



# Not Lacking in Direction

DGA members reflect on how they have stayed productive during the COVID-19 quarantine

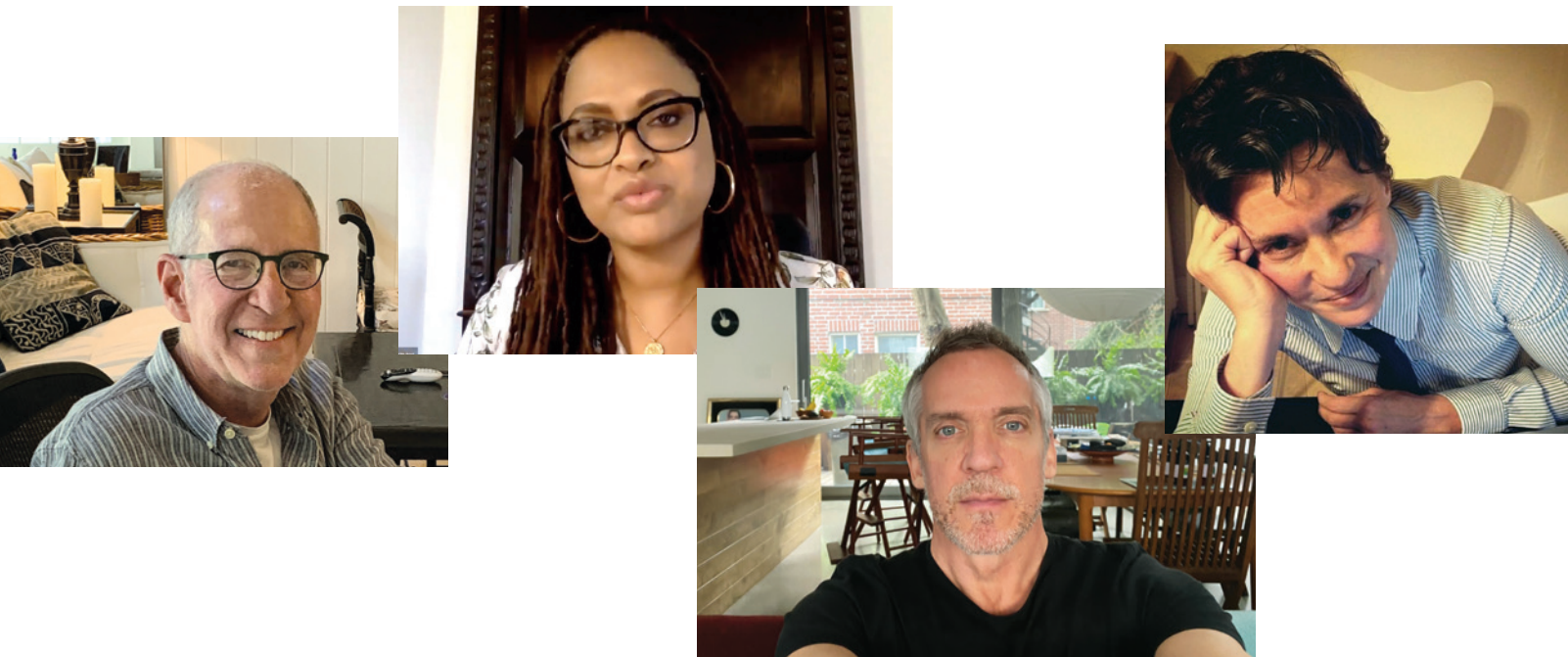
Barely a month into the COVID-19 quarantine, which forced productions to shut down worldwide beginning in mid-March, *DGA Quarterly* surveyed directors on how they'd been coping. And while these helmers continued to work in various ways, they also discovered that time could be on their side, allowing them to indulge in the kinds of activities that usually took a back seat to their perpetually busy schedules. Here are some of their responses:

## What were you doing when the shutdown began?



**Ava DuVernay** (*When They See Us*, *Queen Sugar*, *Selma*): I was on the set of a massive DC Comics pilot I am directing for HBO Max (*DMZ*). We were three days from wrap. We abbreviated the schedule to one remaining day and pressed through. We are now posting remotely. Turns out the fastest internet in my house is in my laundry room, so I edit at a little table close to the dryer! Another show I direct and created, *Queen Sugar*, was in post in L.A. and principal photography in New Orleans. We walked away from both that Friday. I think of my crew every day and how they are making it. My heart aches for all who've lost work.

