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Case Study: James Schamus
In which our subject says the exact opposite thing you expected him to say.

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Marking Time

Rats on NYC streets walking away with camera batteries are probably just a rumor.

Cover photo: Katie Osgood
Thanksgiving is just about my favorite holiday. It’s not because of my taste for turkey; rather it’s because the holiday motivates us to be thankful and appreciative.

So I’m throwing the calendar out the window, and taking a “thanksgiving moment” to appreciate what our Guild and our industry have accomplished on the east coast. It doesn’t seem very long ago that the conventional wisdom was: You’d have to be crazy to shoot in New York. Sure, it might work for your run-and-gun indie scene, but the question that most producers were asking was, “Okay, what location can I get to double for New York?”

Today, New York is a thriving production center, home to top talent, state-of-the-art facilities, the most resourceful crew members east of the Mississippi, and not coincidentally, a strong incentive program that puts New York locations and stages within more producers’ reach than any time in memory. Even our Guild’s President is producing in New York today, keeping the production machinery of the new CBS series *Madam Secretary* up and running.

This turnabout has come as the result of an incredible collective effort on the part of both public officials and industry advocates. Gov. Cuomo and Mayor DeBlasio (as well as Mayor Bloomberg before him) have been ardent supporters of the production incentive, and Cynthia Lopez and her team in the Mayor’s Office of Film, Television and Broadcasting have tirelessly gotten the message out: Whatever story you’re telling, the city of New York will go the extra mile to help you tell it.

As the production prospects of New York have grown, I’m proud that our organization has grown in tandem, riding this rising tide to evolve into the PGA East we know and treasure today. Far-sighted producers like Nelle Nugent and Nancy Goldman laid the groundwork, and leaders like the inestimable David Picker and the savvy John Hadity oversaw the blossoming of the PGA East into an organization that is truly vital, endlessly inventive and characteristically proud of their city and the tough-as-nails producers who work the territory.

In fact, it was David Picker, along with then-PGA East member Rachel Klein who first proposed the idea for a Producers Guild Conference. I’ve always felt a little bad about taking their fantastic idea and transplanting it to Los Angeles, which is why the premiere of Produced By: New York is particularly gratifying. You’ll find profiles of the principal architects of PBNY on page 60, but I wanted to offer some personal thanks to Steven Haft and Jay Roewe, who worked tirelessly behind the scenes to secure the financial support of HBO and Time Warner, as well as providing us with our gorgeous venue at the Time Warner Center.

I hope you get a chance to meet all of these folks at Produced By: New York. I hope you get a chance to meet Peter Saraf, the current PGA East Chair, who has not only been an essential contributor to the conference, but is leading the Guild’s initiatives to build bridges between the Guild and the thriving indie-film community. And I hope you get to meet Harvey Wilson, one of the most dedicated PGA members I’ve ever met, who has not only worked to secure improved health insurance options for Guild members across the country, but is also actively leading the Guild’s efforts to help resolve the labor tensions that have plagued non-fiction producing teams in New York.

Like the Thanksgiving holiday, we shouldn’t need the excuse of an awesome conference to express our amazement and gratitude. But since the event is finally here, I’m not letting the opportunity slip by. Thanks, everyone. You’ve done a great job for your Guild and your city, in equal measure.
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Right off the top, James Schamus lets us know: He finds himself a boring topic; don’t say you weren’t warned.

Schamus’ assessment isn’t descriptive of anything he actually says, so much as indicative of his penchant for saying exactly the opposite thing you thought he was going to say. “Reliably contrarian,” is the thumbnail self-description he throws out, and since we are not James Schamus, we are ready to agree with that assessment.

Talking for an hour to Schamus is like taking office hours with your favorite college professor... probably because for some readers of this magazine, Schamus is your favorite college professor. In addition to a career that’s included dozens of feature films and tenures running companies like indie institutions Good Machine and Focus Features, Schamus serves as a professor of film history and theory at Columbia University. His conversation is discursive and analytical, and that contrarian streak is a key part of this academic package — after all, there’s no reason that questioning assumptions and conventional wisdom should stop at the classroom.

In fact, Schamus’ own filmography could comprise a pretty good syllabus for American Independent Film 101. While Brokeback Mountain remains the most recognizably groundbreaking title, the same humanity and sympathy for the world’s outsiders pulses through films like Poison, The Ice Storm, Happiness and Auto-Focus. His ongoing 25-year collaboration with director Ang Lee has not only yielded such achingly poignant inquiries into the human condition as Brokeback and Ice Storm, but brought the virtuoso aesthetics of contemporary Asian cinema to an entirely new American audience with Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon. Currently, Schamus is deep in development on his next collaboration with Lee, a feature about Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier, even as he produces or executive produces other work such as Sara Gavron’s Suffragette, Vincent Perez’s Alone in Berlin and Udi Aloni’s The Last Verse, while also adapting Reza Aslan’s Zealot: A Life of Jesus of Nazareth for producer David Heyman, and contributing a short film to the Morgan Spurlock–fronted anthology We the Economy. And of course, the guy also has to show up to class.

This is the 68th in Produced by’s ongoing series of Case Studies of successful producers and their work, and the only one so far in which the subject mounted, in mid-interview, a compelling argument against his own appearance on the magazine’s cover. Nonetheless, we’re letting the chips fall where they may, and printing the lion’s share of editor Chris Green’s conversation with James Schamus, a scathing and occasionally corrosive affair that somehow found a way to tie together John Cassavetes, Vestron Video, next week’s Chinese box-office numbers, the perils of advice-giving, and whether producing can properly be called a profession at all.

James Schamus speaks at a screening of Focus Features’ Atonement. (Photo: Brad Barket)
As a producer, you still have to have that “empathy synapse” that fires up in other people’s presence. Even if you’re at heart a martinet dictator who likes to boss people around, somehow if you do this part well, your totalitarian ethos will not be determinant of other people’s experience.

So, starting at the beginning, how did you find your way into the industry? Was producing always the goal?

Ron Yerxa has said that producing is the only job you can hold in the entertainment industry that requires no discernible skills. That is a line I have either borrowed or reproduced in the context of my own early career, because I come out of academia. In fact, I don’t come out of academia, I still have one foot firmly planted in academia as a professor — of nothing practical mind you, film history and theory — at Columbia. But I did land in New York in the late ’80s as a graduate student in English. I only had to finish writing my dissertation, so I didn’t have to be physically on campus at Berkeley. I thought it would be fun to spend at least a little bit of time in New York, where I had a lot of friends, and I immediately got swept up into the very early phases of what has since gone on to be called the indie film movement, hanging out with some very talented people like Christine Vachon and Todd Haynes and Tom Kalin and eventually, Ted Hope and Ang Lee. Since I had no discernible skills whatsoever, the only thing I thought of that would put me in the mix was to offer to try to raise money for the various projects that everybody was involved in.

Everybody else was so busy being so talented. I was welcomed into the group with open arms, and commenced a dual career path: One, I was the oldest living production assistant in New York, at that time making 25 or 50 bucks a day, serving coffee and being yelled at by regular production personnel in New York at the time. And, number two, late at night and on the occasional day off, I got to be an executive producer, out there raising money for independent films. So it was a great, if sometimes dizzying mix of perspectives. It did make me acutely aware that the people to pay attention to on the set were often the people the furthest away from the so-called action. And also it really impressed upon me the value of simple human decency, especially when it comes to the treatment of production assistants.

That’s the start of the era that people now fondly look back on as the golden age of independent filmmaking, that late ’80s/early ’90s moment, when all these forces came together. At the time, there was any sense on the ground that something creative new was forming, that would have its own style and its own contribution to make to the culture?

Yes. You could say “mechanic,” but even that’s too specific, you know? Producing just doesn’t feel like it’s a job, or even a profession. And one reason for that is very simple: You have to have a certain passion for knowing that even if you succeed at what you’re doing today, you will still be unemployed at some point soon anyhow. You are crafting objects, one at a time, that can only be what they are, because if they’re any good, they won’t be like the last thing you did and they won’t be like anything that resembles what they looked like back then.

Our business model was nothing that we were creating into the industry. It was trying to stop VHS tape from getting to the video store. Right? VHS was the enemy of cinema! It was going to destroy film as we knew it! The MPAA came out with an incredibly aggressive campaign to try to stop VHS tape from getting into the industry — let’s say, your next film or TV show, which provided a training ground for a lot of independent crew.

So you are constantly creating situations in which you are in essence applying for a job — let’s say, your next film or TV show — for which you are not qualified. Because if you were qualified for it, it would be the same thing you just did, and that’s boring. Everybody I know who succeeds as a creative producer tends to be somebody who does it because they probably would have very little idea what to do with themselves if they were handed a normal job.

So, starting at the beginning, how did you find your way into the industry? Was producing always the goal? I should preface this by saying that this career stuff is, at least to me, the most boring part of this interview genre. I apologize in advance for being a semi-noncompliant subject. I find myself among the most boring of the topics I have available to chat about, even though it’s probably one of the topics I know something about.

I came to film producing, like many producers, by accident. When you talk to a bunch of high school students, even ones interested in the entertainment field, and you say, “what do you think you want to be when you grow up?” very few of them will ever raise their hands and say, “I want to be a producer.” Instead of saying “I want to be a race car driver,” it’s kind of like saying “I want to work organizing the pit crew.”

“I want to hire the mechanics.” Yeah. Yeah. You could say “mechanic,” but even that’s too specific, you know? Producing just doesn’t feel like it’s a job, or even a profession. And one reason for that is very simple: You have to have a certain passion for knowing that even if you succeed at what you’re doing today, you will still be unemployed at some point soon anyhow. You are crafting objects, one at a time, that can only be what they are, because if they’re any good, they won’t be like the last thing you did and they won’t be like the next thing you do.

So you are constantly creating situations in which you are in essence applying for a job — let’s say, your next film or TV show — for which you are not qualified. Because if you were qualified for it, it would be the same thing you just did, and that’s boring. Everybody I know who succeeds as a creative producer tends to be somebody who does it because they probably would have very little idea what to do with themselves if they were handed a normal job.

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and height of the Reagan era. But it was also the end and the height of an era in which there was still a commitment to public funding for the arts, including the art of film. So some of the great films of that era were at least partially funded with grants from entities such as the New York State Council for the Arts, and the NEA, entities that are still in existence, but not in any form that resembles what they looked like back then.

Our business model was nothing that we were creating intentionally; we were patching together limited partnerships, small sales to European public television, government arts grants, etcetera. But the model itself had been developed in the B-movie world: Guys like Samuel Arkoff and Roger Corman had already laid track for a lot of our own approach to financing and exploitation.

So you had all these different strands of influence and history that flowed into the New York scene at that time. You had avant-garde practices in terms of performance and film, and at that time, the emerging use of video. You had the rise of public access cable, so you had a lot of media makers who were just picking up what looked like gigantic boxes but which were in fact, video cameras. You had the B moviemaking tradition, going back to the ’40s and ’50s, all those fantastic early films noir, shot in the streets here. Henry Hathaway starts in the ’40s shooting documentary style, low-budget independent films, a tradition that moved on through people like Kubrick and a lot of the other greats. And let’s not forget the 35mm porn business, which provided a training ground for a lot of independent crew.

So we might think of American independent film as being miraculously born in the late ’80s, but what about John Cassavetes shooting Shadows in New York in the late ’50s? And Abe Polonsky and Shirley Clark and Jonas Mekas? So you had a lot of precursors, but what you didn’t have was everything congealing together at one moment to burst forward into something that felt new and commercially viable. That was certainly the late ’80s, and one of the things that really made it possible was a medium that is now no longer with us, that being VHS videocassette.

