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In this issue:
PBA members get behind The Conspirator
Debra Martin Chase cranks up the volume
Total immersion: Inside Universal’s King Kong 360 3-D
Case Study: Ryan Seacrest
If you’ve ever been called the busiest man in showbiz, you’re probably a producer.

Secret History
Brian Falk and Greg Shapiro unveil The Conspirator.

Hail to the Tween
Debra Martin Chase serves up Lemonade Mouth.

2011 Producers Guild Awards
Advantage, Amritraj
The producer as world citizen.

Return of the King
A conversation with King Kong 360 3-D show producer Valerie Johnson-Redrow.

Cover photo: Tony Duran

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Shawn Hatosy and Ray Liotta

DETROIT
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“Shooting in Detroit was like having my very own Hollywood back lot with art deco skyscrapers, industrial monoliths, turn-of-the-century mansions and limestone and marble ballrooms all to myself. The only thing better than the architecture were the talented and hard-working local cast and crew who made the experience deeply personal and everlasting”, according to Chris Fisher, Director of the 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment police drama, starring Ray Liotta and Shawn Hatosy.

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After working for producers for more than 10 years, I’ve learned a few things: 1) Don’t count on back-end points; 2) Make sure you’ve got decent craft service; and 3) You’ve got to top what you did last time out.

That last point is the one we’ve had to keep in mind for our 2011 Produced By Conference. Our previous two efforts were sellout successes, so the bar was already pretty high. But after a lot of hard work, we’re certain that this June 3–5, the PGA will be offering its biggest and best edition of Produced By yet.

To do that, we’ve brought on a partner, the Association of Film Commissions, International (AFCI), who have merged their annual Locations Expo under the Produced By banner. So what does this change mean for producers attending our Conference? Only that they’ll have access to over hundreds of local, state and international film commissions, each of which will be trying to lure your next project to their neck of the woods. Together, these commissions represent more than $2 billion — yes, that’s billion with a “B” — in production incentives. If you’ve got a project you’re looking to get off the ground (and if you’re reading this magazine, you probably do), Produced By 2011 is where you start the countdown.

Of course, our Conference will be offering the mix of top speakers and panels you’ve come to expect from this event. How often do you get to spend a weekend with Harvey Weinstein, Mark Gordon, Gale Anne Hurd, Damon Lindelof, Hawk Koch, Marc Cherry, John Sloss, Marshall Herskovitz, Lauren Shuler Donner, Jason Blum and dozens of their colleagues, all drawn from the top ranks of our profession? You’ll hear the straight story from producers who have been there, on everything from producing blockbusters to getting micro-budget features made to selling your non-fiction series to a hungry network.

Every year, we try to rotate our Conference to a new studio venue. This year, Disney/ABC Studios has stepped up as our host, offering Conference attendees unique access to their facilities and producing talent. Executives Barry Jossen, Paul Lee, Sean Bailey and Anne Sweeney have embraced the event wholeheartedly and have helped us to assemble a weekend that no producer will want to miss.

At Produced By, you’ll have the opportunity to network with hundreds of your colleagues, get face-to-face advice from a top producer through our Mentoring Roundtables, learn detailed ins and outs of a variety of shooting locations through FilmUSA’s “On the Ground With...” program, and immerse yourself in your profession like never before.

Oh, and in case you hadn’t heard, 600 PGA members (first come, first served) will get to do nearly all of this for free. Membership has its privileges, after all.

I look forward to seeing you at Disney/ABC Studios for this year’s Produced By Conference ... assuming you can get a registration slot. As I mentioned earlier, this thing has a habit of selling out. Go to www.producedbyconference.com today and register for the event of the summer.

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As this space has observed numerous times over the past 10 years, the paths that lead to a producing career are extraordinarily unique and diverse. Because of the multitude of skills that the craft draws upon, a great producer can emerge from just about any arena in entertainment. Thus, on our cover, we’ve featured subjects who came to the producing profession after (or during) stints as writers, directors, agents, executives, entrepreneurs, you name it.

This issue marks the first time that we are so recognizing a producer who has made his primary impact in front of the camera. Many producers — and very likely a significant number of audience members — are rightly suspicious when they see on-camera talent given a producing credit. Sadly, it’s not uncommon for such talent to receive producing credits solely as a result of agreeing to appear in the project. Which is why it’s cause for an extra tip of the cap to the performers who truly do function as producers, who earn their credits, who build careers that expand, honor and elevate the profession.

Ryan Seacrest, for instance, is the real deal.

Most of America is familiar with him, of course, as the host of a variety of live-event programs including the Red Carpet coverage from E! Entertainment Networks, the Dick Clark’s New Year’s Rockin’ Eve specials, and of course, Fox’s reality TV standard-setter American Idol. Simultaneously, he remains true to his radio roots as the host of the nationally syndicated On Air With Ryan Seacrest. It’s a schedule that already has him on the short list of hardest-working guys in showbiz, and that’s before you start considering his producing credits.

Under his Ryan Seacrest Productions (RSP) banner, he’s taken active producing roles not only in his coverage of E!’s Live From the Red Carpet and ABC’s New Year’s Eve events but within a growing mini-empire of non-fiction programming, including Keeping Up With the Kardashians, Kourtney & Kim Take New York, The Dance Scene, ABC’s Emmy Award–winning Jamie Oliver’s Food Revolution and numerous other series. The New Year’s specials, in 2010 re-titled Dick Clark’s New Year’s Rockin’ Eve With Ryan Seacrest, merit special mention, pairing Seacrest with his acknowledged career model; Dick Clark (another one-time holder of the unofficial hardest-working guy in showbiz title) was the last producer to couple on-camera affability with behind-the-scenes professionalism so effortlessly.

This is the 50th in Produced by’s ongoing series of Case Studies of successful producers and their work. We’re grateful that Ryan Seacrest somehow managed to stop producing for an hour in order to chat with Produced by editor Chris Green about such varied topics as his methods of staying attuned to pop culture trends, the impact that his producing chops have had on his on-camera style, and the early inspiration a young producer can derive from Jerry’s Deli on Ventura Boulevard.
I moved, I had been hosting a show when I was in college for gosh, I want to be one of those people some day. Now, before I would eat there a lot, and would see people that were com-

I landed in Jerry’s Deli in the Valley on Ventura from Atlanta? Where did you land? What were the first steps you took after coming out here Prelude however many years ago. I think those parallel tracks led me to the inevitable, which is wanting to do all of it, once I settled here in my Honda.

Obviously, you come from a broadcasting/radio back-
ground. How did you get from there to producing? I followed parallel tracks, one of which was through working in radio when I was a teenager and having to do every single job in a radio station. So while it was just audio at the time, I had to learn all the different jobs that went into putting something on the air. I got a chance to do everything ... writing, producing, editing all of my own things and other people’s things. And I looked at the people that I wanted to mold my career after, one of whom was Dick Clark. But seeing what he did from afar, I was a fan, but once I got out to Hollywood, I realized okay, this is a guy that has always done it all. Even though most of America knew him as the face of certain television shows, behind the scenes, of course, he was an incredible businessman and had his hands in just about everything.

I mean he became a true conduit for popular culture, television shows, behind the scenes, of course, he was an incredible businessman and had his hands in just about everything. I mean he became a true conduit for popular culture, television programs, as well as music and other various programs. So I think those parallel tracks led me to the inevitable, which is wanting to do all of it, once I settled here in my Honda Prelude however many years ago.

What were the first steps you took after coming out here from Atlanta? Where did you land? I landed in Jerry’s Deli in the Valley on Ventura [laughs]. I would eat there a lot, and would see people that were coming in and out of the different studios. I remember thinking, gosh, I want to be one of those people some day. Now, before I moved, I had been hosting a show when I was in college for ESPN. I had that gig when I was in Athens, GA. Then I got a job out here, hosting American Gladiators for Kids.

I have to say, I don’t remember that show. Were the gladi-

ators actual children? It was the kids competing with gladiators there as coaches, just some Saturday-morning family-friendly programming. So I was actually here in Los Angeles, hosting that TV show and hosting a weekend radio show at Star 96.7. I just kind of knocked on their door and tried to convince them that I could be a decent deejay on the Saturday overnight shift. So I was doing those things, but it didn’t take too much of my time. I was spending a lot of time sitting in the coffee shops and sitting in places like Jerry’s, wondering how to go about it. The thing that I always came back to is just try and get your foot in the door anywhere, and work really hard. Get up earlier than everybody, stay later than everybody. That’s what I did at the radio station, and it paid off.

At what point were you able to look in the mirror and think you were now a television producer as much as a DJ or on-camera personality? When were you able to say, “I can check this off the list”? When I started understanding what all the different line items meant in the budgets of my series and my company, what each of those lines meant and what everything cost and why. Then I said, “Okay, I think I’m doing this for real.” The big transition and tipping-point moment happened inside the E! Network. I was on the radio, and I was hosting American Idol, and they made an offer for me to come over and host E! News and the Red Carpet shows. I was busy at the time, and I remember sitting with Ted Harbert, who I just adored. I think he’s one of the smartest guys in our business, and I’m very excited that he’s doing what he’s doing at NBC. He made this wonderful opportunity available to me to build a company within a company. In essence he told me, “If you come over and host these shows, then we’ll help you, through Comcast, build what you want to build.” He recognized that my goal was to simultaneously build a production company while I was hosting shows. He made that possible from the get-go. We started with the Kardashian franchise. At the time, we didn’t even have any edit bays! We didn’t have anything but one other person in the office and a little bit of office space. But when that show started to take off, other business within E! and then of course, other business outside, started to take interest. Every time I would show up to the staff meeting, the table was getting bigger and more chairs were under the table. So I knew it was working. I knew it was growing.

Obviously, the Kardashian franchise is one that’s been the centerpiece of your production slate. What led you to focus there and make that your home base? We were looking for programs specifically for E!, and they had given us some direction and had talked to us about some of the worlds in which they’d like to explore.

