

**In Proximity**  
**How to make it in Hollywood with Courtenay Valenti and Rebecca Cho**  
**Season 2 Episode 7**  
**Final Transcript**

[Music/Old Radio Sounds by Ken Nana]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: You're listening to P-R-O-X.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

**Courtenay Valenti:** I don't want to become stuck, and partly what keeps me curious is I love creative people. I love hearing their passion. When I'm no longer inspired by that passion, and I no longer get that excitement, which I still do, of sitting in a room with a director or a writer, and hearing them tell a story, and you get that feeling on your arms where you're like, "Oh, my god, I want to be in that world. I love what they're saying," when I no longer feel that, then I stop. But I hope I just fall over at that point because that's exhilarating, right? I mean, that's just the... It's the power of storytelling.

[0:37 - In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

**Paola Mardo:** You're listening to In Proximity. Courtenay Valenti has worked in Hollywood for more than 30 years. She got her start at Warner Bros. in the 1980s, climbing the ranks from assistant to studio executive to President of Production and Development. Under her leadership, the studio green-lit massive hits like Barbie, directed by Greta Gerwig; The Color Purple, directed by friend of the pod, Blitz Bazawule; and Judas and the Black Messiah, directed by Shaka King and produced by MACRO and Proximity. Warners is also where Courtenay hired and mentored Proximity's Head of Film, Rebecca Cho. Today, Courtenay is at Amazon MGM Studios, where she oversees the company's film slate strategy as the Head of Theatrical and Streaming Films. Their slate includes The Pickup, directed by Tim Story and starring Eddie Murphy, and The Fire Inside, the upcoming drama film written by Barry Jenkins and directed by Rachel Morrison.

get into what it means to be a studio executive and how it's different from being a producer. It's a job that can range from giving notes to a director to reviewing P&Ls and leading a historic movie studio. Courtenay breaks it all down along with lessons about leadership, mentorship, and staying curious throughout any stage of your career.

On this episode, Courtenay and Rebecca  
[VOICEOVER ENDS]

**Rebecca Cho:** Welcome to In Proximity. My name is Rebecca Cho. I am the SVP and Head of Film at Proximity Media, and I'm here today with Courtenay Valenti, the Head of Streaming and Theatrical Films at Amazon MGM. Welcome, Courtenay.

**Courtenay Valenti:** Thank you, thank you. I'm glad to be here.

**Rebecca Cho:** We're going to start with our Get Reel segment.

**Courtenay Valenti:** Okay. Let's go.

**Rebecca Cho:** Hey, what film have you seen countless times, and why do you keep coming back to it?

**Courtenay Valenti:** That is a really hard question because there are multiple films I've seen countless times, but—oh, my goodness. Well, I just recently saw Heat again for like the tenth time. And I love that film because it has this sort of collection of extraordinary actors, unbelievably shot, storytelling is just vivid, but it also is more than an action film. It really is a story with larger, grand thematics that I think play out no matter what the era is. But I could list off so many films that I love: Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, and Reds, and, oh, my god, just watched Creed III again recently. I'm a movie lover, so the list is long. You can't just relegate me to one.

[LAUGHTER]

**Rebecca Cho:** This is a tough one. I have recently rewatched When Harry Met Sally, which I think is one that many people rewatch.

**Courtenay Valenti:** Love.

**Rebecca Cho:** And it's one of those movies that, I feel like, can't really get made today, but—

**Courtenay Valenti:** Oh, I think it could.

**Rebecca Cho:** And I can't believe it got made.

**Courtenay Valenti:** I think it could. I think great, great character-driven pieces can.

**Rebecca Cho:** Yeah, maybe. Maybe one day we'll be able to make another classic like *When Harry Met Sally*. Outside of film, what art forms or hobbies inspire your creativity?

**Courtenay Valenti:** Multiple. I am an avid museum goer. I love painting. I love looking at extraordinary painters across all time periods. I find it's another form of storytelling, and in the end, I think what makes movies and art, fine arts, music—I love live music, I love listening to an album—all of it is about helping us, as human beings, make sense of our humanity. That is the power of all the art forms.

**Rebecca Cho:** Absolutely. I would agree with you. I think all of those kind of speak to the same impulse to make sense of who we are.

**Courtenay Valenti:** And to lose yourself in a feeling.

**Rebecca Cho:** Yeah.

**Courtenay Valenti:** I'm excited. I'm excited to open up a—

**Rebecca Cho:** Film reel.

**Courtenay Valenti:** Film reel. Don't think I've seen one of these in a long time. What is the best piece of career advice you've ever received?