Remember: one of the things that happened with the introduction of VHS was that Hollywood, God bless it, was scared shitless. Right? VHS was the enemy of cinema! It was going to destroy film as we knew it! The MPAA came out with an incredibly aggressive campaign to try to stop VHS tape from getting
into people’s homes. And because Hollywood was so panicky about VHS tape, a lot of outside capital started to pour in to try to grab that market.

So while it seemed like that medium was going to get shut out of the film business at the beginning, what happened was that hundreds of millions of dollars were poured into building up these businesses, like Vestron, for example. And what did they need? They needed movies. They weren’t going to get them from the studios. So where were they going to get them from? Well, if you were an independent filmmaker in New York who had made a film inspired by the works of Belgian avant-garde filmmaker Chantal Akerman, but your work happened to have a pretty young woman in it who might be wearing a bathing suit occasionally, guess what? That became a VHS box with a girl with a bathing suit on it. And that was worth money.

That infusion came on top of the small licenses you could get from what were then — and are still — very interesting public television stations, primarily in Europe, plus what you could get from a 16 millimeter distribution network in the United States that in the late ’80s, believe it or not, still had about 250 commercial venues. So you had all of these different factors, and you had a lot of really interesting young filmmakers who were able to ride herd on an emerging film festival culture, where filmmakers were congregating, trading tips, starting to figure it out.

So you now start to see a lot of independent distributors popping up, because they know that whatever they’re putting in theatres, they can get ancillary value from these home video companies, or they’re going to start their own home video companies. It was kind of fun, being in the right place at the right time.

A lot of people point to the premiere of *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* at Cannes in 1989 as the coming-of-age moment for the indie movement. Did it feel that way at the time? Is there another moment we should be looking at? It was clearly an exciting time.

Well, there are two answers to your question. The first is that it may be exciting in retrospect, but it’s just as exciting getting up and going to work today. That is to say, what was the vast majority of the experience of that era? Well, it was working. That’s what you do. You get up, you beg for money, you get the money and then you beg people to spend as little of it as possible.

That is to say, what was that defining moment? Was it *Sex, Lies,*? Or was it, say, when Todd Haynes won with *Poison* at Sundance, and this...
movie made for a nickel ends up bringing in a million dollars at the box office with our distributor, Zeitgeist? Or was there some other moment? And the answer is, unfortunately, there was no moment, because that moment actually never happened.

Look at Sundance in any of the intervening years between the mid ’80s and now, the teens. In the midst of all the BS and hype, it still has maintained an extraordinary artistic integrity. But also ask, how many films in competition over those years were made by filmmakers whose primary source of revenue has been their filmmaking? And ask yourself whether or not those breakthrough moments, whatever you would have called them back in the day, led to a culture in which serious independent filmmakers could develop their careers while also affording health insurance and college educations for their kids as they get older? And the answer is no.

I’m sure you have noticed that the winners of Sundance tend to be children. They tend not to be middle-aged people or older. Occasionally they are. But if you look at the people who win at Sundance, whose films are in competition, representing the height of American independent film culture, and if you ask that rare odd bird who might be of advanced years, who’s standing there holding a grand prize or a directing prize, how is it that he or she survived all these years, you know what you’re not likely to hear? I’m doing great. It’s been an incredible run. My producers and I have been making very individualistic, really artistically demanding movies for the past 40 years, and we are so proud to know that there is a community and a system of support for serious artists here in the United States.

I assume you haven’t heard that refrain lately. That’s because when Steven Soderbergh finished Sex, Lies, and Videotape, he went on to an illustrious career that featured auspicious independent films that was financially stable with very little money. But you also notice he made a couple of other films, he went on to an illustrious career that featured

right. I appreciate that perspective. We don’t often think about would’ve could’ve been, and particularly in America where we’re so generally unfamiliar with the national film cultures of other nations, which are sustained by a sense of community or a sense of social or political obligation to support the arts.

Part of this is a good thing, and part of it is our own myopia. It’s funny, I just gave a talk in London and someone at the very end asked a question about national cinemas and their values. And I brought up the fact that more than ever before, the revenues for the big blockbuster studio movies are now being fundamentally overseas. The big movies these days, if they are to succeed, need to generate only 30 percent to 40 percent of their ultimate revenues from the domestic marketplace. And, in fact, the primary driver of growth for global cinema right now are young Chinese people. And this toossed-off phrase became a screaming headline in The Hollywood Reporter, something like “James Schamus: ‘Hollywood Makes Movies for 20-Year-Old Chinese People.’”

I just saw that headline. [laughs]

What made me laugh was that in the Twittersphere, many people took this as though I was bemoaning this fact, that somehow this is an indication of some devolution in the history of Hollywood. When, in fact, it’s quite the opposite. This is reason to celebrate! And it’s important to underscore that as producers, if you’re not interested in where youth culture in China is and could possibly go with your help, then you’re not interested in the future of cinema. To be curious about that is part of your job. It’s not some depressing fact that we should be bemoaning! [laughs] I mean, let’s put it this way. The average age of a filmgoer in China is around 20. And the Chinese box office is growing at a rate of about 30 percent per year. Got that? 30 percent per year. While the American box office, in actual number of attendees, has shown a relentless decline over the past several decades. Right?

So if you were going to start a business or start your career today, would you want to start in a business that has a shrinking consumer base that is growing steadily older and closer to its inevitable death? Or, would you want to be in a business that is growing larger and whose consumer base is actually growing younger?
I see where you’re going, here. Now, you don’t have to make those global blockbuster movies yourself. You can make other things that have a smaller audience, local or international, but that still just as satisfying aesthetically, politically and emotionally as those big movies. But to the extent to which the big ones, even for a small fish like myself, sustain an ecology of production and creativity and finance, we are all invested in making sure that the global reach of Hollywood remains global.

Very much in line with that, your own work, and particularly your collaboration with Ang Lee, has done a great deal to encourage that cross-cultural appreciation and engagement. On one hand, it’s been the most productive and emotionally satisfying part of my career, being able to work with Ang over a quarter of a century, I think 11 or 12 movies. Part of that has been the intimacy of an ongoing education that we both facilitate for each other across cultures. But there’s no question that I’ve gotten the better of it. Ang knows a lot more about me and here than I know about him and there. [laughs]

But to the extent to which that education has been specific and notable, great, but in fact, all good producers have to enter into other people’s thought-worlds and emotional worlds. Your job is to facilitate that. Your job is to get it out and translate that into some material form that could be shared by other people, while respecting the integrity of a creative vision which is probably not yours. But even if you’re a producer who is the writer and the showrunner and the primary creative locus of whatever it is that you’re up to, even so, in your role as producer you still have to activate everybody else’s creativity and everybody else’s freedom to envision, even as you manage it and give it one particular direction. So as a producer, you still have to have that “empathy synapse” that fires up in other people’s presence. Even if you’re at heart a martinet dictator who likes to boss people around, somehow if you do this part well, your totalitarian ethos will not be determinant of other people’s experience such that it’s an overall detriment to the final product.

Right. Producers often speak of the challenge of creating this collective critical mass around an idea, that relies on kind of porting this vision back and forth between any number of heads. Tactically and strategically, how do you accomplish that as a producer? How do you work to get everybody on that wavelength so that they’re following along? Right. Producers often speak of the challenge of creating this collective critical mass around an idea, that relies on kind of porting this vision back and forth between any number of heads. Tactically and strategically, how do you accomplish that as a producer? How do you work to get everybody working together? That’s the question, right? And the answer is: You make sure that a unified goal is communicated and acknowledged. That seems to be one answer.

But then, look around and there are plenty of amazing films that are made by filmmakers who actually only give five pages of their scripts to individual actors the day before their scenes and actually don’t share the whole thing. [laughs]

How did those movies happen? And so, in fact, sometimes a producer’s role is the opposite: How to create spaces in which people feel comfortable doing what they do best without having to worry too much about the overall goal.

Well, that’s a point well taken. I’d be lying if I said one of the goals of the magazine wasn’t to provide some sense of perspective or a sense of how other people have done it. Whether that is, implicitly, advice I can’t say. But certainly, we hope that the magazine will be instructive on some level. But the thing about that is, we all know how instruction really takes place, especially in the world of film production. If you were really embracing that practice, then at least one half of your covers would feature noble, heroic, intelligent, smart, funny, interesting individuals who had been overwhelmingly crushed by the failure of their efforts in the film business, and who have stories to tell you about just how that failure happened, and how they’ve ended up more or less on the dole and unemployable. But you don’t. In other words, you try to find people who at least on the surface, look and smell somewhat successful in the hopes that your readers will find some measure of useful information in these success stories.

Well, I hate to say it, but that’s actually a fairly limited pedagogical approach to serving your readership. And it goes back to an American ethos in which we are admonished: Learn from your failures! But the only people who are allowed to give you that advice are the people who you think of as successful.

There is a very limited utility in our business to this constant going back to success stories, because to the extent to which they’re successes, they’re usually not replaceable. They’re not like lab experiments where you say, well, I mixed three milliliters of this with a couple of grams of that and the thing blew up. Making movies is the exact opposite. Right? “I just did something nobody ever did before, and nobody should ever do again!” Thanks for your help, dude, seriously.

This is rapidly becoming the most “meta” cover interview we’ve ever done. But since publishing convention, not to say Vance Van Petten and the PGA Board, all but forholds me from putting abject failures on the cover of the magazine, maybe could you speak for those people? Why do projects fail?

Well, first off, I may be in fact, your first abject failure to appear on the cover, having been the guy who was exactly a year ago fired from his studio gig. So you will be celebrating an unemployed guy by putting my picture on the cover.

I think what people always forget is, as a studio executive, there’s not just a gigantic checkbook that you’re sitting on top of, where sometimes you rouse yourself from sleep and fall off the top of the checkbook and take a check with you and write it and give it to somebody.
We’re doing it because we truly believe in the place of this film for this amount of money. Here’s how we’ll do it. The reason with our colleagues and peers, and our financiers and studios, when dealing with the rest of the creative team, and dealing on and get over yourself. Okay?

You a million times that you’re an idiot and you need to move person who has access to any and all available data has told this impossible dream become a reality. In fact, every sane should be flailing around and wasting your life trying to make there is literally no metric available to you that gives you any entice anybody to invest in your shit. So the bizarre thing is to the vision of your filmmaking team supersedes all rational nies that proves that those kinds of movies don’t work. Right?

Big hit and it won a lot of awards, and those idiots didn’t know after year, after year, and finally I got it made and it became a studio in the universe turned it down, and I kept at it for year, characters. People keep punching us and putting us on the floor and we just keep getting up. And at a certain moment we keep going, because as producers we are constantly torn between two separate accounts of what makes us continue to work and to thrive.

The first is the following: I had this project and every studio in the universe turned it down, and I kept at it for year, after year, after year, and finally I got it made and it became a big hit and it won a lot of awards, and those idiots didn’t know what they were talking about, but I knew. The vindication narrative.

Yeah. And usually there are at least one or two people waving statues at the end of the year at the various awards ceremo- nies who genuinely have that story. But in order to have that story, you actually have to have a belief that your connection to the vision of your filmmaking team supersedes all rational evidence that the marketplace and market forces suggest as to whether or not there’s a probability of success that should entice anybody to invest in your shit. So the bizarre thing is there is literally no metric available to you that gives you any sense of objective grounding as to why you, as a producer, should be flailing around and wasting your life trying to make this impossible dream become a reality. In fact, every sane person who has access to any and all available data has told you a million times that you’re an idiot and you need to move on and get over yourself. Okay?

