

IN PROXIMITY
Episode 7: Natalie Qasabian and Sev Ohanian
Final Transcript

[Music/Old Radio Sounds by Ken Nana]

[VOICEOVER]

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

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

Sev Ohanian: So then, speaking of the challenges between Searching and Missing, like, just going back to Searching days, that was a low-budget movie. It was very, very low, and I think—one thing I always think about is it means, usually, you have less people who all have to do more jobs to get the movie made.

Natalie Qasabian: Oh, yeah. Well, I mean, I was talking to Congyu E, our co-producer on Searching and on Missing the other day, and we were cracking up about this because we were doing something in post, and we were reflecting on how, on Searching, the team of people that usually does the following jobs, right, like location managing, production coordinating, production managing, line producing, creative producing, all the producing, like those eight, nine people, it was me, you, and Congyu on Searching.

Sev Ohanian: Yes.

Natalie Qasabian: Like, we were doing everything, and it was bananas. And cut to Missing, and, like, we had a bit more of a proper budget on this one.

Sev Ohanian: Yes, on Missing, there was about 20 people who had all those jobs. Exactly.

Natalie Qasabian: There was 20 people that had those jobs.

[In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: You're listening to In Proximity.

Natalie Qasabian is an award-winning film producer who has worked on both independent and studio films. She produced three movies with the Duplass Brothers including Duck Butter directed by Migel Arteta, and she produced All About Nina starring Mary Elizabeth Winstead and Common. As the producer of the thrillers Searching, Run, and, most recently, Missing, she is a frequent collaborator of writer/director/producer Aneesh Chaganty and writer/producer/Proximity founder Sev Ohanian.

Aneesh and Sev were on a previous episode of this podcast breaking down their writing partnership and process. So, if you haven't listened to that yet, please do yourself a favor and check it out.

Now, Sev and Natalie are partners in work and life. Yes, they're married, and we somehow convinced them to sit down for this podcast.

They share how they met, how they started working together, their tactics for producing both independent and studio films, and the secret to working successfully with your life partner.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

Natalie Qasabian: Hi, I'm Natalie Qasabian, and I am a producer.

Sev Ohanian: Hey, I'm Sev Ohanian. I am a producer, sometimes screenwriter, and founder at Proximity Media. And I'm here in proximity with Natalie at our Proximity Media offices. And, actually, I don't know if there's anyone in the world that I am in closer proximity to than you because we are producing partners. We made, most notably, *Searching*, and *Missing*. But also, we happen to be married.

Natalie Qasabian: That is correct, a lot of overlapping proximity.

Sev Ohanian: Exactly. I think we should probably start with, when did we first become in proximity to one another?

Natalie Qasabian: Let's do it.

Sev Ohanian: Okay. So that was 2014.

Natalie Qasabian: Yep.

Sev Ohanian: We were both students at USC's film school. I was a recent graduate.

Natalie Qasabian: I was a student. You had just graduated.

Sev Ohanian: And we met where a lot of people meet, which was at a networking event on campus for the Armenian Students Association because we're both Armenian American.

Natalie Qasabian: A very exclusive club. It was a networking event where it was a mix of current students and, like, recent grads. And it was people from all different—you know, different careers and fields. And I remember walking around and realizing, "Oh, you're the only other film person here, the only other Armenian in film." So, at some point, we naturally connected.

Sev Ohanian: Exactly. And I remember you were—I think, when you first saw me, you were just immediately smitten, right?

[LAUGHTER]

Natalie Qasabian: No.

Sev Ohanian: That's, that's how I remember it.

Natalie Qasabian: No. Opposite. But no, you were—it's funny because you were, like, such a ball of energy, and you had—I think you'd just written a script with Aneesh.

Sev Ohanian: Yes, Animal Heist.

Natalie Qasabian: Your writing—with Aneesh Chaganty, your writing partner and our directing partner. You were, like, so excited to pitch it.

Sev Ohanian: Well, of course. I mean, it was—we wrote a great script, and I was—you know, I was probably trying to impress you, I'm not going to lie.

Natalie Qasabian: And now that I know you, I realize you were in your phase of, like, practicing the pitch.

Sev Ohanian: Yes, exactly.

Natalie Qasabian: So you saw me as, like, a target to practice on.

Sev Ohanian: Exactly. And I remember I, I was pitching you. I was like, "Hey, like, let me tell you this story I've been writing," and I got into it. I really gave you the full-blown pitch, and something happened during the middle of this pitch that had never—and I don't think has ever happened even since—which is that you interrupted me.

Natalie Qasabian: I did, and it was—

Sev Ohanian: It was quite rude. Yes, I agree.

Natalie Qasabian: It wasn't rude. It was a great pitch, but, no, it was crazy because I kind of predicted the end of your story, end of your pitch. And I remember you were, like, speechless for a second, and you were like, "That's exactly it."