We were looking for a great celebrity family to create a docu-series for E! Eliot Goldberg, who ran development for me at the time, had a meeting with the Kardashians and loved them. I already knew them and was very excited about the opportunity. We convinced E! to give us a little money to shoot a proof of concept tape and we went out with small camera and shot a family barbecue. It was TV gold! Once E! saw the tape, they loved it and asked if we could get it on air in eight weeks; it’s virtually impossible to produce a show at that pace. In order to move as quickly as possible, we made the decision to partner up with some of the best producers in town, Bunim-Murray, who were set up to move quickly in this genre. Eight weeks later we were on air.

We thought this would be the perfect offbeat Brady Bunch scenario to explore, and that family turned out to be one of the smartest families I’ve ever met. I don’t know if they get enough credit for being as smart and as clever as they are, because they have done a tremendous job for us and for themselves in building what they’ve built, and it’s all based on what their world is. And that was something that really took off.

While that was on the air, we were developing other things. But that was a real, real important show for us. It’s just a good group of people who have fun together, who love to be together. But there are a lot of different moving parts and conflict underlying that series. Before I even get to my office, fortunately, I’m exposed to an incredible amount of material, whether it be ideas or people’s stories or celebrities
“Every time I would show up to the staff meeting, the table was getting bigger and more chairs were under the table. So I knew it was working. I knew it was growing.”

and interviews and music. So I think just by sheer volume of ideas and volume of things coming through the door every single day, it points you in a direction, and you hope you can take what you’ve got in the right direction. We asked ourselves, okay, what is popular culture? We should be producing shows to target that goal.

I’m fascinated by this massive cultural stimulus that finds its way to your door. How do you go about sorting through that? How do you find the nugget that is going to work for you as a show or as a series idea or an element of a show? A lot of dialogue with my team. A lot of dialogue with the people that are on my shows and in my offices every single day. We look at input from the Internet and a lot of input from social media sites. It is a little bit of gut and a little bit of instinct. A lot of passion for something. So I use that group of people and the sum of all those different parts to try and make a calculated, strategic decision, based on what we also think is really compelling television.

Can you think of a time when you had to go through that process and where you and your team had to sort through competing agendas to make a concrete decision? Yes. Not to be specific, but yes, we’ve done that recently. One of the things that we do is see what we’ve done successfully here at E! We get a lot of internal information from one of the biggest media companies in the world. So we have access to some incredible data, and we examine it. We look at it. We don’t just throw darts at the board. So I value that information as much as I value gut and instinct, but I don’t put more weight on one direction or the other.

You mentioned social media. What sort of data are you getting from E!, and what data are you getting from these social media sites that you’re crunching into your personal algorithm for what the show is going to be? What is the nature of the data you’re getting?

We look at Buzz Index. We look at music that’s popular. We look at topics that are trending. We look at that often, and we look for the different patterns and trends. And I don’t even know what we’re looking for, honestly, sometimes. We’re not specifically in search of anything. But you may be sitting in a meeting and somebody comes up with an idea, and then that triggers a thought of something you saw on the Buzz Index, and then you put those things together, and it starts to go down a path, and you come up with a format, or you come up with a series that makes a lot of sense. With Jamie Oliver’s show, here is a guy that achieved some tremendous success in the UK with something that’s a really important issue with our kids and our culture. Those school dinners, getting in there and doing that doc series … it was uncomfortable and difficult and tough and nasty at times. He got shut out and people were pissed off at him. But he ended up doing a really great and wonderful thing. And of course, here in America, you can read daily about childhood obesity and school lunches and what should be served and what shouldn’t be served.

I heard that he had the notion of bringing the format to the United States. We had talked to parents on the radio about that issue, and there was a real heated debate. So it all fell into place for me, like this is something that’s meant to be done right now, and I think we’re the ones to do it with him. I didn’t know that was going to happen. I didn’t know he was going to want to do it at the time when we were thinking about that issue, and we weren’t quite sure what the show was going to be yet. So when he came over, his company and our team at RSP sat together and re-created that format for the Food Revolution. So I guess you just have to have the door open. You have to be exposed to a lot of different kinds of information, and that’s what I use. I’m best at that. I guess there are other people that can do it differently, where they sit in a room and they just think of the idea immediately. I like information overload, and then I start to put the pieces of the puzzle together to build a show.

Bringing an international show over and trying to repurpose it for a domestic audience, is something that a lot of producers have done with differing degrees of success. When you’re sitting there talking to Jamie Oliver, what’s the nature of the discussion you’re having with him about changes you have to make? I think you have to try to understand our culture and try to understand what people have responded to in the past. You can never underestimate the audience. I’ve learned this doing American Idol — the audience is really smart. The audience gets it. The audience knows what it wants. The American public is very savvy when it comes to programming and media, and we can’t underestimate that. I think the Jamie Oliver show was a vehicle on a universally emotional level to connect the dots on an issue that is so important. If you have kids, of course you want them to be healthy and live a long life. And if there’s a way to do it and there’s a way to make a show that helps create a national dialogue about it, it just seems like that’s the right type of show to make and the right thing to do. And it appeals to everyone. It’s not niche programming. So the stars aligned with that, and I do believe that that’s a big issue and we’ve got to get our act together, and if we can help be a conduit for information and a national dialogue, then fantastic. And Jamie has done it successfully, and he’s going to do it again.

Thinking about the work that you’ve done over the last five years, what are particular episodes or moments that stand out to you, that you’re particularly proud of, that...
made you feel that you were serving the will of this intelligent and rigorously demanding audience, and doing so successfully?

Well, the Red Carpets, for example, we produce these. We just did the Oscar one, I think it was the highest-rated Red Carpet show we’ve had, which was exciting and fantastic, and it makes you feel good and happy that it all came together. I wasn’t quite sure what we wanted to do, nor did we really know how to do the Red Carpet franchise, but it worked out okay.

I think with Food Revolution, when we saw some real change in Huntington, West Virginia, that was gratifying. We’re still in the process of struggling to figure out where that campaign will go — but we have a lot more people talking about the issue of the school lunches than we did before Jamie came to town. So that’s a different kind of wonderful satisfaction, even though it’s open and it’s still ongoing.

I am really proud of RSF’s [Ryan Seacrest Foundation] first initiative, which is to build broadcast media centers, named The Voice, within pediatric hospitals for children to explore the creative realms of radio, television and new media during treatment. We opened our first studio in Atlanta last fall at Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta, and we already have plans to work with hospitals in other major cities. It’s amazing, and I feel so fortunate to be able to give a new generation a glimpse of what it’s like working with media and entertainment.

It’s a blast to see and hear all of their ideas and to feel their energy as they work in the studio.

Has being a producer given you a different perspective on the way that you perform in front of the camera or in front of the microphone?

I think it has played into how I perform. I try to think of things from both sides. I certainly try to see things from both ends of it. In a live show, you’re trying to produce on the fly and look for great moments and capture great moments, and sometimes you miss them and sometimes you get them, and sometimes you get lucky and sometimes you don’t.

But I think the conditioning that your brain goes through focuses you to see things through different filters simultaneously. If we’re ever taping anything and I’m performing and it’s being taped, I know exactly where and how to make an edit. So I know exactly where to do my pickup and how we can pull it up and what shot to go for and where we want to put everybody. So you do see things with, like, a compound eye.

“"It all fell into place for me, like this is something that’s meant to be done right now, and I think we’re the ones to do it."
Producing a Red Carpet show seems like a unique sort of challenge. What elements are needed to deliver a strong and well-produced Red Carpet event? I’ve learned that you’ve got to do your homework. You’ve got to start early, planning for everything and everybody who might come by. It’s not like a typical show where you’ve booked a guest and they’re going to show up at a certain time. You don’t know who’s coming or when they’re coming, and that fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants broadcasting is a rush and is a lot of fun. You don’t always get it right, and you make some mistakes, and that’s part of the beauty of those shows. But you’ve really got to be on your toes, and you’ve got to over-prepare. One of the challenges is that there are these fantastically talented people who are celebrating and excited. And then you sometimes have to say to them, “So sorry to ask you to wait. Can you just sit through three minutes of commercials and hang here?” That’s tricky to do with some Academy Award-nominated actors. But for the most part, they do it, though I always feel bad, having to make them wait through a commercial.

Speaking of commercials, brand integration is something that a lot of producers are trying to find a way to incorporate into their work. There’s never quite enough money to do what you want to do, and brand integration is one way to close that gap. How have you used that model to effectively collaborate economically or creatively on programming? I strongly believe in a great relationship with brands, with our company in all of our different departments on all of our different platforms, whether it’s something we’re producing or something I’m hosting. We have a department at RSP that is focused on the brands that we’re in business with, and we do brand briefs with them in their headquarters. So we know what they’re doing and when they’re doing it. We get as much information from them as possible because again, we’re not quite sure when the right idea is going to come up. But if we keep taking swings, we know that at some point we’re going to get the right pitch, and it’s going to be the perfect program for a brand, and therefore, they’ll put some money into it to increase the budget, to allow you to put that money on the screen to make a better show. So we keep a division of our company up and running all year long that cultivates those relationships and services those relationships, and they focus primarily on the brands that we have deals with. However, they’re still out there looking at who is ready to invest in the right programming ideas before those ideas are sold. For instance, with Jamie’s show, we were putting together the kitchen for him, and we needed some technology. We’ve got a great relationship with Microsoft and Bing, and we did a deal with them for radio and digital, so we asked them, “Could you also help us with the screens and technology we need in Jamie’s kitchen?” And they signed up. So just by being engaged all year round with them, you find opportunities. But as an investment, it requires time, money, energy, and an entire department on that at our office.

