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# Entertainment Educators Discuss Teaching Cinema's Next Gen and the Importance of Diverse and Impactful Storytellers

By Malina Saval ▾





Schamus: Joel Jares



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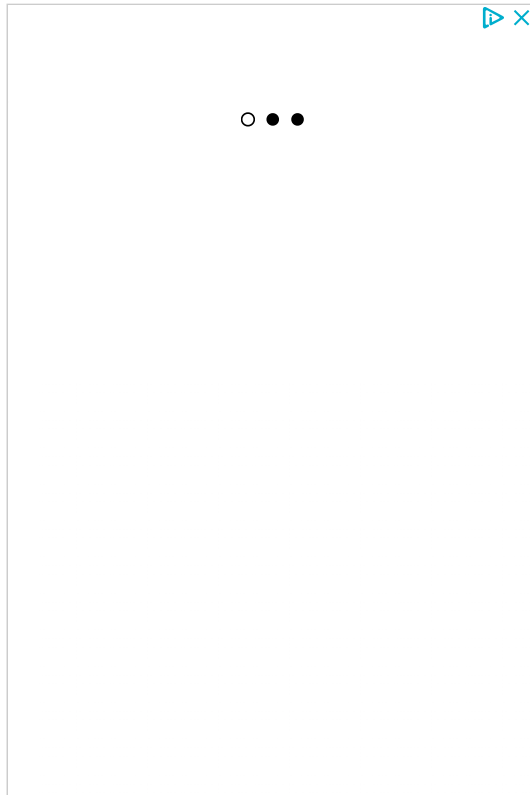
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Two esteemed film professors. Two wildly different cities on two different coasts. And countless ways in which both have contributed to the ever-expanding landscape of [entertainment education](#) in the United States — and the world over.

[James Schamus](#), three-time Oscar-nominated filmmaker of such landmark features as “Brokeback Mountain” and “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon,” former CEO of Focus Features and film professor at Columbia University School of the Arts, is one of Variety’s Entertainment Educators of the Year. He shares this accolade with [Joely Proudfit](#), a Payomkawichum woman, director of the California Indian Culture and Sovereignty Center and chair of American Indian Studies at California State U. San Marcos.

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These two forces of creativity — Schamus in New York, Proudfit in California — have been chosen as Variety’s two educator honorees not only for their dedication to the craft of filmmaking itself, but for their tireless work teaching today’s budding cineastes, many of whom are likely to become tomorrow’s top players in Hollywood.

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Schamus and Proudfit are as different as they are similar, both equally — and passionately — invested in teaching film as a medium to create positive systemic change.

## Popular on Variety



Schamus has written, directed and produced movies since the early 1990s. His latest project is Netflix's "Somos," a Spanish-language miniseries set in Mexico on which Schamus served as executive producer. "My own move into television with 'Somos' has been a wonderful thing both in terms of expanding my own education working in a new language and culture and new medium."



Schamus has also been a professor at Columbia for well over 30 years, focusing on cinema studies, in a tenured position to which he is deeply committed. While he may be a storied figure in the film biz, Schamus is also admirably humble. He lives in Columbia faculty housing a block away from campus and drives the same Subaru he's had for years. His logic being: "They could fire me tomorrow." Schamus also makes a point to never miss class — even if he's on set. Back when he was heading up Focus Features, he made certain that carving out time on teaching days was a non-negotiable part of his studio contract.

“I’ve taught for over 32 years now, at least one semester a year, and while I don’t teach in the summer term, I am religious about making sure I don’t miss class, even for work,” he says. “I will take the red eye back from Europe and roll into class with my luggage if I have to. I’ll do whatever it takes for my classes. Teaching is work. And university teaching — it really is an entire world.”

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Proudfit, who launched her career at San Francisco State University before heading to Cal State San Marcos, has been teaching Native cinema for 27 years. She “has spent decades trying to change educational policy” to reflect a more diverse and inclusive academic space, namely in the way of advocating on behalf of the Indigenous community, whose place in the mainstream entertainment world has only recently begun to net the attention it sorely deserves. Proudfit has worked as a production consultant on projects ranging from Scott Cooper’s Western “Hostiles” to “Spirit Rangers,” an animated series on Netflix created by Karissa Valencia, the first TV series with a California Native American showrunner. In 2016, Proudfit was appointed by Pres. Barack Obama to the National Advisory Council on Indian Education. Proudfit is also the owner of Naqmayam Communications, a public relations, marketing and advertising agency.