Sev Ohanian: I think I even asked you, I'm like, "Do you know Aneesh?"

Natalie Qasabian: You did ask me that.

Sev Ohanian: Like, how do—how do you know this? Like—

Natalie Qasabian: And I did not know Aneesh. And, yeah, it was kind of awesome because our first meeting ever was, like, realizing that we spoke the same story language right away.

Sev Ohanian: Yeah, it's crazy. I remember momentarily feeling slighted by you, and then—and then also realizing, "Wait, this is actually really cool," and, like you said, we were on the same creatively and story-wise, and that genuinely—I guess that was a meet-cute, and that led to us being friends and keeping in touch, and then eventually starting to date. A few months later, I remember—I was, at the time—this was, like, after I had been a producer on Fruitvale Station, which had such a great run, and I was very much in my phase of making indie films that—any opportunity that I would get to produce a good movie, I would take it. And I—I think, at the time, you were working in production.

Natalie Qasabian: I was working in production, yeah.

Sev Ohanian: For documentary films, right?

Natalie Qasabian: Yeah. Yep, correct.

Sev Ohanian: You were, like, helping, office PA-ing and whatever coordinating they needed.

Natalie Qasabian: Yep, coordinating, all that stuff.

Sev Ohanian: And I—I had a movie that I was going to go produce in Savannah, Georgia, and I remember even, like, like, you know, saying goodbye to you like, "Hey, I'll see you in a few weeks, maybe months, whatever. I'm about to go make this movie." And I even thought for a moment about even asking you to come produce with me, but I don't think that you were into that.

Natalie Qasabian: I think you did ask me. So I had switched over. I was actually an assistant to a producer at the time.

Sev Ohanian: Right.

Natalie Qasabian: But, if you remember, I was miserable because I was a horrible assistant.

Sev Ohanian: Sure.

Natalie Qasabian: And I, I was pretty sure I was going to get fired. So I was thinking about leaving. You had asked me to come work on it with you because you needed more, like, production support. But I remember being like, "I don't know if I want to work together, mix that—you know, cross that line."

Sev Ohanian: Sure. Like, it's one thing to have a relationship and one thing to be, you know, professional partners, but not necessarily have both.

Natalie Qasabian: Yeah. And I—you know, you were making your way, and I think I wanted to make my own and meet my own people. But cut to—

Sev Ohanian: Well, what happened was I was in Savannah, Georgia, and we were—it was a tiny movie. I'm talking, like, under a half a million dollars in budget, like very small. And it was, in some ways, a movie that I had a little bit inherited from another producer, and I think it was day one of filming, and I immediately realized, like, "Oh, this is going to be a sinking ship." Like, I did not have the right support, and it wasn't properly set up. Obviously, partially my fault, but really, I just needed some help.

And I remember calling you, and I was like, "Hey, babe, like, what are you up to?" And I think it was literally your last day on the job, right?

Natalie Qasabian: Yeah, it was crazy because I had put in, like, my two weeks. It was my last day on the job, and I—I was looking forward to some time, some time off. And then you were just like—I could hear it in your voice. You, you needed someone.

Sev Ohanian: I remember you were like, "Okay, well, when do you need me to fly out?" And I was like, "Now."

Natalie Qasabian: Yeah.

Sev Ohanian: Like, "What is the next flight you can get on?"

Natalie Qasabian: I think I booked a ticket for the next morning.

Sev Ohanian: And I remember, like, I was sending you the script. I—even the entire flight, you were, like, nonstop on the Wi-Fi.

Natalie Qasabian: You had me working the whole flight. Yeah.

Sev Ohanian: Exactly. You got into town, and, you know, you immediately joined this—like, this crazy production that was already in progress. And I will say, like, legit, you straight up helped save that film. You certainly saved me because, because your involvement just immediately made everything chiller. Everything got streamlined. Everything was taken care of, and I could focus on the creative and work with the director. And it was—it was actually, like, a really good, good experience, I think, working together.

Natalie Qasabian: Definitely. I think it was crazy because I was so nervous about the idea of us working together, and it felt so effortless once I got there.

Sev Ohanian: What were you nervous about?

Natalie Qasabian: I think the obvious, like, how do we keep balance? How do we not just talk about work all day long? And, even though it's our passion, and it's so much fun, but we already—all we do is talk about film, and I was, like, "If we work together, too, like, then we're going to have the same war stories." And I think it was always fun, like, hearing about your experience and me coming to the table with other experiences. So I was afraid of, like, what happens if everything's enmeshed? But it just ended up being so effortless working together and, honestly, so much fun.

Sev Ohanian: After that experience, did we want to keep working together?

Natalie Qasabian: Not really because I—so, if you remember, after that movie, Mel Eslyn, who's a producer, badass producer on that film, her and I really clicked. And when we came back to L.A., she had set up, like, a five-picture deal with—she was running Duplass Brothers Productions at the time, and still is. And she was, like, "Hey, are you down to come and, like, be my co-P, and I have all these films. And you want to come, like, work with me?" And I was like, "Hell, yeah. It's a dream come true. Like, this is what I want to do. I want to produce. I want to creative produce."