By that same token, producing is a team sport. Nobody does it alone. You’ve had the challenge to not just build a career but build a company to further that vision. How did you go about putting together your team? I believe in talent. I love to run across talented people who are experts at what they do. I brought in Adam Sher to help run RSP in 2008. I’ve tried, when I come across somebody like that, to bring them into our company. If they’re executives, then we want to empower those people to go out and get the people they think are talented to work underneath them in their departments. So I’m in a creative business, and I love talented people, talented show runners, and talented executives and entrepreneurial people — people that don’t just see it black and white but people who are always thinking of a new way to do it. I definitely encourage entrepreneurs to come up with stuff and pitch us ideas and not be afraid to do it. Another important thing at our company is everybody in every job has to think not just down the TV path, but the multimedia path, because things are changing, and they’re fluid. I certainly don’t know everything, and I don’t do much of it well, and so you’ve got to have a great team of people who are empowered to make it work. Otherwise, you can’t connect all the dots every day.

One of the greatest things in the world to happen to us was the relationship with Bunim-Murray Productions for *The Kardashians*. They’re just the best at what they do. I remember getting a phone call about it. I was out of town, and I was talking to E!, and we needed to get the show going. But we had no equipment. Nothing. We were brand new. We were a baby company. And E! recommended that Bunim-Murray come on and partner and help us make the show, and that was one of the greatest moves we ever made.
Jon and Mary-Ellis were the first reality producers ever to be on the cover of this magazine. They’re fantastic. Their editors, their music libraries... They’re just great at what they do.

Can you talk more about folks like Jon Murray and folks you have worked with and learned from? Who do you look to as your mentors? Jon Murray is certainly one of those guys, certainly for that genre of programming. They have an unbelievable team of people that really know how to draw the dramatic moments from the talent. They know how to edit. They edit brilliantly. So I would say Jon for sure. Mark Burnett is a guy that I’ve gotten to know, and he’s on top of so many different moving parts. But it’s not just people that I’ve worked with directly or that we’ve partnered with. I have a good relationship with Jeffrey Katzenberg, and while he’s not in the reality TV business, I glean a lot from his methods and his drive and his ability to stay on top of everything with every detail, every single day of the week, every minute of every day, wherever he is around the world. Jerry Bruckheimer, we spent some time with him, and I love what he’s been able to build and to achieve. On Idol, we’ve got one of the great show runners in our business in Nigel Lythgoe. He’s one of the few brilliant guys I’ve met who can produce every single detail and understand every single aspect of the show. I mean, Ken Warwick and Nigel, I’ve worked with them for 10 years. I’ve learned a lot from both of those guys.

You’ve been working pretty exclusively in the reality vein. Is there any sense that you would want to branch out into scripted programming? You think I was just hanging out with those guys to get the free dinner? [laughs] Yes. The answer’s yes. We are. We’re developing scripted fare. It’s something that wasn’t our meat and potatoes at the start, and so we focused primarily on unscripted shows. But we are in the process of two really exciting scripted projects with a partner that we haven’t announced yet. So that’s become a priority for us.

How have you found that transition in terms of creating your developing scripted programs as opposed to creating your developing unscripted programming? To start, you have to defer to the best people you can get. So I met with a slew of various people—producers, production companies and writers—and that are good at the types of shows we were thinking about doing. When you find one that you get along with, you try and bring them in to help you develop it. You give them some direction, but you empower them to do what they do best and teach you a little bit.

You started out talking about Dick Clark and his influence on you, as a figure you can aspire toward. Now it’s come full circle, where you have gotten a chance to produce alongside him. What has that experience been like? At first, I was really nervous. I remember when I got the job that first New Year’s Eve, I was thinking about doing my job, but I was thinking a lot about what he would think of me doing my job and how badly I wanted to deliver for him and make him glad that he let me do it and brought me in. So once I got past that and got through one of the New Year’s Eve shows with him and it worked and we had a good time together, I started to relax a little bit. But it was a really special production and a special show because it’s the guy that you looked at your TV screen as a kid and saw for so many years, and then you’re standing there next to him, and you’re in a meeting with his company, and you’re doing it together with his team. So it was a very, very special thing, and it meant a lot to me personally to have him accept me and to bring me in as part of that team.

It must be a very powerful and gratifying experience. You become a kid in those situations. You still go back to “Oh, my gosh!” I’m this kid, not from this town, who didn’t know anyone before I came out, and then I’m sitting there, hosting the show with the guy that I looked up to before I even knew how to get to Hollywood. So I still have those moments. I had that moment with Casey Kasem. I had that moment with Dick Clark. I had that moment with Larry King. I think those are what really makes it fun and special and keeps you working hard, because those are all guys that worked really hard.
There’s a lot you probably don’t know about the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. That there were coordinated attacks on the Vice President and Secretary of State. That the plot was originally to kidnap the President, not kill him. That Lincoln wasn’t supposed to go to the theater that night. You’ve probably never heard the story of Mary Surratt, the only woman put on trial for the assassination and the central character of the new movie, The Conspirator, opening April 15. For the producers of the film, however, these details just skim the surface of an amazing and surprisingly little-known true story.

“I’m pretty much untouchable on the assassination of Abraham Lincoln at the moment,” laughs Brian Falk, the PGA member who produced The Conspirator alongside fellow member Greg Shapiro, producers Bill Holderman and Robert Stone, and the film’s director, Robert Redford. Falk drops Lincoln facts as casually as the most well-versed historian, like when asked about the Secret Service at an early screening: “I said, ‘Well, you may not realize that Abraham Lincoln, on April 14, 1865, the day he was shot, signed into law a piece of legislation that created the Secret Service...’” There’s much more to the answer, but Falk stops himself: The point is made.

“It’s a fun collateral benefit of making movies that you get to become so immersed in the subject,” adds Greg Shapiro, the Academy Award–winning producer of The Hurt Locker and the Harold & Kumar franchise. He nods toward Falk with a smile. “As good as he is though, he still can’t touch our first AD, Richard Graves.”

On this warm spring morning, two full years since embarking on the project, the producers laugh like old friends and get each other fired up about details of the film, demonstrating an unfailing passion for the project even after living with it for so long. Their excitement is contagious, which is exactly what they’re hoping for.

The Conspirator is the first film for The American Film Company (TAFC), the new production house founded by online entrepreneur Joe Ricketts that’s dedicated to bringing to life the incredible true stories from American history. Although such a mission doesn’t automatically inspire visions of box-office success, it does draw top talent, both in front of and behind the camera. “Artists — filmmakers, directors, screenwriters — they all gravitate to it, so there’s this enormous wellspring of material that’s been sitting out there unmade for whatever reason,” Shapiro says. “I think the whole industry should be excited that a company like The American Film Company exists because it’s filling a huge vacuum.”

When Ricketts set out to create TAFC in 2008, he approached Falk to be a producer and executive because of his extensive and varied experience producing television — and despite the fact that Falk had never produced a film. “I think in any enterprise like this, somebody’s going to step off the cliff and take the big risk,” Falk offers. “That was Joe Ricketts, and I am forever in his debt for that.” Falk brought in producers Robert and Webster Stone, and the newly-formed team began searching for historical scripts.

Within weeks, they found The Conspirator, the first feature script by James Solomon, a former reporter and AFI graduate who began working on the story in 1993. In what’s sure to be a theme with TAFC projects, the screenplay had languished in Hollywood for years despite the strength of both the narrative and the writing. TAFC optioned it without delay. “It was an extraordinarily tight script,” Falk says, “one of the best scripts we read.”

Set in post–Civil War Washington, D.C., The Conspirator kicks off on the night of Lincoln’s assassination, following the assailants through the multiple attacks that culminated with the shooting of Lincoln in Ford’s Theatre. "I think the whole industry should be excited that a company like The American Film Company exists because it’s filling a huge vacuum.”
In a tight spot, PGA member Brian Falk still delivers.

"I saw it as a pure collaboration," Shapiro contends, recalling how the pair divided responsibilities and bounced ideas off each other. "When you make a movie, it's all about trust, and Brian and I developed a mutual trust very early on. "We were both replacing each other's ideas off each other. "When you make a movie, you get a lot of work to do. Since The American Film Company was funding the movie itself, there was no reason to delay production. "Fall was the perfect time to shoot, especially in Savannah, Georgia," Falk explains. "It wasn't as if I was going to have to worry about hiring an official PGA mentoring program," he jokes, "but it may as well have been."

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"The project had a couple key elements going for it that, in my experience, really help a movie go smoothly," adds Shapiro. "One is that there was a very strong-willed leader in Robert Redford. He had a very clear vision, knew what he wanted and had the weight of experience behind him. Then we had a production company and financial backers behind it that were very supportive. You almost never have one of those, let alone both." The relative ease and speed with which the production came together speaks volumes to the strength of TAFC's premise — that real life is often more compelling than fiction. The producers maintain that it was the very personal story at the heart of the grand historical drama that drew them and everyone involved into the project. "On its surface, the narrative is mostly concerned with this courtroom drama," says Shapiro. "But what I realized was, at the core of it really was a mother-son story. It's about a mother who will do anything to protect her son, and once I looked into that, thematically the movie made so much sense to me."

The subtle moments in more intimate scenes and precise details of larger ones beg the question of what, in fact, is fact and what is fiction. The American Film Company is dedicated to drawing that line as far on the side of truth as possible. While working on the script, Solomon read diaries of 19th-century citizens so as to accurately reflect the speech patterns and vocabulary of the period. A team of researchers was employed to verify specifics and advise on everything from the material used in 1865 for underskirts to the layout of the military courtroom. "Everybody across the board loved the idea of bringing the reality of the time into the film," says Falk. "The art and costume departments especially loved being told we wanted this as accurate as it can possibly be."

The Company's dedication to authenticity inspired the cast as well. Beginning with McAvoy, the first member of a dream cast that includes Kevin Kline, Tom Wilkinson, Danny Huston and Colin Meany, the actors dove headlong into researching their characters and the period. Falk recalls Kline bringing him with a suitcase containing every book he could find that mentioned his character, Edwin Stanton. "Already looking the part too," adds Shapiro. "He had the beard, had the spectacles. He showed up looking like Edwin Stanton."

