Sundance Institute Selects 12 First-Time Feature Filmmakers for Screenwriters Intensive

Writers and Advisors from a Broad Array of Backgrounds Come Together to Advance Distinctive Screenplays

LOS ANGELES — Twelve screenwriters have been selected to participate in Sundance Institute’s eighth annual Screenwriters Intensive in Los Angeles, to take place March 4-5, 2020. The Intensive, a two-day workshop for select emerging writers and writer/directors from underrepresented communities, focuses on the development of first fiction features. Fellows at the Intensive will advance the art and craft of their work under the guidance of experienced filmmakers and the Institute’s Feature Film Program, led by that Program’s Founding Director Michelle Satter and Deputy Director Ilyse McKimmie.

Advisors for the 2020 Intensive include Gregg Araki, Lee Isaac Chung, Shana Feste and Susanna Fogel. Previous alumni of the Intensive include Andrew Ahn, Natalia Almada, Reinaldo Marcus Green, Tina Mabry, and Roger Ross Williams.

“We’re thrilled to be supporting a remarkable group of writers at a crucial stage in the development of their work,” said McKimmie. “By providing dynamic dialogues with advisors and a rigorous creative process, we hope the Intensive will have significant impact on the advancement of these projects, and will offer the fellows an inspiring expanded artistic community.”

The Sundance Institute Screenwriters Intensive is made possible with leadership support from the Will & Jada Smith Family Foundation.

The 2020 Sundance Institute Screenwriters Intensive Fellows, and their projects, are:

Rosa Tran
writer/director, Bardo

_Bardo_ is an animated story about the Vietnam War through the eyes of a civilian. After the fall of Saigon, Thao stops at nothing to keep her family together as they journey across the sea, but the battle takes its toll on her and she begins to hallucinate. It's a story of a mother’s strength, sacrifice, and will to leave the world she knows in pursuit of a better life for her family.
Rosa Tran started her career in animation on the Emmy- and Annie Award-winning series *Robot Chicken*. As she made her way through the puppet fabrication ranks to the animation floor, Tran worked to streamline the departments and foster a production order that allowed the creative vision to flourish. She excels at finding creative solutions for sophisticated and elaborate imaginations. In 2012, Tran launched a Kickstarter campaign and raised money to produce *Anomalisa*, directed by Academy Award winner Charlie Kaufman and starring Academy Award nominee Duke Johnson. *Anomalisa* was not only nominated for an Academy Award and a Golden Globe, it was one of the very few animated films to be nominated for four Film Independent Spirit Awards. Currently, Tran is the co-executive producer on *Final Space*, created by Olan Rogers and executive produced by Conan O’Brien, and currently in development at Legendary TV. Tran has penned her first animated feature screenplay, *Bardo*, which will be her directorial debut.

Benjamin-Shalom Rodriguez, *Bar Mitzvah Boy*

writer/director

The horniest, most closeted 7th grade loner does whatever he can to find true love and friends before the biggest and most dreaded day of his young life—his bar mitzvah.

Benjamin-Shalom Rodriguez is a gay, Mexican-Israeli-American, Jewish writer, director, and comedian. His #humblebrags include: being selected for the Ryan Murphy Half Directing Mentorship Program, Fox Writers Intensive, National Hispanic Media Coalition Writers Program (sponsored by ABC and NBC), Film Independent’s Project Involve, and CBS Showcase. As a writer/director, Rodriguez has had multiple comedic and dramatic shorts produced, with some playing international festivals and garnering awards. Rodriguez has also created two sold-out sketch shows for Comedy Central Stage. Before coming out as a full-blown artist, Rodriguez assisted the producers of *Django Unchained*, was a talent manager in Miami for telenovela stars, and a feature exec for the Lionsgate-backed 3Pas Studios. Rodriguez is a filmmaker mentor with Edward James Olmos’ Youth Cinema Project, and a charter member of the queer Latinx writers collective, The Clubhouse.

Francesca Sloane, *Headbangers*
1997, Philly. When Ethan's mom dies, this teenage, devout punk is forced to raise his kid sister with his estranged boozer grandma. They move to an all black and Chicano neighborhood where he finds himself secretly falling in love with rap music. Life finally starts to open up for him—until Ethan makes a mistake that changes everything.

Francesca Sloane was raised between Philadelphia and El Salvador. She is currently writing on the newest season of Atlanta (FX). Francesca is co-creating a series at Netflix, as well as developing a project with Legendary. Prior to working on Fargo (FX), she developed a series at Apple and worked on set, writing with Beau Willimon on The First (Hulu), which starred Sean Penn. Francesca began her writing career on the staff of Veena Sud’s Seven Seconds (Netflix) and Startup (Crackle). She will be making her directorial feature debut on Headbangers, which was recently recognized by the Black List and NALIP on their inaugural list of best unproduced LatinX screenplays. After graduating from the film and video program at CalArts, Sloane travelled the globe shooting lo-fi political video art before getting her Masters in Screenwriting from UCLA. Sloane enjoys finding beauty in the specific and the mundane and considers herself well-suited for the one job that encourages daydreaming at work: writing. She lives with her two big dogs, Billie and Lucy and her fiancé Brandon.

