

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.

Finding Hozho

Travis Holt Hamilton, p.g.a.

Travis Holt Hamilton's dramatic feature finds a 70-year-old Native American Army veteran, Secody Yellowhair Nez—played by first-time actor and Navajo artist Frankie J. Gilmore—on the verge of an emotional breakdown when he gets the chance to offer a loving home to his terminally ill father.

When painful memories of childhood resurface, Secody must fight to forgive

his abusive father or live without *hozho*—a Diné (Navajo) concept that translates as beauty, peace, harmony, and balance—forever.

CONSIDERING THE TIGHT BUDGET ON THIS PROJECT, HOW DID YOU ENSURE THAT YOU HAD SUFFICIENT RESOURCES IN PLACE TO ACCURATELY REPRESENT TRADITIONAL NAVAJO TEACHINGS AND CULTURE?

Thirty years ago, I was introduced to the Navajo and Hopi Nations as a 19-year-old kid from Idaho who would spend the next two years serving the people and becoming acquainted. I don't know

First AC Philip Houser, actors Naabaahii Cordova and Lyndell Chee, producer Travis Holt Hamilton, DP Thomas Manning and sound mixer Andrew Schwab on location in the Navajo Nation for *Finding Hozho*.



much when compared to the vastness and depth that is Navajo, both traditionally and historically. I learned much, but just enough to understand that I was out of its league by myself. It's like seeing the Grand Canyon for the first time from an airplane, then taking a 12-day journey through parts of it on the Colorado River by boat. You soon realize you could spend a lifetime learning about the canyon and all the connections that surround and run through it.

Since those first two years living on the reservations, I have spent 30 years in and around Native country across the United States. I've been invited to visit over 80 reservations with my films and have established relationships of trust around Dinétah (Navajoland).

So the simple answer to your question is to triangulate various perspectives and opinions on the script, being open to advice from cultural advisors and story advisors, and, probably most important of all, writing from the heart. Prayer has

also been a huge part of the producing process for me.

The initial idea for *Finding Hozho* came up 10 years ago. I produced a couple of other features during that time, but kept working on the *Hozho* project, getting script notes from many readers, Native and non-Native alike, trying to find the balance of storyline, cultural sensitivity and the human heart connection that could make a powerful film if produced correctly. A decade of preproduction helped the 10 days of production go more smoothly, even though we experienced rain, hail, sunshine, clouds, sleet and snow. Money is only one resource to make a film happen. Time, love and determination are the other resources that outweigh the actual cash on hand for an indie filmmaker to tell a story that otherwise would never get told.

Finally, it's about really trusting the producing process, or as my PGA mentor Dan Grodnik has said numerous times, "When in doubt, do the work."

YOU HAD MANY FIRST-TIME ACTORS INVOLVED IN THIS PRODUCTION. WHAT WERE SOME OF THE CHALLENGES OF WORKING WITH THEM? DID HAVING LESS-EXPERIENCED ACTORS PRESENT ANY UNFORESEEN BENEFITS OR PLEASANT SURPRISES?

With determination and very limited cash, you learn to work with what resources you can afford and how badly you really want to get the movie made. First-time actors were a way to create opportunities for all involved to get a movie made with limited resources. I've had the privilege of putting over 100 first-time actors with speaking parts in my films, all of which have had theatrical runs. I really enjoy finding new talent and using the words in the credits "Introducing (new actor's name)."

I learned to really love first-time actors, their excitement and their joy over being on a movie set. It helps us remember that making a movie is not life or death, but a great life experience, if we can set it



Lyndell Chee and producer Travis Holt Hamilton sign autographs for a fan after the film's world premiere.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ALICE KEAR

PHOTO COURTESY OF LYNN ADAMS

up right. I love finding individuals who I know can play the part, even though they never wanted to be an actor, and working to help them see that they have more talent than they thought they did.

Our lead actor in *Finding Hozho*, Frankie J. Gilmore, told me he hated cameras. When he was a boy, tourists would take his picture near Monument Valley, then go on to make fun of him. But I have known him for 25 years and we've established a trusting relationship. His performance was incredible. He's the lead, yet he doesn't say anything until around 83 minutes into the film, so he had to perform with everything but words. And he did it.

There's a special joy in giving experience to Native first-time actors. When John Woo was making *Windtalkers*, he said he auditioned over 400 Navajos, and none of them had any acting experience. I thought, how do you get any experience at all so that you have enough experience to get the job? If there's no opportunity, then it will be an endless cycle of no experience. We are changing that and have been for many years.

One of my joys was giving the actor Wade Adakai his first role in a film called *More Than Frybread*. He now has a recurring role on the series *Dark Winds*. There is so much talent in Native country that just needs an opportunity to be found.