On the other hand, as producers we have to be the people, when dealing with the rest of the creative team, and dealing with our colleagues and peers, and our financiers and studios, who represent a kind of reality principle. “Well, we can do this for this amount of money. Here’s how we’ll do it.” The reason we’re doing it is because we truly believe in the place of this film within the landscape, economic and otherwise, of the industry that we’re a part of. We’re supposed to be “grownups.” I mean, if we’re not grownups, who else on the film crew is?

So how do these, again, completely contradictory ideas of what a producer is coexist? And the answer is: I have no clue.

This is a longer view of the profession and of the challenges thereof that we typically get in the magazine. But I guess, at the risk of being manifestly useless, I was wondering if you might talk a little bit about some of the successes that you’ve enjoyed, and about what it took to make films like Brokeback Mountain happen.

How can someone like myself tell the story of Brokeback without it being self-serving at this point? I mean, the only way that I could is if it actually failed, which I think there was, at the time, a reasonable suspicion that it would.

Look, I spent six years trying to make that film as an independent producer. And then I was lucky enough to be able to sell my company, Good Machine, with my colleagues, Ted Hope and David Linde, to Universal and merge it with their specialty label, USA Films, to create Focus Features. The only problem with that sale and that success was that suddenly, I was records to become just another guy who did not green-light the movie that everybody else was rejecting. Because, frankly, when you sat on that side of the desk, the idea of that movie ever making its money back seemed pretty ludicrous.

Of course, in retrospect, it seems like an obvious thing to do. But after Brokeback became one of our first green-lights at the company, I felt a very personal responsibility as a petty bourgeois small-business owner, or at least small-business manager, to get the money back. And we sweated that one, let me tell you.

So, how did that responsibility coexist with the responsibility you felt toward the material? I know that you’ve spoken of the film as one you have a strong personal connection to. Yeah. I would say the following here, just to be, as you might expect, reliably contrary. One the one hand, I think a lot of people can look at the body of work that I’ve been associated with, and they’ll find various strains of progressive political perspective. Let’s use the academic word “postionality” in it. You tend to find something political. And so the assumption is that must be the reason why I decided to make a movie like Brokeback. “You have deeply held lefty political beliefs, so therefore you look for those projects and then you try to make those.”

And I’m very quick to point out that there are plenty of politically-correct movies out there and most of them, just like all other movies, really aren’t all that good. And if you are going to take on the onus of trying to make something that means something politically, that has some kind of liberatory prospect to it, then you have a double burden to make sure the film is as good as it can possibly be. Because otherwise you’re just making, not only a bad movie, but one of “those” bad movies that proves that those kinds of movies don’t work. Right?

So your first obligation as a producer, regardless of your politics, is to try to make really good stuff, and consider it an
extra-special bonus if it “means something.” The great movies don’t necessarily have to resonate, at least not immediately, in any particularly political way. They just have to resonate period, and then over time they’ll take on whatever politics they’re going to have. Your first obligation is still to the thing, the film. Luckily, I get to work with people who are a little on the outside of things. They’re knocking on the door. And those people tend to have stories to tell that really are about the coming into being of some new voice and some new way of looking at things. It’s a double privilege at that point.

Just to continue on the subject of Focus, I think there’s a contingent out there that assumes that in merging with USA and becoming a part of Universal that you’re, in effect, handed the keys to the kingdom. I wonder if that’s another notion that you might disabuse us of. What was your experience of being on the other side of that desk? Look, if you’re going to survive the specialized film business, you’d better understand from day one that it’s a business that conspires to destroy your best and greatest ideas before breakfast, and that even executing a small modicum of them, a small de minimus percentage, qualifies as a success.

The rigors actually increase when you’re inside. Because at that point, I have to make decisions that I believe make sense from a business perspective, as opposed to decisions made as an independent producer, where sometimes your passion leads you to one sole argument: “Come on, everybody. Just take the chance, take the leap of faith.” I think what people always forget is, as a studio executive, there’s not just a giganto-checkbook and take a check with you and write it and give it to somebody.

Focus was profitable every single year of its existence. Good Machine was profitable every single year of its existence. Now, in some years those profits were ludicrously low, so I’m not bragging. Or maybe I am bragging? [laughs] If so, I’m bragging in the context of understanding that some years were not great. But one reason why we never lost money, ever, is that we were rigorous. We were boring, we were middle-class small businesspeople running our little business.

80 percent of the job is the same as the guy who runs the sausage factory across the river in New Jersey. 80 percent of the job is management, paying attention to what it costs and how much you can get in, and leveraging your risk with partnerships, and understanding, in as much real time as possible, your need to reinvest and to reconfigure and to reengage wherever and however it works, and not get locked into your own self and smug identity.

So people think that there’s the big checkbook and we just write the check and then we try to get as much money back as we can, but it’s not that at all. We internally scramble and create new business models almost daily for every new film that comes in the door. You look at the folks who are running the studios today, they are faced with the same challenges. That is to say, they’re not sitting on top of a gigantic empire. They’re sitting on top of 20 to 100 different forms of transactional use and abuse that could possibly unlock their ability to make the next film.

Nonetheless, when you are sitting inside, the language you use is, of necessity, more administrative, more linked to the annual reports and waterfalls and free operating cash flows, and good stuff like that. Over time, that does have an impact. So it’s good to have been inside, but as a producer it’s also good to be outside and to be free from it.

Now that you’ve gone into the belly of the beast and emerged, scarred but unbowed, or something, what are you most excited about today? What kind of stories or what ways of putting stories together speak to your passions these days?

Well, let me give you the pro forma, completely predictable answer —

Oh, let’s not lose that, by all means. [laughs] Yeah. Let’s make sure I come right back at you with the truisms that in fact, I also believe. Because I don’t have that many original thoughts, and I think I already coughed them up. But it is true that now, today, there are simply more ways to tell stories with audiovisual media. There are more locations in which those stories are produced and consumed, different conditions and different audiences. So, quite frankly, what gets me excited today is pretty much the same thing that got me excited a quarter of a century ago. There are a lot of really talented people out there who are banging their heads against various forms of not only storytelling, but also financing. So we have to, not necessarily embrace all these changes, but we have to at least understand them and turn them to account on behalf of artists that we think have something to say.

So everything is very different but, frankly, kind of the same. That’s why I don’t tend to get too nostalgic. It’s just as hard now as it was. I know a lot of people would like to think it’s harder, and, in film, it is. But, on the other hand, there are all these other opportunities out there, in television, online, cable, etcetera, that people in my sphere — that is to say, the film snobs — 10 years ago had a hard time imagining that they would ever be participating in. And it turns out all those indie-film types are now having a blast making all kinds of new kinds of stories in these other media. Whereas, even just a decade ago, you didn’t find many of them in that world.

That doesn’t stop us from complaining. It’s tough. All of us love to complain. So, yeah, sure, I’ll keep complaining. But in the meantime, why don’t we all just get up in the morning and go to work, too? [laughs]

Thanks to all the producers we’ve worked with these last 10 years

FEATURES

THE BUTLER The Weinstein Company
A WALK AMONG THE TOMBSTONES Universal Studios
THE GIVER The Weinstein Company
A MOST VIOLENT YEAR Participant Media

EPISODIC

THE AFFAIR Showtime
ROYAL PAINS USA Network
THE AMERICANS FX
NURSE JACKIE Showtime
RESCUE ME FX

UNSCRIPTED

HISTORY DETECTIVES PBS
MOONSHINERS Discovery Channel
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Conventional wisdom is that Los Angeles is the land of the movies. With young men and women getting off the bus each day with wide eyes and big dreams of becoming the next Joan Crawford or Duane “The Rock” Johnson. New York is for the song-and-dance men, the triple threats and the performance artists. If you want to shoot your visually stunning epic, you’d better head west. But Brooklyn native Terence Winter knows how to bring Hollywood magic home. The contemporary tri-state area is given the magnific treatment in The Sopranos and The Wolf of Wall Street, but nowhere are the challenges and rewards of shooting in New York more pronounced than they are in his recently concluded HBO series Boardwalk Empire.

With the series set in Atlantic City, NJ, the team first looked for possibilities in that region, but found very few locations left over from the 1920s. They considered using other historic cities such as Syracuse and Troy, New York along with Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. Then, as Winter puts it, “we realized that we had everything we needed right where we were.” New York City is home to some of the best crews in the world and shooting in a smaller city would have put that resource out of reach. Brooklyn’s long stretches of brownstone buildings not only worked from street view, but also boasted detailed interiors that hadn’t been touched for 80 or 90 years. The production team found a place where they could step into the past.

The talent pool in New York is unquestionable, between the stage players who make Broadway home and the performers drawn in from neighboring cities. Winter asks me if it makes sense when he says that there’s more of a chance of getting “period-looking people” in New York. “There’s a lot of really interesting faces here,” he observes. “You have people who look like they might have lived a hundred years ago. Not that LA is only full of people who look like models, but you’ve got more ‘real people’ here to choose from, and that’s what we were looking for.” Admit it: He’s right. The expanse of Los Angeles is home to a lot of talent, to be sure, but in the plastic surgery capital of the United States, some of that talent can start to look fairly similar.

Atlantic City, the boardwalk empire, thrived because of the seasons. The wealthy flocked there each summer and returned home in autumn, leaving their money behind. The calendar
will tell you that you can find the seasons anywhere, but the sights and smells that make up the feel of each unique season are woven into the fabric of life in the American Northeast. Unfortunately, this isn’t always a good thing. “For us,” recalls Winter, “the biggest challenge during season one was that it was supposed to be summer on the show, but we were shooting in the middle of March and all of our actors were freezing… And by the time we got to the summer, we were shooting the winter scenes and they had wear fur coats in the warm weather. And I made a mental note that by season two, whatever winter scenes and they had wear fur coats in the warm weather. And I made a mental note that by season two, whatever season they were dressing for opposite weather.”

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Missing out on the predictable sunshine of Southern California didn’t present a problem. There are rainy days in 2014 and there were rainy days in 1920. As long as the weather didn’t present a problem. There are rainy days in 1920. As long as the weather didn’t present a problem or affect the content of the show, Boardwalk Empire is unaffected by inclement weather. “As long as it matches what else is supposed to be happening.” Winter confirms, “it’s really fine. We’ve had that challenge before and I don’t think we’ve ever been burdened by it.”

Good fortune also plays a part. Each spot on the globe is susceptible to its own kind of natural disasters, and when Hurricane Sandy swept through New York, it laid waste much of the coast. Boardwalk Empire escaped disaster by dint of a little more than luck. The hurricane “actually turned out not to send up epic carnage for the show,” he recalls. “It did destroy sets that we had used in season two out on Staten Island, unfortunately. We had some incredible beachfront locations that were washed away, but we hadn’t been shooting at that

point.” Though the hurricane did not affect his project, the native New Yorker has deep connections to his hometown. Winter laughs that while shooting The Sopranos was simpler in terms of its contemporary costuming, props and locations, “it’s one thousand times easier to shoot in New York. Every time I’m in New Jersey, I end up getting lost. I don’t have that problem in New York or Brooklyn.”

Even Empire locations like Chicago and Philadelphia were shot in New York. Havana, Cuba, as seen in season five, was a combination of Lower Manhattan, Upper Manhattan and Yonkers. Winter received emails asking, “My God, where did you go to do that?” And I’d say, well, we went to two hundred and somethingth street, or underneath the municipal buildings in Lower Manhattan and in Yonkers. It was augmented a bit with visual effects but it’s all done right here at home. It’s always challenging to do a period piece, but it couldn’t have been easier for us to do it here.”