"The American Film Company provided consulting historians as well," explains Falk, who kept their numbers on speed dial throughout production to answer questions from cast and crew alike. "The actors loved that. To be able to build pieces of their characters around things that were real was very important."

The passion of the producers and dedication of The American Film Company are evident in the final film, an impressive example of how much can be accomplished with an independent budget and shorter than ideal schedule. Now as April 15 approaches, the team is entertaining hopes that audiences will respond to the story as enthusiastically as the people who brought it to life. "There is something visceral and interesting about non-fiction-based movies," says Falk. "I think audiences have classically responded to that based on a true story card."

(Robin Wright), the lone woman charged in the assassination. Presumed guilty by essentially every Unionist in the tenously united country, including Aiken, and abandoned by her own son who is also wanted in connection with the plot, Surratt must rely on Aiken to discover the truth, whatever it may be. It's a compelling story that unfolds gracefully, managing both suspense and surprise largely because the audience is unfamiliar with the details of the country's first political assassination. As Falk says, "This is the story behind the story that everyone was taught in U.S. civics class."

It was at the urging of an agent at CAA that Falk sent the script to Robert Redford, not expecting much, if anything, in the way of a reply. Just four days later, Redford requested a meeting. By spring, he was signed on to direct and produce, along with Bill Holdemner, his colleague at Wildwood Enterprises, and Shapiro, with whom he'd been developing another movie. "Redford brought Greg into the project, which I think was a godsend," Falk says, clearly appreciative of having an experienced partner to work with on his first film. "It wasn't an official PGA mentoring program," he jokes, "but it may as well have been."

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(From left, costume supervisor Richard Schoen, production designer Katina Ivanov, producer Brian Falk, director Robert Redford and DP Newton Thomas Sigel confer on set.)
"As a movie-goer, I've always loved historical movies," agrees Shapiro. "They're difficult to get made because they're painted on a large canvas, and there's always a financial component to that, but I love them. If I hadn't made this movie, I would have gone to see it, without question."

Falk acknowledges the challenge before them — filling a theater in April for a non-fiction drama — but hopes that recent awards nominees like *The King's Speech*, *The Social Network* and *The Fighter* have piqued audiences' interest in non-fiction movies. "I think our dreams are pretty reasonable on this," he says. "It's a little independent film. With obviously the pedigree of a great director and cast but still an independent film. And we need to take that approach."

"It will be interesting to see how audiences respond," says Shapiro. "To me, that's the defining test. You can come at a movie with all the intention in the world, yet if the audience receives it another way, there's no less truth to their perception than to what the filmmaker intended."

In preparation for the movie's opening, the filmmakers are focusing all their best intentions on every aspect of marketing and promotion, touring the country for advanced screenings, holding Q&A sessions and doing everything possible to build awareness of and interest in the film. For The American Film Company, much more than a box-office figure is riding on the reception of *The Conspirator*. "If this movie does well, I think we have a pretty bright future," says Falk. "So we'll see how we do."

Both producers are eager to do another historical movie, holding up their experience on *The Conspirator* as ideal — one for his first non-fiction feature, the other for his first feature of any genre. "I think my number one takeaway is that producing doesn't start or end in preproduction or production," says Falk. "You have to always be on, always thinking of how to make things better. You have to always be producing."

"ABP!" Shapiro interjects. "I think you just coined a new phrase."

"ABP, always be producing," Falk repeats. "But it is that. You're always on. It's a full-time job. It's a life choice more than a career choice."

And that's the truth.
Hail to the Tween

Debra Martin Chase Serves Up Lemonade Mouth

by Jenna Sweeney

Photos: Disney Channel/Colleen Hayes

A passionate storyteller and intuitive producer, Debra Martin Chase has produced films with $100 million box-office grosses, and spotted some of the most successful young talent in Hollywood. It’s pretty likely that she’s the only major producer of “tween” entertainment who also holds a J.D. from Harvard. Chase is a master at her craft and continues her ambitious work with her latest Disney Channel flick, Lemonade Mouth.

Chase’s office is lined with posters of her notable films, including such titles as The Princess Diaries, The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants, and The Cheetah Girls. As something of a guru of tween films, Chase draws connections between Lemonade Mouth and her previous work, noting the success and timeliness of each movie, as well as their reliance on a blend of positive values with real-life drama.

“First of all, I think of them as movies that I would want to watch,” Chase explains. “I think kids today are so sophisticated. They have access to so much information. Their lives are so complex. So I think it’s about simplifying the messages, but still honoring the complexity of their lives and values.”

Working off of the model of her first major success, The Princess Diaries, which made an instant star of Anne Hathaway, Chase’s tween films typically

By Jenna Sweeney

Producer Debra Martin Chase
incorporate an innocent (read: fully-clothed) love story, an underdog to root for, and the imperative PG rating. Her films are fun — uncomplicated, but never unintelligent. There’s probably no better snapshot of the tween audience than the throngs who recently packed theaters for *Justin Bieber: Never Say Never*. (In a brilliant move, the Disney team ran *Lemonade Mouth* trailers during the opening weekend of the concert film, even though Chase’s movie is a Disney Channel release that won’t be shown theatrically.)

Tween-based marketing aside, *Lemonade Mouth* was originally a book penned by Mark Peter Hughes. The story follows the lives of five students as they create a band and fight against the removal of an organic lemonade machine in the school’s basement. The students use the lemonade as a symbol of their resistance and derive the band’s name from its logo. The kids deal with broken families and overbearing parents while rebelling against their fastidious captor, Principal Brenigan, played with characteristic relish by Christopher McDonald.

Chase grew up in a family that treasured filmmaking. To this day, Chase refers to her father as “the biggest movie buff I know.” The importance of films in her early life led her to the realization that cinema and characterization contribute profoundly to the worldview of young people. Along with that conviction, Chase noticed how few voices of minorities and women were generally represented in television and films. As she began introducing characters that dealt with real and accessible problems, the films took off and eventually helped to make tween content a mainstay of studio production slates.

The five main characters in *Lemonade Mouth* meet in detention and recognize the unifying power of music after an impromptu singing session, eventually forming a rock band and empowering their fellow students to “be heard.” The heartfelt message is a theme Chase has built into many of her films.

“Nobody’s life is perfect, and I think that’s what makes these characters real and human,” remarks Chase. “Hopefully, young people and adults will see bits of themselves in each of the characters. That is what happened with *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, which cut across the age demographic. Because either you remember going through that, or you are going through it now. I have the same feeling about *Lemonade Mouth*, that there is a little bit of something for everyone to grasp.”

As for empowerment, Chase recognizes that a variety of strong voices only connects the characters to the audience more firmly. “I am a woman,” states Chase, “and I want to see strong female characters on the screen. There are not enough strong female characters in movies, particularly in movies today. I guess it’s the stories I’m drawn to. I just try to make the characters interesting, but I have done a lot of ‘girl stuff’ and I like it.”

In *Lemonade Mouth*, three of the five band members are female and are all of different ethnicities. The three girls lead the band and eventually come into their own on the stage. The casting process drew on both known quantities and fresh faces. “Bridgit [Mendler]: a Disney Channel star. Adam [Hicks]: Disney Channel star. But we also did a three-month international talent search. We wanted to find the best, the crème de la crème. It was really intensive. You bring them together, have a great director and a great script. You can make the story work but what you hope for is that the magic happens and that they really do become great friends. That absolutely happened on this movie. You can see it on screen.”

Chase has an eye for spotting young actors with an abundance of talent. She put Blake Lively in her first starring role in *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*. After an extensive search, Chase recalls, “I kept saying that somewhere in
Southern California there has to be a blonde athletic young woman who can do this. We were trying to be true to the books. When (Blake Lively) walked out after the audition we were like, ‘She’s it, she’s the girl.’ You could just feel it.”

Similarly, the search for the perfect girl to play Indian bassist Mo in Lemonade Mouth led to the audition of hundreds of girls in the United States. When none of them quite fit, the search extended to London, where the Disney team discovered Naomi Scott. Chase explains that Scott possesses an intangible spark that made her ideal for the role. After Lemonade Mouth wrapped, Steven Spielberg cast Scott in the upcoming Terra Nova Fox TV series.

In addition to grooming new talent and launching the careers of young starlets, Disney has made some of the most beloved musicals in recent memory. In the same vein as High School Musical, Lemonade Mouth jumps to life with boisterous melodies and musical stylings. Back in 2003, well before the most recent revival of the musical, Chase had to search high and low for musicians to work on The Cheetah Girls. Today, musicians from around the globe compete to be a part of the no. 1 Walt Disney Record Company.

“We have nine songs in the movie and we had five or six songs submitted for each slot by songwriters from around the world,” Chase reports. “We had a team in Sweden who ended up doing it. The key creative team sits in a big room and we pick through what we like and don’t like. It’s a big deal. The music is a huge component.”

The musical aspects of Lemonade Mouth carry the plot along without disrupting the flow of the story. The characters don’t burst out in song to express emotions as they do in High School Musical. Rather, as Chase notes, the intentionalness of the characters’ singing adds a fresh component to the experience: after all, this is a story about a band, with the songs as in-story performances. Even so, the songs were adjusted to fit thematically into each scene to create a fluid story. The soundtrack for the film will be released on April 13, a few days before Lemonade Mouth premiers on the Disney Channel.

In searching for a director, Chase recalled a meeting she had years before with Patricia Riggen, who gained praise for her Spanish-language film La misma luna at Sundance in 2007. Chase sent Riggen the script, and the next day, Riggen signed on to the project.

Although Chase sought to preserve the integrity of the novel, narrative adaptations were necessary to seamlessly move the piece from literature to film. “There’s no science to it,” she explains, “but at this point, I have a pretty good sense of storytelling, so I have my own approach to the things I like to see. I think you always want to understand the motivations of the character and part of that is understanding where they come from and what makes them tick and what makes them special.”

