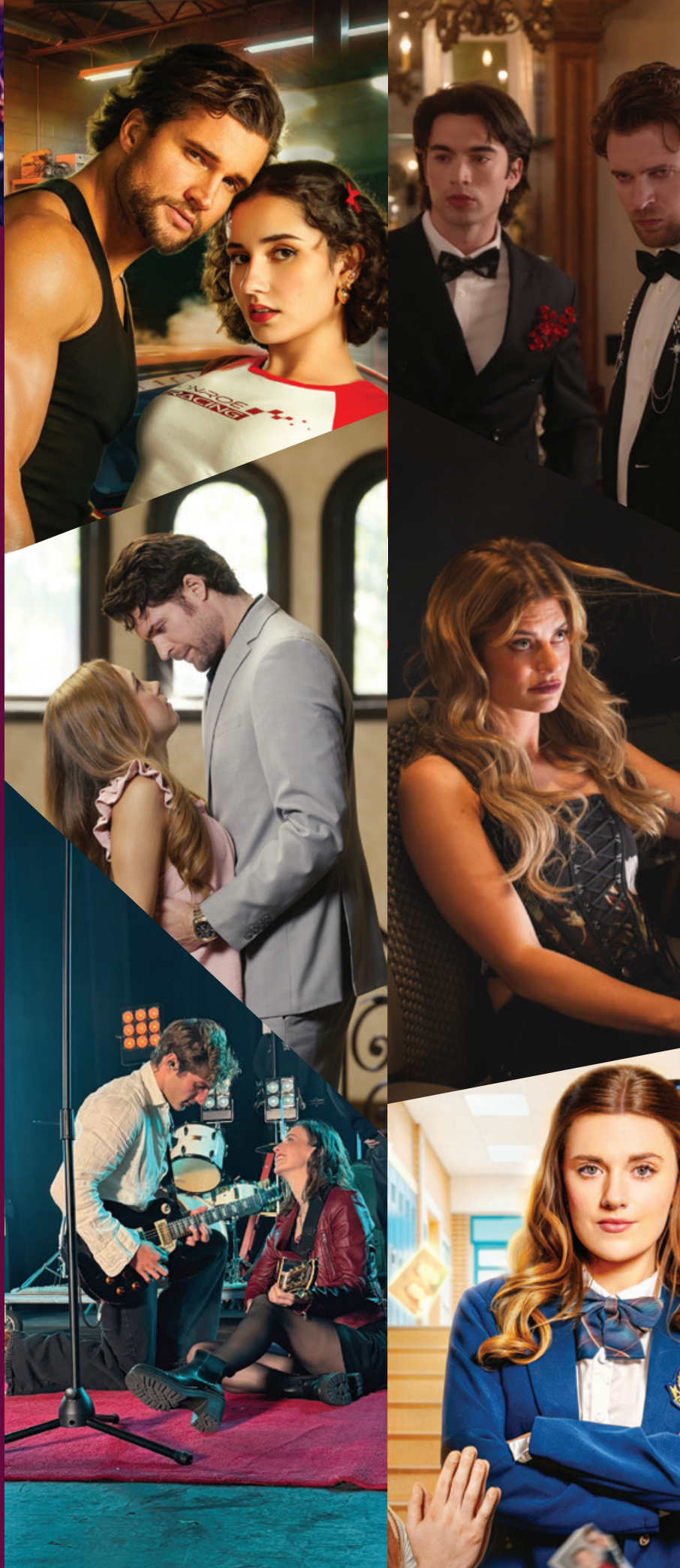
I'LL HAVE MY TV STRAIGHT UP

FOR PRODUCERS OF TRADITIONAL FILM AND TV WHO ARE MOVING INTO THE VERTICAL SPACE, THERE'S A LOT TO LEARN—AND A LOT OF OPPORTUNITY.

WRITTEN BY EVE WESTON



If you ask many people what a vertical is, they won't know. Same goes for a microdrama. Even the audience for this content won't have any idea what you're talking about. What do they call this content? The same thing they've always called it.

"They might call them their soaps, or their dramas, or their novels, or their stories, or their people, or their family. Like, 'I'm watching my stories.'" says Elizabeth Dell, microdrama consultant at Issa Rae's HOORAE Media—just as fans of *General Hospital* have been referring to their soap for 63 years.

