it, you have to keep asking, what are the budget ramifications? It may make more sense to do it as a podcast, as a short film, as a series, or even as a documentary.

Part of the course involves the students developing their project presentation to pitch to investors. When we first started the class in 2013, a majority of the pitches were independent films. By 2023, they were podcasts, short films, web series, regular series—they were so diversified. I had been encouraging that the entire time. The ecosystem finally caught on.

DIANA, IS IT A WISE ENTREPRENEURIAL CAREER CHOICE FOR PRODUCERS TO ALWAYS CONSIDER DIFFERENT FORMS FOR THEIR STORIES RIGHT FROM THE START?

DW: It's not about you as the producer; it's about whether the story wants to go there. You can want to go somewhere, but maybe your script shouldn't go there. If you have a film script that you think would be great as an audio drama, you should absolutely think about it. Does that mean that you should go

and do it? Absolutely not, unless you really understand it in your bones and know how to do it.

There are producers who make podcasts, there are producers who make mobile games, there are producers who really know these things. Their title may not be producer, but there are incredible editors who operate as producers who put together comic books and graphic novels. Work with them. Stop trying to do everything yourself. If you don't know how to do it, you're going to make a terrible piece of content, because you haven't brought it into your world, you haven't thought about how the whole thing fits together, how that makes it a beautiful doorway for someone to come into your world.

Producers need to start thinking less about the platforms and more about the audience. Too many producers now don't think about the audience, perhaps because they are thinking, "I just need to get that executive to green-light it and cash-flow it, because that's the only way I'm getting paid." The focus is on that executive, not the audience. That's left to the distribution and marketing department. They don't understand the heart and the soul of why you have spent years, sometimes decades, working on that story.

Everything is just a beautiful doorway in which you are beckoning an audience. You are begging them to come into your story world. Maybe the door into that world will be a book, cosplay, a TV series, a video game.

Being entrepreneurial is looking at what you have, whether it's an article you read, an idea in your head, an idea from a friend, a game that you've played, and asking, "What can I do with this? Who am I bringing around to make sure we can do this?" Being entrepreneurial is also asking what you can put around that story to protect why you found it interesting.



From left: Berman (second from left) with director Spike Lee (orange cap) and the *Highest 2 Lowest* team; Berman (right) at Skywalker Ranch for the sound mix of *The Birth of a Nation* with BTS director Dwight Wilson II, producer Kevin Turen, writer-director Nate Parker, and producer Aaron Gilbert.

Business, technology and franchise are what are going to protect that thing.

For example, I love vampires. But if I wanted to do a vampire story, I'd have to start by thinking what would make mine special, what would make other people excited. Once you know what makes people excited about your story, you have a backbone to speak to any kind of question or naysaying that comes at you. You have thought it through intelligently in terms of different angles—the financing, the distribution possibilities, maybe some of the marketing, but also the heart of it, which is: Why do we care?

We're making stuff for other people, but we've forgotten this rule. This is an industry in which the revenue comes from somebody else saying, I want that thing. I hear so many filmmakers say, "We didn't think about the audience at all," and I'm like, "Then, why are you doing this? Why didn't you just make it for yourself using your money?"

We should have respect for everyone, and at least think about who would want to come. Ask who would pay for this. Some people find that crass, like it's taking away the art. But ask it this way: Who else will feel as deeply as I do about this story? Who else will laugh as hard at this joke?

Sometimes people feel that thinking about the audience means that they are taking away their own creativity, that they are bending their will to an unknown quadrant that marketing

is trying to hit. That might be true for some, but if you really know what you're doing, you've opened up enough windows into your world for someone to come in on your terms.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

DOES BEING ENTREPRENEURIAL AS A PRODUCER APPLY EQUALLY TO EVERY PART OF THE PROJECT PIPELINE, FROM DEVELOPMENT TO MARKETING?

JMB: It's definitely in the development. What is it worth developing that you feel that you're at the level to accomplish? It's also in the packaging phase: How do you approach agents? How do you approach talent? Does it make sense to get a certain executive producer on board that can lend their name? If it's based on a true story, how are you going to approach the people who have the rights to it?

