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Nov 6, 2020 9:00am PT

Variety's 10 Producers to Watch 2020

By Diane Garrett, Andrew Barker, Leo Barraclough, Shalini Dore, Carole Horst, Addie Morfoot, Lise Pedersen, Alissa Simon



Asomugha: Courtesy of Alex Reside

With so many festivals canceled or downsized due to the coronavirus, Variety shifted its annual celebration

of 10 Producers to Watch to coincide with this year's virtual AFM. The producers on this year's list hail from Europe and the U.S., and tackle a wide range of topics and genres. Their numbers include a former pro football player, journeyman actor and ad agency owner — all of whom were drawn to producing film.



Photo: Courtesy of Alex Reside

Nnamdi Asomugha

“Sylvie’s Love”

When his pro football career ended, Asomugha turned to acting, but soon decided that without any training the only way he could get any meaty parts was to get behind the scenes. “Producing is a team sport and I grew up only knowing and playing team sports. Football is the ultimate team sport,” says Asomugha, who grew up in Los Angeles. “So once I got into this world of producing, there was a bone that I already knew that was inside of me.”

He set up Iam21 Prods., in a nod to his football jersey, but he adds, “When you are 21 you still have all the dreams ahead of you. That’s where I want to be when I am making films. I feel like I have all of my dreams in front of me.”

His first producing project was “Beasts of No Nation”; the shoot was a baptism by fire. His producing partners, veterans Jonathan Baker and Daniela Taplin Lundberg were his “classroom,” grounding the lessons of the field.

“The book and the script were so great, and I said, ‘Oh this is so different.’ The goal was unconscious [then] but now it’s more conscious; I want to make projects that are filling some sort of void in the industry. There aren’t many of these — that’s the only way I feel you can stand out.”

His company prefers to fully finance its projects and take them to studios for distribution, whether that was Netflix for “Beasts of No Nation,” Focus Features for “Harriet” or Amazon on “Sylvie’s Love.” Asomugha stars in “Love,” which premieres on Dec. 25, with Tessa Thompson playing the titular Sylvie.

“Our thinking is you can end the year on a positive note. When we were making the film, obviously we weren’t thinking of it at all. We were just, ‘Let’s make a lovely romantic story.’ But now it’s taken on a new form just because of all the craziness that’s happened this year.”

— Shalini Dore



Photo: Courtesy of Margarethe Baillou

Margarethe Baillou

“The World to Come”

When Baillou founded MYRA Entertainment in 2007, she was determined to only “make films I would love to see myself.”

Most recently, the German native based in New York and London produced Mona Fastvold’s “The World to Come,” a period film about neighboring couples on the American frontier picked up for U.S. distribution following its Venice premiere. It stars Vanessa Kirby, Katherine Waterston, Christopher Abbott and Casey Affleck, the latter also a producer on the project, and is based on as screenplay by Ron Hansen and Jim Shepard that Baillou describes as “nonviolent, destination-driven, inclusive and rich in language, which pretty much sums up the mission of MYRA — a solid match.”

“The World to Come” is “about two women at the American frontier in the mid-19th century, and at first you think ‘how exotic,’ but then the pandemic hits, and you find yourself faced with issues eerily similar to the women in the film: isolation, the need to be witnessed and the majesty of nature that can be your best friend and your worst enemy,” Baillou notes. “All of a sudden it becomes very timely — which proves that a good story is timeless.”

— Lise Pedersen



Photo: Courtesy of Nynne Selin Eidnes

Nynne Selin Eidnes

“Dreambuilders”

When Denmark went into lockdown in March, Selin Eidnes’ animated “Dreambuilders” was already in theaters. “Releasing the film during corona has been tough,” says Selin Eidnes, who produced “Dreambuilders” under her First Lady Film banner, “but it also led to some unexpected success. For instance, since the only films making box office in the U.K. during corona were children’s films, ‘Dreambuilders’ was third in the top 10 U.K. box office for a week.”