**Rebecca Cho:** Ooh. I feel like it might be something you told me very early on in my career working for you, which is to always be learning something and to be working with great people. And that's something I always do a little checklist of for myself whenever I find myself facing new opportunities or new experiences to make sure that those are things that I'm constantly doing.

**Courtenay Valenti:** We keep learning and stay curious, we stay alive. So the best—I've received many pieces of good career advice, but I'll say that one of the best ones I received really early on in my career was, "The road is long, and what matters most is your reputation." And what this woman meant, who I was working for at the time—her name is Lucy Fisher. She was a senior executive at Warners, and exquisite, and I learned so much from her.

What she meant by that is, and I think I probably have said this to you in the past, your reputation is everything. So people remember, and they will remember what you did 10 years ago. And you're going to be working with many of the same people over and over

again through your career. So how you conduct yourself at every stage of the way matters.

Being honest and direct and transparent and also admitting when you've done something wrong and you've made a mistake, and it's just that being direct, clear, responsible, doing the work, doing what you say you're going to do even down to the little things, which is what I learned from Lucy, of you return all your phone calls every day, and if you can't return them, you let someone know you're going to get back to them via text or your assistant or someone, 24 hours. People submit something to you, you get back to them respectfully.

These little things all add up, and they matter. So it's stayed with me for 35-plus years, and I always tell it to other people, too, as they're starting in their careers.

[6:46 - Juno Arp Stinger by Ken Nana]

**Rebecca Cho:** We can jump right into how we met, which is always a fun story because we met in an interview. I came in to interview for you, and I'm curious if that left an impression on you at all or how you remember that.

**Courtenay Valenti:** I am filled with many memories, but it's not so much the specificity of that interview. It's that period of time when you were working as my assistant, and it was sort of clear to me after about 24 hours that you were a rockstar and that you were going to be zooming on to great heights very, very quickly. And what struck me very much in the whole time we worked together was the depth of your intellect and your intelligence but your obsession with film and your knowledge of film and story and narrative. And I think that's so key to anyone working in this industry because it's hard, and it's not always—the path isn't always direct for you to get to where you want to be. So you really have to love it, and that passion, when you feel it in someone, is very—it's powerful, and I felt it in you from day one.

**Rebecca Cho:** Oh, wow. Thank you. I remember our interview so clearly because I was actually hesitant to come in to interview for another assistant position. I had been an assistant for what at that time felt like a very, very long time, and, in hindsight, was not a long time at all. But I had been an intern for then a small production company called Lynn Pictures, now Rideback, and when I was an intern, the executives and producers

at that company was working very closely with you on the first Lego Movie and a bunch of other things. And I've only heard the greatest things with you—about you.

So, selfishly, I was like, I'm going to go to this interview. And even though I don't want to be an assistant, I just want to meet Courtenay Valenti. And then I was absolutely mesmerized by your grace and your experience and the way you talked about movies, and it sort of convinced me in that moment. I was like, I need to work for her. I need to learn from her. And I think it was one of the best decisions I've made.

**Courtenay Valenti:** Ah, working with you was an extraordinary experience.

**Rebecca Cho:** Thank you. Likewise.

[8:54 - Good Times by Ludwig Göransson]

**Rebecca Cho:** It's always fun to talk about how we met, but I think it's also, potentially, important for our audience to talk about what the job was that you were doing at the time, and still doing. Curious if you wouldn't mind explaining what the path of a studio executive is —

**Courtenay Valenti:** Sure.

**Rebecca Cho:**—and what the role of a studio executive is?

**Courtenay Valenti:** Absolutely. Now, when I sort of compare and contrast with a producer, producers tend to have less projects, and they dive in incredibly deep, right? And they're there at every step of the way. We're not producers. A studio exec never is going to have the level of detail and sort of inside knowledge of a film the way that a producer will. But our jobs are, as studio executives, to cultivate talent, to identify great new writers and great new directors, as well as develop relationships with established writers and directors and to then, make decisions about stories to acquire, and also pursue people who have those stories to acquire under the rubric of which stories, what movie ideas really fit into the larger creative strategy for the studio?

