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The Biggest Names Behind the Scenes in Hollywood

The Caucus for Producers, Writers and Directors Hosts its 30th Annual Award Dinner in Beverly Hills in a closed setting.

By An Exclusive by Adrienne Papp | December 14, 2012

People say the most memorable event in their lives is their wedding. For me, the indescribable excitement and honor of dining in a closed setting with the makers and shakers of Hollywood topped it all. These larger-than-life icons with paramount creativity make the world go around. Truth to be told, the actors only bring the work of the writers, producers and directors to life. I wasn't really intimidated by such legendary Industry names as Jay Roach, Gale Anne Hurd, Graham Yost, Stan Lathan and Two and a Half Men director James Widdoes, to name a few of the attendees, but Steven Spielberg was also nominated, and during the days leading up to the event I probably used up all the adrenalin one human is allowed in a lifetime. Add to that John Blanchette, and you've got a majestic event where everything came off perfectly!

You have to hand it to the folks in television; they really know how to throw a party. On Sunday, The Caucus for Producers, Writers and Directors held its 30th Annual Awards Dinner at the Beverly Hills Hotel. The event was not only star-studded, but also classier than the Oscars because it is not commercialized and it has a warm and well-respected human element to it. First class and elegant in every aspect, the Caucus not only celebrated its nominees and honored those with outstanding career achievements, but also generously awarded grants to young up-and-coming talents who otherwise would not get a chance in the Industry. What a noble appreciation for the next generation!

The Caucus, as a leader of the creative Television community, is an organization that promotes the best-broadcast entertainment products for a global audience. It counts among its membership the best of broadcast television's creative content providers, including the top 150 Television producers, writers, directors, and program directors of primetime, daytime and children's programming. The event was produced by Caucus Steering Committee Members Co-Chair Vin DiBona and Treasurer Lee Miller. The awards dinner chair was Norman Powell. President Chuck Fries, with whom I had a few minutes to talk about the Caucus, stated that over one million dollars had been awarded to support and mentor new filmmakers, while promoting and protecting the artistic rights of its creative community.

The evening was hosted with great flair by one of television's revered actresses, Valerie Harper, a four time Emmy winner, who is legendary for her roles in television series like Mary Tyler Moore and Rhoda and also her performances on Broadway and recently The Simpsons. "This is a wonderful event," Harper said in a private interview. "They don't open this up to just anyone. This is for the people who make the entertainment, and it's also about bringing along new talent and young people."

This year many of television's heavyweights were honored for their contributions in elevating the quality and diversity of television and new media while promoting freedom in the creative community. A significant portion of the proceeds from the dinner go to benefit The Caucus Foundation, which continuously provides grants to over 100 worthy students to complete their film, television or interactive projects.

HBO was one of the big winners at the Awards Dinner Sunday evening. Michael Lombardo, President of HBO Programming was named "Executive of the Year," and frequent HBO collaborators Jay Roach, Graham Yost and Stan Lathan were also honored in creative categories. Lombardo accepted the award from producer Gary Goetzman, who he collaborated with on Band of Brothers, John Adams and The Pacific. Goetzman called Lombardo "an inspiring creative partner."

In accepting the award, Lombardo made a point of mentioning how many people it takes to create a hit show, saying that "it really is you (who deserve the award), the men and women who have brought their unbelievable talents to HBO. It's much like getting an award for being husband of the year," explained Lombardo. "It's mostly about picking the right partner."

One of those creative partners who picked up competitive awards was Jay Roach, who was honored as director of the year for a body of work that includes HBO films

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Recount and Game Change. Roach took the award from a field that included Michael Cuesta, Jake Kasdan, Don Mischer, Kevin Reynolds and James Widdoes.

Roach recalled when he was hired to direct Recount in 2008 that he was anything but the obvious choice. "Talk about brave," Roach said. "I was trying to imagine what they were thinking when they were making Recount and HBO said, 'let's get the guy who did Austin Powers.'"

In an interview before the ceremonies, Roach admitted that he didn't plan to do comedy in the beginning of his career, although I told him he had the best sense of humor in the Universe, which I firmly believe, and I could not imagine him skipping comedies. "I was lucky that I got to work with a lot of funny people, and Mike Meyers told me that I should direct Austin Powers, so that started things off. I never really thought of myself as funny, and I didn't have to be funny. I just created an environment for other people to be funny. Currently I'm working on material that offers a little more in terms of dramatic depth, such as Recount about the McCain/Palin campaign, which premiered on HBO in March 2012, and a new project about Nikita Khrushchev starring Paul Giamatti."

Obviously Jay Roach is a monumental talent who easily glides from comedy to drama and back to comedy, which I think he really is the best at in Hollywood. I remember seeing his Meet the Parents three times and couldn't stop laughing. I thought that for my generation that movie was the FIRST one that brought on non-stop laughs and people just kept on flocking the theaters over and over again for more.

