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## **FILM INDEPENDENT SELECTS SIX FILMMAKERS FOR EPISODIC DIRECTING INTENSIVE**

LOS ANGELES (March 4, 2026) – Film Independent, the nonprofit arts organization that produces the Film Independent Spirit Awards, announced today the six filmmakers who were selected for the fifth annual Episodic Directing Intensive, which took place from February 18-20, 2026. The three-day program welcomes veteran directors, showrunners, cinematographers, editors, actors and executives to share their experiences and knowledge of the episodic directing landscape with the participating Fellows and support them with critical mentorship.

“We are thrilled to support this incredibly talented cohort of directors as they work to build careers directing television. With this program, we equipped them with the knowledge necessary to move into the space with confidence,” said Dea Vazquez, Associate Director of Fiction Programs. “We spoke to episodic directors, showrunners, editors, actors, cinematographers and executives about collaboration, prepping for episodes and career planning. The Fellows were prepared for each session and engaged with guest speakers with incisive questions.”

The select list of industry participants included Andrew Ahn, Robert Baltazar, Themi Banks, Adam Bernstein, Ante Cheng, Ben Eisenberg, Gloria Fan, Hilarie Holt, Liz Kelly, Shari Page, Julio C. Perez, Jeremy Podeswa, Beth Schacter, Brian Tee and Daniel Willis.

This year’s Fellows echoed the program’s impact on both their creative and professional development. “I feel like the mystery of breaking into television has been completely dispelled

and I now have a better understanding of how to navigate the next steps in my career as an episodic director,” said Chelsea Christer. “Connecting with my cohort was another major highlight.”

“The Episodic Directing Intensive was inspiring, eye-opening and incredibly informative. A true 360-degree perspective on the state of TV directing and how to move toward landing that elusive first episode,” said Jacob Combs.

The following filmmakers were selected to participate in Film Independent’s 2026 Episodic Directing Intensive:

### **Alex Heller**

Alex Heller is a writer/director working between Los Angeles, Chicago and Norway. Her debut feature film *The Year Between*, an autobiographical comedy about bipolar disorder that stars J. Smith-Cameron and Steve Buscemi, premiered at the 2022 Tribeca Film Festival. It then sold to Peacock and received praise from *The New York Times*, *Variety*, *RogerEbert.com* and *NPR*. Heller’s recent short film *Debaters* (starring J. Smith-Cameron and Kenneth Lonergan) premiered at the 2025 Sundance Film Festival, was selected for the Sundance Short Film Tour and is a proof-of-concept for an upcoming feature film of the same title.

### **Chelsea Christer**

Originally from a horse ranch in Colorado, Chelsea Christer began her filmmaking career in San Francisco. Her work centers on character-driven narratives, often exploring themes of human connection, ambition and identity. Her feature-length debut, the award-winning music documentary *Bleeding Audio* (2020), released to critical acclaim and screened at nearly 20 film festivals, including Slamdance. Her most recent film, the short dark comedy *Out for Delivery* (2025) premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and screened at SXSW. She also directed the unscripted comedy series *Nobody Asked* (2024) for Dropout. She now resides in Los Angeles with her husband and their dog.

### **Christopher Nataanii Cegielski**

Christopher Nataanii Cegielski is a Navajo director, writer and DGA member. He recently developed and co-directed the 10-part docu-series *People of the West* with Boardwalk Pictures and Pechanga Creative Studios, telling California’s history from a Native perspective. He made his television debut co-directing the History Channel docu-series *Sitting Bull* from executive producer Leonardo DiCaprio. Through his commercial work, he has partnered with clients including the FDA, ABC, United Airlines and Google. His narrative work has screened at festivals such as the Berlinale, SXSW and imagineNATIVE, and he is an alumnus of Sundance Native Lab and Film Independent’s Project Involve.

### **J.M. Harper**

J.M. Harper is a Brooklyn-based director and father of two. His debut feature, *As We Speak*

(Paramount+), premiered in the U.S. Documentary Competition at the Sundance Film Festival in 2024, and his sophomore documentary *Soul Patrol* premiered there in 2026 and was awarded The Directing Award: U.S. Documentary. A multi-hyphenate documentarian, Harper has edited four feature films, including the Emmy-nominated series *jeen-yuhs: A Kanye Trilogy* and received a Peabody Award as an executive producer on *Daughters*. In 2024, he was named to DOC NYC's "40 Under 40" list and is a recipient of the 2025 Concordia Fellowship and Film Independent Amplifier Fellowship.

### **Jacob Combs**

Jacob Combs is a Los Angeles-based director, writer and producer whose work blends humor and heart to explore characters bridging conflicting worlds. He was a 2025 Film Independent Project Involve Fellow and Cayton-Goldrich Family Foundation Fellowship recipient, directing the satirical, dark comedy short *Tradwife* as part of the program. His previous film, the intergenerational queer short *The Orange at the Seder*, screened at the Seattle International Film Festival, BFI Flare London LGBTQ+ Film Festival, HollyShorts and the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival. Combs's previous episodic projects include Netflix's comedy *Blockbuster*, as well as Pixar's *Dream Productions* and the Emmy-nominated series *Inside Pixar*.

### **Stefon Bristol**

Stefon Bristol hails from New York with a distinctive voice in independent cinema. Inspired by his Guyanese heritage, his work blends genre storytelling with humanistic social commentary and cultural specificity. Bristol co-wrote and directed the time-travel movie *See You Yesterday*, produced by Spike Lee, which premiered at Tribeca before launching on Netflix to critical acclaim. The film earned Certified Fresh and won Best First Feature Screenplay at the Film Independent Spirit Awards. His latest dystopian thriller, *Breathe*, stars Jennifer Hudson, Milla Jovovich, Common and Sam Worthington. Bristol graduated from Morehouse College and earned his MFA in Film from New York University.

The Episodic Directing Intensive is supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts.

### **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](http://filmIndependent.org).

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