And so I started working with Mel. And then something happened, if you remember, where I was going to do a movie called Duck Butter.

Sev Ohanian: Yes.

Natalie Qasabian: And we were, like, prepping that, but something happened with the cast, and I think we pushed, like maybe even by year. And you were prepping a different film, also with Mel, that I had nothing to do with.

Sev Ohanian: Exactly.

Natalie Qasabian: And because that one pushed, and I think you may have lost someone on—I can't remember the details, but you called me and were like, "Hey, round two?"

Sev Ohanian: Exactly.

Natalie Qasabian: And I was like, "I don't know why I'm fighting it at this point. Like, it was so effortless last time." And—

Sev Ohanian: That's right, and that was the first time that you were actually, like, a producer.

Natalie Qasabian: Yeah.

Sev Ohanian: Because I think, on, on Intervention, on the first movie, you were more production.

Natalie Qasabian: Yeah, that's right.

Sev Ohanian: And—and, yeah, I think, on the second film, which is a movie called Take Me directed by Pat Healy, written by Mike Makowsky, it was a great experience. It was very smooth, and, and we spoke the same language, and we were able to problem-solve and, and really kind of, I think, be additive as a team on that film. But, even at this point, it still wasn't quite going to be, like, an ongoing thing. We were always kind of taking it one step at a time,

But while this was happening, I was writing and developing Searching. I think at the time we called it Search, and this was with, obviously, my partner, Aneesh Chaganty, who I write with. And I was getting to the point in the script that I was feeling really confident. I was like, "I think we have a really strong piece of material." I had a lot of faith in Aneesh as a filmmaker—it would be his first time directing, but I knew he can pull it off. It was going to be my first chance being a quote/unquote "lead creative producer."

And knowing that we were very close to getting a green light to actually start prepping and shooting this movie, it was top of my mind to bring you on as a producer. And it wasn't just because, oh, like, this is going to be a great film. I should have Nat, as my girlfriend at the time, be part of it but rather, I think we're going to need all the help we can get to really pull this thing off. And I remember when I asked you—I think Aneesh and I asked you because you—at this point, you'd gotten to know Aneesh—you actually turned us down.

Natalie Qasabian: That's a slight mischaracterization. I was unavailable. So the movie I pushed was finally going, and it was with an awesome director, Miguel Arteta, and it was kind of going to be, like, the most challenging thing I'd done so far. And I think that might've been my first capital P, I'm a—I'm a producer.

Sev Ohanian: Right, right.

Natalie Qasabian: I'm going to be kind of on the ground on that one. So I was unavailable, but then I remember you guys sent me—it wasn't even a script yet. There was an outline. It was just, like, all the beats, but, you know, not, not fully fleshed out yet. And, actually, I think—I don't know if you remember this, but I was—I think I was on the way from, like, a location scout or something, driving across town. You called me, and you were like, "Check your email. It's in your inbox." And you guys were, like, so giddy, you and Aneesh.

I was like, oh, man, I got to pull over. Like, I'm just going to read this thing. So I pulled over. I was in Toluca. Like, the first thing I saw was, like, a pub. It was like 5:00 in the afternoon.

Walked into the pub, got some lunch, and I sat down to read it. And I remember, like, instantly feeling really, really jealous not of you and Aneesh, but of, like, the person that was going to be, like, you know, your right hand on this one because I was like, "Man, I can't do it. I have this movie. I'm already committed. I'm already in it."

And then I called you guys. I walked outside. I was pacing in Toluca Lake. And I remember just telling you guys how much I loved it, and this works. And, like, all the emotional elements were in there, all the story beats, like the structure of, like, this is the order of the events, it was all just there just in the outline. And, like, as I was talking, I was like, "Yeah, I'm doing this." Like, "I don't know how I'm not going to do this movie." I was—I was too excited. You know, this thing wasn't even fleshed out yet.

Sev Ohanian: You know what's funny? Aneesh and I thought we did not need a script for Searching. Do you remember this?

Natalie Qasabian: I do.

Sev Ohanian: It was really naïve. We were like, "Well, it's a computer movie. Like, it's not done"—

Natalie Qasabian: Well, in your guys' defense, you were like—yeah, it takes place on computers.

Sev Ohanian: I think Aneesh was convinced the script would be 300 pages long, and I could see why because it would be like, "Interior, Google Chrome, Facebook." Like, it's—it's not what you typically expect. And we were committed to not writing a full screenplay because we thought our outline scriptment had it all. And you were the one that were like, "Nope."

Natalie Qasabian: And you guys hated me, but I was like, "There's no way."

Sev Ohanian: Nat's making us write a final draft.

Natalie Qasabian: You have to write a final draft because how are we going to make this movie?