And studios function as financing entities. They not only fund development of projects, but they also then, ultimately, fund the production of the film, and then the marketing and distribution with the release. Whenever I'm trying to describe this to people who aren't in the business, I always say it's sort of like being an editor at a publishing house. You don't write the book, but you are working with the writer, giving observations about where narrative is working, maybe where the plot is not, suggestions on how to deepen or change or adjust character. It's editorial, what the job is of a studio executive.

You really have to learn how to listen and talk respectfully to talent because you're not doing the work, meaning the actual creation. And you have to figure out and learn how to talk to extraordinarily talented writers and directors and producers. You're giving them observations and sometimes criticisms about the work. So how you convey that so that people can hear you and actually feel your respect for them and for the material so that they will engage in that collaborative process is key to everything.

My mother used to say—this is an old fashioned expression, but I really think it's at the core of everything the both of us do—she would always say, "You attract more bees with honey than you do with vinegar." You can say the same thing two very different ways, and how you say it is so important because you need to be heard. And if you're not heard, you fail.

**Rebecca Cho:** Yeah. I would say, having been a studio exec before and now for being more on the producorial side of things, it's different how nitty-gritty you have to get with every aspect of a movie not just in development, but I'm coming out, out of a production right now, and it's—it's so much minutia as to how the extras are getting paid all the way to, actually, creative notes on scenes and, you know, blocking, and whatever it may be. And that was so far removed from my role as a studio executive. And sometimes, I think, as a studio executive, the projects that take a lot of your attention are the ones that are, you know, in crisis for one reason or another. And it's fun being on the producer side and being able to be in detail on things that are also going well.

**Courtenay Valenti:** Absolutely. I think you're really right about that. I'm superstitious, and I think the creative process of making a movie is never easy. And so, when

something—this is just my superstition, but when something goes too easily, I think, "Oh, my god, what's going to go wrong later?" you know?

**Rebecca Cho:** Yeah. Waiting for the other shoe to drop always.

**Courtenay Valenti:** And I don't want it to drop when it comes out. I'd rather it be complicated in the making because how many times have you seen movies that are just so extraordinary, and then you hear the complicated process. The creative process is complex, and it requires push and pull and disagreements.

**Rebecca Cho:** And it's always different, which I think is interesting.

**Courtenay Valenti:** It's so determined by the personality of the key creatives involved.

**Rebecca Cho:** Absolutely. What do you feel like is different about your role as a leader leading a group? What are the qualities that you feel like are needed that are valuable? And what transfers over from being a senior executive to leading a group?

**Courtenay Valenti:** Well, it's a fascinating question and one that I actually spent a lot of time thinking about over the years because when I made that transition from being a senior executive to then running the group, I didn't know what I was doing because no one really trains you how to lead. And you have to figure it out. There are certain attributes and key skills that you have to acquire. I had to flap around a little in the deep end to find them.

But if I could articulate them now, what I think is really important, and I actually think people should teach it early, is when you're running a group, you're no longer in the minutia of a project. You now have to pull back and be very macro on two very important levels. One is the management of your talent, meaning your executives, and how you guide them, inspire them, support them, and not micromanage. I'm a big, big believer that micromanagement is just frankly a sign of insecurity on the leader's part.

But you also really have to think about the larger slate. And what I mean by that is you have to really cultivate an understanding about: How do you create a slate that reflects the larger creative strategy of the studio? Meaning certain kinds of labels in town

are-know more just purely for just genre films versus the studio I'm at right now, Amazon MGM, as well as at Warner Bros., both of those were making broad slates trying to create movies that would appeal to multiple different audience segments and age groups.

Slate management is incredibly important. Given the budget you have, how many movies, what should the actual slots be? How many really big movies versus midsize versus maybe targeted films? And figuring out the right composition, that's not obvious, and that takes time to really figure out. Learning about becoming rather adept at sort of financial modeling and understanding how to read a P&L, profit and loss statement, a financial document that evaluates the financial—potential financial return you will make on a film depending upon the investment. So it looks at, accumulates all the potential revenue streams, puts it against minus-ing out all the expenses you have in order to bring the movie to life, and then it calculates margin of return on the investment. I didn't learn how to read a P&L until much later as—when you actually look at the realities of what it takes to have a return on the financial end, it's kind of shocking sometimes.

People make very glib assumptions about, "Oh, this movie can open to this much and do x amount" and—but then you really have to figure out, well, if that's what you think it is, and how did you get those numbers? Did you look at comps? And then past is not always a reflection of the future, but you have to start somewhere to figure it out. And then that helps you back into what the price point should be of the movie.

