

MovieMaker

How I Earned the Job of Directing My Lifetime Movie, *You're Not Safe Here*



By

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Rachel Annette Helson is a director and actress in New York City. Her directorial debut feature film *You're Not Safe Here*, produced by Stargazer Films, airs on Lifetime TV this Saturday at 8/7c. *You're Not Safe Here* follows Ava, a young pregnant woman, who is fleeing from her abusive boyfriend when she is rescued from a car accident by a friendly married couple. But she begins to fear they may have a sinister plan for her and her unborn baby. In this piece, Rachel explains how she cracked the code to land a job on a Lifetime movie.

Getting hired to direct film or television is a monumental task. You have to prove that you can deliver a project both creatively and financially, and it can all seem like an impossible Catch-22: no one wants to hire you until you are proven, and you can't prove yourself until you are given

an opportunity. Well, gather round my friends, because I want to tell you about a subsection of the industry that is more open to new directors than studio features or television – the wonderful world of TV movies.

I directed my first feature *You're Not Safe Here* in November 2020, and not only was it fully funded and ended up being distributed on Lifetime TV, but I actually got paid to direct – which was a huge step forward for my career.

Here's how I did it.



Rachel Annette Helson

Be prepared. Give them every reason to say yes.

Before you try to book a feature directing job, study the craft, practice on smaller projects and try to get as much on-set experience as you can. I came to directing after a decade of working as a professional actor and editor, so I studied filmmaking from a performing and a post-production perspective. I also watched as many movies, television shows, behind-the-scenes interviews and Masterclasses as I could.

When I finally felt ready to dive in, I directed my first short film, a drama called *Hatched*, and entered it into competitions and film festivals. It was an Official Selection of [HollyShorts](#), Film Shortage

and [StudioFest](#) (where I was a finalist director) and was selected for distribution on Bitpix. I was also chosen as a New Director to Watch by Shoot Online for my work on the film.

Cold Call.

I booked *You're Not Safe Here* because of a cold email. Yes, a cold email.

I was interested in directing TV movies, and I saw that a production company in my hometown of Louisville, Kentucky was producing them. I went on IMDBpro and found contact information for the producers. Then, I put together my best pitch email. It included a brief description of my background, a list of the notable accolades that *Hatched* received, and a link to the film. At the end of the email, I asked if they would meet with me. To my surprise and delight, they emailed back and said yes!

A caveat: I have sent a lot of cold emails in my career. Nine times out of ten no one responds. Once in a while, someone does! I have found the producers and executives that work in TV movies to be particularly open and receptive to newer creatives. So, whether you're a director, a

writer, or a producer, I highly recommend reaching out and introducing yourself. IMDBpro is your best friend here, and I would try searching for successful TV movies to see which production companies worked on them. Then, create a list of executives to reach out to at those companies.

Relationships take time. It's a marathon – not a sprint.

I met with the producers after my cold email in January of 2019, but I didn't book my first movie until September 2020. This is a business of relationships, and relationships take time. Don't expect to book a movie after your first meeting. I made sure to reach out via email every few months until I began to develop films as a writer with the company, so our communications became more frequent. Regardless, each time something new and noteworthy happened in my directing career, I would email with a quick update.



You're Not Safe Here director Rachel Annette Helson (L) camera operator Danielle Elise Bartley and lead actress Haskiri Velazquez. Photo credit: Stargazer Films.

Then, during COVID-19, my husband and I came out to my family's farm in Kentucky rather than stay in our small Los Angeles apartment. I made sure to update the producers that I was in town and available to direct.

Keep creating.

Hatched is about a woman who suffers a loss in her life, and she deals with her grief through an obsession with why children have disappeared in a National Park. It was a female-focused project with moments of mystery that showed I could direct the tension of a thriller beat. It also had a budget of \$30,000, raised through Seed & Spark donations, so I was able to hire a talented cast and crew that made the footage look beautiful and expensive. It was enough to get me in the room, but not enough to seal the deal.

During quarantine, I was hungry to create, and a writer from StudioFest sent me a terrific, COVID-friendly short film script. My husband is a really talented actor, so I was able to use him as the lead, and we made it completely in quarantine.

The two shorts combined with a pitch deck for the film turned the "maybe" into a "yes" – and ultimately landed me the feature directing job!

In conclusion...

My story is not unique. I have heard of many first-time directors who were given opportunities to make TV movies. This part of the industry seems open and willing to take a chance on someone new, and the experience you gain directing a TV movie is invaluable. During the process, I was able to lead a great crew, work with producers and distributors to implement story notes, collaborate with our writer to develop a tight script, direct talented and experienced actors *and* shoot a 90-minute feature film in twelve days...during COVID! I feel prepared to walk onto my next set and take on all new challenges, and I am so proud of the film that our team created together!

You're Not Safe Here, directed by Rachel Annette Helson, film stars Haskiri Velazquez (NBC Peacock's *Saved by the Bell* and a 2021 *Entertainment Weekly Breakout Star*.) Cleo Anthony (She's Gotta Have It) and Nicky Whelan (Hall Pass, *Scrubs*.) It airs on Lifetime this Saturday, July 31, at 8/7c.

Main image: Sarah Wisser (L) and Haskiri Velazquez in You're Not Safe Here, directed by Rachel Annette Helson. Photo credit: Stargazer Films.