Sev Ohanian: Yeah, and then, once we had it done, we were like, "Oh, yeah. This is—this made perfect sense. Thanks, Nat."

Dude, I have to be honest with you. I think—I was telling Aneesh, like, if you say no, I don't know how we make this movie because it was genuinely at that point where, like, I knew I needed all the help we can get, and I trusted you. I think that's such an important quality in producing together, is being able to really have that implicit trust. And what's crazy is, like, you were—you were now in your phase as a producer where you were producing a ton of indies. And I think you were getting your MBA at the time, also.

Natalie Qasabian: Yeah.

Sev Ohanian: So the fact that you committed to helping to produce Searching without even quite knowing how you're going to do it, it spoke volumes.

[KN 9 to 5 by Ludwig Göransson]

Sev Ohanian: Searching was an independent film financed entirely privately, no guarantee of distribution, and—

Natalie Qasabian: No guarantee of anything.

Sev Ohanian: No guarantees, period. And it was especially an experimental movie that takes place on computers, and who knew? And then we had Missing, which was the follow-up standalone sequel that Sony asked us to make that is a studio movie. So, therefore, it's not—you know, I'll be honest. Searching's budget was \$880,000 all in, shot in 13 days.

Natalie Qasabian: Thirteen days, non-union.

Sev Ohanian: Exactly. Missing's budget is way more than that, but it's still a fraction of what most movies cost. It's still extremely—considered a low budget, small budget, and—you know, type of movie. But it's a studio movie. There is a guarantee of a lot of stuff, and there was the pressure of a release date, always. And on top of that, there was also this expectation that Searching was considered, you know, a hit movie with how much it made and the reviews and stuff. Would Missing, you know, stand up to that? That was always a big part of it.

Natalie Qasabian: That was a big part and also, not just the pressure of a release date but pressure of—I think there was this magic on Searching where we did have financiers, and we had people that, financially, we were responsible to. But, in a lot of ways, we had a crazy amount of creative freedom, and it felt like that movie was made in the edit with the five of us, you know, and barely any notes and anyone to, to answer to and just—

Sev Ohanian: Yeah. We, we had, honestly, creative control over Searching, which we'll never have again the rest of our lives.

Natalie Qasabian: Yeah, and it—it was—it was amazing. It was like light—lightning in a bottle. So then to go from that to Missing, where, from the very first pitch, the studio was involved, I think that was a big change, a big shift for sure. And I think our process changed a little bit. When I take a step back and look at the film, Missing, I am proud that I feel like we—we captured what we set out to do. We made the film we wanted to make, and we did protect the creative.

Sev Ohanian: Exactly. So then, speaking of the challenges between Searching and Missing, like, just going back to Searching days, that was a low-budget movie. It was very, very low, and I think—one thing I always think about is it means, usually, you have less people who all have to do more jobs to get the movie made.

Natalie Qasabian: Oh, yeah. Well, I mean, I was talking to Congyu E, our co-producer on Searching and on Missing the other day, and we were cracking up about this because we were doing something in post, and we were reflecting on how, on Searching, the team of people that usually does the following jobs, right, like location managing, production coordinating, production managing, line producing, creative producing, all the producing, like those eight, nine people, it was me, you, and Congyu on Searching.

Sev Ohanian: Yes.

Natalie Qasabian: Like, we were doing everything, and it was bananas. And cut to Missing, and, like, we had a bit more of a proper budget on this one.

Sev Ohanian: Yes, on Missing, there was about 20 people who had all those jobs. Exactly.

Natalie Qasabian: There was 20 people that had those jobs.

Sev Ohanian: I'm curious, how would you break down the process that we have as producers, especially when we work together?

Natalie Qasabian: One thing that we've carried on each project, I would say a big pillar is communication.

Sev Ohanian: And then, of course, Google Docs.

Natalie Qasabian: And then Google Docs, like, man, we could write a novel on how Google Docs have saved our movies.

Sev Ohanian: Literally.

Natalie Qasabian: There's been a couple times in our, you know, journey together as producers where, like, a Google Doc email where it's, like, me, you, and Aneesh all chiming in has, like, quite literally saved our asses on a movie.

Sev Ohanian: Right, because there—you know, we'll have a situation where there's some kind of point of conflict or if a financier or a studio partner really wants to do x thing, but we know that y thing is what the movie needs, and we've tried to have discussions. And it's like, when all else fails, bust out an email.

Natalie Qasabian: It's like, "Let's go. It's time to go. Write that email."

Sev Ohanian: And we put together this extremely comprehensive email that, like, cites our reasoning, our deductions, our logic and, and really tries to be a perfect on-the-record way of, like, making our—you know, our ideas heard. And you're right, like, one of us will draft an email. Then Aneesh will get in and do his pass. I'll do my pass, and so forth. And it, it's—you know, this is also almost, like, boring, but it really is, like, ultimately what helps us make these movies the way we can.