Roach's many directorial credits include the above-referenced HBO film Game Change, which was one of the most watched films in HBO history, and the film also gave him his third Primetime Emmy Award. His other directorial credits include Meet the Fockers, a brilliant continuation of Mr. and Mrs. Focker's turbulent life, The Campaign, a hilariously funny new release with Will Ferrell and Zach Galifianakis, numerous Austin Powers movies, and Mystery of Alaska. Roach's producing credit includes the Academy Award®-nominated Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan with Sacha Baron Cohen.

Although Kevin Reynolds, nominated for the director's award, lost to Roach, I cannot help but mention that his History Channel miniseries Hatfields & McCoy's, a true story starring longtime friend Kevin Costner, was nominated for a record 16 Emmy Awards.

Another frequent HBO collaborator, Graham Yost, won for writer of the year, beating out nominees Alan Ball, Vince Gilligan, Earl Hamner, Steve Levitan and David Shore. Yost won for FX's Justified, which he created in 2010 based on stories by Elmore Leonard. The award was presented by series actress Joelle Carter.

"Television perhaps more than anything is a collaborative medium," said Yost. Yost credited his father for inspiring him to get into the entertainment industry, noting that Elwy McMurrin Yost did a TV show about Hollywood and movies in Toronto for 25 years. Yost recounted that his father told him "you are going to go to Hollywood and be a writer." He also thanked actor Timothy Olyphant for contributing to the success of Justified for FX. I was part of the film crew of HBO's first theatrical big screen production in 1997 When Trumpets Fade, where I met Timothy the first time and one could already tell that he was a true talent. He has come a long way ever since.

In my interview with Yost before dinner I asked him what it was like working with such industry heavyweights as Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks. "It's an honor to be able to work with them, and if they're involved in another miniseries I'd love to show up for that. I'm very lucky to have been able to do work that we are all incredibly proud of." Yost is currently working on a new show for FX called The Americans, about the marriage of two KGB spies posing as Americans in the 1980s. It will debut in January.

His other credits include the megahit Speed that put him on the map and started Keanu Reeves' career, Broken Arrow and Rain, on top of a number of television series. When asked whether he prefers writing or producing, as he was nominated in both categories, he answered, "Writing is more solitary and producing is more interactive. I like them both, but I started out with writing a book." I could not help but ask him about my favorite subject, Quantum Physics. All good things start in Hollywood, so where do we stand with this new science in the world of cinema? He expressed a definite interest in the subject and added, "when there are practical applications then Quantum Physics will become a more accepted part of everyone's lives. The basic truths of QP will have meaning to everyone, because it's one of the basic universal truths. It will take some time to get into the mainstream, but then it also took more than a hundred years to fully accept the theory of relativity." He illustrated the difficulties involved in the technical and visual part of quantum physics shown on film "but then if you asked me about string theory I wouldn't have understood it," he added.

HBO, while showing strongly at the awards event, didn't win in all categories. One creative category that didn't come under the HBO umbrella was the award given to producers. Those honors went to the Homeland producing team of Howard Gordon and Alex Gansa. Their award was presented by Canadian actor, Diego Klattenhoff, who plays Mike Faber on the drama. In accepting the award, Gordon noted that the creative team has been "blown away" by the response to Homeland.

Another producer/director with a long history of HBO affiliations, Stan Lathan was honored with the Caucus "Lifetime Achievement Award" by Dennis Doty. Lathan, a prolific producer and director, spoke with pride about helping create entertainment

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featuring African Americans, whether with or without producing partner Russell Simmons. Lathan came to Los Angeles in 1975 to direct pilots for Sanford & Son, Martin, Moesha, The Parkers, The Steve Harvey Show and recently The Soul Man for TV Land. He noted that a lot had been done in terms of minority programming, but said African Americans are still an underserved audience. "I want more," he noted in a personal interview after the event. "I want much more. I want more executives, more employment and more substantive content." Meeting Stan Lathan is a life changing experience. With a list of directorial credits to his name longer than most, he is humble and kind, and there is something special about him that leaves an impression on you. His elegance, charisma and intelligence are an inspiration. While he is courteously respectful, he also has the charisma to change the room he walks into.

In 1991, with partner Simmons, Lathan launched the groundbreaking show Def Comedy Jam and Russell Simmons's Presents Def Poetry. In 2003 Lathan and Simmons won a Peabody Award for their Def Poetry series on HBO, and Lathan went on to produce and direct the Tony Award-winning Def Poetry Jam on Broadway. In addition to the Tony and Peabody awards, Lathan has received five NAACP Image Awards and the 2004 Diversity Award from the Caucus for Producers, Writers and Directors. His big screen credit includes The Cotton Club in 1982.

He has also been honored by the Directors Guild of America for his long and distinguished career!

Lathan further elaborated our shared Industry perspective in my interview. "We had much more programming for minorities ten years ago, so things seem to be going backward. This will remain a challenge for minority talent who are trying to break into the Industry." And, I intend to help increasing the programming any way I can.