It is that invaluable sense of what works and what doesn’t that has led to much of Chase’s success as a storyteller, which extends beyond the tween niche she’s carved out. In addition to her work on those films, Chase claims credits on adult fare such as Just Wright and Courage Under Fire. There’s a common thread underneath these illuminating scripts and compelling narratives — they’re each stories the producer felt a strong personal connection to.

With a grin, Chase remarks, “It’s funny, Stacey Snider told me many years ago that we all as filmmakers have our issues and we kind of work them out through film. If you look at a body of work, there are similar themes. I think mine is that we always have the power to do whatever we want to do. We have to understand, first and foremost, that we have that power and put it to work.” As Chase’s work demonstrates, it’s a message that holds true both onscreen and within the producer’s professional life.
At last year’s Producers Guild Awards, a small independent film upset the long-established front-runner for the Darryl F. Zanuck Award, shifting the entire momentum of the industry’s awards season and paving the way for an underdog win at the Oscars a month later. The shock in the room that came with the announcement of the final award of the night was palpable. It was the kind of last-minute surprise that those in attendance couldn’t hope to experience again. 

Unless, of course, they showed up this year too.

In what is becoming an annual tradition, the Producers Guild Awards proved to be the staging ground for major awards season drama, as *The King’s Speech* stole the thunder of prohibitive favorite *The Social Network*. The Facebook drama went into the event having won the Golden Globe for drama and most major critics’ awards, but after the evening’s festivities at the Beverly Hilton, *The King’s Speech* seized pole position and never looked back.

**Produced by** is proud to congratulate the evening’s winners...

**1. Milestone Award honoree Jeffrey Katzenberg**

James Cameron (left) chats with presenter Kenneth Branagh.

**2. Visionary Award honoree Laura Ziskin**

Emile Sherman with admirer and presenter Dame Helen Mirren.

**3. Scott Rudin accepts the David O. Selznick Award.**

David O. Selznick Award honorée Scott Rudin, blended laughs and insight to perfection, while recipient Rudin’s gratitude toward his peers within the Guild and particularly his onstage mentor were equally apparent.

**Produced by** would like to congratulate Event Chair Paula Wagner and PGA Presidents Hawk Koch and Mark Gordon for their leadership in providing the Guild and the industry with another lively and star-studded evening. May their 2012 show upset the conventional wisdom just as thoroughly.

**4. Host Judd Apatow zings David O. Selznick.**

At last year’s Producers Guild Awards, as host of the Golden Globes a week earlier (on the very same stage, no less), proved the source of the host’s spiciest barbs, though by and large, self-deprecation was the order of the day, several of the video pieces prepared by Apatow featured colleagues’ none-too-flattering appraisals of his own producational skills.

**Comedy aside, the evening featured a variety of emotional high points, including Laura Ziskin’s acceptance of the Guild’s Visionary Award, and Sean Penn’s passionate appeal on behalf of the citizens of Haiti during his Stanley Kramer Award acceptance speech. Larry Gordon’s affectionately pointed introduction of his former protege, David O. Selznick Award honoree Scott Rudin, blended laughs and insight to perfection, while recipient Rudin’s gratitude toward his peers...**

But the similarities to last year’s show ended there. For the first time since 2005, the Awards featured an honest-to-goodness host, as longtime PGA member Judd Apatow handled the proceedings with characteristic wit, warmth and profanity. Ricky Gervais’ controversial performance as host of the Golden Globes a week earlier (on the very same stage, no less), proved the source of the host’s spiciest barbs, though by and large, self-deprecation was the order of the day, several of the video pieces prepared by Apatow featured colleagues’ none-too-flattering appraisals of his own producational skills.

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**The Darryl F. Zanuck Award for Outstanding Producer of Theatrical Motion Pictures**

*The King’s Speech* Iain Canning Emile Sherman Gareth Unwin

**The Award for Outstanding Producer of Animated Theatrical Motion Pictures**

Toy Story 3 Dana K. Anderson

**The Award for Outstanding Producer of Documentary Theatrical Motion Pictures**

Waiting for Superman’ Lesley Chilcott

**The Danny Thomas Award for Outstanding Producer of Episodic Television — Comedy**

Modern Family Steven Levitan Christopher Lloyd Jeff Meron Dan O’Shannon Jason Wein Bill Wiubel Danny Zuker

**The Norman Felton Award for Outstanding Producer of Episodic Television — Drama**

Mad Men Lisa Albert Scott Hornbacher Andre Jacquemetton Marina Jacquemetton Blake McCormick Evangela Shattuck Matthew Weiner

**The David L. Wolper Award for Outstanding Producer of Long-Form Television**

The Pacific Gary Goetzman Tom Hanks Eugene Kelly Todd London Cheryl Ann Martin Bruce C. McKenna Steven Shores Ratanaja Vali Black Jack Smarr Beth Eyrich Scott Glenyce Jeff Morton Lisa Albert Matt Weil

**The Award for Outstanding Producer of Non-Fiction Television**

Deadliest Catch Thom Beers Jeff Conroy Sheila McCormack Ethan Prochnik Matt Reiner

**The Award for Outstanding Producer of Live Entertainment and Competition Television**

The Colbert Report Meredith Bennett Stephen T. Colbert Richard Dahn Tom Purcell Allison Silverman Jon Stewart

**Produced by** is proud to congratulate the evening’s winners...

**Photos by Getty/WireImage**
7. PGA Icon Larry Gordon presents the David O. Selznick Award.
8. Presenter Joe Manganiello (second from left) with award winners (from left) Jeff Conroy, Thom Beers, Matt Roniner & Shane Proctor of Deadliest Catch.
9. PGA Board member Bruce Cohen (right) with King's Speech director Tom Hooper.
10. PGA President Mark Gordon (right) and Event Chair Paula Wagner start the show.
11. PGA President Hawk Koch (center) with SAG President Ken Howard (left) and Fox Co-chair Tom Rothman.
12. Presenter Amy Adams with presenter and nominee Mark Wahlberg.
13. Presenters Jim Parsons and Amy Poehler.
14. Sean Penn accepts the Stanley Kramer Award.
15. From Modern Family, winning producers (from left) Jeff Morton, Jason Winer, Bill W守el, Christopher Lloyd, Danny Zuker, Steven Levitan and Dan O'Shannon.
16. John Lasseter (right) clown around with Pixar colleagues Lee Unkrich (left) and Animated Feature Award winner Carlos S. Anderson.
17. Director David O. Russell and producer Ryan Kavanaugh of The Fighter.
18. The crowd is wowed by the 3D tribute reel for Vanguard Award honorees RealD.

19. From left: Armie Hammer, Justin Timberlake and Amy Pascal are all smiles at the Social Network table.

20. Documentary Award winner Lesley Chilcott (left) with presenter Kerry Washington.

21. Lear Award Honoree and Long Form TV award winner Gary Goetzman with PGA New Media VP Alison Savitch.

22. Host Judd Apatow (center) tries out some new material back-stage on friends and presenters Will Ferrell (left) and Adam McKay.
For a man who’s produced or executive produced more than 100 movies in the last couple of decades, Ashok Amritraj is unusually calm and relaxed, especially considering that his most recent film, *Dylan Dog: Dead of Night*, is rolling out across the globe. “I wanted to retire five years ago,” he laughs, “and the reason I didn’t was because my wife doesn’t like me at home during the day.” Yet it’s hard to imagine Amritraj sitting around at home; his production company, Hyde Park Entertainment, has grossed more than $1.5 billion with such hit films as *Bringing Down the House*, *Premonition* and *Shopgirl*, and branched out across the globe with offices in Singapore, Abu Dhabi, and Chennai, India. Amritraj’s career has taken him around the globe and from the world of professional sports to international finance and distribution, but through it all, he’s approached life as he would approach a simple tennis match: as a sport to be enjoyed, not as a battle to be won.

Raised in Chennai (formerly Madras) in southern India, Amritraj was drawn to the glamour of Hollywood from an early age. “I grew up watching Hollywood movies... *The Sound of Music* and *Ben-Hur* and all the other big epics, and that was how I first became interested in movies,” he says. However, his family pushed him in a different direction from an early age. “My mother was a big tennis fan, she played for her college in Madras, and so she put my brothers and myself into tennis at a pretty young age.” The three Amritraj brothers — Anand, Vijay, and Ashok, the youngest — were among the very first Indians to make a splash in the world of international tennis during the sport’s boom years of the 1970s. Ashok traveled the world, playing in every major tournament, including the U.S. Open and Wimbledon, and in 1978, won the World Team Tennis Championship alongside Chris Evert and Ilie Nastase. Yet through his years of success on the courts, Amritraj found himself drawn elsewhere. “I first came to L.A. in 1975 and I got to know a lot of entertainment people, and being in L.A. and around all the studios was amazing,” he recalls. In 1980, Amritraj hung up his racket and began his second career as a producer, facing a rocky start. “I thought it was going to be

Advantage, **AMRITRAJ**

The Producer as World Citizen

by Jeff McMahon
not as difficult as it turned out to be, because I knew people and thought I should be able to get things done. It didn’t quite turn out that way. For the first five or six years, I would develop some things and go into the studios with a project and they would say, “We love the project but we’d like you to bring on a producer,” and I said, “I’m a producer!” It took me about five years to figure out that getting some development money was a very different thing from getting producing money,” he recounts.

Undeterred, Amritraj decided to step away from the studios and get his hands dirty in the world of low-budget independent filmmaking. “It was an interesting time for independents because the videocassette business had picked up, so I started making smaller films with Roger Corman, Trimark, New World, Hemdale.” Amritraj’s films at this time included such low-budget action and thriller titles as Fleshburn, Nine Deaths of the Ninja, and Night Eyes. Working in this arena turned out to be a terrific way for Amritraj to gain experience and producing skills. “There was no bigger strategy, it was just about getting on the set, it was development, putting the financing together, make the film at a price, get through post-production and try to figure out how to get the film out there in distribution. It was a fabulous education, and you didn’t have a lot of room to make mistakes.”