Still, in the same way that "soap opera" is a valuable distinction for a producer, the terms vertical and microdrama are worth understanding.

The terms are not interchangeable. The term "vertical" defines the orientation of viewing, not the content. Your colleague producing verticals is producing short-form content for vertical consumption on smartphones and tablets.

If this is sounding familiar, it may remind you of Quibi, the short-form mobile streaming service founded by Jeffrey Katzenberg that shut down in December 2020 after only six months, despite raising nearly $2 billion. The difference now is that there's an English-language audience in place for verticals that wasn't in place when Quibi launched.

And then we have microdramas—a genre of vertical content that originated in China. Dell, who spent approximately five years heavily invested in the China space, describes microdramas as "soaplike stories that are kind of like telenovelas or soap operas. They're melodramatic and romantic, and they are the first genre that is taking advantage of this consumer behavior shift."

So how does knowing about this content serve working producers in more traditional spaces like film and TV?

"I think it speaks to a dopamine-starved audience, and it's serving a purpose," says Benjamin Odell, CEO and cofounder of 3Pas Studios and former executive at Pantelion, a partnership between Lionsgate and Mexican media giant Televisa.

3Pas' track record of success in traditional media includes acclaimed series for Apple TV+ and Amazon, along with *Instructions Not Included*, the highest-grossing Spanish-language film of all time in the U.S. Last year, the company made its own venture into the vertical space when it coproduced *Playback* for My Drama, one of the most downloaded apps for verticals in the world, according to digital analytics provider Sensor Tower. The series is the first-ever musical produced specifically for vertical video.

"We're all prisoners of this concept of all or nothing—everything's going to be AI, everything's going to be verticals, everything's going to be YouTube. What we're really seeing is a splintering of audiences across many surfaces to consume content."

These series are largely viewable on apps like My Drama or DramaShorts, but they reel viewers in by showing soapy, cliffhanger-laden clips on social media. When you click to see more, you're taken to a subscription page where you can sign up to watch the rest. And there are hundreds, if not thousands, of verticals apps, with the number growing almost daily.

If you've been accosted by a microdrama—say, on Facebook or Instagram—you might have recognized it by its telltale signs: on-the-nose dialogue, unsubtle acting, bright lighting and the word "billionaire" in the title. *The Double Life of My Billionaire Husband, Fake Married to My Billionaire CEO,* and *The Divorced Billionaire Heiress* are all current shows. At the time of writing, the No. 1 show on the DramaShorts platform is *The Billionaire Sex Addict and His Therapist*, produced by Vertical Sunsets.

"In the business of verticals, you want your title to be the logline of the show. It has to be clickbaity and say what the show is about," says Vertical Sunsets cofounder Chrissie DeGuzman.

All these choices—seemingly unsophisticated by industry standards—belie the true nature of verticals. What appears to be banal content reflects, in fact, calculated decisions made by talented individuals who know what they're doing.

"When I first saw verticals, I thought, why don't we just color grade it better, make it more cinematic?" recalls John Lewis, producer and president of JLE Cinema Group and founder of the new U.S.-based MuVpix verticals app. "I learned real quick, they make it bright on purpose. It's not that they don't know. They've been doing it for so long, they've tried everything. People on the phone want to clearly see what's going on. It's not the same thing as a movie."

Along with DeGuzman, Dell, Lewis and Odell, the creatives who are participating in the creation of this content are worth sitting up and noticing. Chris Wicke, who runs Embr Entertainment, a mobile-first film studio that focuses on scripted vertical content, is a 25-year veteran of the entertainment industry, having produced TV for Discovery, History Channel, CNN, MTV, BSkyB and many other global networks.

"In my time working on these verticals, I was always impressed with the talent and work ethic of the crew members," says Shaun Boylan, a Los Angeles actor, comedian and improvisor. He recently acted in *My New Daddy Is a Five-Star General*, produced by GoodShort, a short-drama streaming app owned by Inknet Pte. Ltd. that boasts having the best Chinese short drama.

He adds, "A second AD on another vertical I worked on was a working actor who had acted in an Ava DuVernay film and also had a scene with Jonathan Majors in another big film."

At a time when the number of Hollywood jobs is shrinking, many talented professionals are working in verticals. So it shouldn't be surprising that, while copying what one sees on a vertical screen might be a recipe for success in the microdrama space, copying what goes on behind the scenes is a recipe for success in any medium, vertical or traditional.