But what else? I think—I think as far as, like, our producing skills, I think about, like, the way we've incorporated feedback into the process.

Natalie Qasabian: That's a big one.

Sev Ohanian: Because I do think, ultimately, we want to make films for audiences. And one way to really ensure that we're doing that the right way is to bring them into the process and, and navigate that.

Natalie Qasabian: Absolutely.

Sev Ohanian: Can you—can you speak about how we do that?

Natalie Qasabian: Yeah, and I think we learned how to do this better, I think from our indie films. On the indie films, I feel like one of our grievances was always like, there's never enough time, right? Like, never enough time to do enough feedback and really, like, mine an audience. And so one thing we said we were going to do on movies where we were in charge is, like, really take time and put the movie in front of an audience and, like, what a—it's such a gift, obviously, when people haven't seen the thing that you've been watching 18,000 times. And you've read it, you've watched it, you were there every day. So I, I love that we both have this, like, same philosophy on, like, "Let's get people in there. Let's ask 200 questions. You know, let's go really in-depth."

Sev Ohanian: So, like, a typical feedback screening that people are probably used to is you come, you watch a movie, and then usually there's—

Natalie Qasabian: It's like, "What do you think?"

Sev Ohanian:—light questions about, "What do you think?"

Natalie Qasabian: It's—yeah, it's a little light.

Sev Ohanian: And people have an opportunity to, like, weigh in.

Natalie Qasabian: And I think we go a little bit deeper than that. And there's the usual questions, usually, of, like, pace and tone. And we go super deep, and, again, like you said, it's because our movies are very—it's with the audience in mind. And I think especially with the thrillers we've made, it's like, did, did you catch this clue? Did this beat land for you? Going really granular.

Sev Ohanian: Yeah, so we actually have—like, the editors have the movie up and scrolling through it as we ask the questions.

Natalie Qasabian: Yeah. Yeah, to remind people.

Sev Ohanian: Like, literally people, "Hey, you guys remember this one beat right here? Like, who laughed at that, or who thought it was lame?" and so forth. And what's been great is seeing—because you've been doing it on Missing.

Natalie Qasabian: Yeah.

Sev Ohanian: You know, like, it's—you're literally quite—

Natalie Qasabian: I've been stealing all your tricks from Searching.

Sev Ohanian: Sure, sure. Like, we'll have an audience that's somewhere between 10 to 30, 40 people, and it's being able to, like, kind of work the crowd. Like, I see you, how, like, if someone has been really shy and not speaking up, you tend to call on them and encourage them to speak up more. Or if someone's been maybe dominating the room too much, you find very subtle ways to get that person to give more space to others. And it's really interesting because while you're up there managing the crowd, the rest of us are in the back row furiously, like, whispering to each other and, like, taking, like takeaways and—

Natalie Qasabian: Here comes the texts.

Sev Ohanian: Oh, my god, and we're—and we have that group text that we're literally texting you, "Ask this, don't ask that!" And you look at your phone—

Natalie Qasabian: And I'm like, "Dude, keep the channels clear, like important things only."

Sev Ohanian: Yeah, because someone is inevitably sending a bunch of memes. But that has been a really good process because I think what happens after those feedback screenings is the—you know, the five of us—you know, when I say five, I mean you, me, Aneesh, our other partner and, and for the case of Missing, it's Will Merrick and Nick Johnson, the two directors. We really get together, and we analyze, like, okay, what did we—what did we—what have we learned? You know, like, what's the takeaway?

Natalie Qasabian: We spend days, honestly. We spend days on, on the markerboard just, like, putting everything up, what worked, what didn't work.

Sev Ohanian: Exactly, and I know, obviously a lot of—like, all films probably do this to an extent, but with us, it's really trying to create a system that has invited the audience feedback in a way that doesn't allow that feedback to also take over, either. Naturally, what happens, especially, you know, talking about feedback screenings, is morale. I think that's a big part of what I think you and I really strive to do when we—when we produce these projects, is how do we keep the morale up? Because—

Natalie Qasabian: That's a—that's a big one.

Sev Ohanian: Yeah.

Natalie Qasabian: Yeah. I mean, I feel like—and I think we agree on this—like, a big part of our job as producers is just keeping, keeping the energy up but also the positivity because it can be hard, especially after—sometimes the screenings don't go, you know, as, as great as you hoped. And also, you're under, like, a mountain of notes, and sometimes you feel like you can't get out from under it. So I feel like you and I always come in and, and bring that—bring that energy and kind of, like, try to reinvigorate everyone and keep—try to get us back to the place where we're being creative and solution-driven, you know what I mean, and not, not lingering on the negative too much.