Amritraj began to break out of the direct-to-video world with a few big hits. “In 1990, I was at the Cannes Film Festival selling my movies and this guy comes up to me and he says, ‘A few years ago, I sent out 800 photographs and you were the only guy to call me back, and we’ve got to make a movie together!’ And we did.” That young actor was Jean-Claude Van Damme, who teamed up with Amritraj to make Double Impact, a breakthrough hit for producer and star, alike. After that point, Amritraj had access to larger budgets and bigger stars. This led to his formation of Hyde Park Entertainment in 1999, which was founded as a full-service production, financing, and sales house.

“We operate like a mini-studio,” Amritraj explains. “Unlike a normal producer who gets a piece of material and likes it and takes it around to places, we have our own financing in place and we have a foreign-sales company. We come up with marketing campaigns, we come up with the promos for festivals... I see my job as producer as being there from start to finish, rather than just finding a piece of material and spending someone else’s money.”

As Hyde Park’s business has expanded, Amritraj has insisted on building ties to the burgeoning markets in Asia and around the world. “Since I’ve made a lot of movies, it was more exciting to have a leg in the East as well as in the West, and offices in Abu Dhabi and Singapore and India as well as in L.A.,” he says. “It’s personal and professional. I come from India, I have a constant interaction and I’m at home in both worlds and I want my children to be that way as well... All of these things are partly financial and partly cultural to build a bridge between East and West, which I think is very important.”

As anyone who’s paid attention to box-office statistics for the last couple of decades could tell you, keeping an eye on international markets has become essential for the global film industry, and Amritraj is on top of the latest trends. “When I got into the business, international made up maybe a third of the marketplace and domestic two-thirds. Today, it’s the other way around.” As a result of these changes, Amritraj is constantly making adjustments to Hyde Park’s business models. “In greenlighting any picture, once we creatively like a project, the first thing we do is see if the international sales guys and ask them what they think we can do with it. And to a big degree that determines if we make the movie or not.”

Adding to the complexity, Amritraj notes that in recent years, international audiences have become less predictable in their tastes. “Fifteen years ago, you could check off a couple of boxes — you could have a good script and a good star and make a good movie. Today, you’ve got to get the director, the star, the script, the budget, the domestic release, all of those things have to be right and if you don’t get them right, technically you shouldn’t be making that movie.”

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For Amritraj, the reasons for these added complications are simply the result of a world that has become more interconnected. “The world is smaller and as all this connectivity happens, foreign audiences look at things the same way American audiences do. Audiences are more sophisticated, more discerning, so it becomes incumbent on the producer to put together the best possible package of all these elements.”

Of course, Amritraj doesn’t consider himself or his company a mere slave to the latest trends. “As far as what my company makes, I would say 50% comes from what the marketplace determines, and 50% comes from my personal taste,” he says. “Today, we look for movies that either are attractive to the foreign market and have a wide release capability in the U.S. market, or movies that are festival-driven. Of course, sometimes you feel so strongly about something that you say, ‘You know what, I’m going to roll the dice on this one.’ That happens but it’s not advisable to do that all the time,” he smiles. “The challenge is that the marketplace changes and the distribution chain changes and you have to keep all those things in mind. If anybody in this business says they don’t change how they do things every decade, they’re lying.”

Once Amritraj has a film in pre-production, a crucial element for him is communicating with his creative partners. “Whatever my budgets are, the most important thing is to sit down with the director and make sure we’re on the same wavelength, both creatively and financially, budget-wise. No matter what movie, it’s the same conversation, it’s just different numbers. In my movies, the creative element and the budget element meet in my office and there’s always that compromise that needs to happen.”

Within his 100+ filmography, there’s a special group of films of which Amritraj is especially proud. “For me, movies are made for enjoyment or to move somebody emotionally. Shopgirl is one of those movies which, for me, is quite emotional and sweet. Bringing Down the House was pure fun. I thought Bandits was a movie with great performances along the lines of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid,” he says. Yet even for Amritraj, life as a mini-studio mogul has its limitations, especially when a cherished film doesn’t live up to expectations.

“Sometimes it’s very tough when a movie comes out at the wrong time, or is released wrong, or not enough money is spent on the release, or too much is spent on the release. That Friday night is always challenging. It’s having a couple of bottles of red wine around because you have no control over what’s happening at that point,” he says, with a word of advice for younger producers. “Our business is not for the weak of heart. When you get into it, prepare for a rough ride. But it’s about discipline and focus; I brought that with me from sports. Discipline and focus become very important. I see a lot of kids running around with five different projects, and I think our business takes single-minded focus to slam movies through, literally.” He leans back in his chair. “But for me, it’s not so much the long-term goals. I have a great team and I think the journey has been great and continues to be great.” And with a hundred movies on his belt, Amritraj is ready for a hundred more. 

Dustin Hoffman and Amritraj on the set of Moonlight Mile.  
On the set of Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance with Nicolas Cage (second from left) & crew. (Photo: Jason Boland)

Steve Martin with Amritraj on the set of Shopgirl.
A warm, sunny September afternoon last fall, more than 100 PGA members and guests met at Universal Studios Hollywood and embarked on an exciting journey to the mysterious and primeval Skull Island. We plunged into a lush jungle and encountered T-rex, raptors, giant spiders, and the Eighth Wonder of the World, King Kong himself.

Of course, what we experienced is the newest addition to the Universal Tram Tour, Peter Jackson’s King Kong 360 3-D, which is the world’s largest and most intense 3-D projection installation ever produced with physical effects. The attraction, based on Jackson’s 2005 blockbuster film, broke new ground in immersive-themed entertainment and storytelling technology.

After slowly approaching what seems like a formidable fortress of rock, ancient skulls and talismans, our tram made a sharp right turn up the side of the hill where we saw a crushed and smoking shell of another Universal tram that had met with doom along the same path. Meanwhile, on the video monitors within our tram, Peter Jackson calmly narrated his story of King Kong, expressing that this creature is a marvel of size and heart and that Skull Island is truly a magical environment.

Magic is the best word to describe King Kong 360 3-D. After you enter the dark tunnel and Jackson instructs you to put on your large 3-D glasses, immense gates open and the tram enters another dimension of time and space. Moments before the blackness around the tram gives way to the first rays of sunlight, a wave of jungle scent washes over the tram and you can sense the dense vegetation all around you. In moments, giant insects fly by and out from the ferns, raptors, drooling T-rex, and giant spiders make eye contact with you and you realize your place in this primeval food chain: lunch. As your tram attempts to outrun these predators, the roar of Kong shakes the tram and he bursts forth to take on these giants, wrestling all around and over your car, as a T-rex drags you over the edge of a massive chasm, and Kong comes to your rescue.

Unlike Universal’s Jurassic Park ride, which is an expansive boat excursion through physical set pieces featuring dozens of animatronic dinosaurs, King Kong 360 3-D delivers a brilliant digital manipulation of light, sound, water and air emitters, movement and scents using digital projectors and two massive curved screens within a 200-foot-long building.

We were genuinely blown away with our very first King Kong 360 3-D experience and to our delight, after the first trip through the attraction, our guide parked the tram outside and we changed seats in different cars to experience it from different viewpoints a couple more times.

Many of us commented that we had never experienced 3-D on such a huge scale, and we were excited about how immersive the story felt to us. It
was especially interesting to see how the seating arrangement in the four-car trams really affected the storytelling depending on the guests’ point of view. This multi-POV storytelling design ensures that the ride can easily sustain multiple views and deliver fresh experiences each time.

The story of King Kong 360 3-D starts back in June of 2008 when a devastating fire ravaged Universal Studios’ back lot. Once the smoke cleared, gone were the famous New York Street and sadly, the giant animatronic King Kong attraction (with his famous banana breath) millions of visitors from around the world had come to know and love.

Less than two years after the blaze, a spectacular new King Kong has risen from the ashes with immediate critical and popular success. It’s estimated that this epic new attraction has helped Universal Studios Hollywood increase park attendance by approximately 10%. Following a very successful 2010 summer season, King Kong 360 3-D was immediately included as part of Universal's popular Halloween season and continues to draw large crowds.

Behind this innovative special venue is PGA member and producing veteran, Valerie Johnson-Redrow, who has a long list of theme park shows and attractions under her belt, as well as work in film and television. Thanks to Valerie, NMC Board member Dina Benadon and NMC Chair Alison Savitch, Universal Studios Hollywood opened their doors and allowed the PGA to get a special behind-the-scenes peek at King Kong 360 3-D.

When asked about the immediate response from the park guests, Johnson-Redrow cheerfully responds, “Well, what I’ve heard is that the experience is a surprise! Guests are surprised to find themselves in the middle of an environment created digitally and they’re not sure if it’s real or not.”

While the overwhelming response to this ride might generate speculation that King Kong 360 3-D experiences will be built for Universal’s other parks, Johnson-Redrow doesn’t believe so, pointing out the simple fact, “Well, there is no other tram tour. This was designed to be viewed from a 120-foot-long tram, so it’s very unique in that sense.”

Given that most of us have experienced effects, etc., we knew there were attractions or themed attractions at amusement parks, museums, aquariums, etc., it’s fascinating to learn the responsibilities of a show producer like Valerie, and how they correspond to the showrunner’s role regarding the development and execution of an immersive storytelling project.

Johnson-Redrow explains, “I was brought in because Jen Sauer, the creative director from Florida, needed a show producer on the West Coast. So we worked very closely together. My job was to manage the creative process and give creative buy-offs along with Jen to make sure that what all vendors were doing worked with the show. “A show producer’s job,” she continues, “is to make sure that the creative intent of the show, just like a film, gets on the screen and in front of the guests. I worked with a creative director to make sure that the vision happens. It’s a lot like producing a movie but with additional aspects like the practical effects, the media, the overall timing of the show, and the reactions to every guest … and quickly!”