Young Jean Lee, Mistress Hand
co-writer/director

Jesse Short Bull, Mistress Hand
co-writer

A Lakota family is terrorized by a demon that maneuvers its way into their home by exploiting their matriarch's blindly devout Catholicism.

Young Jean Lee is a playwright, director, and filmmaker who has been called “the most adventurous downtown playwright of her generation” by The New York Times and “one of the best experimental playwrights in America” by Time Out New York. In 2018, Lee became the first Asian-American woman to have her play produced on Broadway with her show Straight White Men. Lee has written and directed ten shows in her New York-based Young Jean Lee's Theater Company, which has performed in more than eighty cities around the world. Lee has written a
screenplay commission for Plan B Entertainment, and her short films have been presented at the Locarno International Film Festival, the Sundance Film Festival, and BAMcinemaFest. Among many other distinguished recognitions, Lee was also the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2011. She is currently working on a Broadway play commission for Second Stage and a screenplay commission for Cinereach.

**Jesse Short Bull** is a member of the Oglala Lakota Tribe in the state of South Dakota. He is pursuing his Bachelor of Fine Arts in creative writing at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico. In 2014, Short Bull was part of a team to change the name of Shannon County to Oglala Lakota County in South Dakota. He co-founded a non-profit in 2009, the Native Youth Leadership Alliance (NYLA), which supports Native college students. He continues to be involved with the day-to-day operations of NYLA, and is active in his home community by supporting other Native nonprofits working in the region. Short Bull’s filmmaking features stories from the Oglala Lakota Nation. His short film *Istinma* won several awards and was screened at dozens of film festivals across the country. He participates in summer youth filmmaking workshops on the Oglala Lakota Nation with the First Peoples Fund, a national artists organization where he was a 2013 filmmaking fellow. Short Bull sits on the board of the Black Hills Film Festival in Hill City, South Dakota, one of largest film festivals in the state.

**Daniel Antebi**
writer/director, *On the Mat*

Ilan, 16 and queer, struggles to untangle himself from a complicated sexual relationship with his martial arts coach.

**Daniel Antebi** is a writer/director who shares stories about unsettling realities. As a 2019 Sundance Ignite Fellow, Antebi worked with mentors Malik Vitthal and Andrew Ahn to shoot *Soft*, an excerpt of his debut feature film *On the Mat*. Both films traverse Antebi’s sexual assault and its effects on his queer identity. Antebi has also been awarded the Sundance Institute’s BOAN Fellowship, pairing him with mentor Ira Sachs to guide him through his feature. *Soft* will have its world premiere in the narrative shorts competition at the 2020 SXSW Film Festival. In 2019, Antebi wrote an op-ed and directed a PSA regarding sexual assault for *Teen Vogue*’s award-winning Wellness
Robert Herrera
writer/director, *Pink Casa*

In blighted industrial neighborhoods of South Texas, a Tejano oil worker raises his orphaned, artistically gifted 12-year-old niece with the help of his cousins. After she is discovered by national art media for painting every inch of their house pink, a renowned New York artist’s visit prompts two disparate families to unearth their losses and confront their coupled futures.

Robert T. Herrera is a Mexican American filmmaker born and raised in Corpus Christi, Texas and currently based in St. Louis City, Missouri. He shot, directed, and edited the 2011 women’s basketball feature documentary, *The Gray Seasons*. He also created the 2017 no-budget feature narrative, *Palacios*, distributed by Freestyle Digital Media. Herrera attended Baylor University and Washington University in St. Louis where he studied architecture, art, and literature. He runs a Midwest video company, Gray Picture, where he creates a wide-range of content for commercial, brand, entertainment, and fine art use.

Kiran Deol
writer/director, *Tidal Disruption*

A starry-eyed graduate student desperately struggles to maneuver between her passion for astronomy and her charismatic mentor’s advances in this claustrophobic psychological thriller.

Kiran Deol is a filmmaker, comedian, and actor based in Los Angeles. Her first film *Woman Rebel*, a documentary about women rebel soldiers, was nominated for an Emmy, shortlisted for an Oscar, and distributed by HBO. Deol currently stars as Mallory in the new NBC/Hulu series *Sunnyside* from Mike Schur and Kal Penn, tours nationally as a standup comedian, and can be heard on the *Hysteria* podcast from Crooked Media. *Tidal Disruption* is her first feature film. Deol is the recipient of the 2020 Sundance Institute | Sloan Development Fellowship.
Jason Park  
cowriter/director, Transplant

David J. Lee  
cowriter, Transplant

A Korean American surgical resident, driven to fulfill his family’s American dream, pushes himself to extreme lengths while training under a legendary heart transplant surgeon who’s obsessed with protecting his perfect reputation.