Anyway, these are—that takes time. And then there's people management, and I think, you know, you go from a time where you're focused just so on yourself and your own slate to now having to think about, "How do I help people find what they're really strong at and great at? And how am I also honest with myself about what my strengths are and my shortcomings?"

So I think it's really important as a leader to not only know what you're good at, but what are your shortcomings? And how do you bolster those with other people that you work with? And the same thing goes for your executives that you're leading and working with. How do you help push them towards and support them to really excel at what they are excellent in as and then also take note of their growth areas? How do you help people



with their career development—which is really important? Everyone wants to keep moving along and growing, and you have to, as a leader, help them achieve those goals.

**Rebecca Cho:** Yeah, definitely. I think these are all things that are—I wouldn't know how to learn them until you trial and error, fail at it, succeed at it, figure out your own version of it.

**Courtenay Valenti:** I think we might do better by people if we gave them a little bit more guidance and a little bit—some of the skill sets before we throw them into the deep end. We're big on throwing people into the deep end and hoping they can swim.

**Rebecca Cho:** Mm-hmm. That seems to be the mode of operation most of the time. Do you think there's anything you learned, like as a senior executive, that prepared you for some of those leadership roles, or leadership qualities that you had to learn? Is there things that were transferable, in your opinion?

**Courtenay Valenti:** Oh, without a doubt. So much of being a leader is listening. Communication, listening, all of those things that make you, I think, a successful executive are definitely transferable when you're leading. Those soft skills are all developed as an executive overseeing material and projects. What I was also talking about is some just very concrete skills that I wish I had had earlier.

But then you acquire them by being curious, asking questions, and being honest about what you don't know. This is actually a really big thing that I think is really important. I think too many people are embarrassed to say what they don't know. I am much older than you are. And I just—I'm 60! And you want me to tell you something? I'm learning all the time.

And I think it's really important to learn and to ask questions. And I can't tell you how many meetings I sit in now even, where I'll go, "I'm sorry. I don't understand that. What was that? Can you explain that again?"

And I take notes all the time. Still to this day I am carrying around a notebook. Anything I hear that I don't know, I write it down, and at the end of the day, I figure out someone I

can go ask to explain it to me. And I've been doing that since I was 25 years old starting as an assistant in this business because the worst thing you can do is not be honest about what you don't know and not seeking the help and not actually getting the support that you need in order to do a great job.

**Rebecca Cho:** Yeah, absolutely. I think it's really hard in this industry, I think, to admit things you don't know or things people say in meetings that everyone assumes you understand. And you're like, "Oh, I've never heard that before. I've never seen that before."

**Courtenay Valenti:** I actually have tremendous respect for anyone who says that in a meeting.

**Rebecca Cho:** Yeah.

**Courtenay Valenti:** I think that's brave.

**Rebecca Cho:** Yeah, I think so, too, but I think the environment of the industry makes it very difficult for people to say that or to raise their hand and ask questions.

**Courtenay Valenti:** I agree. I agree. I remember early on, really early on in my career, when I was a creative executive, working on Wyatt Erp, which Lawrence Casdon wrote and directed. Kevin Costner was starring and Warner Bros. was producing, making. This is in the early '90s.

And I really just wanted to go be around him and be on set. And I was the baby executive on to, on the movie, but I also knew that they probably didn't have a lot of patience for some newbie who didn't really know what they were doing. But I did a set visit, and I think he was, like all people, I imagine you feel—when people come from studios to visit, you kind of want them to come in and get out really quickly. But I just wanted to be around. I wanted to learn.

**Rebecca Cho:** Yeah.

**Courtenay Valenti:** So I sat on an apple box for three days, never said anything, but would take notes and just watched. And I would go, and I found different people on set just to talk to like, you know, maybe the second, you know, or I would go talk over to the wardrobe department, or I would go talk, you know, to the assistant to the line producer.

I would just go talk to people, ask them questions. And I was curious. And I just sat there quietly and on the third day, Larry came up to me at the end of the day, and he goes, "Okay, kid. What do you want to know?"

**Rebecca Cho:** Wow.

**Courtenay Valenti:** I knew my place at that time. I shouldn't get in the way. But I think I was just persistent and quiet. And—

**Rebecca Cho:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Courtenay Valenti:** And it's—so you, you show your interest and your willingness to just be there.