Over the past few years, many of us have been learning how to produce stereoscopic 3-D media and we all have experienced new digital and 3-D movies in the theater. Such producers understand the basic requirements for a good illusion — a specific angle of projection between the audience and the screen at a certain viewing distance. Johnson-Redrow explains, “The media was delivered in 3-D to the maximum without compromising the illusion for people on one side of the tram. So we did a lot of grid sightline tests and interocular tests to figure out the best show.”

We brought out the 3-D as far as we could and it feels like [Kong and the dinosaurs] are actually bumping the tram. “That was the goal,” she states, “to make it a 2-D media experience but to make it an immersive experience. Since our show building wasn’t built yet, we had to find a soundstage large enough to do our testing in. We ended up leaving the same stage in Playa del Rey in which Howard Hughes built the ‘Spruce Goose’! We built a fake tram out of wood and a full-size mockup of the screens for our projection tests. Then those screens got recycled.

“The compound curved screens were conceived and custom-built to accommodate the uniqueness of the attraction’s viewing environment and to maximize light return to the guest’s eyes,” Johnson-Redrow elaborates. “There’s a 25% vertical squeeze built in so that it’s about 1,350 pixels squeezed to 1,080 pixels tall, the width of each frame we were getting from Weta was 6,686 pixels. We had a pixel map built to plan and test the overlap and work our final delivery out from Weta Digital.”

And as far as the monstrous aspect ratio for the two screens that deliver the stereoscopic digital animation, Johnson-Redrow explains, “The media was delivered in four pieces … each a long frame that we divide up and project. The various camera angles were stitched together by Weta Digital and color-corrected. Weta Digital delivered a left eye and right eye for both tram left and tram right. We then processed those four files to project from 16 projectors.”

As Johnson-Redrow spelled it out, “You have the architecture of the tram that’s between you and the screens. You can't change that. It’s not all like a typical theater situation. You have a roof over your head and you've got the bars of the tram to look through. We had concerns over how can we bring out the 3-D to the maximum without compromising the illusion for people on one side of the tram. So we worked very closely together. My job was to manage the creative process and give creative buy-offs along with Jen to make sure that what all vendors were doing worked with the show. “A show producer’s job,” she continues, “is to make sure that the creative intent of the show, just like a film, gets on the screen and in front of the guests. I worked with a creative director to make sure that the vision happens. It’s a lot like producing a movie but with additional aspects like the practical effects, the media, the overall timing of the show, and the reactions to every guest’s perspective. It’s not my job to build the show building, but to make sure that the building works for our purposes.

“I also worked with the publicity and the marketing teams. They chose me to be the ‘voice’ of Kong for various presentations that we did, both in-house and for sales outside. I didn’t come up with the campaign, but I was the liaison between [Jackson’s company] Weta Digital and our marketing group to get elements from the ride to use.”

It’s quite remarkable that such a complex attraction came into being less than two years after the fire destroyed the previous incarnation of Kong. But as Johnson-Redrow explains, “Weta Digital did some marketing research which showed that King Kong was a much-loved attraction on the tour by international crowds as well as domestic. So they knew they had to bring him back.” We banded about working with animatronics, incorporating pieces of the feature film, etc., and we knew we wanted to work with Peter Jackson’s King Kong because it was a Universal film and we loved his version of the character. Things evolved and we realized that digital technology had come much further than animatronics, and if we used 3-D media, we could make Kong come back to every guest … and quickly!”

“Ultimately, we had to get the digital media right. We needed to get the timing of the speed of action to work in 3-D at a scale not done before.”

The doomed fate of a previous tram at the mouth of King Kong 360 3-D.

Produced by Spring 2011
Onward to mysterious Skull Island to encounter King Kong himself.

“Peter really embraced the film side of things,” she continues, “and worked with us to choose things like the specific scents. When the ride begins, you’re on Skull Island and since he knows Skull Island better than we do, he chose the environmental scent. He also decided what ‘dino breath’ would smell like, and for Kong we all agreed we didn’t want banana breath!”

“We did tests for cycling times to determine how fast the tram could or should move. We spent weeks programming the pneumatic tram mover to complement the movement in the media. We needed to see what a show experience would be like based on all possible viewing positions.”

Of course, no one undertakes a project of this size and scope on her own, and throughout the conversation, Johnson-Redrow is quick to acknowledge the members of her award-winning team, including Sassoon Film Design for grid creation, Weta Digital for media dividing and processing, Peter Anderson and Electrosonics for their screen design and projection system, Park Road Post in New Zealand for color-correction and audio production and Visual Terrain for show lighting.

And as far as Johnson-Redrow’s biggest challenge as show producer, it came down to something we can all relate to in any project we’ve produced: the time factor. Johnson-Redrow adds, “As show producer, I had to keep the momentum going, to get feedback from New Zealand as to how things were progressing. We knew that we had to open the ride in July for the summer and I needed to drive that process to make sure we were fine-tuning a show instead of still designing a show when we got into the final facility (at Universal Studios). Ultimately, we had to get the digital media right. We needed to get the timing and the speed of action to work in 3-D at a scale not done before. You can’t judge those aspects until you are the right distance from the screen. And there were certain things we couldn’t plan in our facilities in Playa del Rey. We couldn’t move the tram. We could only sit still. We didn’t have the perfect lighting conditions there. We didn’t have audio other than a few mockups here and there, but we were fortunate enough to get the audio design and mixing team from the 2008 film to create our audio.”

The results of Johnson-Redrow’s and her team’s efforts speak for themselves. “Universal Studios Hollywood is thrilled,” she beams, “the attendance of the park shot up. They had a very busy summer and it’s continuing. The ratings have been through the roof, according to the guest surveys. Overall, the park management has been very happy with the guest reaction.”

Not surprisingly, since interviewing Valerie this past fall, this landmark achievement in special-venues design and production recently made industry history when it won the “Best Achievement in Visual Effects in a Special Venue Project” at the 9th annual Visual Effects Society Awards on February 1, 2011. This is the first VES Award ever presented to a theme park ride.

With summertime quickly approaching, this classic Universal Hollywood’s saga continues as it should. Kong is “King of the World” once again.

James A. Fino is Vice Chair of the PGA’s New Media Council.
“If you have a lot of beads and they are not threaded, you don’t have a jewel. My job is to make a beautiful, powerful jewel.”

-UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon

On March 21, 2011, the Global Creative Forum (GCF) welcomed United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon along with international experts to join leaders from the entertainment industry in a collective discussion about the environment and climate change.

Ban Ki-moon believes that governments in the world are not going to collectively address climate change without the UN to keep them focused, and he is appealing to Hollywood to help spread awareness and keep the general public focused. According to the Secretary-General, “Science has made it absolutely clear that climate change is happening and impacting our lives. Our children and grandchildren will be facing misery ahead. We need a sustainability revolution, and this is the defining challenge of our time.”

He went on to add, “Twenty-five percent of action is behavior change. We have the technology, but we don’t have the political will to deliver the solutions to the people who need them. You can reach 20 million viewers in one hour. What are your key messages? Creative people can find lots of interesting ways to do this. Make it entertaining!”

There is a recent precedent for high-profile television to blend entertainment with social messages. Law & Order: SVU has incorporated important UN issues into three episodes thus far, and an episode of Ugly Betty highlighted the use of mosquitoreps to prevent malaria as a result of the UN’s outreach. Pushing for climate messaging within popular media is now a high-priority effort.

Rouhana emphasized that, “there are places where messages integrate without being artificial — where it’s intellectual and artiful and it fits the story. It doesn’t always have to be the overarching message, but storytellers can make it part of what we are doing.”

The panel “Making Global Warming a Hot Issue” included actor/activist Djimon Hounsou, Christiana Figueres, who is Executive Director of UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, and executive Director of Greenpeace Kumi Naidoo. The panel raised a variety of topics and pressing issues that might serve as the basis for compelling stories.

Members of the UN team acknowledged that the U.S. domestic policy situation, i.e. the lack of political will around climate change, is causing a huge problem for the world. Herskovitz stated, “If you look at all the polls, 50%–70% of the American population believes climate change is real and action needs to be taken. The problem is a disconnection between our leaders in Congress and what people think.”

President Obama’s initial stimulus package made impressive steps toward building a renewable energy infrastructure in the United States, but the oil, coal and natural gas companies — in combination with electric utilities and climate deniers — have exercised their control over congressional decision-making by blocking climate and energy legislation in the U.S. Senate. Regarding this subject, Figueres laid out the numbers from a recent Center for Public Integrity study, noting that one can “put the 60 or so venture and investment firm lobbyists together with the 170 alternative energy lobbyists and 160 environmental lobbyists, and they are still outnumbered 5-to-1 by the approximately 2,000 representatives of 770 major companies that are looking to block all progressive legislation around climate change.”
"Historically, the arts and cultural communities have been at the forefront of mobilizing for progressive change."

UN leaders acknowledged that social media has changed everything they do at the UN. The ability to organize has jumped far ahead of where they were five years ago. The concern is that there is an environmental movement in the United States, but it is disaggregated and needs to come together.

PGA Green member Dan Halperin said the UN event was "informative, inspiring, and I made some very positive connects, for both PGAgreen and personal projects."

Historically, the arts and cultural communities have been at the forefront of mobilizing for progressive change. To that end, PGA Green members are actively network-

The sentiment was backed up by producer/actor Don Cheadle who recalled, "I took my 8-year-old daughter to see WALL-E, and she said, 'This is what's really happen-
ing with PGAgreen.org and a new website, greenproduc-
ingguide.com, which provides a vendor database and offers a tutorial and calculator to help productions measure and reduce carbon emissions. The 2011 Produced by Conference will feature a panel about creating purpose-driven con-
tent and climate messaging for multiple platforms.