Then, when you're thinking about finding the right financiers, you don't need them to be a traditional financier. People who may not be your traditional film investors may connect emotionally to your story. One of the financiers of our first movie, which was about a police officer in Baltimore, was a former police officer who made a lot of money in real estate and wanted to invest in the film because he could connect emotionally with the story.

Ask if your project speaks to a socially and culturally relevant cause, like a documentary does. If so, are there nonprofits or foundations out there that may make a charitable donation to your feature film? If you're planning to do things in a different way, like environmental sustainability, market the fact that you're doing something that's good for the environment. That could be of interest to people you're trying to raise money from.

If you're an independent producer, build an audience even before you start making the film. Start an Instagram page and create content about the way that the story's being brought to life. We used to do these behind-the-scenes vignettes that we would post online to help build up a fan base, which can help with distribution. Of course, you have to make sure that you're capturing the content while you're making the movie.

A lot of these things have evolved now. Even the studios are doing them. But many students in film school have to be encouraged to think about these things because they're new to the system. Maybe they're already active on social media personally, but they're not linking it with the film they want to do. That's that outside-the-box thinking. Zoom out of the focus of the movie, think about all these other connectivity points, and try to pull them together.

I tell my students that just sitting in New York and LA trying to raise money is probably not the best route. People in those cities are way overexposed to what we do. If you're telling a

story in another city, whether it's Dallas or Denver or St. Louis or Cincinnati, there are patrons of the arts in those cities and others who want to see great stories get told. You've got to go embed yourself in those places and get to know people.

DON'T GO IT ALONE

WHO ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT PEOPLE FOR AN ENTREPRENEURIAL PRODUCER TO HAVE ON THEIR TEAM?

JMB: I think an entrepreneurial line producer is number one, because we're all trying to figure out how to make things within a certain price point. You need somebody who is really willing to get their hands dirty to figure out how to do that.

Also coproducers, associate producers, or an executive team that takes on those roles. It means a lot to have an entrepreneurial studio executive. They're few and far between, but if you can find them, they're invaluable. The people at A24 are that way because entrepreneurship was inherently built within the culture of that company.

Your director has to be entrepreneurial, too, because they have to figure out ways of getting things done in terms of the assets you may need to get the movie set up or the financing raised. They need to see that your approach is not compromising their vision, but really trying to execute it in a particular way.

DW: The two things I think about are who is going to protect and who is going to push.

Protect being like, man, if you're gonna step out on that cliff, do you have a parachute, a helmet, the right kind of gear to be on that mountain? That's your lawyer and your accountant.

Who is going to push you? If anything, that's the tech side. I know a lot of producers don't want to talk about tech. All tech is doing is asking, how do you want to do this? When do you want to do this? And so, who's there to push you out of your comfort zone? Then your protector is there to make sure that if you're taking that step, here's what you need.

For me, I just care about story and where it wants to go. I am not format- or media-led. I am story-, audience- and technology-driven. All three are married together. I then think about where is protection and where is push.

For example, your lawyer can be a good one to push as well as protect, but you gotta find the right lawyer. I'm always talking trademarks, patents and copyright, and asking, what are the new models we can look at? What are the new deals?

We're in an era in which we need new models. But those models have to protect everybody, because getting to something new means that there's going to be quite a few mistakes. When you're like, I want to try this, that's when a good lawyer comes in to say, time out! Have you thought about this? This both pushes and protects.



CASE STUDIES

WHICH OF YOUR PROJECTS WERE THE MOST ENTREPRENEURIAL IN SPIRIT AND EXECUTION?

JMB: *The Birth of a Nation* was about a slave rebellion in the 1830s that was written by, directed by, and starred the same person. With *Nine Days*, we were filming two movies in one. You have the film within the world of all the television screens within the character's home, and then you have the actual movie that's being shot around it. We basically needed two different productions. *Nine Days* was going to cost \$5 million and *The Birth of a Nation* was about \$8 million. Both were very ambitious and both were also the writer-director's first feature film (Nate Parker and Edson Oda, respectively).