Sev Ohanian: Exactly. I mean, I think, look, we—I think, as producers, I do know we feel just as much investment and ownership as any of the directors we work with, but I think because we're producers, you and I know that the only way to move forward and to beat whatever obstacle we're facing is positivity and is a desire to fix and continue to iterate and continue to try and make something work that we don't allow ourselves to ever show the negativity, at least amongst the group. What's nice about you and me being husband and wife now, you know, previously just relationships, is when we get home at the end of the day—

Natalie Qasabian: Yeah, we get to vent.

Sev Ohanian:—the truth can really come out between us.

Natalie Qasabian: We get to be negative to each other.

Sev Ohanian: Exactly.

[Good Times by Ludwig Göransson]

Sev Ohanian: Another thing with Searching is, like, we didn't have the studio on—on the—on the process of making Searching, but there were conflict. I mean, there was—with the financier, we had a lot of differences with business decisions.

Natalie Qasabian: Yeah, and I think a big one was definitely after the movie was done. We were finally done. That challenge was over with, and it was like, "All right, what are we going to do with the film?" And we'd submitted to festivals, and we were into Sundance at this point.

Sev Ohanian: We had gotten into Sundance, yep.

Natalie Qasabian: We'd gotten into Sundance, which is, you know, holy grail, especially for an indie film. And there was this question that they put on the table of, "Well, why don't we"—there was a studio that was interested in seeing the film. And I remember you and I were like, "We cannot do this."

Sev Ohanian: Well, the financier was saying, like, "Hey, there's a studio that we have a relationship with. We're going to just show them the movie, and they'll buy the movie, and they'll distribute the movie," which is, like, amazing because we made the movie with no promises, but having now gotten into Sundance and you and I having had multiple movies in Sundance in which we've had movies sell there, we got very alarmed because we were thinking, "Well, why would we screen the movie for a studio before the festival? Why even engage about having them buy the movie?"

And their response was, "Well, it's a big studio. It'll be a big deal." And we were just like, "Man, like"—

Natalie Qasabian: I think we were wrong. It would've been a sure thing, but I think we all knew that there was a chance for something even bigger than that.

Sev Ohanian: Exactly. Our whole argument was, "If we go to the festival, and we know we have a good movie, we can have a bidding war where multiple studios can bid." And that way, the deal is better not even just financially but rather, more guarantees that the movie will have a bigger release, and more audiences can see it, and so forth. The issue was we were just producers on an indie film. We had literally no legal power here.

Natalie Qasabian: We had no power at all.

Sev Ohanian: It was—they paid for the movie. So, therefore, as always, they control the movie. So we were in a really tough situation here. So of course it called for—

Natalie Qasabian: Cue, cue email, Google Doc.

Sev Ohanian: Exactly.

Natalie Qasabian: Amazing, intense email.

Sev Ohanian: And we put—I think it was one of the—I mean, actually, I literally—I can pull up the email right now. It was one of the more epic emails we've ever sent. Here, I'm going to—I'm going to—do you mind if I just read it?

Natalie Qasabian: Go—please, I'd love to—

Sev Ohanian: Hold on. I got to find it. So this was sent August 2, 2017 from us to—

Natalie Qasabian: After hours of, of editing.

Sev Ohanian: After many hours of Google editing, it was:

"Hi there. Our team discussed the topic again, and here are our thoughts. Everyone involved in this film worked their butts off so we can sell the film for a lot of money and have the best distribution deal possible. Here's what we mean specifically. One, we want to sell the movie for enough money to cover the cost of making the movie and to also make a great deal of profit for the investors and for everyone who worked on it. Two, we want to make sure the movie can be seen by as many people as possible in theaters and outside of them."

This next part is underlined: "We are confident that prescreening search to any distributor or studio president before a festival premiere will hurt us from achieving the highest marketplace value, and here's why. Number one, if your studio watches the film and either doesn't like it or does not want to make an offer to buy it, there's a high chance people in town will hear about that decision, and they will think that the studio did not think Search was good enough for them. Therefore, others either offer us low amounts of money or they will not offer us anything at all. Two, if your studio watches Search, likes it, and does want to make an offer to buy the movie, there's no reason for that offer to be a high offer. Without other competing bids from other distributors, they have no motivation to offer a lot of money because there will be no marketplace pressure for them to give us a good deal before someone else buys the film. What we do know is that the movie is great. If Search plays in any competitive setting, we know that the film will be already positioned for a bidding war, and here's why. One, it's a thrilling, suspenseful story with a lot of emotional heart. Two, it's starring a diverse family, and who doesn't want that? Three, it's a computer movie in the vein of the successful Unfriended, but it's also evolved into something more cinematic and emotional. Four, the director comes from Google commercials and is a new talent in Hollywood. Five, the cast is the most famous cast ever seen in this kind of movie to date. Any distributor will want to make offers, so we should not do anything to jeopardize that."

Anyways, it goes on and on and on, but it's—it's like—

Natalie Qasabian: It was long. Wasn't it like two or three pages?

Sev Ohanian: Oh, yeah, and it was, like, an epic, like trying to—like, in our minds—

Natalie Qasabian: It was like an evidence-based argument.