In conversations with working professionals at the top of the vertical space, several main takeaways emerged—each with enough punch to earn a microdrama-esque clickbaity title.

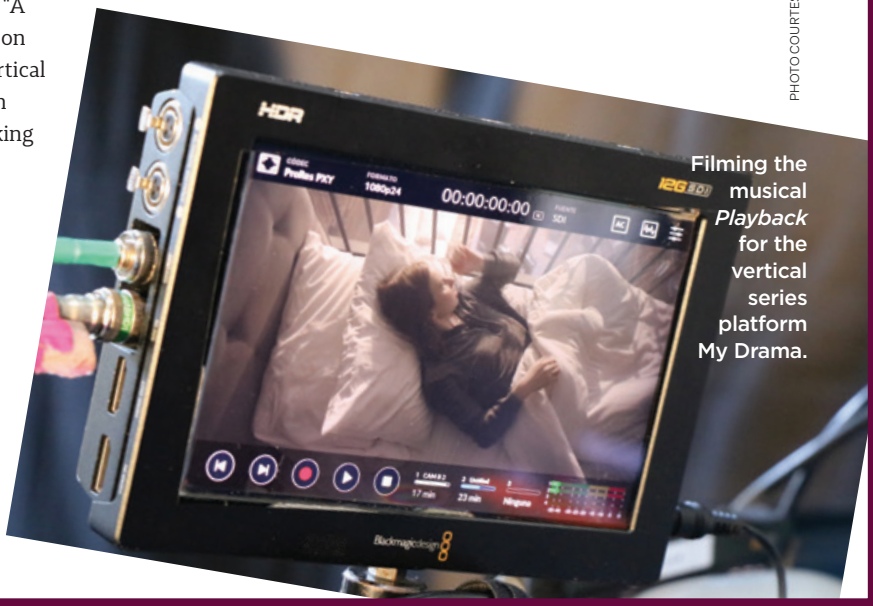
THE BILLIONAIRE PRODUCER AND HER EXPERIMENT

"Hollywood could learn a lot from microdrama in the in the way of 'Let's spend less per at-bat, but let's take a lot more of them,'" says Dell. "How do we think about how to be lean, but then be able to have a dozen experiments?"

One example: not making television shows for $4 million an episode, but making shows that are $250,000 an episode or less.

At first, this sounds reminiscent of pilot season, but, as Dell points out, it's been a long time since 12 new shows launched every fall with orders behind them.

It does seem to confirm that there's something to learn from this new format, even if it's remembering why



Filming the musical *Playback* for the vertical series platform My Drama.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MY DRAMA

some industry practices started in the first place. Dell stresses that there is an infinite number of stories that could find an audience and become successful, but only if those stories are produced at the right price point.

Dell also points out that, as an industry, Hollywood has taken to outsourcing its experimentation to other media—for example, mitigating risk with what she terms "preawareness properties." This is essentially the driver behind the strategy of adapting books or video games into series or films. So why not do this with one's own story ideas and IP via verticals?

Anina Net, a well-known actor in the microdrama space, explains the genesis of the first microdrama she performed in.

"Vertical dramas, including the first one I ever did, came out of book apps. They took a risk to say, 'If they like our books and we own the IP, why don't we try to make some short social media videos?'"

Net was working in China at the time. The only experienced filmmaking crews available were commercial production companies, and they only knew how to shoot horizontal. But because they shot game TVCs—TV commercials or video ads created to promote video games—they understood how to tell a story in a minute and a half. They also understood how to shoot at a 45-45–degree angle to fit everybody in the camera. These days, this is a skill worth learning.

"This is the era of social media and mobile devices," says Kelly Tang, about to embark on her next vertical adventure after serving as senior head of content development at DramaBox and head of content at Alta Media before that. "In order to grab current audience attention—because attention spans are way shorter—we might have to sacrifice visual design that's designed only for long-form content and greater patience."

PHOTO COURTESY OF REELSHORT

A scene from the microdrama *Bound By Love*.

DON'T TAKE LADY ATTENTION FOR GRANTED

Kristen Brancaccio, director of *Screen Time*, the new microdrama from HOORAE Media, points out that rules that have long guided the creation and distribution of features or television have often been applied to the digital space. But verticals are an entirely new format. The time-tested strategies for traditional content may not serve producers well.