We as storytellers have a unique platform. Working toward this common goal, the cumulative effect of all of our efforts has the potential to make a critical difference for billions of people around the world. The UN couldn’t be making the connec-
tions more clear as Robert C. Orr, UN Assistant Secretary-General, said, “We’re not tinkering around the edges — the wolf is at the door.” –LYDIA DEAN PILCHER

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Chuck Fries has been called the “Godfather of the Television Movie” for good reason. In this memoir, focused on his life in the film and television industry, Fries weaves a narrative encompassed by personal anecdotes and a detailed timeline of his many accomplishments in the business. The book is as much a helpful tool for prospective producers as it is a personal homage to a noteworthy and productive career.

As a producer, Fries produced and supervised roughly 30 television movies, nine television series, and five theatrical films. Known for producing such long-form television projects as *Small Sacrifices*, *The Neon Empire*, *Leona Helmsley: The Queen of Mean*, *The Martian Chronicles* and *Deadly Web*, he is one of only a handful of long-form producers to have a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

Fries’ family history illustrates the roots of his later success. Fries evokes a heartfelt picture of his life growing up in Cincinnati, citing his father’s cunning business sense and his mother’s creative inclinations as the basis for his own aptitudes. The author is enthusiastic and unabashed about the personal attributes that led to his success, but he is equally quick to show appreciation and thanks to everyone who has helped him along the way.

Every one of the book’s many anecdotes contributes toward the memoir’s larger purpose and meaning. Every recollection, from his days running the fraternity kitchen business at Ohio State to his time as a PGA Board member running the Guild’s Golden Laurel Awards (the forerunner of today’s Producers Guild Awards), ties to another significant event in the "Godfather’s" dynamic life. In this, Fries provides valuable how-to of producing, but it’s important to read between the lines. Tips are not explicitly laid out for the reader, but a close reading will provide real insights into what’s required to make it in the entertainment industry. Fries, for instance, has learned the secret to public relations and networking, but never explains outright what it is. Keep reading and you just might manage to figure it out.

One of the joys in reading *A History of Television* is the amount of personality that shines through in the author’s writing. The conversational tone makes the material engaging and accessible. It helps that Fries seems to have an uncanny ability to recall details. Names, events, and even production costs pepper the pages with such abundance that it may overwhelm the reader even as it pulls them in for more.

Chuck Fries makes a point to address the always-loaded question: “What is a producer?” as is only appropriate for a professional whose history is so intertwined with the Guild’s. His time at the PGA proved to be invaluable, both for the Guild and the producer himself, as Fries helped lift the Guild out of its financial rut in the 1990s and laid the groundwork for its current success. [Editor’s note: Fries is one of only 18 PGA members to have been honored with the Charles FitzSimons Award for lifetime service to the Guild.]

Having spent five decades in the producing business, Fries is able to portray the fascinating transitions that occurred in the studio systems as well as the innovations of technology that make the industry what it is today. And producers? Even though Fries recognizes them as “shepherds ... in a thankless job,” one gets the feeling that there’s no thankless job he’d rather have.

**Chuck Fries: Godfather of the Television Movie**

by Chuck Fries

Reviewed by Melanie Eddy
New Members

The Producers Guild is proud to welcome the following new members, who have joined the Guild since December, 2010.

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KIM SUROWICZ

Segment/Field/Story Producer
ROBIN ACUTT
CHRIS AILES
MARK ARBITRARIO
ANDREW HYMAS
DEVIN MARBLE
KEVIN MILLER
BRIAN MURPHY
CINDY PETERS
NATALIE QUINATA
JONATHAN REINER
MICAH WEISSBERG
REBECCA WINSTON

Visual Effects
RON ANANTAVARA
WAYNE BILLHEIMER
DARIN MCCORMICK-MILLET
MELINGA THOMPSON-GOOD

Production Coordinator
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On the Ground in Japan

Producers may feel like heroes when they wrap their production ahead of schedule and under budget, but occasionally, they get the chance to be heroes for real.

As of press time, PGA International Committee Chair Stu Levy is in Japan, where he’s been since not long after the March 11 earthquake and subsequent tsunami struck the country. As the founder of Tokyopop, Levy claims close personal and professional connections to Japan, compelling him to take part in relief efforts despite government warnings as to the safety of the region.

Levy’s efforts have been focused on the Takasago neighborhood in Miyagi prefecture. Roughly 1,000 men, women and children have taken shelter in the local junior high school where, until recently, Levy reports, refugees were doing their best to survive on a food ration of a single potato chip per day.

“Even in those circumstances,” reports Levy, “the victims are working hard as a team. They are cleaning together, cooking together, carrying the provisions, helping each other out… it’s truly inspiring to see them fighting so hard to survive and overcome this tragedy.”

Particularly moved by the spirit of the students of Takasago, who were delighted to learn English phrases and handshake styles, Levy has asked the PGA community to contribute materials to help keep the students’ spirits high. While listening to letters of support read over the radio, Levy found himself frustrated that the families of Takasago, which still have no electricity and thus no radio, would be unable to hear the words of encouragement read over the air.

“We can’t do this digitally,” he notes, “because there’s no electricity, so we have to go old school: paper!” Levy has asked the community to contribute their letters, artwork, photos, manga, or anything else that might lift the spirits of the students of Takasago. “I want to bring up a huge box on my next provisions trip, so please send them directly to my office in Tokyo. I know the postage is a bit more expensive, but it will save precious time not to go through our L.A. office… Your letters will guarantee many more smiles over the hard months ahead.”

To contribute to Stu’s effort, please send materials to:

Students of Takasago
c/o Stu Levy
Tokyo Towers, Mid-Tower 4918
6-3-2 Kachidoki, Chuo-ku
Tokyo, Japan 104-0054

Member Benefits

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

When I read about the PGA Mentoring program, it sounded like a great chance to meet a “seasoned” producer and ask questions. I was very fortunate to be paired with Kathleen Courtney. What really worked for me is that Kathleen and I have the same outlook on life! Our first meeting was at her offices at the Film Department. With permission from those participating, Kathleen invited me to audit some production calls with department heads who had just finished filming on location. Just listening to those conversations helped me to realize that we’re all problem solvers, and even at the higher levels we don’t have all the answers, but we find a way to figure it out. In our meetings it became more apparent to me that just like life, my career was about persistence and positivity. I told Kathleen that one of my goals was to line-produce a bonded show. She introduced me to her good friend, Steven Berman, at Film Finances Bond Company. By coincidence and fate, we were hired to line-produce Oren Peli’s second feature and Steven ended up being our representative! All the nuggets that I took from my meetings with Kathleen have helped both my line-producing and the management side of our company, which runs the U.S. operations for Lidar VFX 3D scanning. Having done independent films for 10 years, it’s great to be able to grow with the mentoring program at the PGA.

Kathleen Courtney

When I volunteered to be a mentor, I was excited about sharing experiences from my years of filmmaking with a PGA member who was looking for guidance. However, Jeanette Brill walked into my life, already a full-fledged independent filmmaker. She had solid credits as well as life lessons and excellent tales from the trenches that she graciously shared with me as well. I immediately found my “mentoring” experience illuminating and humbling.

I asked Jeanette why she chose to be a mentee, as she could clearly be sitting where I was. She explained that, though she has made films as a producer, there were specific experiences that she has never had on larger features that she hoped would expand her horizons. I realized that after all of this time working on feature films for studios, there was still information I didn’t know about getting things done on lower budget films. I was fairly new to that world, having recently started working as head of physical production at an independent production company. I took advantage of her knowledge base and solicited tips and information from her. In fact, not long ago — though well after our program ended — I called Jeanette with a question about how she typically handles a certain situation. I truly value her opinion and guidance.

I didn’t know what to expect from the mentoring process and was happily surprised to find how much I received — not the least of which is a great contact, a valuable resource and a good friend.
I’m a big believer in the PGA’s motto (well, at least one of their mottoes) of “Hire From Within.” What is that, you ask? Why it’s the concept of hiring a PGA member when you need to fill a job opening on your production. When I go to staff up a show, here’s my usual process:

• I think about who I know that would be perfect for that production coordinator position (or whatever position it is). If I run through my regular list of players and none of those are available, then:

• Call a few producer friends, asking for recommendations. If no one from that list works out, then:

• Go to the PGA website and search for a member or post a job notice there.

And one of the first things I ask someone who’s sitting in front of me interviewing for the job is: Are you a member of the PGA? Big decision point here, folks… Someone ends up getting that job and then if they’re not a PGA member, I then offer to sponsor them into the Guild (honestly, though, with more than 4,300 active members, how could I not find someone who’s a well-qualified PGA member?). And despite what you may have heard, I have never hounded, harassed or stomped my feet at anyone in order to get them to join the Guild. Honestly. No, really…

I’ve often found that the most reliable, most knowledgeable, most experienced people who work in our business are PGA members. Given the fact that we have so many seminars and educational events (not to mention the amazing annual Produced By Conference, plus the serious networking that can happen at these events), it’s not a surprise that our members are usually up-to-the-minute in the technology, terminology and production techniques that we all use every day.

Over the course of my time in the PGA, I’ve been lucky enough to be asked to attend some of our Job Forums as an employer. This one event alone gives me access to literally hundreds of PGA members. If you haven’t been to one, you should. It’s set up as a sort of “speed-dating” event, where I, as the employer, go from table to table, and the members sitting there each get around two minutes to introduce themselves and tell me a little about themselves. At the end of the event, I have a notebook crammed with resumes neatly sorted by job function. And it is invaluable when I want to go hire someone (when my list of usual suspects has run dry). Okay, so that’s really the same as the third step above, but you get the picture.

So, at the risk of repeating myself, I’ll say it again: Whenever possible, I do exactly what it says at the top of this article, I Hire From Within. I humbly suggest that you do, too. It’s good for the Guild, good for our members, and good for you! Oh, and be sure to encourage non-members to join, and I do mean encourage!