**Rebecca Cho:** Absolutely. I think that's actually a quality that isn't really valued in our industry, like openly, the sort of quiet persistence or the quiet observance of process, of strategy, of people's workflow.

**Courtenay Valenti:** Mm-hmm. I agree.

**Rebecca Cho:** You know, it's more—

**Courtenay Valenti:** Everybody needs to talk, talk, talk, talk.

**Rebecca Cho:** Everyone needs to be the one to talk, everyone needs to be the one to have ideas, everyone needs to be the one who is bold and brash and, you know, speaks the most, and, you know, all of the above. But I find being silent and listening and observing, you'll learn so much more—

**Courtenay Valenti:** I agree with you.

**Rebecca Cho:** —before you have something to say. And also, it's okay if you don't have something to say until later on once you've—

**Courtenay Valenti:** Totally agree.

**Rebecca Cho:**—absorbed everything.

**Courtenay Valenti:** Totally agree.

**Rebecca Cho:** People don't tend to value that, I think, as externally.

**Courtenay Valenti:** I, I, I agree with you, but I also truly believe, and I've seen it from experience, "Slow and steady wins the race."

**Rebecca Cho:** Mm-hmm

**Courtenay Valenti:** It's not racing along, trying to like, "See me! Look at me, look at me, look at me! And like, I need that next job, and I need that next"—pushing your way through. I don't, I think, learn.

**Rebecca Cho:** Yeah

**Courtenay Valenti:** And slow and steady, you'll outlast all—

**Rebecca Cho:** Yeah

**Courtenay Valenti:**—the people who got rash and weren't committed to really learning their craft. "Patience is a virtue." It gets you there.

**Rebecca Cho:** Yeah. Yeah. I think when you're young, and you're so hungry for your career to advance, it's really hard to internalize that.

**Courtenay Valenti:** Yes.

**Rebecca Cho:** But even just my years working at Warner Bros. with you, so much changed in those years.

**Courtenay Valenti:** It moves so quickly so people get very impatient, but I'm always saying to people, "Relax. The way it looks like right now, whether it's inside the company, the studio, or the production company or the agency or wherever, a year from now, it's going to look different, six months from now." Everything keeps changing. It always does.

**Rebecca Cho:** I think I started working for you as your assistant, and six months later, you were running the group, which wasn't something that we had talked about or expected when I started working for you. So you can't anticipate how things will change—

**Courtenay Valenti:** You cannot.

**Rebecca Cho:**—internally, externally, all of the above.

**Courtenay Valenti:** And you have to remain nimble and adaptable.

**Rebecca Cho:** Mm-hmm. I remember when we were going through many changes at Warner Bros., I ran into Steve Papazian—

**Courtenay Valenti:** I love—

**Rebecca Cho:**—who used to run physical production at Warner Bros. for many, many years, and he had been through many, many changes at the studio. And I remember him being like, "Don't sweat it. This is constant. It's always like this."

And I, being much younger and earlier in my career was like, "What are you talking about? This is the world ending." And even in my short career, I've realized, yeah, it was very true.

**Courtenay Valenti:** Well, it's interesting, you referenced Steve Papazian, because there is another, you know, iconic executive from Warners named Steve Spira—

**Rebecca Cho:** Yes.

**Courtenay Valenti:**—who ran business affairs for many years there. And I would always get really fraught in negotiations and get emotional. Like, "It's not happening!" and, you know, get all worked up.

And he would always say, "No one's dying on the table here. We're going to solve this. This is a problem to be solved. We will get through it." And I learned a lot from him about trying to take the emotion out of the panic. He was unflappable. I never saw him mad. I never saw him lose his temper. Everything was a "problem to be solved."

And it was a real—he said that to me early on in my career. By the way, he would say it to me all the time because I would get—everything sometimes would feel like a crisis. But, you know, your thinking can get very confused when you get all worked up, right? And to remain calm and sort of strategic trying to figure out the solution because I—another thing I always say about what I think producers do and what executives do is, "We are professional problem solvers." That is our job. And we have to remain clear-headed, and we just have to sit down and go, "Okay, we got to move these three moves down the chessboard. How are we going to get there? And what are our options for getting there?" It's, a lot of times, breaking down problem-solving.

**Rebecca Cho:** Mm-hmm. And sometimes, you'll get it wrong, and you have to adapt and figure out a new way to solve the way the problem has changed a little bit.