They're competing against TikTok, not against Netflix. While both platforms require capturing the attention of one's audience, verticals have to clear a much higher bar to sustain that attention.

"Each episode is only one to three minutes, so a beautiful 15-second tracking shot that would feel cinematic in a traditional format eats up a quarter of an episode in verticals. Every second has to deliver information or emotional engagement because viewers are casual. They drop off and come back constantly," says Shicong Zhu, head of studio (LA) at DramaBox, a global entertainment platform redefining storytelling for the mobile-first era through high-definition vertical shows.

Aside from pacing, which is perhaps the number one tool for sustaining an audience's attention, casting is also key, and similarly, doesn't follow the model used by film and television.

Lewis recounts Hollywood's approach as, "'Let's get these big SAG actors.' But vertical viewers don't care about that. I don't want to watch Chris Hemsworth on my phone. I want to see him on my big-screen TV or in a theater."

To put a finer point on it, verticals aren't about star power; they're about the viewer.

The vertical space is an unexpected candidate for employing the term "viewer as participant," or colloquially, "viewer-participant." While the term

generally applies to content in which the viewer can impact the story or scene, it can also apply to vertical content because vertical viewers are placing themselves in the story—even if only in their mind.

Viewer-participant as a term captures Lewis's description of the aspirational relationship of the viewer to vertical content. "They're not a voyeur from the outside watching it," he says. "They want to be the character."

Yet even with this shift to perceived first-person embodiment—to use the terminology of the Taxonomy of Experience (2020), a framework designed to categorize and analyze extended reality (XR) and in-real-life (IRL) experiences based on how audiences perceive and engage with them—some rules of traditional media still apply, like the tried-and-true three-act structure.

DeGuzman acknowledges that writing for verticals is well served by this structure; it's just that the pacing is on steroids. She cites a five-second rule, which has nothing to do with eating food from the floor while requiring an equally quick reaction time.

"You have to be more resourceful in the way that you quickly world-build in five seconds," she says. A guideline for judging the success of any vertical: How quickly can you hook your audience?

WILL YOU BE UNCOMFORTABLE FOR ME?

Anina Net addresses the common, and understandable, inclination of Hollywood players to work with the same people time and again. It's comfortable.

"They know who they know, and they trust who they trust. They think that those (same) people can shoot short dramas, but then they fail. That's simply because they (traditional filmmakers) don't understand it," Net says.

"What I see happening right now is that they're getting all of these famous people to do it," she says, echoing Quibi's experience. "But that doesn't mean it's going to be successful."

That said, microdrama offers a big opportunity for producers who might not have the budget for or connections to big-name talent. The strength of the vertical space isn't because it's powered by millions of dollars or celebrity names. In fact, it's quite the opposite.

DeGuzman takes this less-is-more concept onto the set itself. She's a huge advocate of producers' testing their resourcefulness, a test that is not inherently comfortable.

"When you're on a traditional set shooting three to five pages a day, you're doing anywhere between from five to 15 takes," she says. "We shoot so many pages per day (in verticals)—nine to 16 on average, sometimes even 18 to 21—that you're only really doing one or two takes for each setup. So prep is crucial, especially with our limited resources and micro budgets.

"From casting the right actors who can give you great performances in a short amount of time to hiring the right crew and having an airtight shooting plan, thoughtful and thorough preproduction will make these impossible days possible," she adds. "Then when it comes time for me to shoot my feature film or episodic television, I can be even more efficient within that time frame."

Zhu agrees.

"Shooting is where the biggest difference from traditional TV/film shows up," she says. "Our typical production is seven to 10 shoot days, 10+ pages a day, with about three to four weeks of prep. Every department has to be built around that schedule from day one. There's no learning it on the fly."

This is true for roles in front of the camera, too, DeGuzman says. "Can they act? Can they carry a lead role on their back? And are they able to memorize their lines? Are they able to get these emotions very quickly?"

Whether it's process efficiency or cost efficiency, efficiency is something to always keep in mind as a producer. For Brancaccio, this comes down to shifting priorities. For example, location becomes much less important, because in the vertical frame, you don't really see the location.

"One of the advantages of being in vertical is that we don't have to fill up all this real estate on the side, so it's much easier to PD things," says Wicke. "We do scenes all the time with big banquets, but we'll only have six or seven background people because you only see the vertical space."