Iconic producer Gale Anne Hurd, president of Valhalla Entertainment, which created AMC's smash hit The Walking Dead, was presented the Caucus Chair's Award. "Hollywood may have been in my blood," said Hurd, "but mine was a long obstacle-strewn road from the San Fernando Valley." Hurd began her career as Roger Corman's executive assistant and then become Head of Marketing for New World Pictures. Her production career took a stratospheric leap when she co-produced The Terminator. She followed that huge breakthrough with blockbuster hits Aliens, The Abyss and Terminator 2: Judgment Day. Hurd's additional credits include Armageddon, Hulk, Aeon Flux, The Punisher, the Academy Award-winning The Ghost and the Darkness and most recently The Waterdance.

When she finished her acceptance speech I had tears in my eyes. This truly influential and legendary producer had the most humble beginning and yet shined through in a largely male-dominated industry and showed all women that with hard work and dedication everything is possible. Kudos to Gale Anne Hurd, she is an idol!

Other honors were presented to producer John C. Moffitt, President of Moffitt-Lee Productions, who received the Caucus Distinguished Service Award and is a 1977 Emmy winner. Moffitt has been directing and producing for over forty years, beginning with The Ed Sullivan Show and carrying through a long distinguished career and longtime HBO involvement. His work includes the cult comedy series Mr. Show, and more recently he was nominated for a 2011 DGA award and primetime Emmy producing nomination for Bill Maher's special But I'm Not Wrong. Moffitt's career has included two primetime Emmy nominations for The Richard Pryor Show and Dick Van Dyke and Company, the first four American Music Awards, and he has 14 CableAce Awards and a record number 14 Emmy nominations.

Also honored was Variety political and legal editor Ted Johnson, who was given the Caucus Journalism Award. Johnson has been the editor of Variety's political and entertainment website "Wilshire and Washington" (www.wilshireandwashington.com), and hosts a political podcast of the same name. He has also been a regular contributor to Politico and The Huffington Post. Johnson has made numerous appearances on MSNBC, Today, Hardball, CNN, ABC News, and Good Morning America. He was also the managing editor of Variety from 2006-2010.

The Caucus awards are usually oriented toward the television community, but increasingly there is also an interest in New Media, which according to Frank Chindamo, encompasses "everything that isn't TV or film." Chindamo is the force behind Fun Little Movies (funlittlemovies.com), and is promoting New Media as another route for creative entertainment. In a personal interview after the show he said, "When we had movies and then TV came along a lot of people predicted that TV would kill the movie business. That obviously didn't happen, and each medium maintained its respective audience.

Then computers came along and YouTube made a big splash in 2006, and it didn't kill off any of the other media outlets. So today we still have people going to theaters in droves for the big screen effects and they're also viewing content online and on their phones. A lot of things are going mobile, and that just offers new opportunities, a new set of avenues to explore, for writers and creative people."

Not to be forgotten were the Caucus awards and grants presented to students. Alethea C. Avramis, a Greek-American student at UCLA, won first place in the Gold Circle Awards, which comes with a \$60,000 package of services from Panavision for her next project, which she said was a feature inspired by her winning short, The Foreigner.

Jordan Salvatoriello, who has an MFA from Emerson College, won second place,



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which brought her \$20,000 in services from Illuminate TV for her next movie. Other student winners included Jerell Rosales of UCLA, Joel Novoa of the American Film Institute, Micah Robert Barber of the University of Texas at Austin and Rebecca Louisell of USC

The Caucus also presented grants to students for projects done for TV or the Internet. The winners were the creative team at Dodge College of Film and Media Arts at Chapman University for a half hour serial called Two Close and the USC School of Cinema and Television for the production of the show In Brotherhood.

In a personal conversation with James Widdoes, director of One and a Half Men, I learned that although they had some wildly publicized and pretty dramatic outbursts on and off set, "they are back on track and things are going really well." Regarding new projects for Widdoes, let's not spoil the magic!

The Caucus also remembered four iconic Entertainment Personalities who passed on this year: Norman Felton, Bob Finkel, Dick Clark and famous and fun-loving publicist to the biggest stars, Dale Olson.

This most memorable and unique Award Dinner will stay with us forever! The ambiance felt like a big family as friends, colleagues, and family members expressed their gratitude and love for all winners and nominees who truly have dedicated their lives to entertain, teach, motivate and most importantly, inspire us through their hard work, to always remember that anything is possible if you are fully committed to your craft and never give up, no matter what!

[Adrienne Papp is a journalist/publicist, economist and MBA. She runs Atlantic Publicity and Spotlight Media Productions in Los Angeles, New York, Aspen and Europe. Adrienne Papp is the member of the International Press Academy]

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Steven Spielberg, Legendary Director and Filmmaker

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Michael Lombardo, President of HBO



Adrienne Papp with Two and a Half Men Director, James Widdoes



Adrienne Papp with Jay Roach, Winner of Directors Award; Three Time Emmy Winner Director; Credits include: Meet the Parents; Meets the Fockers; The Campaign; Austin Powers Movies; HBO film Game Change and many more



Adrienne Papp with Graham Yost, Winner of Writers Award, Credits include Blockbuster: Speed, launching Keanu Reeves career, Broken Arrow, Rain, and Mega hit FX's Justified

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