In New York, he found streets that he could direct, locations where he could take what was offered and alter it to suit his needs, like working with an actor on her lines. Living on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, Winter confesses to jealousy of the art department cavalry rides in. “We have an incredible art department. They do an amazing job of making the sites and smells that make up the feel of each unique season are woven into the fabric of life in the American Northeast. Unfortunately, this isn’t always a good thing. “For us,” recalls Winter, “the biggest challenge during season one was that it was supposed to be summer on the show, but we were shooting in the middle of March and all of our actors were freezing… And by the time we got to the summer, we were shooting the winter scenes and they had wear fur coats in the warm weather. And I made a mental note that by season two, whatever season they were dressing for opposite weather.”

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Though Boardwalk Empire has drawn to a close, Winter is still shooting in his hometown, having recently wrapped an as-yet-unnamed pilot set in New York in 1973 — a year caught in the crosscurrents of disco, glam, jam bands, FM-driven rock, and the first stirrings of punk and hip-hop. With Mick Jagger executive producing, Martin Scorsese directing and powerhouse performer Bobby Cannavale starring, this series promises to bring an inside look at rock and roll to our home box offices. “Cross fingers that we get picked up to series,” he laughs.

“It’s interesting,” he goes on, “the joke about the challenges of shooting in New York. New York in the ’70s was a vastly different place than it is today. Now, the challenge for us is to find locations that look dilapidated. Everything in Manhattan has been gentrified. The entire East Village, basically… we used to have abandoned buildings! And the Upper West Side had a very high crime rate. Now it’s such a very different place, and the challenge is going to be to ugly it up a little bit. Usually you try to beautify something. We actually will probably have to use visual effects to make the city look dirtier and grungier, but I’m looking forward to the challenge. I work with incredibly talented people and I know we can pull it off.” And if Boardwalk Empire is any indication of Winter’s ability to paint a period picture in New York, this project will elegantly capture the feel of the year that gave us New York films like Mean Streets and Serpico.

Shooting in New York has its challenges, but that’s true of any production, not to mention life itself. But the city is one of the best collaborators at a producer’s disposal, breathing life into the scenes and making them buzz with the thrill of the unpredictable. Even in a period piece like Boardwalk Empire, the future seems uncertain. With an historic city and a first-rate art department, Winter has invented a time machine. Buckle up.

Winter (left) on Boardwalk Empire’s massive exterior set, with (from left) executive producer Tim Van Patten and cast member Steve Buscemi. (Photo: Abbot Genser/HBO)

Winter (center) on the set of The Sopranos in New Jersey, with executive producer Tim Van Patten (left) and cast member Edie Falco (right). (Photo: Barry Wetcher/HBO)
More spacious suites. More breathtaking views. More than you could have imagined.
Right now, season 45 of *Sesame Street* is on the air. Think about that. For 45 years, Big Bird and Oscar, Bert & Ernie, Cookie Monster, Grover, the Count, Elmo and all of their friends have been helping kids get ready for school through stories, songs, parodies and fun. And of course, for 45 years, a dedicated team has been producing the show that has gone on to be the longest-running kids show, the most Emmy-awarded show ever, and the ubiquitous part of being a kid in America we all know and love. And think about this: Right now this team is working on season 46. And 47.

So what’s it like?

It’s demanding, it’s endless, it’s constantly evolving, and it’s like no other show in the world.

The core production team is six-strong with PGA members. Executive producer Carol-Lynn Parente has held the reins for nine years. Coordinating producer April Coleman oversees budgets and operations while supervising producer Nadine Zylstra oversees all of the creative. Other members include senior producer Ben Lehmann, overseeing post and film and animation commissions, Mindy Fila, producer in charge of schedules and line producer Stephanie Longardo.

*Sesame Street* is a research-based show, and from the beginning it was well understood that if kids watch the show with a grownup, they will get more out of it. As a result, the series has always been produced and written on two levels, pitched to appeal to both audiences, often through great parody segments like "Monsterpiece
The documentary-style camera

ALEXA image quality up to 200 fps

Single-user ergonomics perfect shoulder balance

Cost-efficient in-camera grading

Safe, future-proof Investment

Theatres," "Homelamb" and "Preschool Musical." If the show doesn't appeal to adults, there's no way they'll come into the room and watch the show with kids.

This dual audience has created new possibilities in today's world of media. Ben Lehmann observes that now, "we have multiple audiences. We have the core kid audience, of course. They come first — that's who we're really producing this stuff for. But more and more with our parodies, we know we're reaching a grown-up audience through YouTube and other outlets. They loved Sesame as kids, and now they get the adult humor. It's important to feed that audience too!"

Sesame doesn't utilize the showrunner model with a single writer-producer holding final say on every aspect of production. Instead, head writer Joey Mazzarino has final say on every script, and Carol-Lynn Parente has the call on other creative matters like music, sets, costumes and celebrity guest casting. On top of that, there's another layer: Research. The education and research department vets all scripts and has a staff member sitting in the control room and the edit suite so they can flag anything that comes up in the moment.

I asked Lehmann if this could be an occasionally frustrating way to create content. "At times, we do get a little frustrated with each other," he laughs, "because a writer might be fighting for the comedy while the person from research wants to cut that same moment in the script because it distracts from the educational message, while the producer needs to stay on time, get everything shot and make sure there is enough to edit together in post. But at the same time, because we are trying to make the best content we can for kids to help them get ready for school, it's important that it be vetted, accurate and meaningful. It's unique to this place. The tension between writers, producers and research makes you smarter as a creator. Because the constraints aren't random; they are there for a reason. So if research is telling you not to do something, because it's not educationally acceptable, sometimes that gives you the freedom to be even more creative."

"For instance," he continues, "during the writing of "Jurassic Cookie" (part of our series "Crumby Pictures" where Cookie Monster parodies famous movie trailers), there was a scene that featured a mix of Muppet dinosaurs and a giant cookie chasing our heroes. That raised some concern from research that the script was too scary for our audience. Responding to that concern, we hit on the idea of making the giant cookie and dinosaurs into one creature, and came up with a huge gingerbread dinosaur with a friendly smile... still definitely giant and prehistoric, but friendly and not terrifying."

Production for the show is a year-round business. The 12-month cycle begins in January with the Curriculum Seminar to which representatives from the whole company are invited, along with all of the show writers and producers. Advisors come and share their expertise, and content guidelines are set for the season. The writers' meetings begin soon after, following which the writers go off and write. While all of that is happening, the team is still working on the previous season in post and is commissioning animation and films to round out the shows.

The themes raised in the Curriculum Meeting undergird the team's work for the season. "Each year," Lehmann elaborates, "the focus is set based on the needs of kids now. While we have a "whole child" curriculum — dealing with social/emotional as well as cognitive development — they always stress one area of particular importance. A few years ago, when concern with obesity was first being voiced, we did healthy habits. Then when research revealed the "word gap" and how kids who don't know a certain number of words by x age are at a great disadvantage, we focused on vocabulary. Right now we are emphasizing executive functioning and school readiness."
In the spring, there’s a week of shooting celebrity vocabulary segments in Los Angeles, and a few weeks of recurring formats like “Elmo the Musical,” “Super Grover 2.0” or “Crumby Pictures” in New York. In May, there are two weeks of location shooting in New York City with Murray and Ovejita for the “Word on the Street.”

Over the summer, shows start shipping out to PBS in advance of the September premiere, and pre-production begins for the start of the main shooting season, which runs for three months in the fall at Kaufman Astoria studios in Queens. That’s when the Street stories, Muppet inserts, songs, music videos and celebrity segments get shot for the 26 episodes of each season. Most of the time, the producers are working on two seasons at once.

Always innovating, this year, Sesame Street took the radical step of creating a 30-minute version of the traditionally one-hour morning show for a coveted afternoon slot on PBS. Work started in the winter after shooting wrapped. Lehmann and Nadine Zylstra felt like they had four strong ideas, they presented them to Parente. While they were in Oscar’s can!

**APRIL COLEMAN**

No matter who it is that comes onto the set — whether it’s the First Lady or a kid from Make-a-Wish or a 25-year-old hip-hop artist — everyone is always delighted and happy to be there. No one is ever less than thrilled, and everyone wants their picture taken while they are in Oscar’s can!

**STEPHANIE LONGARDO**

How people react when I tell them I work for Sesame Street. They always say, “Oh, that’s so great! I love Sesame Street!” Some people who were born in a different country have even told me that when they came to the USA, Sesame Street helped them learn English. The reach of this show is deeper and bigger than anyone can imagine!

**MINDY FILA**

I’m always surprised how long a puppeteer can hold up their arm to perform the puppet! But we’re a family here. I’ve met some amazing friends working on Sesame Street.

**NADINE ZYLSTRA**

When I started working as a producer on Sesame Street, I was immediately struck by the efficiency of the team. I guess that’s what comes from working together for so long, but this team is incredibly efficient and can work through an enormous volume of content in a day. I was equally struck by the absolute conviction of everyone who works on the team. At every point in the decision making chain everyone on the team is asking, “What can I do to make this bit better? How can I make sure kids learn the most from this piece of content?”

“Some days,” says Lehmann, “you feel like ‘Oh my God! It’s a tremendous responsibility! I’m following the work of Joan Ganz Cooney and Jim Henson!’ And we’re very protective of our brand. We’re a mission-driven company. That sets us apart from a lot of media companies. We’re trying to make content that’s valuable to kids, and to give them a leg up before they go to school. One of my favorite — and, sometimes in the moment, least favorite — things here is how we get in these deep internal conversations or disputes about how ‘Cookie Monster would never do that!’ And then there’s actually 45 years of history to back the person who said that! So that part of it can feel like a weight or responsibility. But at the same time, you know that if you don’t love it, kids won’t love it. You have to keep that in mind at all times. It’s true of producing anywhere. If you don’t love the stuff you’re making, no one else will either. You have to love the stuff you’re putting out there for your audience to really embrace it.”

**WHAT’S AN ASPECT OF WORKING AT SESAME STREET THAT SURPRISED (OR CONTINUES TO SURPRISE) YOU?**

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Subscribe Now
They say there are a million stories in the Naked City... most of them about the challenges of getting a new project off the ground. But there are some things you can only learn from your fellow producers...

Rats on NYC streets walking away with camera batteries are probably just a rumor.

Keep that budget line that says ‘parking,’ because you always need a slush fund. (The subway is only $2.50 and walking is free.)

The Word on the Street

If you’re shooting in any kind of building in NYC, you need to find out exactly where the freight elevator is before you unload all of your gear. If you dump your van full of equipment on Ninth Avenue, and the freight is on 45th Street, your crew is not going to be happy schlepping it around the corner.

Michael Bridenstine
Producer/Director/Writer, Towhead Productions

Hot dog vendors cut great deals for using them in shots. Far cheaper than renting a cart for $2,000 a day.

James Percelay
Co-Founder, Thinkmodo

Before catapulting pumpkins westward toward 8th Avenue, invest in a large net.

Kathy Mavrikakis
Supervising Producer, Late Show with David Letterman

It’s easier getting a table at Le Bernardin than getting permission to shoot on a subway.

M. Blair Breard
Executive Producer, Louie

The best deal in NYC is the $300 film permit. You get free “movie” cops and free parking spots. There are many free city-owned locations — there may be some labor charges, but it’s usually very affordable in such an expensive city. The Mayor’s Office of Film, Theatre and Broadcasting really makes it easy and supports our film industry.

Maureen Ryan
Co-Producer, Man on Wire, Project Nim

Unless you’re banging the city’s film commissioner, you ain’t gonna be allowed to shoot on the subway. Not happening.

Irene Burns
Producer, Gracepoint, 30 Rock, Oz

If you have to shoot on the subway — go small, go guerrilla and keep your mouth shut!

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Better to say you're *filming* on Times Square, than *shooting* on Times Square. Just sayin'.

