‘We Brought the New York Hustle to Hollywood’: How the Movie-Making Couple Behind ‘Novocaine’ Scored a Creatively-Satisfying Number One Hit

Looking for a neat way to celebrate the 20th anniversary of your company? Do what the married couple running Safehouse Pictures did — release a movie that hits number one at the box office.

Tory Tunnell and Joby Harold are the founders and lifeforces behind Safehouse Pictures, which for the past two decades has produced a wide variety of films and TV shows ranging from arthouse indies to the aforementioned action-thriller *Novocaine* starring Jack Quaid.

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Entrepreneur spoke with the producing team to learn their approach to creating work that succeeds on both artistic and commercial levels, and to get their advice for pushing ahead when relentless obstacles get thrown in your way.

Dan Bova: Congratulations on Novocaine.
Tory Tunnell: Thank you very much. We really are proud of the movie, and it was a fun one to make.

You've produced so many films and shows, how do you decide what you want to make next?
TT: We always say that if everything now is reduced to a thumbnail, what is that thumbnail saying? How does it grab your attention? If it's a story that feels like it's been told before, how are you telling it in a different way? For example, there have been so many *John Wick* knockoffs, right? And we had spent some time in that world. In *Novocaine*, you get that outrageous action, but in our movie, the hero is getting the shit kicked out of him whereas with John Wick, he's kicking the shit out of other people. That sort of inversion was a lot of fun.

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How did this 20-year journey begin for Safehouse?
TT: We started the company in New York at a moment when independent film was thriving. We had all of the big buyers — Miramax, Fine Line, New Line — and we were making smaller movies that would go to the Toronto Film Festival and Sundance. The movies would get a love letter in the *New York Times*, but they had smaller audiences. So we shifted our strategy. We moved to L.A. with the idea of bringing that New York hustle into Hollywood filmmaking.

Can you describe what that means to bring that hustle?
TT: We were pitching a TV show called *Spinning Out,* about a female ice skater who was bipolar. Everyone had passed on it. But we really believed in it, and there were a couple of people who were sort of curious. So to follow up with them, we'd send them a pair of ice skates. One day, we were in the lobby at Netflix and a friend walked in. So we were like, "Why are you here?" "I'm working here now." "Oh, you should make our show!" We pitched it there in the lobby, sent them a budget that met their target, and six months later, we were in preproduction. Another example is more about how we utilize Joby's expertise as a writer and as someone who has a nose for story. We had a show called *Underground* about enslaved people

escaping the South. People really believed in the show, but there was concern that it might be too heavy for viewers to want to go back to it week after week. Joby was able to help frame it as “the greatest prison break that’s ever happened in this country.” Giving it that little bit of genre lift helped get our buyer fully behind it.

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Joby, what’s your process for distilling big projects down to that core idea?
Joby Harold: It can be quite pragmatic. It’s looking at the marketplace, figuring out where the gaps are, and figuring out how to engineer something creatively that caters to a need that buyers have. So either it’s an opportunity that they haven’t been able to solve themselves, like a genre they’ve been looking to explore that hasn’t been cracked recently, or it’s a piece of IP that’s always been low-hanging fruit, but no one’s figured out a way into it. So we’ll stick that in the oven and cook it for a while. It is like any other business where you’re addressing a need, you’re addressing a consumer — in this case, an audience — and you’re figuring out what they want, what they need, and finding a new way to solve an old problem. That tends to be the process.

Speaking of IP, you’ve worked as a writer and producer on some legendary franchises — *John Wick 2* and *3*, *Obi-Wan Kenobi* for Disney+, *Transformers*, to name a few. Is it intimidating to work on something as iconic as the *Star Wars* universe?
JH: It’s honestly just a wonderful opportunity. I feel very blessed to be able to have a seat at that table. There are always big collaborative experiences. There are a lot of big brains, along with my medium-sized brain, that get to discuss what the opportunities are and where the story is. I have tremendous enthusiasm for the things I’m lucky enough to work on. Right now, we’re getting to work in the monsterverse with

season 2 of *Monarch*, with Godzilla and King Kong, on Apple TV+. Our children are now the same age that I was when those things captured my imagination. So yeah, it can be intimidating, but only in the very best way. Only because you feel lucky to be there.

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Do your kids give you feedback when they think Obi-Wan should have done something differently on an episode?
JH: They do. Boy, do they. They're a little focus group. Not just after the fact, but in the process as well. They cut straight through our nonsense. They tell us what's up.

We read a lot about the issue that movie theaters are having, which is getting people to leave their houses. As filmmakers creating for theaters and for streaming, what are your thoughts on the future of moviegoing?
TT: When we look at something like *Novocaine* – and it was number one at the box office on a weekend that was a lower-grossing weekend than the industry would like to see – it shows the kind of movies that make sense in a theater: action, horror, big IP. Films where audiences are having fun together – they're laughing, screaming, and curling up in their chairs. So much of what is being reported about the box office is that the sky is falling. And it will fall if we just say that, rather than doing something about it. I think it'll be interesting to see what happens if people can start to widen the amount of time between theatrical release and PVOD (Premium Video On Demand) streaming. This way, people don't just feel like, well, I don't need to go to the theater, I'll see it on my TV in two weeks anyway.

Working in film isn't exactly a guaranteed career path. Did you have a backup plan?
JH: It's all I ever wanted to do since I was a little boy. This was my thing. I traveled across the world from Britain to

do this and had no backup plan and intended not to need one. As we tell our kids, we work our asses off to make sure that we don't need a backup plan. It's a nonstop, seven-days-a-week, 16-hour-a-day endeavor to continue our company rolling and make sure we're creatively satisfied and working with people who make us feel fulfilled.

TT: I went to Johns Hopkins, which is not known for film. Everyone was like, "Are you a doctor?" I was working at a mom-and-pop shop production house down by the World Trade Center when 9/11 happened and we couldn't access our office for six months. One day, my bosses said, "We think that you are awesome, but we can't afford to run the company anymore." And I said, "What if I raise money for the company? Could I keep my job and get a raise?" And they were like, "Oh, that's so *adorable.*" I started cold-calling and emailing billionaires, and I got Mark Cuban and Todd Wagner to make a more than $10 million investment. Joby and I lived in a 600-square-foot apartment with a roommate at the time, and that roommate was Donny Deutsche's assistant. So we got Donny onboard as well. So I got to keep my job, but it also made me feel like if we want to start our own company, we could do that again. Determination, enthusiasm, and gumption can keep you going and keep you afloat.

How do you personally deal with setbacks?
TT: We tell our boys all the time that you cannot be successful unless you risk failure. And when you risk failure, you're going to fail sometimes. But yet it's the only ingredient for success. I've had so many moments where I felt crushed. But one thing that we really love about being a married couple is that we have a great way of balancing each other. So if one person's feeling doubtful, the other person's more like, "We can do it." The only thing that will ensure continued failure is doing nothing about it or not being able to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and start all over again. We are really good at doing that.

JH: It’s cliche, but the biggest truism is that time really does heal wounds. So when you’re in a moment of transition or failure, know that it’s going to hurt a little less tomorrow. Your body heals quicker than you imagine. And when that healing allows you to come up with the next idea or the next project, you’re a little bit more savvy and your instincts are a little sharper. It’s harder to remember in the moment, but when you’ve done it enough times, you’re able to say, “Just get through today, tomorrow will be all right.”

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