This narrowing of the frame was parodied by Conan O'Brien at the Oscars earlier this year, when he quipped that, thanks to verticals, current audiences can enjoy reimagined classics like *Two Angry Men*.

While O'Brien's observation was played for comedy, the truth underneath is that if two actors are framed vertically on a screen, we see a lot less of their surroundings than we would otherwise, and the constraints of the vertical format lead to greater opportunities for creativity and efficiency—even if not actually the cutting of 10 characters.

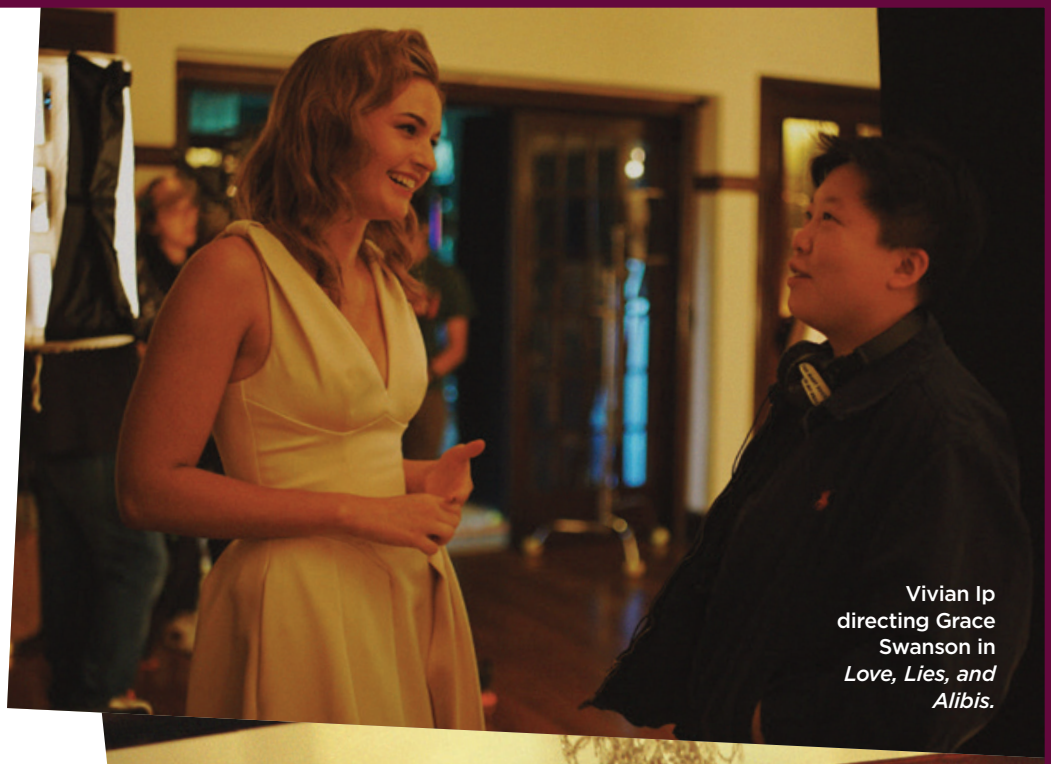
A more practical example from Brancaccio is that another part of the same room can serve as an entirely different set, because where the audience might have seen that part of the room in a horizontal framing of the first set, they won't with a vertical framing.

"We can just hang a medical poster on that white wall, and that can be the hospital," Brancaccio says. With the narrow vertical frame, that white wall will be totally new to the audience.

Zhu shares the insight that as a result, in verticals, costume is doing more work than location.

"In a 9:16 frame, actors and their wardrobe take up about 70% of the screen, so the costumes end up carrying more of the world-building than the background does. It changes how you allocate resources," she says.

Challenging oneself to consider how to shift some of the telegraphing work from one element of production to another could open up new, budget-friendly possibilities even for producers of traditional media.



Vivian Ip directing Grace Swanson in *Love, Lies, and Alibis.*

HIDDEN TRUTHS & PARED-DOWN LIGHTS

"Verticals demand efficiency in both storytelling and production," explains Vivian Ip, a filmmaker who broke into verticals by directing the highly rated microdramas *Breaking the Ice* for ReelShort and *Love, Lies and Alibis* for Vigloo. "You learn to prep fast, cast smart, simplify coverage, prioritize emotional beats, and build schedules around maximum output without losing what matters in a scene."