It's very busy. Make sure you secure stage space immediately upon getting a green light.

Don't be intimidated. Embrace what the city has to offer in its production resources and local crew. The Mayor's office, the Governor's office and local production staffers are here to help you realize that ANYTHING you need on screen can be accomplished.

Keep your sense of humor. Even the bad days can be good days.

If information is power, the Doorman is King. Treat him with respect, and recognize that he's the key to all the info you don't have that you will inevitably need when you shoot in the building.

If you want to stage a Paul McCartney concert over Broadway, don't forget the NYPD, DOT, FDNY and MOFTB are your BFFs.

The cleanest, easiest, least complicated type of entity to use as your ProdCo, in order to ensure a NY tax credit that is free from any encumbrances (or traps) is a C Corp.

John Hadity
Executive Vice President
EP Financial Solutions

The Brooklyn Navy Yard houses a slew of great fabricators who can build just about anything for film and TV, including companies like Clockwork Apple, Ferra Designs and Situ Fabrication.

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Whereas Californians are thought to be 'laid back,' we New Yorkers are 'laid forward.' We think being direct is efficient. Notice the tone of voice as much as the words if you want to understand intent.

When staging a civil war reenactment in midtown Manhattan, remember even muskets shooting blanks will scare some tourists. New Yorkers will keep walking.

When working in Grumman Studios in Bethpage, Long Island, beware of the sound-stage's resident bat. During a final rehearsal for *The Sound of Music Live*, the bat swooped down onto set and barely missed Carrie Underwood's head. Not reassuring for the following night's three-hour live TV broadcast. It took a day of pest control efforts to get the bat out of the facility, only to have it return after us TV folk packed up and left town.

Robin Kramer
Production Manager, NBC’s *The Sound of Music Live!*

Scott Franklin
Producer, *Noah, Black Swan, The Wrestler*

Always seek certainty in how long the entire tax credit process takes.

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Mari Jo Winkler
Executive Producer,
*The Dictator, Premium Rush, Pain Game*

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Whereas Californians are thought to be 'laid back,' we New Yorkers are 'laid forward.' We think being direct is efficient. Notice the tone of voice as much as the words if you want to understand intent.

When staging a civil war reenactment in midtown Manhattan, remember even muskets shooting blanks will scare some tourists. New Yorkers will keep walking.

When working in Grumman Studios in Bethpage, Long Island, beware of the sound-stage’s resident bat. During a final rehearsal for *The Sound of Music Live*, the bat swooped down onto set and barely missed Carrie Underwood’s head. Not reassuring for the following night’s three-hour live TV broadcast. It took a day of pest control efforts to get the bat out of the facility, only to have it return after us TV folk packed up and left town.

Robin Kramer
Production Manager, NBC’s *The Sound of Music Live!*
In an industry now in flux, being at the vanguard can prove to be as chaotic as it is exciting. Enter the game-changing New York indie distributors. For Tom Quinn of Radius-TWC, Jonathan Sehring of IFC Films, and David Fenkel and Heath Shapiro of A24, working in the New York indie film scene presents its own set of opportunities and challenges. But ultimately, what makes it unique is its unifying factor: the decision to work here in the first place. “The people who decided to be in the New York film industry love New York,” Shapiro says. “That decision is informed by the energy and creativity of New York. [These people] love film. New York and film have a certain type of alchemy in creative output.”

As opposed to Los Angeles, Quinn offers: “We’re not a company town. There’s such a great tradition here of distributor-based, programmer-based, critic-based and filmmaker-based culture. I think it represents the highest form of film. Because it’s always in service of filmmakers, it’s a far more collegiate environment, and a supportive one.” Quinn adds that it’s not uncommon for competitors to attend one another’s premieres — even if one party lost out to the other party’s distribution deal. This kind of collaborative environment has turned New York into an incubation tank for the film industry, facilitating some of the most cutting-edge experiments in distribution, producing and filmmaking at large.

Doing It from Scratch, Every Time Out

On the Front Lines of New York’s Indie Distribution Scene

by Emily Buder

This year in particular, the experiments are paying off. Radius’s groundbreaking release strategy for Snowpiercer saw the film gross $175,000 on eight opening-weekend screens; three weeks later, instead of merely expanding to smaller theaters nationwide, Radius also released the film on VOD. It was the widest simultaneous theatrical-VOD release to date, and after bringing in over $5 million, the industry has begun to soften to the idea of multi-platform releases. “It’s the release strategy of the future for larger, review-driven indie movies,” says Quinn. Just a month ago, IFC, which effectively pioneered the day-and-date release strategy, saw major success with The Trip to Italy. Though it opened theatrically in August — a month notorious for low box-office census — IFC simultaneously released the film on VOD, giving The Trip to Italy the exposure it needed to become their most successful day-and-date release ever.

Things are changing quickly. As little as five years ago, being denied a wide theatrical release was the kiss of death for an indie film. Now, the industry mindset is struggling to keep up with rapidly-changing economic models that aren’t predicated on box-office revenue. “The one thing that I wish could change would be having the industry reset their obsession with theatrical box office and taking a look at the entire pie,” says Sehring. And box office is a shrinking piece of that pie. “The box office, in this day and age, can represent as little as 10 percent of the revenue for a movie,” he added. Recalibration is a natural byproduct of a changing business model, but asking the film industry to part with its preoccupation with box-office figures is a lot like asking parents to no longer consider letter grades an accurate measurement of their child’s success. “We talk a lot to our filmmakers about how you define success,” Fenkel tells me. “Right now and forever, it’s been box-office numbers. But because of collapsing windows and the strength of digital platforms and ancillaries, people are taking a fresh look at what success means.” If box-office figures are no longer the sole barometer, what is? According to Sehring, “what determines success is what a film costs to make, what it costs to release, and how much money goes back to the filmmakers to cover the production and distribution costs.” More than ever before, producers must keep their budgets as low as possible. “The more money spent, the longer time — if ever — until you’re going to see

“ It can be a leap of faith, but we pride ourselves on taking movies that seemingly ‘can’t work.’”

Produced by
We talk a lot to our filmmakers about how you define success... because of collapsing windows and the strength of digital platforms and ancillaries, people are taking a fresh look at what success means.

money back,” Sehring says. Even smaller productions with a big-name cast opt to keep production costs minimal. “Obvious Child was made for $500,000 partially from Kickstarter, and made $3 million in box office. It’s all relative,” says Shapiro. Success can also mean overcompensating for lost box-office revenue across VOD platforms. When Radius initially released The One I Love, a dearth in ticket sales — $50,000, as opposed to the projected $1 million — led to a significant VOD push. And it was on VOD that the film thrived. “The One I Love” is traditionally a million-dollar grossing film theatrically,” Quinn explains. “That would be the success story. If you nail the focus and deliver it, you can dynamically grow.” Quinn agrees: “Know what we do. Know what we’re interested in.”

Since we’re releasing it this way.” It was also a great opportunity for us to find an audience for it. Of course, it’s not a VOD-only phenomenon, but it changes the economics. I think we’ve enhanced the overall value of the film by virtue of releasing it this way.” It was also a great opportunity for what that theatrical dollar is — changes the economics. I think we’ve enhanced the overall value of the film by virtue of releasing it this way.” It was also a great opportunity for

For Fenkel, success for an indie film can even involve the elimination of box office entirely. “A very new example of success might be a movie that does a one-night-only theatrical event and goes to iTunes a week later [and does well],” he offers. Now that theatrical can occupy such a small portion of a film’s revenue, it’s beneficial to consider bypassing it in favor of a VOD model that may be more conducive to the film’s financial success. This would funnel more money into innovative marketing opportunities and a wider platform release, giving the film a chance to reach a larger audience.

Though impressive success stories like Snowpiercer, The One I Love and The Trip to Italy showcase the adaptability of the New York distribution world, a producer’s job is to maintain realistic expectations. Most indie films aren’t Snowpiercer or even Obvious Child; they’re smaller films with more modest budgets, often without Tilda Swinton or Elisabeth Moss or Steve Coogan to get audiences and distributors excited. A drawback of New York’s collegiate film community is that it can feel like a closed circle, and asking an indie producer with breaking through what’s already an oversaturated market seems daunting.

“Every time we do a movie, it’s a marriage,” Quinn explains. “That marriage takes a long time to develop and it’s a lot of work doing it from scratch every time out. When you find people that you love working with, you want to keep those people as close as possible.” Fenkel is more direct: “We like to do business with filmmakers and producers who we have relationships with, who know our taste and know how we distribute movies.”

It is possible, though, to get a distributor’s attention. All the companies agree on the one barrier to entry: “Submit to film festivals. Get on our radar,” Sehring advises. Quinn agrees: “The festival-premiere-launch pattern is actually a great funnel. We adequately cover every single festival and then some.” Each distributor emphasizes that a distinctive vision or voice is the hallmark of a film that could rise above the noise of the festival circuit. “[We’ll acquire the movie] if we think it’s something so unique and so different,” Sehring says. “And if it’s something that will capture the hearts and souls of an audience. It can be a leap of faith, but we pride ourselves on taking movies that seemingly ‘can’t work.’”

When it’s time to take a meeting with a distributor, producers must be armed with ample research. “I’m always impressed when a producer has done their homework, knows the type of movies that we distribute. We release every movie differently. I appreciate when a filmmaker will talk to us about what model they think is the best for their specific film, and if they can draw comparisons from types of movies we’ve done,” Sehring reveals.

Quinn agrees: “Know what we do. Know what we’re looking for. Have something interesting to say, whether it’s marketability or something new to add to the genre or an
your movie's audience is an invaluable component of a relationship with a distributor. But before you can know your audience, it’s crucial to develop a solid sense of your film’s identity. “Audiences want to know what the film sees itself as. Films that don’t know what they want to be confuse the majority of audiences. Especially on a VOD platform, they’re ignored,” cautions Quinn. Distributors also expect producers to be intimately familiar with their audience’s behavior patterns. “My job is to connect the filmmakers with their audience,” says Sehring. “In my mind, it’s as incumbent upon a producer and a filmmaker to know who their audience is, how big it is, and what the best way to reach them is.” It doesn’t hurt to start building an audience before meeting with a distributor, either: “There’s no distributor that’s going to say, ‘No, I wish you hadn’t built this audience of 50,000 people following you on Facebook now,’” Quinn deadpans.

From the vantage point of the New York indie distribution scene, the future is nigh. The consensus among the executives seems to be a shift toward creative empowerment, resulting in a surplus of content and further complicated revenue streams. “There’s going to be more content and more ways to have access to that content,” says Shapiro. “The higher quality and more distinctive material you have, the better chance your voice will be heard.” According to Sehring, mobility will play a larger role in our viewing experience as audiences continue to place value on accessibility of content. And distributors will continue to adapt. “We do continue to reinvent the wheel,” Sehring admits. “Before IFC’s day-and-date model, I was sort of at a loss.”

As the role of the distributor changes, we can expect a lot of blurred lines and increased self-sufficiency on the filmmaker side. “The more ownership talent can take for distributing their movie without a lot of investment and/or apparatus behind them, the better,” Quinn advises. “If you had a choice to buy your movie from a filmmaker’s Twitter handle or from [a distributor], which would you choose? You’d choose the creator, the thing that has the brand value. As soon as that happens — where

we’re literally consuming directly from the creator — that changes the paradigm again.”

But producers won’t be given carte blanche just yet. Quinn: “I think we’re in a transition period where there’s a lot of DIY opportunities on the distribution side, but I don’t think that we’re there yet in a way where a filmmaker or producer can take advantage of those revenue streams and be truly successful.” Even if filmmakers currently have access to the same digital platforms as distribution companies, the fact that the direct-to-consumer shift has not yet taken hold means that a film will likely be ignored without proper distribution. “But that’s the future. I see it coming,” Quinn forecasts. “But I don’t know what role I personally will have in it.”