**Craig Gillespie** (*I, Tonya*; *Lars and the Real Girl*; *The*



*United States of Tara*): I was in post on Disney's *Cruella*. It was just before we showed the director's cut. We have since been working remotely, editing and going over VFX shots.



**Lesli Linka Glatter** (*Homeland, Mad Men, ER*): I was, literally, on my way to Budapest for seven months. We were just beginning full on prep on a new eight-

hour miniseries for Amazon (*The Banker's Wife*) when everything went down. I had the four suitcases and the three boxes packed, ready to go—this was March 12 or 13, I think.

This is a project that is about the banks that do business with dictators and money launderers and drug runners and presidents and the wealthy and entitled, with two amazing, complicated, layered female characters. So it's something I'm really excited about.

The good news is I didn't fly to Budapest with all of that shit and then have to turn around and come back.

**Nicole Kassell** (*Watchmen, The Following, The Killing*): I was and am in script development on a feature and a couple of shows for TV.

**Eytan Keller** (*Iron Chef America, Kids Baking Championship, All American Handyman*): I was in the process of prepping a few returning series and specials and working on closing an upcoming franchise relaunch.

**Alexander Payne** (*Downsizing, The Descendants, Sideways*): As the plague was spreading, I was in London

**HOME FRONT:**

Left to right: Lesli Linka Glatter, Craig Gillespie, Alexander Payne, Ken Whittingham, Nicole Kassell, Eytan Keller, Ava DuVernay, Jean-Marc Vallée and Kimberly Peirce.



prepping a four-hour limited series (*Landscapers*) with Olivia Colman for HBO and Sky Television. I'd been there only four weeks, revising the script,

just beginning to cast and scout, and the U.K. was still wide open. I remember we were scheduled to scout courtrooms on Monday, March 16, but just a few days before, the U.S. announced it was closing travel into the country for noncitizens. The airports were chaotic, the writing was on the wall, and I rang the producers that Sunday to suggest we cancel the scout and fold our cards. My family and I returned to the U.S. four days later.

Since the shutdown, I've kept tinkering with the scripts and watching a few casting tapes. It's great to work, but at the same time it's hard to avoid even a small sense of spinning one's wheels, since no one yet knows what filming will look like on the other side of this, if indeed there even is a definable other side.



**Kimberly Peirce** (*Stop-Loss, Boys Don't Cry, Dear White People*): I was directing material I love (Jim Carrey on *Kidding*) and finishing the screenplay for my next

movie, a classic romantic comedy about love, sex and heartbreak, when the pandemic hit.

We sent the script out March 11. The world shut down March 12. It became obvious we were *not* going to be shooting anytime soon.

So I set about finishing another script—a personal, family-based romantic tragedy about an American singer-songwriter and her father.



**Morten Tyldum** (*Defending Jacob, The Imitation Game, Passengers*): I was in the last week of postproduction on *Defending Jacob* when the shutdown began. I mixed

the last episode and then went straight into promoting the show. I was very lucky that the shutdown didn't really impact us that badly.

Since we had wrapped postproduction that week, what the shutdown did force us to do was do press and publicity for the show remotely. There was no press junket, but we were able to do interviews over Zoom and over the phone. There was no premiere, which was disappointing since we couldn't be together with everyone who had worked so hard on this show and celebrate the show going out into the world.

**Jean-Marc Vallée** (*Big Little Lies, Wild, Dallas Buyers Club*): A few days before the shutdown, I just had time to fly back home from Santa Monica, where I was already isolating myself in a house since November 2018, [when] I started to research and write a feature film on John and Yoko.

I guess I'm lucky since nothing was interrupted; nothing has changed as I'm still working from home communicating with the others through emails and phone calls.

**Ken Whittingham** (*Grace and Frankie, Black-ish, Parks and Recreation*): We were in the middle of doing a new show for Netflix called *Dad, Stop Embarrassing Me*, starring Jamie Foxx. It was a multi-camera show, and we were going to do eight episodes (all to be directed by Whittingham), and we had just finished the first one. On March 13, we got the notification that we were going to shut down for a couple of weeks. And then, of course, it turned into a few months. However, I was able to edit that one episode. Our editor lives in Washington, so he had to go back. And they set him up with a very simple way of editing. I think a week later, he sent me his cut. And we were able to communicate back and forth and give notes and I gave him my cut.

