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**FILM INDEPENDENT INTRODUCES THE 2026 PROJECT INVOLVE COHORT,
SETS TINA MABRY, JULIO PEREZ AND RACHAEL FUNG AS RESIDENT MENTORS**

First Look Screening of 2025 Shorts to Take Place January 15

LOS ANGELES (January 14, 2026) — Film Independent, the nonprofit arts organization that produces the Spirit Awards, has announced the 33 filmmakers who will comprise the 2026 Project Involve cohort. The filmmakers will be introduced at Film Independent's annual First Look Screening on Thursday, January 15, 2026, at the Directors Guild of America in Los Angeles, where five shorts produced by the 2025 Project Involve cohort will screen. The event is open to the public.

Tina Mabry (*The Supremes at Earl's All-You-Can-Eat, Mississippi Damned*), a past Project Involve Fellow, marks a full-circle return to Project Involve as the 2026 Directing Resident Mentor. Resident Mentors work closely with the cohort throughout the program year, offering creative insight, industry knowledge and career guidance across disciplines. Mabry is joined by Rachael Fung (*Eye for an Eye, Fremont*) as Producing Resident Mentor and Julio Perez (*Euphoria, Malcolm & Marie*) as Editing Resident Mentor. Ruth Atkinson (Script Consultant and Story Editor) and Aaron Edmonds (Vice President of Film at Hartbeat) return as Story and Creative Executive Resident Mentors, respectively.

LAIKA returns for another two-year cycle, providing an annual stipend to the five LAIKA Project Involve Fellows. With LAIKA's generous support, Fellows receive mentorship and guidance from LAIKA executives as well as a production stipend to create their stop-motion animated short film.

The inaugural University of Arizona School of Theatre, Film & Television Fellowship, providing a \$10,000 unrestricted cash grant to an outstanding TFTV alum, will be awarded to Rafael Gomez. For its second year, the Climate Entertainment Commissioning Grant, in partnership with Plot Shift Media, will award one screenwriter a \$25,000 grant to create a new climate-focused fiction feature script, helping to build a pathway for projects centered around climate. 2026 Project Involve Fellowships to be awarded at a later date are supported by Amazon MGM Studios and Sony Pictures Entertainment. Each Fellowship provides essential program support to Project Involve and includes a \$10,000 unrestricted cash grant for a selected filmmaker participating in the program. In addition, the Panavision Fellowship will provide an outstanding cinematographer in the program with a camera rental package valued at \$60,000 for use on a future project produced in the U.S.

Film Independent's Project Involve Principal Sponsors include the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, Formosa Group, the Golden Globe Foundation, LAIKA, Panavision and Picture Shop. Supporting Sponsors are Amazon MGM Studios, Los Angeles County Department of Arts & Culture, Plot Shift Media, SAGindie, Sony Pictures Entertainment and University of Arizona School of Theatre, Film & Television. Additional support is provided by Indiana University Jacobs School of Music and The Office of Supervisor Holly J. Mitchell of the Second District of the County of Los Angeles.

Going into its 33rd year, Project Involve has proudly fostered the careers of more than 1,000 filmmakers from communities historically excluded from the film industry. Alumni include Andrew Ahn (*The Wedding Banquet*), Thembi Banks (*Young. Wild. Free.*), Julian Breece (*Rustin*, *Harlem*), Effie T. Brown (*The Inspection*), Linda Yvette Chávez (*Flamin' Hot*), Jon M. Chu (*Wicked*), Jomo Fray (*Nickel Boys*), Rachel Goldberg (*Agatha All Along*), Hank Jones (*Will Trent*), Mako Kamitsuna (*All Day and a Night*), Marvin Lemus (*Gentefied*), Lulu Wang (*Expats*), Harry Yoon (*Thunderbolts*), Kim Yutani (Director of Programming, Sundance) and many more.