**Courtenay Valenti:** This is the benefit, I think, and why it goes back to not always racing through everything, right? Or wanting to get to that next job or that next thing. Experience matters because when you've been on a set 15 times versus once, you've seen different variations of certain problems and the challenges of what presented itself as well as the myriad solutions that you then employed over those many years all come to bear just to make you better at solving the problem because you have the experience, and you can draw on those different moments. So it's really important to accumulate experiences.

**Rebecca Cho:** Yeah, definitely. Speaking of experiences, you had a very long career at one company, which I think is quite rare in our day and age where people jump around a lot. Curious to hear sort of what you felt was a benefit of staying somewhere for a really long time, and then, now having moved to a different company.

**Courtenay Valenti:** Yeah. My experience is probably one that wouldn't happen today. And I came up in the business—you know, I started at Warner's in 1989. I remember, January 3rd, 1989, as an assistant to an executive named Bruce Berman at the time.

And I just loved it. I loved the company. I loved the lot. I loved the history. I—but most importantly, it's about who you're working with. And I just had the great privilege of working with extraordinary people who were inspiring and who I learned so much from. And I knew it was different and not like everybody else, but one of the benefits of being at one place for a long time is sometimes certain projects I had took 10 years. And I'm a big believer, because of that, that some projects need to wait for their moment to really be relevant. And you can love something, but there's some sort of bizarre, fabulous kismet that occurs in the larger cosmos of the movie business, which is sometimes after that 10 years, it's just that, thankfully, that right director and that right actor came along, and the subject matter and the themes of the movie really resonated and were right for that moment in time. And a classic title of a movie that took a long time to come to fruition was George Miller's *Mad Max: Fury Road*. And, I don't know, that might have been more than a 10-year process to bring that to the screen. And it had different incarnations along the way, and it just needed to be the right moment in time for George to bring this to life.

So I felt patient. And I would stay committed to something because I really felt there was something there. But it was always interesting to me how sometimes things just came along, you know, and it—and it became its moment and its time. And I never thought I was going to leave.

And then, when I ultimately did, what I've learned recently is how exhilarating change is and how you get inspired in a different way because you're in a different environment and a different culture and how much you learn. And because I went from a company that was really historically a theatrical distribution company, a legacy entertainment

company and a revered one to a company that is both, is a combination of legacy entertainment with MGM combined with the sort of innovation and the sort of ethos of a tech company, Amazon.

And when I describe it now to people, I say, "It's like one plus one equals five," because it's this wonderful—and I really believe, you know, I now feel like I'm at the future, like I'm at where the industry is going.

**Rebecca Cho:** I love that. I love that, even after 30-somewhat years, there's still more to learn. I'd be curious to know, like, what you feel like you do to keep yourself from falling into being jaded or judgmental and staying open and curious to all of the new things that are possible.

**Courtenay Valenti:** I don't want to become stuck. And partly what keeps me curious is I love creative people. I love hearing their passion. When I'm no longer inspired by that passion, and I no longer get that excitement, which I still do, of sitting in a room with a director or a writer and hearing them tell a story, and you get that feeling on your arms where you're like, "Oh, my god, I want to be in that world. I love what they're saying," when I no longer feel that, then I stop. But I hope I just fall over at that point because that's exhilarating, right? I mean, that's just the—it's the power of storytelling.

**Rebecca Cho:** Yeah.

**Courtenay Valenti:** To inspire, to take you someplace you haven't been before, to allow you to feel an emotion you either are familiar with or you're not, or you don't want to feel, that's the power of movies. Or in books and all of it, but that's what you and I love about movies.

**Rebecca Cho:** Yeah. It's, it's so funny how, ultimately, that feeling of being in a room with someone who's smarter than you, who's more creative than you, who has a passion for storytelling or a passion for a story, what you can sort of feel in that moment, I, I think it's so hard to replicate or manufacture. And it's interesting how, at the end of the day, despite all the politics or the management or all of that, that's what it sort of, like, boils down to.



**Courtenay Valenti:** It's—yeah, it's all about passion and specificity of voice and vision. Vision is everything. You know, I can't remember if you worked on this movie with Niiaja Kuykendall, who at the time was the EVP of Production at Warner Bros. Pictures and is now VP of Film at Netflix, but it's something that Ryan produced, Judas and the Black Messiah, which Shaka King directed.