As new technologies in the photographic world emerge on what seems like a daily basis, one has to be open to embracing what they may have to offer. Often times the performance does not match the hype and that can be frustrating. I have no interest in being simply the first to use some new technology. However, I am interested in being one of the first embracers of new technology that actually delivers the high expectations. It has been clear to me for years that Clairmont Camera has been doing just that.”

Jim Michaels, PGA, DGA

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A good producer adjusts to shifting circumstances, which in this case means chucking three pages of heavily researched questions and diving in with the less eloquent one that’s at the forefront of my mind at the moment: “How is it that you’re always working?” And don’t you know it? He starts in right away with an answer. And it’s great.

“I don’t let myself get in a position where I don’t have a job,” he laughs. “When you’re working on a project, you should already be thinking about what the next link in the chain is. And that’s the best way to look at what your career is. Your career is basically a long chain, a project linked to a project linked to a project. And there are projects that you can do off of the current link of the chain that you’re working on that make sense. It’s a natural transition.

“For my very first Web series, the show called I Bet You Will, back in 2000, we would bet people to do silly things. When that show got canceled off of MTV, then the next thing we made was Super Size Me. And when you watch these two shows back to back, they make sense. We were doing a half-hour TV series for $50,000, and we ended up producing Super Size Me for 65 grand. You start to see the same economics at play in the fact that we owned all the equipment, and we had all the people already there; it made sense. And on the heels of that, we went right into 30 Days, our show at FX, which was kind of a spinoff of Super Size Me. And we sold that before Super Size Me was ever in movie theaters. When you’re a filmmaker, especially if you’re working in non-fiction, there’s actually a part of you that’s like Bobby Fischer. You’re not just looking one move ahead, you’re looking 16 moves ahead... As we’ve grown and as things change, we branched off and did things that were maybe a bit out of the norm, something like One Direction: This Is Us or 7 Deadly Sins. But you have to get to a point of having trust within the industry to do that.”
Makes total sense. Though with the explosion of tools and technologies to capture and share content, how does he plan out how and where his stories are told? After all, he’s a producer whose work has spanned TV, theatrical and digital media.

“As viewing habits and audiences change,” he proposes, “I think that you have to become platform-agnostic. If you want to build a career, you need to be working in multiple facets of the business and you need to be able to create content across the board. There are stories that are meant to be told in 90 minutes. There are stories that are much better suited to being short, that are perfect as five-to-ten-minute, little snackable bites of content. You need to identify the best place for whatever story you’re telling, and be able to adapt accordingly.”

Sure. It sounds pretty simple and doable when he says it. Maybe it’s all the multiple roles he plays — behind and in front of the camera. There’s a benefit to controlling all those functions because there’s a singular vision. But doesn’t that also lead to some fairly heated arguments with himself as director, producer, writer, actor?

“You kinda wear different hats in this business,” he explains. “And especially if you’re a documentary filmmaker, you have to be able to change those hats. You have to be able to put on your TV hat. You have to be able to put on your director hat. You have to be able to put on your producer hat. You have to be able to put on your digital hat. You have to be able to put on your PR/marketing guru hat,” he laughs, possibly at the prospect of what such headgear would look like.

Spurlock definitely embraces multiple responsibilities with one of his latest projects, *We the Economy: 20 Short Films You Can’t Afford to Miss*. Just as the title recommends, you really ought not to miss this one. It’s a free series that launches on October 21 on (what else?) multiple platforms, including online, VOD, traditional TV broadcast, mobile and theatrical. More than 80 actors, filmmakers, economics experts and civic leaders collaborated on this digital series, a co-production of Spurlock’s Cinelan and Paul Allen’s Vulcan Productions.

Now, I’m not someone who generally gets excited by a lengthy dinner discussion over whether or not the Fed will lower the prime rate, but I have to admit it, this series is really engaging. How did Spurlock envision tackling this subject, and as or more impressively, how on earth did he get so many talented people to participate?

“I sat down with Vulcan and we cooked up the idea for the project,” he recalls. “We knew we wanted to be able to have diversity. We wanted to be able to have a lot of different voices, bring a lot of different creative talent. And by having that many different directors, there’s a little something for everyone. Somebody who may not be a big fan of straight docs is gonna love to see a movie directed by Mary Harron, or John Chu, or Adam McKay or Chris Henchy. Somebody who is a super doc freak is gonna love seeing the films by Jessica Yu or Joe Berlinger or Barbara Kopple. All the films are three to eight minutes long, so you have the ability to lure people in on a much easier basis. Getting somebody to sit down to watch something for 90 minutes requires an investment. You really have to care about that topic to want to watch it for 90 minutes. But a film by Adam McKay about the economy that’s three minutes long? ‘Shoot, I’ll watch that.’ And then,

Judah Friedlander (center) and cast of Spurlock’s *We the Economy* short film, Caveonomics.
after you watch that, you're like, 'Well, man. That was really good. That was so funny. I'll watch another one, and another one.' The next thing you know, you've watched 10 films about the economy and you might have actually learned something.

There are so many different kinds of stories Spurlock tells in this series, in so many different ways, and to so many different audiences. So what were his criteria for a good story for this project?

“One that the viewer doesn’t turn off” he laughs again. “That’s a great story! Whatever is gonna be the thing that actually gets an audience engaged, and keeps an audience engaged, and makes them want more, want to see more, read more, learn more. That’s the ultimate goal. I think with We the Economy we’ve been able to accomplish that. When you watch some of these movies, some of them are almost poetic. They’re so beautiful… there’s a pair of words you don’t usually associate with the economy. But these films are stellar, and I’m so proud of the work that’s been done. I think people are gonna really be enamored with them.

Speaking of finding great stories in rarely explored territory, Spurlock has just teamed up with the AP for access to their vast library of broadcast, digital and mobile content. Talk about an overwhelming amount of source material! I asked Spurlock about how he was getting a handle on such a massive trove of primary sources.

“The possibilities are just so immense,” he marvels. “It’s a very big process. But I think we’re gonna get some amazing things out of it. Yeah. Truth is stranger than fiction. You’ll think, ‘Oh, my God. That’s a crazy story. That sounds like a movie.’ That’s the first thing you say when you hear a crazy story. I think doing non-fiction is just as hard as doing fiction. I think that they’re both difficult.

“But what’s happened is we’ve kind of let this idea of reality television suck down powerful non-fiction storytell- ing. The beauty is that in the last year, two years, three years, the bar continuing to rise in the way that it has on scripted television. The audience, I think, will finally get the non-fiction programming they deserve.”

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Remember, we’ve got 15 minutes tops with Morgan. It turns out to be about 12 minutes, broken into two chunks of three minutes and nine minutes, because, of course, he’s on the move and his cell loses the signal and we have to dial back in with an efficient 23-step conference call process that devours three of my precious minutes.

But you know, I’m still feeling lucky to have even this time with him. Really. Because here’s the takeaway. He’s ter- rific. Succinct. Insightful. Focused. Energized. Generous with his stories and his experiences. And really helpful, actually. How does he do that?

He’s used to thinking on his feet. He’s used to fram- ing complex issues in ways that are accessible and action- able. And maybe, just maybe, he also is carrying his fourth REALLY good cup of coffee of the day with him as he races down the street. I don’t know. I don’t have a chance to ask him before we sign off and he heads into his next break down-down-the-wall, jump-out-of-your-chair, smart, funny, surprising, collaborative thing. I couldn’t tell you what that’s going to be, but don’t worry, any minute now, someone will probably be texting you, “Dude, you gotta see this!” and sending you the link.

For out of anything we make, whether it’s a movie or it’s a TV show, or something on an iPhone, is that the minute someone watches it, they say to their friend, ‘Dude, you gotta see this.’

“That’s what you want. You want to create something that people talk about and want to share. That viewing expe- rience that you have in a movie theater, or even watch[ing] something on television, is being translated in a different way for the younger audience, where sharing it and getting it to your friends is even quicker. You’re not waiting to go to work at the watercooler the next day. You’re tweeting it out or emailing it or sharing it with them the minute you see something you like. That type of instant reaction, that instant ability to share this emotional moment that you’re having because of a TV show or a movie, is magical… We’re so lucky to get to do what we do. Every day I feel so lucky to get out of bed and to get to tell stories.”

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The Guiding Principals

(East Coast Edition!)

For our Produced By Conference on the Warner Bros. lot this summer, we had the chance to introduce you to the talented and dedicated Chairs of the event. Now, we’re happy to do the same for the dynamic group that made Produced By: New York a reality.

DANA KUZNETZKOFF
PGA East Executive Committee (Member-at-large); Chair, Produced By: New York
Producer, Fourth Agreement, Inc.
PBA MEMBER SINCE: 2008

What made you want to get involved with Produced By: New York?
It is a thrill and an honor to be a part of a conference that is all about continuing education for producers. “For producers, by producers,” was the message when the conference was first created years ago and the Guild has never lost sight of that. With PBNY, our goal is that we shine a bright light on the creative community in New York and on the East and keep it shining for many years.

How can we expect this conference to differ from the Los Angeles events?
The beautiful Time Warner Conference Center is a much more intimate environment. Attendees will have the opportunity to relax and mingle in the comfortable lounges while being inspired by the extraordinary guests and spectacular views of Manhattan.

What has been the biggest challenge in putting together this conference?
The realization that people truly do not use phones anymore! Keeping up with emails when a simple phone call would have sufficed was maddening!

If you had unlimited budget and unlimited time, what “wish list” item would you want to include as a part of Produced By: New York?
I dream of one of those double-decker tourist buses visiting every one of New York’s studios, and some of our great iconic locations — maybe culminating in a producer rumble under the Brooklyn Bridge and then dinner at Peter Luger’s. Or a compilation of great subway scenes on film followed by a tour of the New York subway.

BLAINE GRABOYES
PGA East Executive Committee (Member-at-large); Delegate, PGA New Media Council; Chair, Produced By: New York
Executive Producer and Game Designer, Mash3, Inc.
PBA MEMBER SINCE: 2004

What made you want to get involved with Produced By: New York?
About five years ago, I realized that without volunteering, I was not fully taking part in the Guild. This inspired me to serve on the PGA’s committees and boards. When I heard we were bringing Produced By to New York, I knew I wanted to contribute and was thankful that Dana and Ben welcomed me as a co-chair.

How can we expect this conference to differ from the Los Angeles events?
We’re in a conference center as opposed to a studio lot. I’m so proud to join the producing community here that I was absolutely determined to be a part of the first-ever Produced By: New York.

What has been the biggest challenge in putting together this conference?
Creating any type of live event for the first time is always incredibly challenging, but Dana, Ben and Blaine have done an amazing job meeting every challenge.

Benjamin Lehmann
PGA East Executive Committee (Member-at-large); Chair, Produced By: New York
Senior Producer, Sesame Street
PBA MEMBER SINCE: 2007

What made you want to get involved with Produced By: New York?
I attended the first Produced By Conference in Los Angeles and found it to be an invaluable and unique event, the only event where they get you, and you can understand the work you do as a producer. So when conversations started about having a New York version of Produced By, I was very enthused. Looking at the opportunity, I jumped at the opportunity.

How can we expect this conference to differ from the Los Angeles events?
Loads of New York attitude! From a physical standpoint, we’re in a conference center as opposed to a studio lot. I’m still talking about the great networking and socializing opportunities for everyone. And there’s the killer view of Central Park from the Park Cafe.