I had to drive hours and hours to find some of the actors for *Finding Hozho*. The number of fluent Navajo speakers is dwindling. Add to that the factor of who wants to be in front of a camera and it's an extremely hard casting challenge. No talent agency can help. I had to put my boots on and go to work, involving friends along the way. We would find an actor here, one in another state, and so on, handpicked when a good number didn't even try out. Patience and trust in God that we would find the right people were definitely a part of the process.

A GOOD PORTION OF THIS FILM WAS SHOT IN ARIZONA ON THE NAVAJO NATION. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE UNIQUE CONCERNS A PRODUCER SHOULD ADDRESS WHEN DEALING WITH A TREATY TRIBE THAT IS TECHNICALLY A SOVEREIGN GOVERNMENT EQUAL TO THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT?

For me, it's not a matter of a tribe being a treaty tribe, federally recognized, state recognized, a tribe in the process of becoming recognized, a settlement, an Alaskan village or any other situation. It's really a matter of how the community wants to work through the permitting process. Is this the first time a film will be shot in this community? Is there a permit process already established?

I've produced films with five tribes over the years. I've had tribes that have said no and not allowed me to film. But it's all part of the process. You look for ways it will benefit all

involved, and ask what's the win-win.

It's a working collaboration with patience, kindness, vulnerability and transparency. It's about building bridges with the goal that more films can happen in this community. The process can't be heavy-handed with the mindset of, "This is how we make 'em in Hollywood, so you must comply!" That won't get you anywhere. Doors will close very fast. Word of mouth will spread very quickly in Indian country, for better or worse.

It's the conversations, the explanations, the walk-throughs on site, the script and storyboards, and ultimately the building of a relationship of trust as a person and a producer. That means pushing back in all the right ways about safety and the needs of the story while balancing sensitivity to the culture and community you are a guest in. Hiring locals is also a big help and step in the right direction, not only for the current project, but for future opportunities for all involved.

Producer Travis Holt Hamilton and DP Thomas Manning with actors Frankie Gilmore, Cheyenne Gordon, Camille Nighthorse, Chinn Chay and Braedyn Chay on set in Gilbert, Arizona.



PHOTO COURTESY OF TRAVIS HOLT HAMILTON

Eddington

Lars Knudsen, p.g.a.

Ari Aster, p.g.a.

Written and directed by Ari Aster, who produced the film alongside Lars Knudsen, *Eddington* is a modern Western/paranoid thriller set in the American Southwest during the tumultuous summer of 2020. The film stars Joaquin Phoenix as small-town sheriff Joe Cross, who runs for mayor when progressive incumbent Ted Garcia (Pedro Pascal) attempts to modernize their dusty hamlet by attracting a new artificial intelligence data center.

The latest collaboration between Aster and Knudsen, whose previous films include *Hereditary* and *Midsommar*, takes the form of a classic showdown between two opposing

forces over the future of the fictional Eddington, New Mexico (population 2,345), as spiraling conspiracies and standoffs derail a citizenry pushed to the brink.

HOW DID YOUR LONG-STANDING CREATIVE PARTNERSHIP SHAPE THE DECISION TO FORM YOUR OWN PRODUCTION COMPANY, SQUARE PEG? IN WHAT WAYS HAS THAT COLLABORATION INFLUENCED HOW YOU DEVELOP AND SUPPORT PROJECTS COMPARED TO WORKING WITHIN MORE TRADITIONAL STUDIO STRUCTURES?

AA: *Hereditary* was our first experience working together. It was quite the gauntlet. Without going too far into

it—and at the risk of being cryptic—we were under the thumb of someone who had quite a lot of power over me and the film. This wasn't a problem during prep or production, but once it came time to screen my director's cut, this person entered the process and became quite the menace.

It was a very painful process, and for a long time it was not certain that we would make it through. Certainly not with the film intact, and perhaps not with it resembling anything I intended. It ended happily but was a torturous process.

LK: It brought Ari and I very close together. I had already produced many independent films under the banner of my first production company, Parts & Labor, and I had never gone through anything like the *Hereditary* grinder.



Joaquin Phoenix and Pedro Pascal stand off in *Eddington*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF A24

meticulous about every single detail in the film. He's relentless. And because he pushes himself to his own creative breaking point, it inspires everyone—cast and crew—to do the same.

Unlike Ari's past films, which in big part were shot on a soundstage or in one or a few bigger locations throughout the shoot, *Eddington* was shot on location all over New Mexico, from Albuquerque to Truth or Consequences, Madrid and To'Hajiilee. But the most challenging films and the ones that have something to say are the most rewarding and the ones that I'm the most proud of. *Eddington* is all of that and more for me.



Ari Aster and
Pedro Pascal.