## Have you indulged in other creative activities to help fill the time?

**Payne:** For the first few weeks, food acquisition and organization seemed like a creative act. Now I'm trying to use the time to squeeze out a new screenplay and read submissions. Outside of filmmaking, I was always

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—AVA DUVERNAY

a pretty avid home cook, but I'd never really baked. Now I'm covered in flour every couple of days. And I'm finally finding the time to organize my collection of old Omaha postcards.

**Kassell:** I've found a real love for painting with watercolors. I'm gardening for the first time. Practicing meditation. And as always, taking many photographs.



**Keller:** I have always wanted to perfect my skills painting with watercolors but couldn't find the time until now. I wouldn't say I "perfected" my skills, but it's certainly great fun, completely gratifying and humbling all at the same time.

**Glatter:** I haven't spent this much time in my own house in years, because I spent the last nine months in Morocco (for *Homeland*). As a director, we're on the set with hundreds of people. That's the world we function in, and we're in a team sport. And I love that about it. And, you know, it's definitely been a shift of consciousness to find the creative process again in this new way.

So I gave myself a schedule, and now I'm really focused creatively on developing new projects. And that actually has been kind of wonderful. So yes, it's all in this Zoom world, but that has been the exciting creative challenge. Plus, I'm working on the DGA task force with Steven Soderbergh and a bunch of amazing people to really talk about how we can open safely.

**Gillespie:** There hasn't been much spare time; the remote situation has proved very productive. Mostly a routine of exercise, editing and family time.

**Tyldum:** At the beginning of quarantine, I was just trying to rest as much as possible since we had an incredibly intense post schedule. But now I have been catching up on movies and series I haven't had the time to watch, as well as reading books and scripts—searching for my next project.

**Whittingham:** Well, my wife and I finally picked up where we left off years ago on a project—a film that we've been working on. And so we've been writing, which has been nice, because we never have the time. We have three kids and work, so we've been procrastinating for a few years. As soon as this thing happened and looked like it was going to be extended for a while, we both started saying, "If we don't do it now, we're never going to do it." So it was the perfect time.

And then we have a couple TV projects that we're working on as well.

## Was there anything you watched or read that you found inspiring?



**Jason Reitman** (*The Front Runner*; *Up in the Air*; *Juno*): This moment has been an opportunity to rewatch the entire James Bond catalogue with my daughter. When I was a kid, my dad and I did the same thing, heading down to Videotheque on Beverly Drive and working our way through Connery and Moore. It's fascinating to binge these films now, watching a series that has been around since the early '60s. You can actually watch the state of the world change: world powers, sexual politics, musical taste and fashion. It's even kind of an essay on evolving film technique. You can see the moments when rear-screen projection evolved, or the Steadicam became available. My daughter has taken to pointing out every day-for-night shot. Just wish we could still be perusing the covers of VHS cases. I miss that.



**Vallée:** *The Last Dance*, a fascinating and addictive documentary series on Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls from director Jason Hehir. *Crip Camp*, from directors James Lebrecht and Nicole Newnham, so moving and inspiring. *Prophecy*, a documentary from director Charlie Paul on painter Peter Howson—absolutely mind-blowing. *I Know This Much Is True* on HBO, directed by Derek Cianfrance. It's so damn good, the best thing on TV out there right now.

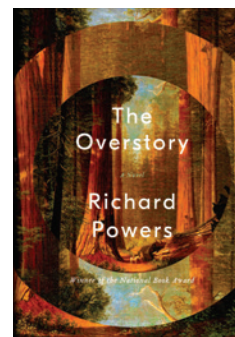
**Gillespie:** We just watched all of *Breaking Bad*. Amazingly, I hadn't seen it before. It was incredible (as the rest of the world already knows).

I also just finished *The Splendid and the Vile* by Erik Larson. Amazing and fascinating, and horrifying. To read how London dealt with the threat of death from aerial bombings for a year is truly inspiring.



**Kassell:** I feast on the biweekly e-newsletter *Brain Pickings* by Maria Popova. She curates artists/thinkers' essays, poems and segments from novels that relate so poignantly to the moment at hand. (In terms of) podcasts, I always listen to *The Daily* for news delivered in a calm, in depth, thoughtful manner. *Still Processing* for its heart and souls and humor. And *The Business* to stay in touch with Hollywood.