What has been the biggest challenge in putting together this conference?
We’re a start-up, so everything was new. That was scary. But luckily we had the experience of LA to lean on. It’s been a great national effort to organize. Ultimately, the biggest challenge was having to eliminate great panel ideas due to the fact we’re a one-day event. It was heartbreaking. But it’s been 50 pages too long.

Which PBNY session are you most looking forward to seeing?
Tech & Storytelling in Kids Media is the closest to my heart. Tech is a hot topic right now. I hope our attendees leave with fresh ideas and a lot of excitement from this session.

Bruce Cohen
National Board Member, PGA; Chair, Produced By: New York
Executive Producer, Sesame Street
PBA MEMBER SINCE: 2000

What made you want to get involved with Produced By: New York?
I am so excited to be a newly-transported New Yorker and so proud to join the producing community here that I was absolutely determined to be a part of the first-ever Produced By: New York.

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Which PBNY session are you most looking forward to seeing?
Tech & Storytelling in Kids Media is the closest to my heart. But also the showrunners panel and the video game panel. That’s another great thing about Produced By, it’s your opportunity to gain insights into areas that directly impact your career, but might not be exactly what you do today.

If you had unlimited budget and unlimited time, what “wish list” item would you want to include as a part of Produced By: New York?
Creating any type of live event for the first time is always incredibly challenging, but Dana, Ben and Blaine have done an amazing job meeting every challenge.

Which PBNY session are you most looking forward to seeing?
DAVID PICKER  
PGA East Executive Committee (Member-at-large)  
Author, Musts, Maybes, and Nevers: A Book About the Movies  
PGA MEMBER SINCE: One Million B.C.

Since you joined the Guild, what’s the biggest change you’ve seen in the PGA East?  
As a senior member of the Guild, I have gotten great pleasure from meeting producers working in every aspect of the profession, as well as establishing friendships that have lead to a truly broad understanding of what it takes to “produce” – not just in my familiar world of feature films, but also television, documentaries and online content. There is simply no better way to expand your knowledge of the many outlets in our business than to learn firsthand from the extraordinary and diversified accomplishments of our members.

How do you expect PBNY will differ from its counterpart events in Los Angeles?  
I won’t have to drive anywhere.

How can the PGA East better serve its members?  
By making sure that we communicate as much information as possible about all, and I mean all, the projects that our members are working on. You never know when one idea can lead to another, and to another, and another. We need to be aware of, and talk about, the diverse worlds in which so many of our members participate.

What’s a “New York producing moment” you’ll never forget?  
It’s 3 a.m. on a New York City street and I’m producing a project for HBO. It’s the last shot, it’s dark, and we only have small lights. We hadn’t planned a big wide shot on the dark streets. We simply can’t light it. We’re f---ed. A Teamster whispers in my ear, “David, what do you need?” I tell him, “A very big light — maybe a 20K.” He says, “I’ll be back in 20 minutes.” Twenty minutes later, my Teamster arrives with a 20K on a truck. I don’t know how or where he got it, but my Teamster friend got it! And we got our shot.

DONNA GIGLIOITTI  
Programming Advisor, Produced By: New York  
President, Levantine Films  
PGA MEMBER SINCE: 2006

Since you joined the Guild, what’s the biggest change you’ve seen in the PGA East?  
Those of us who produce films and live in New York sometimes feel like the ugly stepchild to our more glamorous west coast counterparts. People are always amazed to hear that I am a film producer who lives in New York. Over the last few years, the PGA East has worked very hard to make New York producers feel part of the larger film and television community.

Who are you most excited to see or hear at Produced By: New York?  
I’m speaking on a panel that will explore alternative distribution platforms and I’m eager to participate in that conversation with fellow panelists Tom Quinn, John Sloss and Peter Saraf. Theatrical distribution isn’t going anywhere, but there are many different distribution options that are becoming available. To me, that’s exciting. It’s the wave of the future.
Since you joined the Guild, what’s the biggest change you’ve seen in the PGA East?
I’ve been a member since 2001 and in that time I have enthusiastically watched the expanding influence of the PGA on the east coast. For me, the New York City film community is the most energetic and dynamic place to live and work. It’s vast, vital and intimate at the same time. I value being a part of the leadership of a Guild that steps up to set agendas for change in our industry, whether we’re promoting diversity, sustainability, or most recently, our initiatives to support female-driven content. Incorporating social responsibility into our work is an ethical part of our role as creators of content.

How do you expect PBNY will differ from its counterpart event in Los Angeles?
As this is the first time we’ve convened a Produced By in New York — it will be interesting to see how the identity of the east coast is translated into the experience. The best part of being a PGA member in New York is the community spirit of joining forces with other producers who are led by a sense of purpose and vision. Produced By is a unique opportunity for producers to network and focus on career development and education by sharing current information and learning from the experts and from each other.

Which PBNY session are you most excited to see?
As a feature film producer, I look to these events to educate myself on those areas of content creation which I’m less immersed in on a daily basis. I’m interested in all of the panels and personally think that the showrunner panel looks awesome in terms getting more insight into a popular realm of our business that is experiencing unprecedented growth.

1. RE•BATE
(re, bāt) noun
San Francisco could rebate up to $600,000 per TV Episode or Feature Film.

VISIT: FilmSF.org or CALL: 415.554.6241
I’ve had a month or so to reflect on the last year. The “Naked: Story to Revenue Using the Direct-to-Consumer Video” journey has been an eye-opening roller coaster.

A year ago, I was motivated by this article series and my desire to move from a focus of entrepreneurial education and support into full engagement in development and production. I dove full-force into digital media. I started with a vision, applied some skills, acquired a talent relationship, focused my time and hardware, and added a little money. While many factors had my plans moving slower than expected, the speed of adoption and acceptance of my approach is now increasing exponentially, and I see my goals taking shape.

So where am I now?

- There’s a library of 30+ hours of “naked kim” HD videos that are being used in the paid-subscription service and can be cut into a reality series;
- The “naked kim” paid-subscription service is relaunching with new sizzle and marketing campaign with a number of educational bonuses to boost sales;
- kimTV has 86 shows to date;
- kimTV viewing demographics are right on target, 35-54;
- kimTV has started to driving “naked kim” paid-subscription sales from YouTube;
- kimTV distribution is expanding off YouTube including full shows on Facebook;
- We have already shot 20+ hours of footage for AgingUngracefully;
- The crowd-building campaign for AgingUngracefully is launching this month;
- I have a few shows with other talent in development;
- Kim has begun taking network talent meetings, and just began a network development deal exploring what could be the next generation of lifestyle programming.

I guess that’s a pretty good year!

It’s been enlightening experiencing digital media grow up from the inside as the predicted shifts materialize. Ad dollars are flying into online video at an unprecedented rate. According to TubeFitter, Omnicom Group, which works with major brands like McDonald’s, Apple, Pepsi and Starbucks, is advising its clients to shift between 10% and 25% of their advertising budgets to online video. They tout online video as a flexible and easily measurable platform, especially when compared to its TV counterpart. This advice comes on the heels of food conglomerate Mondelez’s (aka Kraft Foods) decision to sign a $200M upfront deal with Google.

So what else did this year bring?

- According to statista.com, digital media use of American adults will surpass TV use for the first time this year and I’m not sure they are even tracking app use on smartphone yet. And, only digital media see growth in daily consumption.
- A new report by comScore shows how far along we are in the ongoing shift toward mobile media usage. In many categories, digital content is consumed almost exclusively on mobile devices. statista.com confirms the only viewing growth of media is in mobile.
- eMarketer’s latest media spending forecast says by 2016, there will be more digital ad revenue than TV revenue. The Internet would become the largest single medium in the US advertising world.
- Endemol created Endemio Beyond with $40+ million war chest. DreamWorks bought Awesomeness TV and Big Frame, Disney bought Maker Studios, and Chernin and AT&T bought Fullscreen.
- Discovery, Ron Howard and Brian Grazer created New Form Digital to create a digital film slate.
- Every week there is another multi-million investment into digital media plays.
- Agents and managers have swooped in, and every established agency now has a digital practice.

The behavior continues to shift and the money is on the way!
PRODUCERS ON THE MARCH

An estimated 400,000 people turned out to participate in the People’s Climate March on Sunday, September 21, 2014, in New York City. Among them were numerous film and TV producers, writers, PMs and production staff of all ages from both coasts.

Scheduled to precede the United Nations Climate Summit, the March was created to send world leaders a message more powerful than any TV spot, tweet barrage or email blitz could. It was impossible to ignore what coalesced that morning on Columbus Circle, a spontaneously combusting, intensely vocal, exuberant, emotional raw cry for change. Hundreds of thousands of people gathered along Central Park West, a vivid ocean of painted banners, paper-mâché puppets, origami birds, eight-foot globes, and colorful signs, all calling for immediate global action to combat the perilous impacts of changing climate.

The film and TV production industry was well represented among the marchers — several members of the Producers Guild’s Green Committee marched, along with dozens of other producers. We marched with our environmental groups, our states, our churches, our documentary series production teams, even our dance and theater troupes. Pacific Islanders chanted and church choirs harmonized, babies in strollers cooed and mermaids posed with penguins for selfies. It was powerful, hilarious, loving and unforgettable.

Here’s what a few producers had to say about the experience, and why they marched.

Beth Ackerman, documentary producer/editor

“I’ve been thinking about how to inspire folks to wake up. We need to form a bottom-up pressure bulb to tip public opinion from one of apathy to one of moral urgency. It’s clear that solutions are needed, and the political players will not advance unless there is some kind of revolution of concern giving them motivation to do so.

“As we were rounding the bend onto Columbus Circle and we started booming spiritual protest songs like “Down by the Riverside” and “We Shall Overcome” and spontaneously, the crowd all began to sing along with us. I was incredibly moved.

“As storytellers, we producers need to be like beacons — shining light on information and making the connections to help people begin to see what they can do. No one will be immune from the effects of the callous, capricious and foot-ful destruction of our planet. If we show up, then they can show up, become politically involved and help push the tipping point of awareness about the climate crisis.”

Mari Jo Winkler, feature film producer

“I marched because I felt it was important to send a message to our elected officials and the United Nations, to reinforce the notion that “the people can and should have the power.” My favorite part was the moment of silence. It was a really powerful moment of reflection. There were 400,000 completely silent marchers — silent to the point that you could hear the birds chirping in Central Park. Then, all of a sudden, a giant wave of sound, this mass cheering surged through the crowd, reverberated through every bone in my body. It filled me with hope and actually brought me to tears.

“There is a huge opportunity and responsibility for film and TV producers to use their cultural influence to get the message out. We need to keep the dialogue alive through our films, tell stories that can influence a shift in thinking, and keep leading by example. Climate change is the issue of our time; all roads lead back to protecting our environment.

“I was drawn to this movement most-ly because I’m a parent, and I want to do everything I can for the future world my daughter will live in. Let’s ask ourselves, what will we leave behind for future generations?”

Remember: to find out how to join in the movement and take climate action now, learn how to reduce your own production’s carbon emissions by logging on to greenproductionguide.com

Mary Ann Rotondi, documentary producer

I grew up in Montana, and we still spend our summers on Flathead Lake, each year visiting Glacier National Park. My sons are young — 16 and 14 — and you can trace the disappearance of the glaciers in their summer photos. So we’ve been a part of this movement for a long time.

Near the end of the March, we were surrounded by a group of Canadians. There was a big herd of people dressed as caribou, with signs that read “Caribou against tar sands,” and a huge black skull. There was also a group of people advocating for bees and their collapsing colonies. They wore beautiful headaddresses with swarms of bees hovering just above the marchers. The bee people included a gorgeously dressed dance troupe dancing and singing and getting others involved. My friend Ursula wore a huge, gorgeous and very impressive handmade owl on her head. It was all street art, performance art and very moving.