**Rebecca Cho:** Yeah.

**Courtenay Valenti:** When Ryan first talked about, like, what he was hoping to accomplish with the film and the story, it just hooked me. And then to hear Shaka talk about with such a clear vision about every scene and every frame and how he was going to both tell the story of an icon but also tell it through the lens of a thriller, right? And that's what you seek. You seek to find, in our jobs, both as a producer and executive, what you're seeking is to find a vision that is compelling, a point of view on a story.

**Rebecca Cho:** Mm-hmm, yeah. Absolutely. I worked on Judas at the tail end of it, but it was always so inspiring to hear Shaka and Ryan and everyone else on that movie just speak about what this movie could be, what it meant, and then to see it come to life. I think that's the magic of what we do.

**Courtenay Valenti:** Oh. Because we don't— we don't—we're just responding to vision, right?

**Rebecca Cho:** Yeah.

**Courtenay Valenti:** So we'll read a script, and then you hear a director talk about it. It becomes a little bit more vivid. And then you see the footage being shot, and then it becomes a little bit more apparent, a visual style. And then there's the magic of post, where a movie is made all over again, and multiple different movies can be made, infinite different versions of a movie can be made in post, and then you get to experience it again. And that—I love that iterative and also revealing process, right? It's

like different layers of the onion. The skin is being peeled off, and you're, you're getting then, ultimately, to what it is.

**Rebecca Cho:** Yeah. No, definitely. It's—it's fun to watch a movie start out as one thing and then transform into something that resembles what it originally was but is also wholly different and original on its own. I find that to be such a fascinating process of moviemaking because so many people collaborate on it, and so many people's opinions and thoughts and creativity and work feeds into that process.

**Courtenay Valenti:** Without a doubt. But then, in the end, it has to all get filtered through the vision of the director.

**Rebecca Cho:** Definitely. Curious, like, how you manage different personalities, especially working with creatives and people who have sensitivities. And, as you said, sometimes we're giving praise, sometimes we're giving criticism, sometimes we're in a place where we have to have very difficult conversations with people who we are working with, continue to work with, and hope to have longstanding creative relationships with. Curious how you, like, approach those very difficult situations and managing different personality types?

**Courtenay Valenti:** Always with compassion. We're all human beings, right? We want to feel safe, especially, I think, artists do when they move through the world exposed all the time. So I am very direct and really straight and really transparent, and I do not say one thing and mean another. And I sometimes overshare in my transparency because I think if people really feel like, "No, no, no. She's not doing that namby-pamby kind of studio exec thing where they say nothing"—I'm not doing that.

I have found that if you're direct and clear and respectful, you can get through almost anything. And I think you have to be really, really sensitive to the fact that you didn't write it, you didn't act in it, and you didn't direct it. And the other thing that I really found over the years is that, look, you have to gain the trust of creative people. And one of the ways you gain trust, I've found, is when you're willing to fight for them, and you go to battle sometimes with your own studio, trying to, like, protect them from whatever is going on. Once you've been able to actually show that you have their movie and its best

interest and you will go to fight for them, then when you come back going, "We can't do this," whatever it is, and you now need their help on something, people are far more open to now maybe doing something that they might not have originally wanted to do because they understand that you went and threw yourself on the train tracks for them. So you can't play it safe.

**Rebecca Cho:** Yeah, absolutely. Do you feel like there's a difference in how you manage your team of executives and how you approach managing the creative talent that you work with? Is there sort of different skill sets for you when you approach those things?

**Courtenay Valenti:** You know, I—I knew you were going to ask this question, and I've been thinking about it because they're very similar attributes and considerations. Ultimately, "manage" sometimes almost can sound like you're controlling. So I almost feel like it's interacting, right, how we interact with creative talent. How do we interact with our colleagues? I think there's a lot of very similar skills or qualities that you have to bring to it.

I do find, weirdly, or maybe not weirdly, that a lot of this is easier now at this point in my life versus 20 years ago. And I think a lot of people in our youth-obsessed business don't want to admit where they are on that age scale, and I am thrilled and ecstatic to be where I am in a little bit more of a—it's not maternal, but it's just a more, I don't know, I've been doing it a long time, and I think people can feel safe with me.

[37:17 - Prox Recs Theme by Ken Nana and Ludwig Göransson]

**Rebecca Cho:** At the end of our podcast episode, we always like to do a little recommendation of anything that you're reading, listening to, watching, anything that helped you become a better leader or manager.