PHOTO COURTESY OF RICHARD FOREMAN

The Bride!

Emma Tillinger Koskoff, p.g.a.
Maggie Gyllenhaal, p.g.a.

A lonely Frankenstein (Christian Bale) travels to 1930s Chicago to ask groundbreaking scientist Dr. Euphronious (Annette Bening) to create a companion for him. The two revive a murdered young woman, and the Bride (Jessie Buckley) is born. What ensues is beyond what either of them imagined.

Producers Emma Tillinger Koskoff and Maggie Gyllenhaal joined forces to bring to life a bold take on one of time's most compelling stories with *The Bride!*, which Gyllenhaal also wrote and directed.

HOW DID YOU BALANCE HONORING THE LEGACY AND EXPECTATIONS OF A WELL-KNOWN CHARACTER WHILE ENSURING THE PROJECT FELT CONTEMPORARY AND DISTINCT?

MG: In the original *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), the bride is only in the movie for maybe three minutes at the very end, and she doesn't speak at all. But she's made a real cultural impact.



Maggie
Gyllenhaal
and Emma
Koskoff on set.

PHOTO BY NIKO TAVERNISE

Why? I think it's because the way Elsa Lanchester plays her is so radical and formidable and intense. I wanted that intensity, but at the same time, I felt free to do what I wanted, to imagine something that was my own.

Frankenstein is its own thing and has been imagined in all sorts of ways. I really like that it holds a cultural place in our minds and in our mythology of monsters. Again, because there's been so much bouncing off that original Mary Shelley mythology, I also felt free to let it bounce around my own mind.

WHAT ARE SOME UNIQUE CHALLENGES YOU FACED AS PRODUCERS WHEN DEALING WITH SUCH A PROSTHETIC-HEAVY PERIOD FILM?

EK: The prosthetics were a big deal. The look and the character were of the utmost importance. We had a luxurious 16-week prep, but we were right up against the SAG strike, and we couldn't do anything until it ended. We started in mid-November (2023), but then you have all the holiday breaks, so we didn't get into it until January. We had a really short amount of time considering

what we did with these prosthetics. We worked tirelessly to get it right and to reduce the time in the chair that it would require from Christian (Bale). We weren't going to proceed with a finished product until it was right. We're so proud of the look ultimately, but it was a nail-biter for sure. We did it in 12 weeks. We really got down to the wire.

MG: What was really important to us was that he looked like a real person. Yes, he's a monster, but he could fit into our world. As soon as it tipped over too much into a Halloween costume, I was not on board.

EK: Maggie would always say, "I hired Christian Bale not only because he's a brilliant actor, but because I want to see Christian Bale as *Frankenstein*." So we kept needing to pull back on the prosthetics.

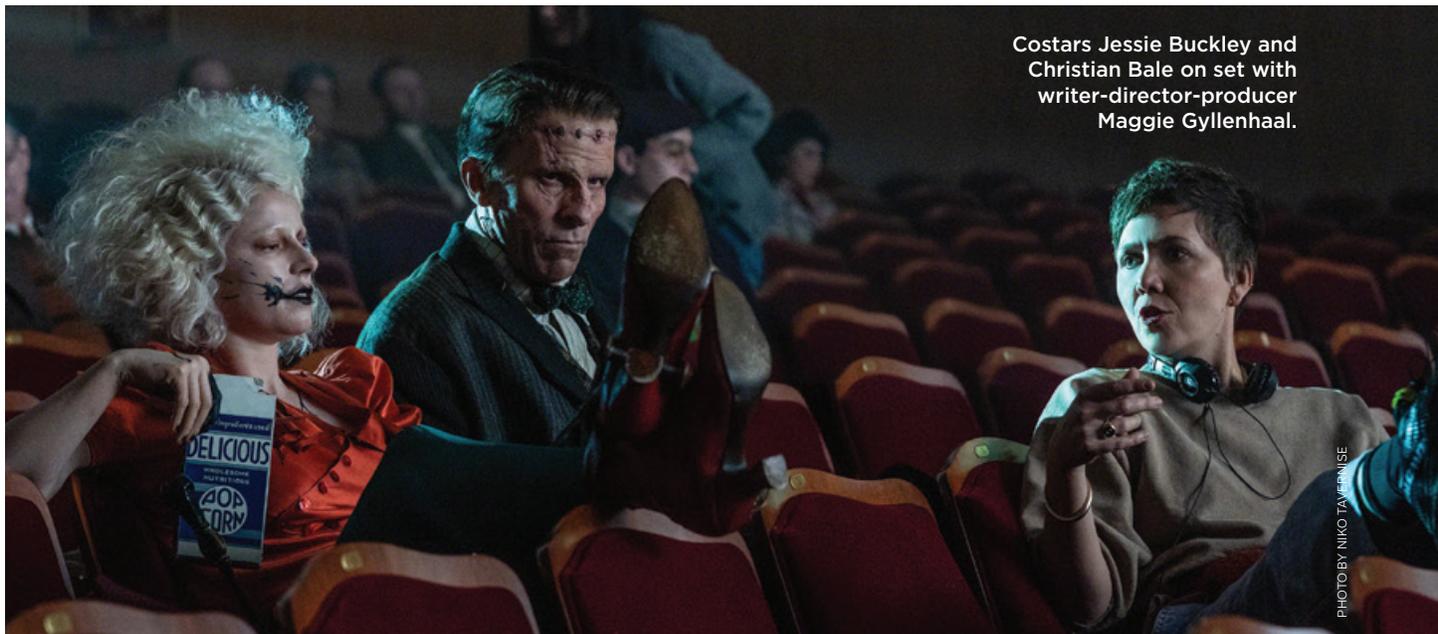
MG: But sometimes when you have a boundary or a box that you have to fit in, it creates something artistically interesting. That definitely happened here. It meant that we couldn't mince our words and had to say exactly what