"Lighting is a really good example. You can't have big, bulky lights. You've got to have things that you can move from room to room and set up really quickly," says Wicke. "We're not doing jib shots. We're keeping everything pretty basic. But then we'll throw in some specialty shots here and there with a Dana Dolly or an Easyrig, something that's still pretty simple."

Essentially, Wicke is pointing out the lesson "Do more with less."

Zhu echoes this advice in an interesting way. "Show, don't tell doesn't really apply the same way in verticals. We tell and show," she says.

This hearkens back to TV's early days, when soap operas were designed to be consumed by viewers who might

Ip directing cast and crew on the set of *Love, Lies, and Alibis*.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF VIVIAN IP

be doing other work—housework—that often required them to look away from the screen. Zhu's insights apply equally to both TV and microdrama content. Viewers must be engaged as quickly as possible. "So we lean into clarity over subtlety," she says.

TELL ME NOT TO TAFT-HARTLEY YOU

There is also the important factor of emotional efficiency, which is shaped by compensation and working conditions.

"You have to take care of yourself, your crew and your team because producing verticals is very time- and budget-limited," says Sunyin Zhang, head of US production for ReelShort, a vertical content platform backed by China's COL Group and owned by Silicon Valley-based Crazy Maple Studio.

When asked how professional industry craftspeople in the vertical industry are being provided the compensation and working conditions they deserve, Wicke answers plainly: "They're not." He acknowledges that it's a problem.

According to both Wicke and Ip, compensation and conditions have improved but vary project to project. "There are producers trying to do it the right way and there are others still using compressed timelines as an excuse to under-resource crews," Ip says. "Like any fast-growing sector, standards are still catching up as the industry matures."

Wicke's experience is a case in point that's still developing. He hired a lot of young and hungry college grads when he started in the business and still works with many of those folks today. He notes that their rates have gotten better—but that those rates are still nowhere near Hollywood rates.

When being hired by a platform or vendor company, Ip comes in with expectations around fair crew rates, realistic schedules, and basic protections. "Efficiency should come from thoughtful planning, not from exhausting people," she says.

Thankfully, this is not a pipe dream. "It is very possible to have good working conditions. Certainly we did when we shot *Playback*," Odell says of the SAG-signatory production. "You just have to design productions and not stretch yourself so thin that you can't give everybody what they need in terms of compensation," which is sound advice for any platform or medium.

Along with SAG-AFTRA, the DGA and WGA also have agreements for their members that cover verticals.

Tang, who's served as head of content for multiple vertical studios, explains that most verticals are still nonunion, but most platforms, especially the bigger ones, are doing

A scene from Hoorae Media's *Screen Time.*

PHOTO BY LILIANE LATHAN

everything in compliance with the protocols, even using union standards. It's just not union pay.

"There is usually no OT, at least for the (vertical) platforms I've worked with. If there's no OT, they will be compensated very well. It's definitely a sustainable job, which is why many people choose to enter the space," says Tang.

Tang's sentiment is echoed by Zhu, for whom many crews have come from traditional TV and/or theatrical backgrounds, "The feedback we hear is that our rates and workflow are comparable to Hallmark and Lifetime movies. The pace is faster, but for crews who want consistent work in a space that's actively producing, it's been a sustainable place to land."

Having multiple irons in the fire is another smart practice. Wicke shares that it's impossible for him to do one film at a time and make a living—he's got to have multiple productions going at the same time.

"The bigger picture is that vertical operates on a different business model from traditional film and TV," says Zhu. "It's high-volume, fast-turnaround, and the economics have to reflect for the model to work at all. "The whole industry is working on how to keep refining the model so it continues to support professional craftspeople here in LA, rather than incentivizing platforms to move production elsewhere. That balance is something we pay a lot of attention to, and I think it's something the whole ecosystem benefits from getting right."

A FEELING PRESCRIPTION OF MR. EMOTION

Zhang acknowledges that producers from traditional filmmaking might misunderstand vertical shows. Some believe that producing verticals isn't a worthwhile endeavor aesthetically or narratively. "But I think we are," she says.