Sev Ohanian: And it's always the same thing—

Natalie Qasabian: It's full of proof.

Sev Ohanian: Like, "Here's what we think, and here are the reasons why we think that," and so forth. And it worked. And, you know, we ended the email with basically, like, "Thanks for hearing our thoughts on this matter. Please let us know what you think. We are extremely confident in the logic behind this argument."

Natalie Qasabian: Do you—and then do you remember their response, or do you have it?

Sev Ohanian: Oh, yeah. I have it right here. It was literally, "I agree with your plan." We got the financiers to chill. We took the movie to Sundance. We had the bidding war, and we had an incredible distribution deal that honestly would've probably eclipsed anything that we would've had—

Natalie Qasabian: 100%.

Sev Ohanian:—in our previous thing.

Natalie Qasabian: 100%.

Sev Ohanian: And this is after weeks of, of them saying no and no and no in person, in phone calls.

Natalie Qasabian: Yeah, this spurred a lot of in-person debates, too, I think.

Sev Ohanian: I think the power of a really well-crafted email is, obviously, it's in writing. It's in the record now. You know, like you can't deny something that's been put to the word. And, again, our process of having everyone on our team weigh in, and we, like, will debate about commas. It's like, we want to make sure that we're, A, speaking for everyone collectively, but, B, like, putting our best foot forward, you know, like, and really just—you know, communicating is 90% of producing. Like, communicating as best as possible, like, the real intent behind the team back here.

Natalie Qasabian: And I think this was the email, I think, that taught us the power of these emails.

Sev Ohanian: Yeah. I mean, I, I—

Natalie Qasabian: Because we brought it—we brought it with us after.

Sev Ohanian: I mean, on Missing, like, you know, there's been endless emails about, like, you know, debates with the studio about how the movie should end and—

Natalie Qasabian: Or even, even just down to one—I remember there was one note we were all kind of not on the same page on, and we went back and forth. And I think one of our emails was—had so many arguments for why we were right about this one story point that I bet you, like, by the time they got halfway through the email, they probably just gave up.

Sev Ohanian: Yeah, I mean, it said—

Natalie Qasabian: Because they were like, "You guys are right. Go for it."

Sev Ohanian: Yeah, but I, I think—it's funny. I think our—Sony—our execs at Sony have characterized you and me in particular as, like, good producers in that we care. I, I don't know—I can't speak for other producers, but you and I clearly really, really, really put a lot of our energy into these things, and we don't want to give up on behalf of our filmmakers or directors who also care, but they're sometimes burdened with other things. So we take it upon ourselves to really be this interference there.

Natalie Qasabian: Yeah, and I think that's one of the things—just going back to communication, like, we've never—and we both don't subscribe to this idea of, like, you have to always protect your director or keep them away, shelter them from things. And, like, while you are there to—you want to protect their time, right, so that they can do the job they have to do, I think you and I are very transparent with our directors.

Sev Ohanian: Yes.

Natalie Qasabian: And we never want to burden them with what's going on behind the scenes, but it doesn't help anyone for them—

Sev Ohanian: To be in the dark.

Natalie Qasabian:—to be in the dark about things.

Sev Ohanian: Yeah, we want to always make sure that they are—they have an awareness of all things, and usually we are updating them about problems while we're also telling them our solutions.

Natalie Qasabian: Our solution, yeah.

Sev Ohanian: But I agree with you, like, part of communication is that transparency and just candor.

Natalie Qasabian: And that's how we work as producing partners, too. I remember, you know, calling you a couple times on *Missing* when maybe you weren't at the office or whatever and being like, "So this happened, but, like, here's my three things. What do you—what do you think?"

Sev Ohanian: Exactly.

Natalie Qasabian: That's always been our—

Sev Ohanian: Because I think, you know—

Natalie Qasabian:—our style.

Sev Ohanian:—with *Missing*, you became the lead producer, and I went off to help, you know, start this company, *Proximity*, with Ryan and Zinzi. And, honestly, even speaking of us working as partners and as a relationship, like, you were the one who encouraged me to really start *Proximity* with these guys.

Natalie Qasabian: Yeah. I mean, it was a big turning point realizing that—because, you know, my favorite thing—I always say, like, every time we do—because we do a lot of projects

separately, obviously. You have stuff at Proximity, and I keep a slate that I produce on my own, which has been really nice, I think, for balance. But Proximity was a huge turning point because it was like, man, my favorite producing partner is you. My favorite team to work with is the Searching team with Aneesh and Will and Nick. And when Proximity came about, it was like, well, this is amazing. You got to go do this, and this is going to be good for us on so many levels. But it was like, all right, I—I got to go—you know, I got to go take the lead now and not, not have you there, necessarily, physically there every step of the way. But I feel like it did a good thing for our relationship.

Sev Ohanian: I agree, too.