Highest 2 Lowest had been in development for 35 years and had around \$15 million in costs against it. It had a lot of rights issues because of all the scripts that had been drafted. It was based on a Kurosawa film, which was based on a novel. Spike (Lee) didn't get involved until after we cleaned up the chain of title and got the writer to write the script. And that writer was a first-time-produced screenwriter who came up with a fresh and original way to reimagine the original film. That made it worth making, because it had social and cultural relevance.

Williams on stage at a 2025 Hollywood X event at Fox Studios in Los Angeles.

Those three films all seemed impossible. They all had challenges that had to be figured out entrepreneurially every step of the way, especially the two that were made with outside financing and no studio behind them.

DW: I'll say (comic book series) *The Gatecrashers*, which really launched (my company) Kinetic. I came up as an indie producer, as did one of my good friends, Zach Mortensen. One year, we were at a Christmas party and talked about how we wanted to make comic books. The idea came from wondering, where is medical care going in the future? I got into a story about how the only way to get into an ambulance in China is to pay. Then we discovered that 30% of ambulances in the U.S. were privately owned. What happens if they all become privately owned? What if you're poor? We started building from that nut.

That was creative entrepreneurship, where we looked at a big subject and found a way in. We call it "near-fi" as opposed to sci-fi, as in, this could happen. Quite a few things in our comic book have now come true.

We had gotten through Issue 5 when we started getting interest from networks and film companies and studios. Eventually, we landed on one for a TV series and sold it.

Now, has it been made? Of course not. It's been in development for God knows how long. That goes to the brokenness of the system. But this also shows what entrepreneurialism can get you because, sure, we could have navigated to film. But we chose to navigate a different path. That became the backbone for Kinetic. That's entrepreneurship. You have to pivot.

TWO-WAY STREETS

WOULD YOU SAY THAT THERE IS SOMETHING TO BEING AN ENTREPRENEURIAL PRODUCER THAT LENDS ITSELF TO GIVING BACK? IS A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF ALTRUISM BUILT INTO SUCCESSFUL ENTREPRENEURSHIP?

JMB: Yes, 100%. When you're entrepreneurial, you have to rely on yourself to be the leader, but you also need a lot of people's support, people who are going to back you and champion you. I've had those champions with everything I've done. They gave of themselves. So I always felt the obligation to give back to others, to try to help them accomplish something. That was the reason

teaching became so important to me. It goes back to my growing up dyslexic and having incredible teachers who helped me to overcome a big obstacle in learning. It's interdependence with an independent approach. You have to have both.

And you've got to be entrepreneurial even in the ways that you approach that. For example, when I was an undergrad, I wanted to learn from people who were anywhere from 5 to 10 years older than me, so between my freshman and sophomore year, I partnered up with a graduate student who was trying to make his thesis film to help him raise the money. I needed to raise \$40,000, but I knew that the concept of the short film alone wouldn't raise the money. How do you make this stick out more?

So I said, let's create a set where all the department heads are all graduate students and all the seconds and thirds are undergrads, so that we're creating a real, practical, educational environment. And we used that narrative to raise money for the short film, because it wasn't just about making the short film, it was also about creating an educational experience in the process.

It comes down to how do you create the most amount of value in doing something for everyone involved? The other thing that's important about being entrepreneurial is that you have to think about it being a two-way street. How do you create the most value for everyone involved? If it's just a one-way street, you're not being entrepreneurial. Everybody's gotta benefit.

DW: I'm a pragmatic optimist, and I want everyone to be one. If I can help in that endeavor because of my background and my experience, I will.

We are going to the next era of entertainment, which means we need mindset shifts. You cannot bring the same mind, the same model, into where we are going, which is going to be fundamentally different. We are already seeing it. If we're going to this next era, we need new minds.

New does not necessarily mean young. This is not an age thing; this is a mindset thing. It is just saying, how are you going to think a little differently to form these new models, a new way to protect creators, a new way to protect creative, and to get them to the audience? That's my job. I want more people to be thinking that way. So if I'm able to help, I will. If you want to call it altruistic, sure. I can't do this alone. I need other people who are also going to be kind. ■