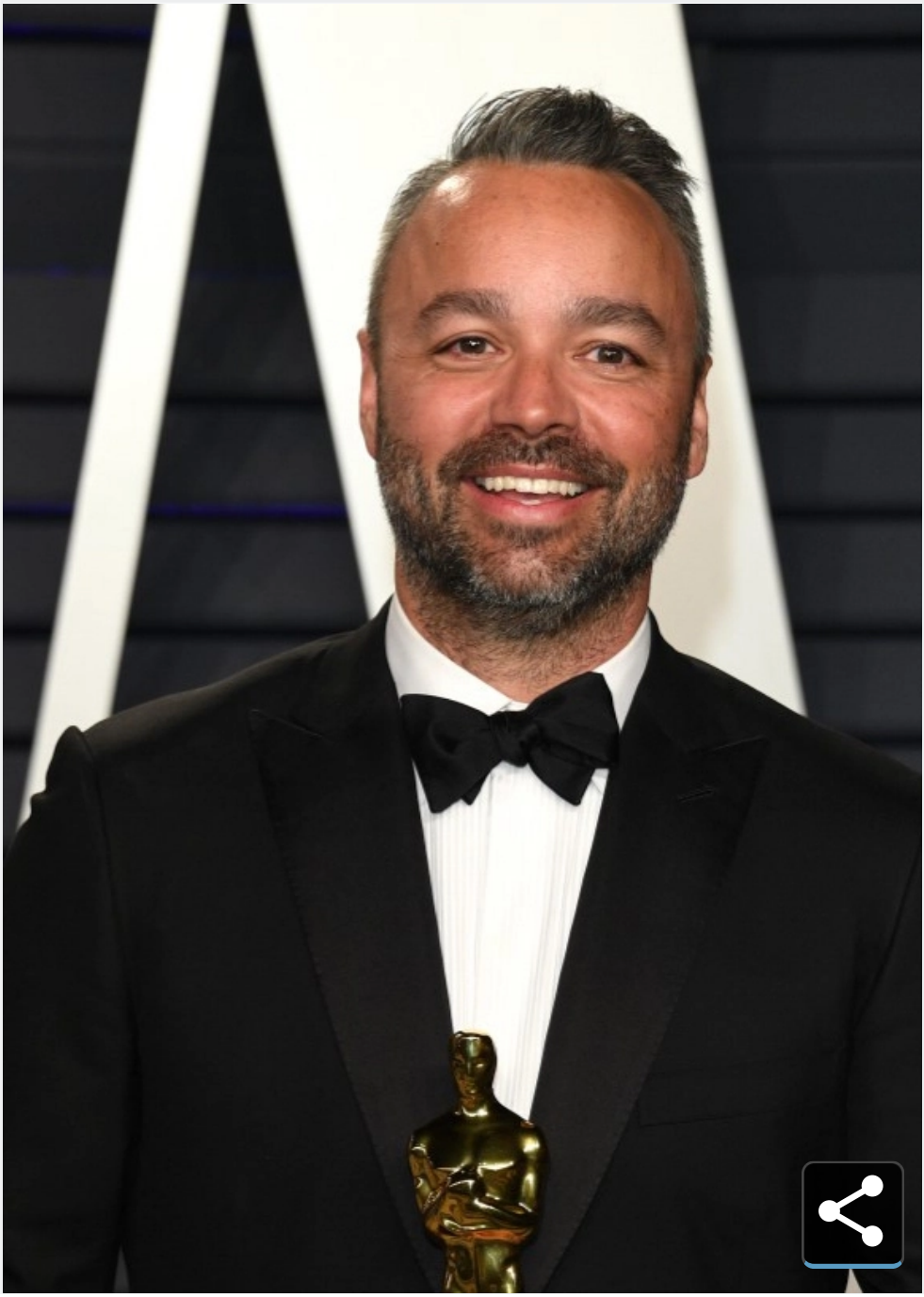
While First Lady Film focuses on youth titles, Selin Eidnes also works with the innovative, independent production outfit Nimbus Film, the group behind Dogma hits such as “Festen” and “Mifune.” Her first feature for Nimbus, the World War I drama “Erna at War,” helmed by Henrik Ruben Genz, debuted on Oct. 29. “The biggest challenge in the making of ‘Erna’ was producing the film with regional funding from three different countries,” she says. “Not only

was the financial spending locked to a country, but to a very specific region in that country, which means that we had to come up with some very creative solutions for the film."