I'm late to the party but have been watching *The Great British Bake Off* with my 8-year-old daughter for mindless fun. But I find it also triggers great conversations about



**EDIFICATION:** Clockwise from top left: Alan Pakula's *All the President's Men*, Richard Powers' *The Overstory*, the ESPN multi-part doc *The Last Dance* (Jason Hehir), the James Bond movie *Dr. No* (Terence Young), the series *Breaking Bad*, Erik Larson's *The Splendid and the Vile*, HBO's limited series *Watchmen*, the series *Fauda* (on Netflix) and *Fleabag*.



art, effort, temperament, criticism, success and failure. *Tangled* and *Zootopia* have been on repeat as well.

I've also been watching some of the great films with my 15-year-old son: *The Insider*, *The Usual Suspects*, *The Sopranos* and, of course, *The Last Dance*.

I've definitely looked back to stories from the Spanish Flu and other eras of great illness to look at how people managed.

And reading—always reading the news, novels, scripts.

**Payne:** I rewatched all five seasons of *The Wire*, something I'd been meaning to do for years. Man, it's better than ever what with the patina of time on it now—still the gold standard of modern TV series. Other than that, I mostly watch old movies. Been trying to watch some "Master Class" but haven't been terribly disciplined about it. And I just enjoyed Sam Wasson's book about the making of *Chinatown* (*The Big Goodbye: Chinatown and the Last Years of Hollywood*).

**Tyldum:** I like Alex Garland's new show, *Devs*. But since my son has been out of school, I've made a kind of film school for us to watch the classics and revisit some of the movies I loved when I was in my early teens like *Alien*, *The Breakfast Club* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*.

**Peirce:** I went back to great dramatic works and brilliantly directed productions—Jung's *Memories Dreams and Reflections* (during WWII), *Upanishads* (800 B.C.), Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (audio version with Michael Sheen)—also set during a plague, Aristotle's *Poetics*, Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1951 film starring Fredric March), Miller's *Tragedy and the Common Man*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1948 film directed by and starring Laurence Olivier) and *King Lear* (2018 telefilm starring Anthony Hopkins).

That led me to the musical equivalent of the writer-director, the singer-songwriter. Every live performance, album and documentary on Pink Floyd (*Dark Side of the Moon*, *Wish You Were Here*), the Stones (*Gimme Shelter*, special emphasis on backup singer Lisa Fischer in 1995 and 2003, the eponymous Maysles doc), Dylan (civil rights and anti-war anthems), Pennebaker's groundbreaking *Don't Look Back* and Dylan's (memoirs) *Chronicles*, which led me to retrace his influences—Hank Williams Sr. (*Luke the Drifter*), Mike Seeger, Brenda Evans (*Shake Sugaree*), Chuck Berry, Woody Guthrie (*Dust Bowl Ballads*).

**Glatter:** I always look at things before I start a new project, whether it's books of photography or paintings. But in terms of films that I'm watching, I have a list of classics that inspire me: I went back and looked at *The Insider* again. *All the President's Men*. *The Constant Gardener*. *The Year of Living Dangerously*. *Zodiac*. *Three*

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—MORTEN TYLDUM

**"*The Insider* (Michael Mann) is one of those movies that I think changed how people make movies now, in terms of deep character study."**  
—LESLI LINKA GLATTER

*Days of the Condor*. These are all things that relate to what I'm working on. But they're also amazing films, with incredible directorial vision and performances. So it's exciting to have the time to really look at all of this.

I'm a big reader, so the couple of things I've been reading recently, *The Overstory*, the Richard Powers Pulitzer Prize-winning book, amazing. *Where the Crawdads Sing*, I loved that. *All the Light We Cannot See*. So it's great to have the time to actually read novels. On *Homeland*, there was so much research. Every time we go into a different arena, whether it's Russian interference or the war in Afghanistan, it's always digging deep and granular into those worlds.

For podcasts, I always listen to *The Daily*. But also, *The Big Steal*, which is about Putin, very interesting. Always love Malcolm Gladwell, and *This American Life* is kind of a go-to.

There's a lot of amazing TV that I've caught up with that I hadn't seen. I loved *My Brilliant Friend*...It's great. It's on HBO. It's based on the Elena Ferrante novels, which I loved. And they've done a beautiful job with it. *Fauda*, incredible series. And *Unorthodox*. I'm also really enjoying *Mrs. America* and *The Plot Against America*—lots of "Americas."



**Whittingham:** There were a few shows that I had never got a chance to see and I'm really enjoying them. Like I just finished *Breaking Bad*. I know it's like [laughs] years ago it was done, but I love that series. I've been watching a comedy called *Better Things*—a great show from Pam Adlon. And then some documentaries: one on Miles Davis (Stanley Nelson's *The Birth of the Cool*), one on Malcolm X (Rachel Dretzin and Phil Bertelsen's *Who Killed Malcolm X?*) and one on Clarence Avant, it's called *The Black Godfather* (Reginald Hudlin). And I really got into *Watchmen* (HBO).