"In our 33rd year, Project Involve is proud to welcome 33 exceptional Fellows into the Film Independent family," said Francisco Velasquez, Associate Director, Project Involve. "This moment reflects the heart of the program—creativity, collaboration and growth coming together in a complete cycle. We are incredibly excited to support this cohort as they embark on a transformative journey together. This journey is made possible through the generosity of our longtime partners and sponsors, to whom we extend our deepest gratitude."

Project Involve is a free year-long program for writers, directors, producers, editors, cinematographers, animators, programmers and entertainment executives from diverse backgrounds. Throughout the program, participants engage in one-on-one meetings with film industry mentors, attend workshops and conversations led by renowned professionals, join industry networking events and collaboratively produce five short films from inception to completion.

This year's Project Involve Fellows by track are:

CINEMATOGRAPHERS

Matty Beavers

Rafael Gomez
Kelvin Kataria
Kate Ketcham
Tianyi Liu

DIRECTORS

Loren Escandon
Sydne Horton
Omar Kakar
Robin Wang

EDITORS

Mario Fierro
Haruka Gerald
Joanna Phillips
Yessenia Sanchez

EXECUTIVES

Nora Bernard
Uriah McKinney
Lauren Milan Rausaw
Olivia Stark
Meera Vaidya

PRODUCERS

Chidi Amadiume
Carver Diserens
Suki "Shuqi" Li
Rachel Moss
Parco Richardson

WRITERS

Raymond Arturo Perez
Bryce Marrero
Jacky Watson
Nikki Palumbo

WRITER/DIRECTORS

April Maxey

LAIKA FELLOWS

Haley Chung
Alexander Gonzalez
Inna Mikhaliova
Rika Nakayama
Carlo Padilla

Past shorts produced in the program include *Single Residence Occupancy* (2025 Atlanta Film Festival Jury Award for Best Narrative Short), *Dear Mama...* (2023 NAACP Image Award

Winner), *7lbs 8oz* (2022 Florida Film Festival Grand Jury Award for Best Animated Short), *Black Boy Joy* (2020 NAACP Image Award Winner), *Lonely Blue Night* (2020 AFI Fest Short Film Audience Award), *Liberty* (2019 SXSW Narrative Short Film Jury Award, 2019 AFI Special Jury Prize – Live Action) and *Emergency* (2018 Sundance Special Jury Award, 2018 SXSW Narrative Short Film Jury Award).

Film Independent Artist Development programs promote unique, independent voices by helping filmmakers create and advance new work through Project Involve, Filmmaker Labs (Episodic Directing, Documentary Story Lab, Documentary Producing Lab, Episodic, Fiction Producing and Screenwriting), Fast Track Film Finance Market, Fiscal Sponsorship, Amplifier Fellowship, and the Imaginar Producers Residency, as well as through Grants and Awards that provide over one million dollars annually to visual storytellers.

For more information on any of the Labs or the projects that have been developed in them, please contact artistdevelopment@filmindependent.org. Additional information and an application form can be found at filmindependent.org.

ABOUT FILM INDEPENDENT

For over 40 years, Film Independent has helped filmmakers get their projects made and seen. The nonprofit organization's core mission is to champion creative independence in visual storytelling in all its forms and foster a culture of inclusion, in support of a global community of artists and audiences who embody diversity, innovation, curiosity and uniqueness of vision.

In addition to producing the [Film Independent Spirit Awards](#), the organization supports creative professionals with [Artist Development](#) programs, grants and labs. Signature mentorship program [Project Involve](#) fosters the careers of talented filmmakers from underrepresented communities. Weekly Education events and workshops equip filmmakers of all ages and experience levels with tools and resources. International programs provide cultural exchanges and career-building opportunities for film professionals around the world. And year-round screening series [Film Independent Presents](#) offers a robust program of unique cinematic experiences, including screenings, conversations, Live Reads and Bring the Noise musical events.

For more information or to become a Member, visit filmindependent.org.

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