With Writer Lena Waithe, Studios Get a Marketer Too



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When we spoke with Lena Waithe for Adweek's L.A. issue in October, she was both excited and nervous about her new movie Queen & Slim because "it's the first feature that I've written that really took people by surprise, and the industry really responded to it."

Now, audiences have, too: Queen & Slim made $15.8 million over the long Thanksgiving weekend, marking a strong debut for the critically acclaimed film about a black man and woman on the run in America in 2019.

Waithe has also been heavily involved in the marketing of the movie—as she tends to be with all her projects—because she said creators are best positioned to sell their work, and that "a smart marketing campaign can make the difference between a success and a bomb."

She credits the likes of writer, producer and director Ava DuVernay—who was honored in October as Adweek's Game Changer

of the Year—and writer-director Justin Simien (Dear White People) for teaching her about how to market her work and to be creative and bold—and not merely in viewers' faces.

"It's not just about a bunch of billboards, but about what kind of billboards are you presenting: What is the message, what are you saying to people about this movie, this TV show?" she said.

Waithe worked with director Melina Matsoukas on Queen & Slim, including promoting the film. In fact, Waithe acknowledged Matsoukas did a lot of the heavy lifting as she strived to make every trailer and poster and all the behind-the-scenes footage special because "she cares about everything."

Waithe also credited the studio behind the movie, Universal Pictures, with being "very patient with us" as she and Matsoukas have been very involved in marketing the film.

"Queen & Slim is the kind of movie that one false move can make it feel like something that it shouldn't feel like," she said.

That meant being creative and bold, but also honest.

"We're very intent on not being too [politically correct] because I think that could be a thing that sometimes marketing is like, 'Oh, we don't want to scare people.' But we also don't want to be too bland, either," she said. "We don't want to make people think, 'Don't worry—this is a nice movie about black people,' it's like, 'No, you're going to get some raw shit when you come in,' and we want to make that clear in our marketing campaign so that whoever comes into the theater knows what the fuck they're getting."

That sense of authenticity extends to her other work. Waithe, an Emmy winner for her work on Master of None, signed a deal with Amazon Studios in July and has been working on a horror anthology series for the streaming service called Them:

Covenant.

Although there’s no release date yet, Waithe already knows she’ll be a part of the marketing campaign.

“If I’m going to be a part of it, there has to be a mutual understanding of what that marketing campaign is gonna look like, which I think is so important and so amazing,” she added. “Because a lot of writing directors still are of the mind, ‘I’m just going to make something great and then let the studio sell it.’ It’s like, no, because the people at the studio don’t know your audience better than you.”

That audience and the trust she has with them is why she won’t stand in front of a marketing campaign—movie posters included—that she doesn’t believe in.

Waithe is also working on a new comedy series for BET Networks, Twenties, which is based on her own experiences in L.A. and will premiere in early 2020.

BET, too, has welcomed collaboration with Waithe and her team on selling not just the series, but the network itself.

“Because they’re in the process of rebranding their network,” she said, “so we’re like, ‘Alright, we want to be helpful with that, and we think these marketing campaigns will help rebrand and we’ll help tell people, “Oh, this is a new day, I promise.”’

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