Jason Park, a second-generation Korean American born and raised in Chicago, started making films when he would take his dad’s camera and reenact his favorite movies with his friends. He somehow decided to study theology, history, and secondary education in college, and spent a year as a teacher/missionary on the island of Palau in the South Pacific, where he eventually reaffirmed his love for cinema. He received a screenwriting fellowship through Film Independent’s Project Involve, where he wrote Teachers, a short film starring Tatyana Ali, which screened at the LA Film Fest, PBS Short Film Online Film Festival, and Urbanworld Film Festival. Park has written, directed, and produced short films and music videos, and most recently directed, produced, and edited Under the Boardwalk, a short that will have its festival premiere in 2020.

David J. Lee is a Korean American actor and writer from New Jersey. After graduating from NYU, he won a Fulbright Scholarship to research the transmission of dengue virus in rural Honduras. He went on to receive his MD from Johns Hopkins, where he spent nights and weekends on the other side of campus attending film classes, performing in an improv troupe, and frightening his Asian parents. Upon graduation from medical school, he moved to Los Angeles where he fully committed himself to acting and writing. Lee most recently wrote and acted in the short film, Under the Boardwalk, which will premiere at festivals in 2020.

Razelle Benally  
writer/director, Winter in Black Mesa
A terminally ill former mine worker uses the last few months of his life to attempt to reconnect with his estranged daughter, forcing both to confront the questions and emotions they've spent years trying to avoid.

Oglala Lakota/Diné director and writer Razelle Benally currently attends Tisch School of the Arts at New York University as a second year MFA candidate in film production, with a focus on directing. Benally received her undergraduate degree in Santa Fe, New Mexico at the Institute of American Indian Arts. She is an alumna of the 2012 Sundance Institute Native Filmmakers Lab as well as an awardee of Sundance Institute’s first Native Short Film Production Grant Fellowship in 2015 for her project I Am Thy Weapon. Her 2017 short film Raven screened internationally and picked up various awards, including Best Narrative Short, Best Directing, and Best Sound. Most recently, Benally directed a PSA featuring Mark Ruffalo and Tonia Jo Hall to promote the Indigenous Vote. She is currently developing her first narrative feature, Winter in Black Mesa, which has been supported through Sundance Institute’s 2018 Creative Producing Summit and the 2019 Women at Sundance Financing and Strategy Intensive.

Alex Heller
Writer, The Year Between

A comedy about the year between Clemence’s earth-shattering diagnosis of bipolar disorder and her earth-shattering comeback.

Alex Heller is a 26-year-old mentally ill filmmaker who lives in her parents' basement. Her upcoming work includes her first feature film, The Year Between, a comedy about bipolar disorder that is being produced by Alex Dinelaris, the Academy Award-winning screenwriter of Birdman. In addition to being selected for the TFI Network, The Year Between was one of five projects selected for AT&T Presents: Untold Stories, the million-dollar pitch at the Tribeca Film Festival. Heller’s short film Handjob has played at the Newport Beach Film Festival and the Chicago International Film Festival, where it won Best Comedy in the CineYouth category. Her short film 24 and Pregnant premiered on the front page of Elizabeth Banks's comedy site, Whohaha. Her upcoming short film Grizzlies is a collaboration with Jason Chiu, the cinematographer behind Adult Swim's Joe Pera Talks With You. In 2018, Heller was named one of Vulture’s "Rising Filmmakers Every Cinephile Should Have on Their Radar."
Sundance Institute
Founded in 1981 by Robert Redford, Sundance Institute is a nonprofit organization that provides and preserves the space for artists in film, theatre, and media to create and thrive. The Institute’s signature Labs, granting, and mentorship programs, dedicated to developing new work, take place throughout the year in the U.S. and internationally. Sundance Co//ab, a digital community platform, brings artists together to learn from each other and Sundance Advisors and connect in a creative space, developing and sharing works in progress. The Sundance Film Festival and other public programs connect audiences and artists to ignite new ideas, discover original voices, and build a community dedicated to independent storytelling. Sundance Institute has supported such projects as The Farewell, Late Night, The Souvenir, The Infiltrators, Sorry to Bother You, Eighth Grade, Won’t You Be My Neighbor?, Hereditary, RBG, Call Me By Your Name, Get Out, The Big Sick, Top of the Lake, Winter’s Bone, Dear White People, Little Miss Sunshine, Beasts of the Southern Wild, Fruitvale Station, State of the Union, Indecent, Spring Awakening, A Gentleman’s Guide to Love and Murder and Fun Home. Join Sundance Institute on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube.

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