Given her strong background in all aspects of filmmaking, creative solutions are Selin Eidnes' forte. "What I love about producing is mastering the puzzle. Making all the millions of little details come together as a complete work of art is immensely satisfying." She considers American producer Gale Ann Hurd an inspiration. "I hope to be making kick-ass films like her while also helping young women forward in the industry," she says.

Selin Eidnes has a slate of five features and four TV series in various stages of development. Next up: the body-swap series "Tiger Leap" for a young-adult audience. And, she adds, "hopefully there will also be a sequel to 'Dreambuilders' in the future."

— Alissa Simon



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Evan Hayes

“The Way I See It”

As a partner and head of original development and production at ACE Content, Hayes likes to have a lot of balls in the air and considers himself format

agnostic.

He produced Oscar-winning documentary “Free Solo” with filmmakers Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi and Jimmy Chin, a feature that also won an Emmy for backers National Geographic Documentary Films, and has followed that up with “The Way I See It,” a look behind the scenes with former White House photographer Pete Souza, who captured the presidencies of Barack Obama and Ronald Reagan.

Directed by Dawn Porter and produced along with Laura Dern and Jayme Lemons, the Focus Features docu debuted at Toronto before airing on MSNBC in October.

“I didn’t know if Pete would be able to hold an audience on screen when we went into that first meeting with him,” Hayes says of Souza. “Then we saw him give a talk a few hours later and I was just bowled over by emotion. I knew to trust my instincts that his story was a story that needed to be told.”

Besides Toronto, the doc was an official selection of this year’s Telluride Film Festival. Last month, Hayes and Porter attended a very small, private screening of the film last month with the Secret Service and former President Obama. “Seeing Obama tear up while watching your film is surreal,” Hayes says. “It was a COVID silver-lining moment.”

Hayes worked his way up the producing ladder at Working Title Films, where he started as a college intern and rose to senior executive producer. While exec producing “Everest” for Working Title, he

showed the cast and crew clips of soloist climber Alex Honnold, subject of “Free Solo.”

“I learned a tremendous amount about storytelling there,” Hayes of his Working Title stint.

— Addie Morfoot



Photo: Courtesy of Ashley Levinson

Ashley Levinson

“Pieces of a Woman”

Levinson, chief strategy officer at Bron Studios and a producer at Little Lamb Prods., tends to gravitate toward projects with potential to enlighten and inspire, in hopes they will make the world “a little bit of a better place.”

She co-founded Little Lamb Along with husband Sam Levinson and Kevin Turen, and produced Kornél Mundruczó’s “Pieces of a Woman,” starring Vanessa Kirby and Shia LaBeouf, which debuted at Venice to strong reviews; a gala screening at Toronto followed.

Netflix acquired the movie, Mundruczó’s English-language debut, which centers on a grieving mother after the loss of her baby. It’s a film that “has such a perfectly balanced American sensibility with a European sensibility,” Levinson says.

In the summer, Little Lamb shot “Malcolm & Marie,” starring Zendaya and John David Washington, one of the first films to return to production during COVID-19. Another of her productions, David

Lowery's fantasy horror "The Green Knight," starring Dev Patel and Alicia Vikander, is waiting for release.

Selecting projects that balance commercial and creative potential "starts with finding a story that you feel people will connect to, and doing it with talented people," Levinson says.

"One of the most important aspects of my job is removing obstacles so that filmmakers can stay focused on the task at hand, which is making a great film. Oftentimes, I find myself just being the platform for that, and being able to connect different entities and pieces that allow them to be successful."

Levinson cites Kathleen Kennedy and Donna Langley as influences, calling them "women that I've seen elegantly lead and who truly understand physical production and working with artists." She also learned a lot from Keri Putnam, with whom she worked at the Sundance Institute.