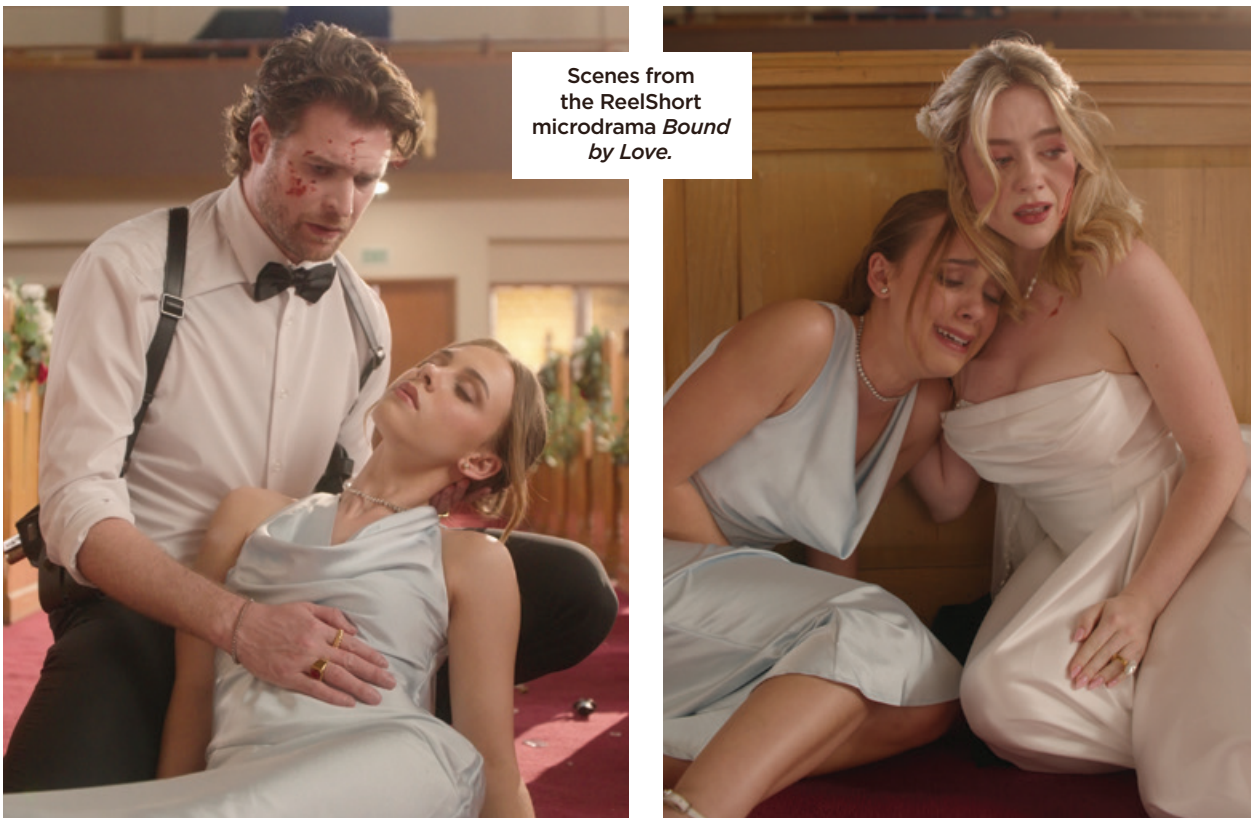
As the saying goes, the proof of the pudding is in the eating: DeGuzman notes that series like hers may not be seen on a big screen, but they are consumed by millions of people.

Zhang believes everyone in the film industry wants to give the audience a sense of what the future might hold, or how we represent ourselves, or "how we hold the idea of what we think is really meaningful to the world."

She continues, "I feel like verticals belong in the part of the entertainment world where the most meaningful or worthy thing is to make people feel good."

Zhang worries that feel-good is a small plate getting lost at the vast buffet of mainstream film or TV-making, with their high production values and known franchises. This is precisely why microdramas are taking off.

Whereas a feature film might be building toward the climax that keeps everyone glued to their seats, when it comes to a microdrama, the audience