Natalie Qasabian: Would you agree?

Sev Ohanian: I 100% agree. I think, I mean, we—you know, when we're home, it's so nice. I mean, to me, like, to be in a relationship with who—with someone who is my producing partner, it's amazing because I can be eating my breakfast cereal and realize I just thought of a solution to a problem we've been having in the edit, and I—all I have to do is literally lean over the breakfast table and pitch it to you.

Natalie Qasabian: Yeah.

Sev Ohanian: And, right there, you can give me immediate feedback. Or you and I might come home after a really long, stressful day, and we can suddenly be workshopping together literally as we get ready for bed because we just have that luxury and that trust. But I think, to your point, what has probably kept it healthy is that we also work on things not together.

Natalie Qasabian: Yeah, absolutely.

Sev Ohanian: Because if it was maybe all we did together, who knows if that would—might be—you know, maybe that wouldn't be good for our relationship.

Natalie Qasabian: Well, I don't know if it wouldn't be good. Like, I think it would be fine because we're so—this is our passion, at the end of the day. The cool thing about having separate projects is the perspective that we can each bring, right?

Sev Ohanian: Right.

Natalie Qasabian: Like, you, you—you went off, and you guys did Space Jam 2, which was huge, you know, and, like, the stuff that you learned on that, the experiences you had, like, you made me a better producer by just sharing that stuff with me while I was working on Missing, you know what I mean? I think that's been really cool, having that—the different perspectives that we can each bring.

Sev Ohanian: 100%.

[Prox Recs Theme with Caution to the Wind by Ludwig Göransson]

Sev Ohanian: Time for our Prox Recs.

Natalie Qasabian: Yes.

Sev Ohanian: What is one book, movie, documentary, article, YouTube series, anything that you would recommend somebody checks out to help them maybe, potentially when it comes to producing?

Natalie Qasabian: Mine's an oldie but a goodie, a classic. It's Christine Vachon's *Shooting to Kill*, and it's specifically about indie producing, but I think it applies to all producing. But my favorite thing about that book is, like, it has my favorite quote about indie filmmaking ever, which is—I'm going to butcher it, but something about how making an indie movie is like having a baby. It's really, really painful while you're, like, pushing it out, but once it's over, and you look at the thing, you can't wait to do it again. And it's so true. That's true of all filmmaking, I think.

Sev Ohanian: Yeah, that's a—that's a great quote. My recommendation would be a book called *The Big Picture*. It came out a few years ago, and it was actually inspired by the Sony leak, if you remember, from a couple years ago. This author poured through all of the leaked emails and crafted an entire book that really tries to talk about the quote/unquote "big picture" about the direction that the Hollywood studios and the industry at large is going in. He didn't incorporate any of, like, the really personal stuff that came out of the leaks but rather analyzing the way some of the studio heads were responding to pitches or the direction that they wanted to take franchises. And, really, it was so insightful because it was no b.s. It was literally inspired by real interdepartmental emails between actual studio executives, and the takeaway that you get from it is not at all juicy and scandalous but rather very pedantic. It's very academic in how you can really get a sense of where the studio is today. I couldn't recommend it enough. That's *The Big Picture* by author Ben Fritz.

Natalie Qasabian: It's a good one.

[Theme Music fades in]

Sev Ohanian: Well, Natalie Qasabian, thank you so much for being In Proximity with me today.

Natalie Qasabian: Thank you for having me. This was fun.

Sev Ohanian: Thanks for being my producing partner.

Natalie Qasabian: Thank you for being my life partner.

Sev Ohanian: Eh.

[In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

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The show is produced by me, Paola Mardo. Executive Producers are Ryan Coogler, Zinzi Coogler, Sev Ohanian, and me. Our theme song and additional music is composed by Ludwig Göransson. Ken Nana is our Sound Designer and Mix Engineer. Polina Cherezova is our Production Assistant. Audio editing for this episode is by Cedric Wilson.

Special thanks to the whole Proximity Media team and to you for listening to In Proximity. Meet you back here next week.

[END VOICEOVER]

[MUSIC STOPS]

Natalie Qasabian: Near the end of the shoot, because it was—it was chaotic, obviously, 13-day shoot—the—someone on the camera team, I remember, was, like, giggling. And I think maybe me and Aneesh were—I don't know if you were there, but we were like, "What are you guys laughing about?" And they're like, "You guys have never seen this house before." I was like, "No, this is our first time shooting here. Isn't it great?" like, just so giddy. And we realized that what they shoot at this house was—

Sev Ohanian: It was a porn house.

Natalie Qasabian: Porn house.

Sev Ohanian: It was a porn house in the Valley. All the clues were in front of us the whole time.

Natalie Qasabian: We were so naïve.

Sev Ohanian: We shot these beautiful scenes of a family coming together and loving each other in—in a porn house.

Natalie Qasabian: Yeah.

Sev Ohanian: But you know what? It got the job done.