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One of Proudfit’s most stellar achievements is the work she has done as executive director of the California’s American Indian & Indigenous Film Festival, which takes place annually at the Pechanga

Resort Casino in Temecula. In its eighth year, the fest grew out of Proudfit recognizing the need for Native people to see films with Native content otherwise not available to them.

“I was screening these films in my classroom, and members of the community would come,” says Proudfit of those early days. “The only other places you could see these films were at film festivals — and that was pretty elite. My classroom would be standing room only.”

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By 2013, the screenings ballooned to the point where Proudfit needed to find a much larger space. This year’s fest, which ran April 2-3, attracted some 900 attendees each night.

“It was always important to bring a festival to tribal lands, to bring it home,” says Proudfit. “‘Hostiles’ screened to tribal people on tribal lands before it ever screened in Hollywood. And that’s important. Because Native art isn’t only for the elite. Native art isn’t only for film buffs.”

Proudfit and Schamus have varying perspectives on the evolution of entertainment education in America. Together, in conversation with Variety, they share their wisdom and experiences regarding cinema, cancel culture and film school programs in America.

**Film school is certainly one path toward becoming a filmmaker — but many successful writers and directors and producers have never gone to film school. Is there value in getting a film school degree?**

**James Schamus:** I’ll give you the same answer I’ve given for over 30 years, which is, I don’t have an elevator pitch, and I don’t have a pitch per se for MFAs in any way, shape or form — whether it’s film, writing, studio art or anything else. This doesn’t mean I don’t recommend folks pursuing graduate education in the arts — far from it. But I think that people often misconceive the benefits of time spent in these programs, and they can miscalculate the value of it. For a lot of people, going straight out of elementary school and making movies is perfectly reasonable. I don’t want to push film school for everybody. But for a lot of folks, that time spent, the years spent in the company of interesting,



thoughtful, engaged, questioning, ambitious people who bring their own voices and perspectives collectively to the spaces of learning and teaching – and that includes faculty as well as students – there is an enormous benefit to that. You're learning attitudes and skills from a cohort that you join. You're not doing it on your own. And that's probably the first lesson that people learn at the spaces in which they're going to be putting themselves forward when it comes to working professionally – there are going to be a lot of perspectives and voices and sometimes there will be people passing judgment. I think the health of the institution that offers these [BFA and MFA] degrees can be measured by the way in which the pedagogy can be critical, but also supportive. And it's the students often themselves, both individually and as a collective, who share responsibility for that productivity.

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**Joely Proudfit:** I agree with James. This is my 27th year of being a professor, and a lot of going to school is going through the motions – learning the structure, learning you can work well with others, experiencing those late nights and doing those research projects with others. These are all lessons that you don't get if you don't go through the process. I do wish we were talking about things [in the film business] that they're talking about in the class environment – through real critical lenses that just don't exist. I don't know if you can really have those conversations in the real world. But, I mean, there are amazing filmmakers that didn't go to film school. Scott Cooper, for example. I think he's great. We talked about this a lot when we were making 'Hostiles' and how, you know, there's a whole different approach [to filmmaking]. I think a lot of times it's like, how do you get to be in those spaces? And I think a lot of it is luck. And I think what film school does is take some of the luck out of it and gives you some of the opportunities and structure that you wouldn't normally find. But not everybody gets to go to NYU or Emerson or USC. I'm not a film school snob. To me, I think knowledge is power. It's what you do with it. I always remind people, the Unabomber went to Harvard and Berkeley.

**James, you're a filmmaker and you're a professor. Do you consider yourself more of one versus the other?**

**JS:** People often have this assumption like, oh, well, you've always got academe, that must be such a nice respite from the, quote, real world. And I'm like, no, it's actually work. It's labor. That's work. And we should treat ourselves as workers in that space and with all the rights and responsibilities of that description. So I've maintained a fairly consistent approach to my pedagogy over the years, even as the courses evolve and change, and the curriculum changes. I'm in the middle of my fourth decade of teaching at Columbia. So this is my real day job. I'm a professor. And I maintain that throughout the various iterations of my career. I treat the classroom time and space as sacrosanct — I don't phone it in. That said, I was hired and I have taught at places like Yale and Rutgers and Columbia as a film theorist and historian. I have never taught a directing workshop. I have never taught a screenwriting workshop. The only producing classes I ever taught were over around three decades ago when I started the producer track at Columbia. So, I've never really taught a pure workshop class — I never will. It's not my strength. I teach film history.