— Leo Barraclough



Photo: Courtesy of Jindrich Motyl and Martin Ruzicka

Jindřich Motýl and Martin Růžička

“Shadow Country”

“Shadow Country,” the first film produced by Růžička and Motýl, recently debuted in their native Czech Republic before screening at the London Film Festival. American distributor Menemsha Films picked up the devastating period drama, shot in black and white by Czech auteur Bohdan Sláma, and set in years following World War II.

“We fought for this story,” says the producing partners of Luminar Films. “It is very important for us to tell of events that happened right after WWII because they’re not spoken of in the Czech Republic and it is our national dark secret.”

One-time advertising agency owner Motýl and attorney Růžička have been friends since childhood who also joined forces to found the Zlin Film Office to promote filmmaking in their region. Inspired by independent directors and the Czech New Wave of the ‘60s, they are producing both art movies and popular comedies, as well as series for TV and VOD platforms. “We want to tell exciting and original stories. There’s a different way for each one,” they say.

Luminar’s current slate of projects includes the 3D animated family film “The Proud Princess,” a remake of the most popular Czech fairytale of all time, due in 2021. Next year, production will begin on another period drama, “The End of the World,” with a screenplay by Ivan Arsenjev, who also penned “Shadow Country.”

“The End of the World” will mark the feature debut of Ivan Zachariáš, the directing talent behind TV series “Wasteland” and “The Sleepers.” The producers describe the project as a story of a grandpa and his grandson in a fragile relationship. “We believe that Arsenjev and Zachariáš are among the best of contemporary Czech moviemakers.

When we read the screenplay the first time, we couldn't fight back tears. It's a story full of light and hope."

— *Alissa Simon*



Photo: Courtesy of Gennie Rim

Gennie Rim

“Over the Moon”

Rim has worked with animator Glen Keane since they were both at Disney, and after they both left the Mouse House, she became a big part of the animator’s shingle, producing the Oscar-winning short “Dear Basketball.”

Keane’s feature directorial debut, “Over the Moon,” is streaming now on Netflix. The adventure, set in a charming Chinese town, takes the audience to the moon with its prepubescent protag Fei Fei (a clever girl with a talent for building rocket ships and voiced by Cathy Ang) peppered with catchy songs and eye-popping colors and memorable characters, including moon goddess Chang’e, voiced and sung by Phillipa Soo. It’s also about losing a parent when you are a young child, as Fei Fei loses her mother early on in the film.

The late screenwriter Audrey Wells wrote the film “as a love letter to her daughter and her husband to

say, ‘You know it’s OK to grieve. But please don’t stay in that grief for too long. Please move on and allow yourself to love,’ ” says Rim. The “Moon” team worked hard to honor Wells’ intentions.

Rim considers Pixar her “home base,” where she learned to tell stories through both features and shorts. “With shorts, you have agility to move quickly and be really innovative and kind of break the rules a little bit,” she says. “You have a smaller crew and also you’re not held to a house style, just be free creatively. I really love that.”

Rim got into animation by chance: while a college student, she was working at her family’s pizza parlor in San Francisco when an animation director walked in and happened to mention he was looking for an intern. She was hired and has never looked back. “I never had thought of animation as a career. I never knew that you could do this for a living.”

— Carole Horst



Photo: Courtesy of Bradford Rogne Photography

Becky Sloviter

“Palm Springs”

Sloviter cut her teeth as a producer working for Mary Parent and Scott Stuber at Universal and

eventually found her way to Andy Sandberg's Party Over Here shingle, where she oversaw the production of "Palm Springs," a time-loop comedy that sold to Neon and Hulu for a record price at Sundance this year.

"I ate, slept, and breathed it and almost nothing else for two years," says Sloviter, who revelled in the opportunity to take a hands-on role in the production, based on a script by Andy Siara and starring Samberg along with Cristin Milioti. A sci-fi twist on "Groundhog Day," it is entirely set in the California resort town of its name, but despite a state tax credit, was mostly shot in Palmdale and Santa Clarita due to indie budget constraints. "We ran into very inclement weather," says Sloviter, calling the production "really challenged in that respect."