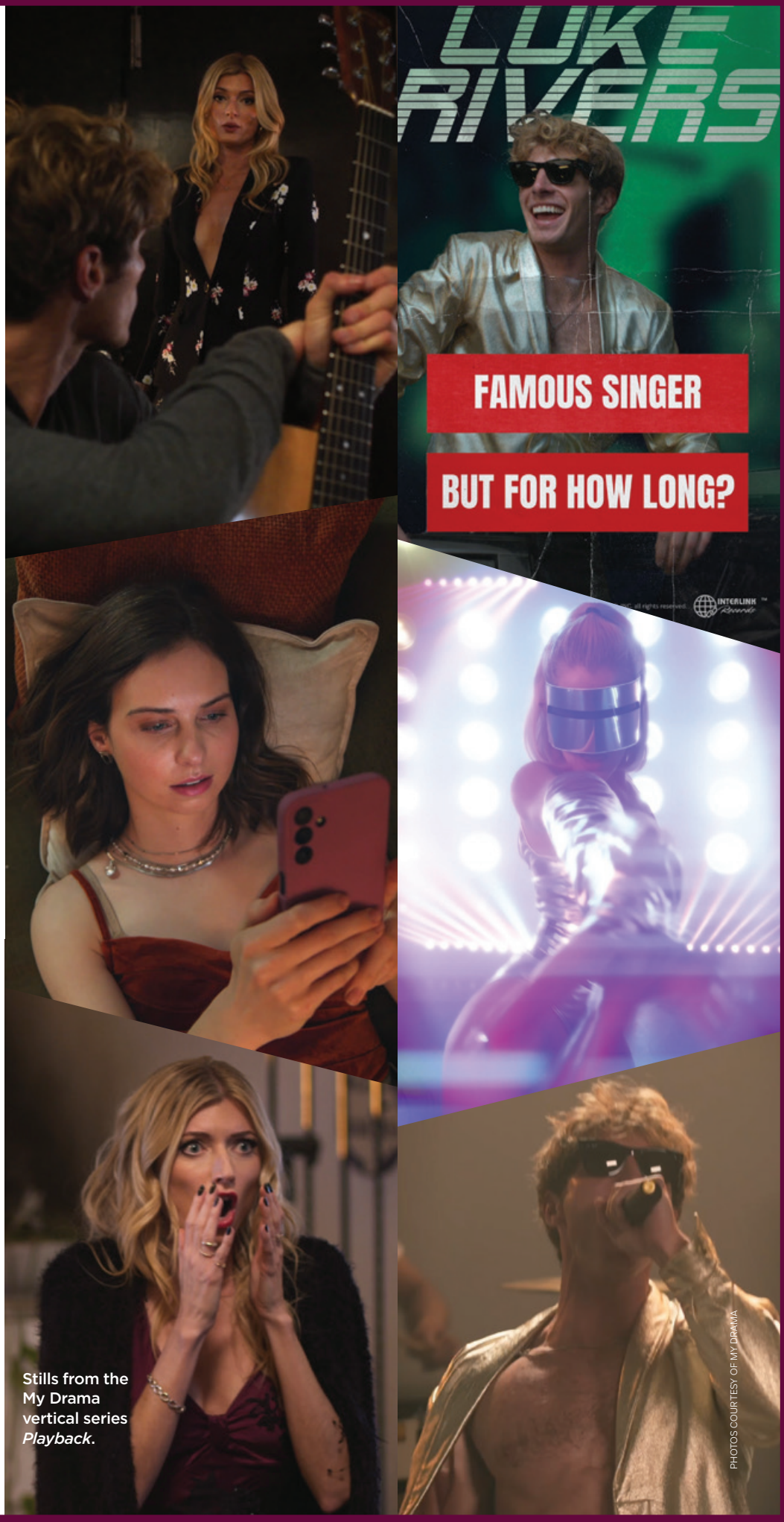
Scenes from the ReelShort microdrama *Bound by Love.*

PHOTOS COURTESY OF REELSHORT

could metaphorically leave the theater at any second by putting down their phone. "Every beat is designed to make the audience feel something," says Zhang. So, moments with the emotional weight of a feature film climax happen much more frequently. It's the dramatic equivalent of the sitcom rule of three jokes per page—one every 20 to 30 seconds.

"If something drags, confuses, or delays the hook, you feel it immediately," says Ip. "Producers of traditional film and TV do not need to imitate verticals wholesale, but they can learn from the urgency, the lean decision-making and respect for pacing that the format demands."

It was in 1951 that movies stopped being projected on literal silver screens—coated surfaces designed for low-light projectors. Yet the overall approach to filmmaking has stayed largely the same, even as it moved into the era of digital projection, which became dominant by 2013. Technology drives the evolution of visual storytelling—and always has. For now, it's driving us in a vertical orientation while opening up possibilities for audiences and creators alike. ■



Stills from the My Drama vertical series *Playback*.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MY DRAMA