**Keller:** On the book side, I enjoyed Daniel Yergin's *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money & Power*; and Nigel Hamilton's two great books on FDR—*Commander in Chief* and *War and Peace*. All three books are a must-read to understand the full context of globalization and the role of the U.S. in shaping history then, now and in the future.

On the TV side, I enjoyed watching *Fauda* (all seasons on Netflix). It's a truly compelling, introspective narrative that tells the story of the Israeli and Palestinian conflict in very human terms. It's an Israeli production that has support on the political right and left. Significantly, it's also a very popular show among Palestinians. Most importantly, it reveals how the lack of resolution to the current situation is destroying both peoples. The collateral damage of these forces is powerfully reflected by the characters on both sides of the divide.

## And if you watched another director's work, past or present, was there anything you learned from it?

**Vallée:** *I Lost My Body*, from writer-director Jérémy Clapin and co-writer Guillaume Laurant. I saw it first in a theater with a crowd just before the shutdown. I loved it so much, I wanted to see it again right away, to try to understand why I was so moved by it. So I got back home and watched it on a streaming service. I loved it even more the second time. I realized that I was moved not only by the story and what the characters are going through (what a wild, amazing fable), but by its fabrication as well. I was touched by the cinema experience, and funny enough, by its score, which is something I never use in my own films. I'm not sure what I learned from it, but to dare to aim for that quality of emotion.



**Gillespie:** I loved the use of music and time-lapse photography in *Breaking Bad*. I just watched Billy Wilder's *The Apartment*, such an amazing dance between humor and pathos.

**Payne:** I'd never seen a lot of John Ford's work. As far as Westerns go, I'm much more a fan of Anthony Mann, William Wellman, Raoul Walsh and Sam Peckinpah. I'm trying to get caught up on Ford and have really enjoyed *Pilgrimage* (1933), *The Long Voyage Home* (1940) and *Wagon Master* (1950), which is really funny and has a great performance by fellow Nebraskan Ward Bond. For a really great Ward Bond performance, see Walsh's *Gentleman Jim* (1942), which is also a spectacularly entertaining and well-directed movie. I've also been digging back into Ozu after many years, and it's again a revelation that even with a fixed, seemingly calm style, a director can achieve such emotional heights. And he never made a bad movie.

As I watch Westerns, I wonder whether any of them could be made again, just the sheer scope of them. I just rewatched Mann's *The Far Country* (1955), set amid the Alaska gold rush, and I kept wondering whether a film like that one could ever be replicated now, post-plague, in terms of its ambition, locations, scale, number of extras, all of it. I guess I even wondered that before the plague.

**Peirce:** I've been brought back to essential storytelling—powerful, emotional, sexy, lyrical and realistic stories of protagonists who shaped and were shaped by their



### INSPIRATION:

Clockwise from top left: Michael Mann's *The Insider*, Billy Wilder's *The Apartment*, Raoul Walsh's *Gentleman Jim*, Hal Ashby's *Being There*.

times—what originally and still compels me to write and direct. My current two scripts are inextricably informed and inspired by these works, their dramatic structures, and the characters that fuel them.

**Glatter:** I've been totally moved by the directorial genius of the directors I've been looking at. *All the President's Men* (1976, Alan Pakula), for example: You know the end of the story. It's history. There are no surprises here. But the telling of it is so extraordinary that every time I watch it, I'm on the edge of my seat. It is the most incredible political thriller. I am tense throughout. I look at the brilliance of *The Insider* (1999, Michael Mann). I mean, *The Insider* is one of those movies that I think changed how people make movies now, in terms of deep character study. And Michael Mann, focused on the back of Russell Crowe's head when Al Pacino has all the dialogue! I mean, again, it put you inside of the character. Plus, to mention, I just rewatched *Being There* (1979, Hal Ashby), which has nothing to do with, you know, the story I'm about to tell, but it's one of my all-time favorites.

**Whittingham:** I really liked *Fleabag* and the way it was directed. And really I thought *Breaking Bad* was directed very well. I loved the transitions, so it really got me thinking more about transitional shots. And even breaking the fourth wall in some ways, as they do in *Fleabag*, because we're going to do some of that in the Jamie Foxx show. ♦