**Courtenay Valenti:** I thought about this question for a while, and I can't point to a specific book or movie or podcast. It's more—to me, it's about the accumulation of extraordinary mentors, and I've had some extraordinary mentors, and I'm very grateful for that. I had mentioned one person earlier, Lucy Fisher, who was the senior executive at Warners back in the '90s; Alan Horn, who used to be chairman of the motion picture

group at Warner Bros. and later was the chairman of the motion picture group at Disney, a man of the highest sort of ethics and standards, and, you know, I call him my Yoda.

You know, I just—I really would say to people who are listening, you can call up someone and say, or I've had people call up and say, "Would you mentor me?" And I actually think it's not so active as that. I think finding your mentors and your teachers is about the people you end up—you'll experience them through work, and you sometimes don't even realize what you're learning from people. But I think part of the growth for all of us in our careers is watching different people—you were talking about that earlier—and going, "Wow, I love the way that person gives notes to a writer," "Love the way that person strategizes," "Love the way that person resolves conflicts," and you're sort of putting together all the pieces that fit and are authentic to you because I think one of the most important things to do as you're figuring out whatever you're doing in your life is being authentic to yourself and not trying to be someone you're not.

And here's what I would say to people starting off their careers about looking for mentors. It's a two-way street. So the people who I learn the most from, I also worked for, and I didn't—I tried to make their lives easier in their work, meaning preparing them for meetings or reading something, you know, doing extra. And people tend to teach those who are also engaged in making their work life a little easier.

**Rebecca Cho:** Yeah, absolutely. I think that's hard to remember sometimes, but it is true that, you know, I think like all relationships, mentee/mentor relationships, there's supposed to be mutual benefit or mutual learning there.

**Courtenay Valenti:** Yeah. Yes. And not in a callous way. It's just about we both give something to each other. It's about—I actually think it's about generosity of spirit.

**Rebecca Cho:** Yeah, absolutely. That's great. In terms of leadership and management, a podcast I listen to fairly frequently is called Work Life by Adam Grant, and he's a—

**Courtenay Valenti:** Oh, I know who Adam Grant is. Yeah. He's fantastic.

**Rebecca Cho:** He's an organizational psychologist. He interviews a bunch of different people from different industries about their company practices or, you know, their management styles or unique things that certain corporations or startups or, you know, all of these various different work environments do. And it's fascinating to learn about how those qualities or those practices could be applicable to the entertainment industry, which often feels very siloed and, like, different. And we, I think, feel like our industry is super unique and super—you know, like there's only one way to do certain things, and

it's interesting to hear about what tech companies do and what, you know, legacy corporations do, and hear how those might be applicable to all of us.

**Courtenay Valenti:** I'll have to listen to that. I really like him.

**Rebecca Cho:** Thank you, Courtenay, for being here with me and for taking the time out of your very busy day to sit down and answer some questions about the industry and leadership. I always value time I get to spend with you. So this has been wonderful.

**Courtenay Valenti:** Thank you so much for having me. I have loved talking with you and always love talking about movies with you.

**Rebecca Cho:** Yay!

[41:15 - In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

**Paola Mardo:** In Proximity is a production of Proximity Media. If you like the show, help us spread the word. Send a link to your friends and loved ones. Follow, rate, and review In Proximity on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or your favorite podcast app, and follow us on social media. We're @ProximityMedia on Instagram, TikTok, Twitter.

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In Proximity executive producers are Ryan Coogler, Zinzi Coogler, Sev Ohanian, and Paola Mardo. That's me. Our theme song and additional music is composed by Ludwig Göransson.

Caitlin Plummer is our Producer. Celine Mendiola is our Associate Producer. Our editors are Cedric Wilson and Judybelle Camangyan. Ken Nana is our Sound Designer and Mix Engineer. Isabella Miller is our Production Assistant. Alexandria Santana is our Social Media Coordinator.

Special thanks to all the other folks who help make this show possible, the whole Proximity Media team, and to you for listening to In Proximity.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

**Courtenay Valenti:** I love a podcast.

**Rebecca Cho:** Me, too. I don't have—

**Courtenay Valenti:** Living in L.A., when we drive so much, you need a podcast or a book on tape.

**Rebecca Cho:** I didn't have a long enough commute when I was in New Orleans to—it was a six-minute commute—to be able to listen to podcasts. But now that I'm back in L.A.—

**Courtenay Valenti:** You have plenty of time.

**Rebecca Cho:**—driving for 40 minutes, I have plenty of time on the road.

[LAUGHTER]