### **Joely, what motivates you to teach and do the work that you do in the Native space?**

**JP:** I came into this having grown up in the time of [the 1970s film] “Billy Jack.” When I was a kid, I used to watch “Billy Jack” on TV over and over again. And in my head [“Billy Jack” actor Tom Laughlin] was half-Native. I didn't know who he was. And then as an adult, when I was teaching Indigenous cinema, I would teach “Billy Jack” and what not to do — I mean, it's just terrible. But then I met Tom Laughlin in real life, and I met his wife, Dolores Taylor, who played his love interest in the series of “Billy Jack” films. And he began to cry. They met in college, she lived in the Dakotas and they wanted to deal with the injustice and plight of Natives. They did [“Billy Jack”] as a student film. He wasn't trying to culturally misappropriate. He just was trying to do what he could do to help us. And we all know the road to hell is paved with good intentions. He wasn't attempting to be the white savior. And it was a moment wherein I realized, we can put this all together — and not culturally misappropriate. I had seen for years how studios and filmmakers were trying to do the right thing. And what we want is the art form. What we want is to connect non-Natives and Natives together to tell the stories. It's about being able to control our own narrative. That's very powerful.

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**Political correctness and the threat of cancellation are such massive forces in pop culture. How does that play out in terms of your teaching?**

**JS:** We can look at this way: it's called the School of the Arts — where I teach. And that name assumes that what I teach is in and of itself valuable — art. But don't we all also distinguish between, let's say, good art and bad art? But it would sound weird if we called it the School of the Good Arts. So we're already in a field of ethical and political contestation — who's in charge of saying what's good and what is bad art? And on top of that conundrum, doesn't giving art a purely positive value open the door to a culture that has often fostered terrible abuse under the excuse that it's in the service of a higher good? It's like, we've forgotten that there are extra steps you need to take, further discussions that are messy and fraught. You have the obligation to think through these things. In fact, the whole point of art may be that it surfaces these problematic and often contradictory imperatives. Which means we have to allow for at least the possibility that art as an enterprise, the way we have organized it in our culture right now, might actually be in and of itself, well, bad — it gives us the illusion of being able to achieve some kind of ethical pleasure through a process that unmoors us from basic ethical considerations. And that means students and teachers have a responsibility to engage with art in ways that aren't simply mastering its techniques or appreciating its greatness. So we have, at the least, a responsibility to engage with these texts critically. And that means calling out when we see stuff that we think people are not necessarily taking full responsibility for the risks they take. But I do encourage my students to take those risks — clearly, there is no good art, however you define it, without risk — while also accepting those responsibilities.

**JP:** You know, we talk about a power structure. These systems are everywhere, all around us. And you know what they say about Hollywood — that it's just high school with money. And if you see it that way, then you can start to at least prepare yourself for what's around you. I want to talk a little bit about Raoul Peck's "Exterminate All the Brutes," because he based it on three books. I don't know how he got HBO to allow him to do a four-hour docuseries on colonialism, but he takes on this whole white supremacy notion through a lens that we can start to talk about in real systems change, right? And it's not calling everybody racist. I wrote the discussion guide for that, and I've been using that a lot to teach students how you can use your position to really talk about systems and the way he uses art and music to really talk about colonialism. To talk about fascism and the Holocaust. It's just an amazing way to use art and storytelling and filmmaking. And I think it's really integrative to have the student look beyond their own personal [life]. As storytellers, we should always be asking, What is the impact? Who does this impact? Why are you telling the story? How are you telling the story? It's important to have our students ask themselves all those questions. Yes, it's better for them. It's better for the story I want. I want the art to be well-received whatever the art is. I want them to hit their mark, and asking those questions up front really helps them strengthen whatever it is they're trying to do, to be in good relations. Because nobody wants to be alone by themselves and an outcast. The

worst thing you can do for our tribal communities is to damage someone. And nobody wants to be damaged in Hollywood.

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**Considering how competitive the film business is, do you ever find yourself having to convince students – or even their parents – that pursuing film as a career makes any sort of financial sense? Do you ever get the urge to tell them to pursue something more practical, like medicine or law?**

**JS:** It's the same thing I say to investors of the movies that I have been involved in, whether it's "Brokeback Mountain" or any of the other ones. You have to be honest with them: the odds are kind of against you. But then again, the odds are against us in almost everything. So, you do have to make an informed decision. But if you're making the decision based solely on a cost-benefit analysis, and if you use that as the rubric under which you make all the decisions in your life, you're really not going to have much of a life anyway.

**JP:** For Native communities, it's not about profit, it's not about making money. It's about, what are you going to do for the community? We are the original storytellers. Storytelling is our future. It's our voice. It's about cultural sustainability. Telling your story is power.

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**Read More About:** Entertainment Education, James Schamus, Joely Proudfit

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