“Film and TV people have a special opportunity to get the word out about climate change. I’m just making a transition from network news,
"I also think it’s important to talk about solutions. It feels so hopeless now, and it really may be, but the more there can be a clear message about what individuals can and need to do, the better.

"Small, constant individual changes in things like power and plastic consumption can drive bigger change, and empower people to push for more. That’s a long way of saying a constant drumbeat of positive reporting on what individuals can do to help change the American lifestyle seems important to me. Things like, say, holding big joyous marches in New York City!"

As for me, I marched for reasons both near and distant. I marched in honor of the things I’ll miss — sledding in Central Park, New England maple syrup, Long Island lobster, chilly fall and balmy summer days for my kids to enjoy, and their kids, too. As for those far away, I marched for the people of Tuvalu, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands and other places at risk of inundation from sea level rise, not to mention drought and wildfires. In between, we can’t forget the farmers of Texas, the ranchers of California, the birders of Florida and all parts of our own country where people are already suffering the negative impacts of climate change.

The March gave me hope, it gave others hope, and I think that the President and his colleagues at the United Nations got the message. Producers unite — and vote with your feet, your scripts, your cameras, your AVIDs. Let’s keep beaming out that message every which way we can, until the tide slowly turns.

–KATIE CARPENTER

Producer Katie Carpenter (center) prepared for the March with League of Conservation Voters President Gene Karpinski and Sen. Chuck Schumer. (Photo: Kabir Green)
New Members
The PGA is proud to welcome the following new members, who have joined the Guild since September, 2014.

PRODUCERS COUNCIL
JOEL ANDRYC
ARCADIA BRIJONNEAU
NIRAJ BHATIA
JEAN BUREAU
MARK BURLEY
ANNE CAREY
DAVID CASSIDY
JULIUS DALY
MARK BURLEY
JEAN BUREAU
ARCADIA BERJONNEAU
JOEL ANDRYC

NEW MEDIA COUNCIL
JOHN GRAY
CALLUM GREENE
DAVE GROHL
ERIC JARBOE
PATRICK MARKEY
LINDA MODONOUGH
JOAN M-MICHAEL
EDWIN MEDA
ARNON MILCHAN
THOMAS NICKEL

AP COUNCIL
JAYNA PELLEGRINO
MARLIS RIZOLI
JOHN RAMASAY
ADAM ROZENTHAL
SANDRA SIEGAL
JIM STEPHENS
JASON TAYLOR
STEWARD TILL
MICHAEL WRIGHT
VLAD YUDIN

NEW MEDIA COUNCIL
NATHAN BROWN
DANETTE DUGAS
BRANDON GOETZ
ADAM HAUCK
ALEXIS LINDOUST
PRASANKA PRUTHI
RHODES RAIDER
WHITFRED SCHDEGGER
SUNITA SURAJIAN
SARAH ULLMAN

AP COUNCIL
ASSOCIATE PRODUCER/ PRODUCTION MANAGER/ PRODUCTION SUPERVISOR
MELISSA CONNOLLY
JOEL DUBEWSKATZ
DAVID DOWNEY
BOB KOZICKI
GILLIAN LURBERT
SHEILA MANAR
LBON ANNE PAKE

NEW MEDIA COUNCIL
NATHAN BROWN
DANETTE DUGAS
BRANDON GOETZ
ADAM HAUCK
ALEXIS LINDOUST
PRASANKA PRUTHI
RHODES RAIDER
WHITFRED SCHDEGGER
SUNITA SURAJIAN
SARAH ULLMAN

AP COUNCIL
PRODUCTION COORDINATOR
BRYAN DAVIS
JOSEPH IZD
MICHELLE POOLE
MEGAN POWERS
RANDY WESS

NEW MEDIA COUNCIL
NATHAN BROWN
DANETTE DUGAS
BRANDON GOETZ
ADAM HAUCK
ALEXIS LINDOUST
PRASANKA PRUTHI
RHODES RAIDER
WHITFRED SCHDEGGER
SUNITA SURAJIAN
SARAH ULLMAN

Member Benefits
• Vote on Producers Guild Awards and receive discount tickets to the event, as well as DVD screeners for awards consideration
• Discounted registration for Produced By Conference
• Admission to special PGA pre-release screenings and Q&A events
• Full access to PGA website including events, calendar, social networking tools
• Access to PGA Job Board, online résumé search, employment tools and job forums
• Participation in the Motion Picture Industry Health, Welfare & Pension Plan
• Eligibility for PGA Mentoring Program
• Listing of contact and credit information in searchable online roster
• Eligibility for individual, family and small business healthcare options through Producers Health Insurance Agency
• Free attendance at PGA seminars
• Eligibility for credit disputes
• Wide variety of discounts on events, merchandise, travel
• Complimentary subscription to Produced by

StorYtellinG AND VIRTUAL REALITY
The promise of virtual reality has always been enormous. Put on a set of goggles, and be transported anywhere, from the comfort of your seat. Facebook paid $2 billion for Oculus VR in March 2014, jump-starting the virtual reality space.

Cris Popenoe, a member of the PGA NMC Board of Delegates, is organizing the PGA’s “Storytelling and Virtual Reality” afternoon event happening November 15 at Sony’s Harryhausen theater. Popenoe reports, “We’ve selected four exceptional experiences which showcase VR storytelling: Senza Peso, a VR mini-opera that’s an extraordinary passion project, two studio VR marketing productions (one for a film and one for a TV show), and a live-action VR adventure. The producers and talent behind the experiences will be screening video that gives a sense of the experience and discussing their creative, narrative and technical challenges along with their business goals.”

Today, filmmakers, game developers, animators and visual effects artists are experimenting with short features, documentary films and projects that immerse viewers deep in other worlds.

ProducerS GUILD Awards TIMELINE
October 27
Polls open: Television Series/Specials, Digital Series, Sports Programming
November 24
Polls close: Television Series/Specials, Digital Series, Sports Programming
November 26
Nominees announced: Television Series/Specials, Documentary Features, Digital Series, Sports Programming
December 1
Polls open: Theatrical Motion Pictures, Animated Motion Pictures, Long-form Television
January 2
Polls close: Theatrical Motion Pictures, Animated Motion Pictures, Long-form Television
January 5
Nominees announced: Theatrical Motion Pictures, Animated Motion Pictures, Long-form Television
February 24
Final polls close
January 23
Final polls close
January 24
Producers Guild Awards at Hyatt Regency Century Plaza Hotel

The Visual Effects Society Vision Committee is co-hosting the event with the PGA.
RYAN LEWIS

Producing independently is a lonely business. It’s our job to pull off the trick of convincing people to invest in a product with no guarantees, create the miracles to make that project, and start all over from scratch when completed. Quite naturally, in the quiet moments, it’s easy to spend time wondering if there’s more to be done or if you’re even doing it right in the first place.

I have been lucky enough to already have three seasons of my Crackle show Chosen released along with a number of low-budget features, but as with most of us producers, I always aim to make ever-larger content. So when the opportunity came to join the PGA Mentoring Program, I jumped. I’ve worked with some great people in the past decade, but my hope was to find someone producing the highest level of content (film, TV and digital) to glean every tidbit possible to continue on an upward trajectory in my own career. Needless to say, when I was matched with Stuart Cornfeld, I knew I had a lot to look forward to. Already having been on a digital-to-television TCA panel with Stuart and knowing his extensive list of high-quality hits, I knew that he’d have a ton to share.

With half a dozen independent productions under my belt, I went in hoping to discover the major differences in production scales, studio dealings and the kinds of headaches that come with the jumps in budgets, scopes and executive pressures. Stuart was incredibly kind and answered any and all questions, showing me the relative similarity of our worlds with welcome honesty. Time and again, each query led back to two simple statements that he reiterated multiple times: “It’s never easy and I’m doing the right things. Sticking to the philosophy of pursuing only content I believe in, never waiting for things to happen and not putting anything on hold, were just some of the practices we discussed.

In a world where questioning everything is commonplace, simple confirmation that I’m on the right track is invaluable. It reinvigorates passion, renews confidence and above all, extends the patience to continue the marathon that is producing. As Stuart himself said, “The rules, language and situations in show business are always in flux and can become confusingly convoluted. It’s good to have access to someone you respect who can help you tune out the static and focus on what’s important.”

I am incredibly fortunate to have come away so inspired from a handful of meetings and emails, and I continue to correspond. I can happily say the experience has been invaluable for me and I’m thankful that the PGA Mentoring Committee made it possible.

MENTORING ROUNDTABLES

One of the most treasured features of any Produced By conference is its Mentoring Roundtables — small-group sessions that allow emerging producers to ask questions of established industry veterans in an intimate, conversational forum.

We’d like to take this space to thank our guests who shared their time in a Roundtable session at Produced By: New York. At the PGA, we believe that face-to-face mentoring is an invaluable element in building a career, and we’re gratified that the individuals named below share our commitment to mentoring the next generation of media storytellers.

Kevin Lewis

PRODUCED BY: NEW YORK CONFERENCE STAFF

Conference Co-Chairs
Bruce Cohen
Blaine Graboyes
Dana Kuznetzoff
Benjamin Lehmann

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Robin Kramer

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Victoria Ashley

Programming Advisors
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Kymberley Franklin

Talent Manager
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Larry Barbastouls

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Production Supervisor
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CONEXSYS Registration
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De Boer Media
Jeffrey De Boer

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PRODUCERS GUILD OF AMERICA EAST

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Director of Programs, PGA East: Patrick Gerety
Manager of Membership and Digital Initiatives, PGA East: Kevyn Fairchild

PRODUCERS GUILD OF AMERICA EAST
The Producers Guild proudly salutes the following producers whose credits have been certified with the Producers Mark. This list includes films that have been released in September and October, 2014.

Certification via the Producers Mark indicates that a producer undertook a majority of the producing duties on the motion picture.

**ADDICTED**
- Paul Hall, p.g.a.

**ALEXANDER AND THE TERRIBLE, HORRIBLE, NO GOOD, VERY BAD DAY**
- Shawn Levy, p.g.a.
- Lisa Henson, p.g.a.
- Dan Levine, p.g.a.

**THE BOOK OF LIFE**
- Guillermo del Toro, p.g.a.
- Brad Booker, p.g.a.

**THE BOXTROLLS**
- David Bleiman Ichioka, p.g.a.
- Travis Knight, p.g.a.

**DRACULA UNTOLD**
- Michael De Luca, p.g.a.

**THE DROP**
- Peter Chernin, p.g.a.
- Jenno Topping, p.g.a.

**THE EQUALIZER**
- Todd Black, p.g.a.
- Jason Blumenthal, p.g.a.
- Steve Tisch, p.g.a.

**GONE GIRL**
- Ceán Chaffin, p.g.a.

**THE JUDGE**
- Susan Downey, p.g.a.
- David Dobkin, p.g.a.
- David Gambino, p.g.a.

**LAGGIES**
- Alix Madigan-Yorkin, p.g.a.

**THE MAZE RUNNER**
- Ellen Goldsmith-Vein, p.g.a.
- Lee Stollman, p.g.a.
- Wyck Godfrey, p.g.a.
- Marty Bowen, p.g.a.

**NO GOOD DEED**
- Will Packer, p.g.a.

**OUIJA**
- Jason Blum, p.g.a.
- Bennett Schneir, p.g.a.

**WILD**
- Reese Witherspoon, p.g.a.
- Bruna Papandrea, p.g.a.

Make certain your next credit carries the Producers Mark. See producersmark.com for details.