Originally, a theatrical release was planned for the movie, but it ended up debuting on Hulu in July due to pandemic constraints on the theatrical marketplace.

"Andy and I really do joke that we made a documentary because we're releasing this at a time when most of us feel stuck in our personal time loops," Sloviter says. "It really is the resonance of this movie. Certainly an unintentional resonance, but a resonance nonetheless."

Sloviter's last day with Party Over Here was the day the team left for Sundance. She has since been focused on building a division at MRC Films devoted

to developing female comedies. It's a fitting development for a producer who cites "Baby Boom," "Adventures in Babysitting," "Nine to Five" and "Working Girl" as inspirations, and Nora Ephron as a role model.

Says the Philadelphia native: "This is literally a dream job."

— Diane Garrett





Photo: Courtesy of Peter Spears

Peter Spears

“Nomadland”

It took 10 years for Spears to produce his first movie, “Call Me by Your Name,” and a mere 10 months to get “Nomadland” into production with Chloé Zhao directing and Frances McDormand topping a cast filled with non-pros.

“They were on very, very different paths,” says Spears, a self-described journeyman actor who decided to pursue producing in earnest after a pep talk by Diane Keaton on the set of “Something’s Gotta Give.”

“Nomadland” was birthed on the awards circuit three years ago, while Spears was supporting “Call Me by Your Name” and McDormand was promoting “Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri.” They jointly optioned the book “Nomadland” is based upon and McDormand found their director when she screened “The Rider” during a break from promoting “Three Billboards.” Once Zhao pitched

them her naturalistic approach, the adaptation really began to take shape.

“Call Me by Your Name,” by contrast, went through several potential directors during the decade Spears and fellow producer Howard Rosenman spent trying to get the book adaptation made.

“The planets aligned in a very different way that time,” Spears says.

Zhao’s producing partner Mollye Asher and Dan Janvey soon joined the trio on the project. Their challenge: Finding ways to blend non-professional nomads with McDormand’s fictional Fern, a rootless widower in her early 60s. Spears credits the lean filmmaking team and Zhao’s nimble approach as key to her ability to pull off a near documentary approach.

“I love that my career has transformed and reinvented itself,” says Spears. “I don’t think I would have been at all ready to step into this role in as effective a way as a younger person.”

— Diane Garrett



Photo: Courtesy of Jenifer Westphal

Jenifer Westphal

“Farewell Amor”

Since starting Wavelength Prods. in 2015, Westphal has executive produced nearly two dozen films, among them documentary smashes such as “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?,” “Where’s My Roy Cohn” and “Scotty and the Secret History of Hollywood.” Branching out into narrative features, Westphal was also an executive producer for the Sundance premieres “Selah and the Spades” and “Farewell Amor,” both of which were picked up at the festival. Not bad for someone who didn’t get her start in film until her early 50s.

“When I first got together with my producing partner Joe Plummer, our philosophy was basically: ‘Whatever Jen likes, that’s what we do,’” says Westphal. “And I think we still operate that way, only now we’re more of a team.”

Westphal originally intended to be an investor, but soon started finding her voice as a producer. Since then, she’s displayed a remarkably keen eye for breakthrough docs that combine social relevance with charismatic central characters, as well as making young women filmmakers and filmmakers of color a priority.

With the pandemic having gutted the theatrical pipeline, Westphal decided to take matters into her own hands, self-distributing Wavelength films

including Pepe the Frog documentary “Feels Good Man,” which won a special jury award at last winter’s Sundance, and “Maybe Next Year,” which focuses on the Philadelphia Eagles’ notoriously diehard fanbase.

“What we love about that is we can control all the marketing, because it’s all our money,” she says. “Would we love these films to be up on a big platform like Netflix? Obviously. But they didn’t buy it. And it’s not going to go to theaters, so what do you do? One of the things we’ve done is to pivot to self-distribution, and we feel really good about it.”

— Andrew Barker

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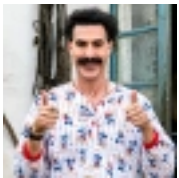

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