we thought very quickly.

I remember Christian saying to me, and this is not just about the makeup, "Walking with Emma must be like walking with a panther by your side." That was true from the very beginning, when she was like, "No, this is not good enough. Let's not fuck around. We need to go in again. Let's not stop until we're all totally happy." And thank God we did that.

Also, it's very unusual to have a character in prosthetic makeup this long who is number two on our call sheet, someone who's in almost every day. It meant that the way that we shot fundamentally had to be worked around.

EK: It was a five-hour ordeal every day in the makeup chair for Christian on top of the shooting day. I'll never forget what he said to me: "You, me and Maggie are gonna get through this together. I'm gonna give you everything I've got until I can't, and I'm gonna let you know when I can't." He would be in that chair four to five hours a day, and he would still give us a 10-hour (shoot) day. We could never have made our schedule or our budget, much less the



Costars Jessie Buckley and Christian Bale on set with writer-director-producer Maggie Gyllenhaal.

PHOTO BY MIKO TAVENISE

Jessie Buckley as the Bride.

movie, if Christian had not done that.

We were not in any way going to compromise the look of Frankenstein or the Bride. But we had to start shooting when we had to start shooting, and we could only start prepping when we could start prepping. So we had to throw every resource we had at it. We had to compromise in other areas to make the budget work, but we had Mike (Michael De Luca), Pam (Abdy), Jesse (Ehrman) and Cate (Adams) behind us at Warner Bros., championing us and supporting us.

About the period aspect: It's tough to shoot in New York because of its gentrification. But I want to give a shout-out to New York with its increased incentives because we were able to travel upstate and create the individual looks as if we were on the road. In a perfect world, we would have gone to a couple of other locations, but New York made it possible for us to get out of the city and do our thing.

MG: The problem is, if you go upstate or you go right outside New York, you have Starbucks, Starbucks, Starbucks. That makes it really difficult to shoot

period (films). But we found this old sailor's home at Snug Harbor in Staten Island for a beautiful, huge section of the movie. You never would have thought that you were in Staten Island. We built a lot of it with VFX and beautiful work by (VFX supervisor) Mark Russell and (production designer) Karen Murphy.

Also, we're all from here (New York). We know it all, and we scouted it all, which made it possible to do that period work. The aesthetic has a real beauty to it, but you have to really look for it and know where to look.

LOOKING BACK, WAS THERE ANYTHING YOU WISH YOU HAD APPROACHED DIFFERENTLY EARLIER IN PRODUCTION TO MAKE POSTPRODUCTION SMOOTHER?

EK: I would have had a stronger approach to the VFX and production design marriage, and started Karen and Mark earlier. I would have liked to have them prep earlier and go into post with more clarity on some of our world-building.

Also, when we started the movie, Maggie said, "We'll just have little VFX." Then it suddenly grew, and that's a big jump with a lot of complexities that I think none of us really anticipated.

MG: I had a crash course in what VFX can offer and how it offers it. I love the VFX in the movie. I think it's very unusual, very real and very different. But part of the reason why VFX was difficult for me was because I didn't want the kind of classic Marvel VFX stuff, and yet we had a lot of VFX shots in the movie. I think we got there, but that was hard.

I would have liked a longer, smaller prep, an extended period of time with very few people to really get the artistic side nailed down. On the post side—and I know VFX would probably raise their hand and say no way—I would also like a tiny beginning of post for just me and my editor, without the whole office space and everybody's assistants. A little bit of protected artistic space where you're not just spending all the money, but you can protect your mind space. ■