NEON GOZIE AGBO

ASSASSINATION NATION

IN THEATERS SEPTEMBER 21, 2018

Runtime: 1 hour, 50 minutes
Rating: R

Directed and written by Sam Levinson

Starring Odessa Young, Suki Waterhouse, Hari Nef, Abra, Anika Noni Rose, Colman Domingo, Maude Apatow, with Bill Skarsgård with Joel McHale and Bella Thorne

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SHORT SYNOPSIS:

High school senior Lily and her three best friends live in a world of selfies, emojis, snaps and sexts. But when their town of Salem is besieged by a massive data hack, resulting in half the citizens' private info spewed into the public view, the community descends into anarchy. Lily is targeted after being falsely blamed for the hack—and bands together with her friends to survive a long, blood-soaked night.

SYNOPSIS

Mass hysteria, shaming, trolling, false accusations, scapegoating, hypocrisy, mob mentality, blood lust. Those were the ingredients for a lethal cocktail 326 years ago in the town of Salem, site of colonial America's notorious Witch Trials, which left twenty people dead.

Salem 2018 seems keen to top that number. With the throttle of a fuselage and the slice of a razor blade, writer-director Sam Levinson's ASSASSINATION NATION plugs us directly into our current cultural moment. Combining elements of comedy, horror, gonzo vengeance thriller and scorching flamethrower satire, the movie is a cracked mirror, reflecting back our madcap national mood.

The film adopts a provocative teenage-girl's-eye-view of the world. Lily (Odessa Young), Bex (Hari Nef), Em (Abra) and Sarah (Suki Waterhouse) are four all-American high school seniors who, like most teenagers of their generation, barely know of a time before their lives were curated online.

But their existence explodes violently when the phones of prominent members of the community are hacked—and a geyser of embarrassing texts and photos is rained into the public sphere.

First the secrets of Salem's mayor (Cullen Moss) are revealed, followed by the school principal (Colman Domingo). Then in a colossal, dam-breaking data dump, half the town is stigmatized, including 18-year-old Lily, who is blamed for the attack and becomes the target of violent mob rage.

Levinson, the director of 2011's *Another Happy Day* (and son of Oscar-winning filmmaker Barry), doesn't simply tell the story of Lily and her friends struggle to survive in a meme-manifested nightmare. Levinson has also boldly matched the pulse of the movie to the pace of social media itself, splitting the screen and filling it with ephemera from the characters' phone-obsessed lives.

The result is relentless sensory experience, steeped in cinematic references, from the 1927 silent masterpiece *Napoleon* to John Carpenter's iconic *Halloween* to Japanese girl-gang films of the 1970s. Yet Levinson's vision is also startlingly modern, offering a deft commentary on current politics and the #MeToo movement—particularly with four female heroines and the crescendo of violence that they fight against.

With a deep thoughtfulness filtered through a delirious style, ASSASSINATION NATION is a movie for absolutely right now. You asked for it, America.

TRIGGER WARNING!

"I know this movie is angry and shocking and scary," Levinson says, "but so is the world right now. This film is about who we are as a nation—how our collective lust for entertainment, humiliation and violence has superseded our sense of self-preservation."

The average American teen spends eleven hours a day on the internet. According to researchers, the more time teens spend on social media, the less happy they are. The paradox is that to avoid social media is to feel marginalized and alone, everything teenagers are eternally been desperate to avoid.

For an Insta-savvy teen like Lily (Odessa Young), there is no other path to selfhood than through extreme cultural overwhelm. That is why Levinson dared to open ASSASSINATION NATION with such a provocative bomb blast—the movie's very own Trigger Warning, warning the audience of what lies in store: *bullying, classism, death, drinking, drug use, sexual content, toxic masculinity, homophobia, transphobia, guns, nationalism, racism, kidnapping, the male gaze, sexism, swearing, torture, violence, gore, weapons* and *fragile male egos*.

The Trigger Warning serves also as Lily's realm of the senses, the only world she's ever known. Raised on smartphone, Lily has never known a life without the peer pressure-cooker of social media. She has never known an absence of the potential for being shamed in the most permanent way.

All of this swirled in Levinson's head as he was working on the script for the film, not least of all because he and his wife were expecting their first child.

He explains, "I was asking myself: 'What kind of world am I bringing this person into?' I was thinking about how hard it is now to be young when every minor mistake you make is documented forever. Every awkward hookup, every bad photo, every intimate text exchange becomes ammunition for shame."

Shame became the powerful emotion that resonated most for Levinson as he was brainstorming a story about small town under siege. The attack would not come from an outside force but instead a particularly modern terror: the anonymous hack.

As he wrote, Levinson saw the film in his mind, with its three-way screens, candied colors and references to teen comedies and gory revenge flicks. Yes he also saw the potential to defy genre rules. "How could I make a film that emulated the emotional volatility of the internet?" he asked himself. "How can I make the internet the genre?"

With that pique of ambition, Levinson wrote the script at a breakneck pace in three and half weeks. "Once I saw that these four best friends were going to unite and fight back, the movie just poured out of me."

Of course, by setting his movie in a fictionalized town by the name of Salem, he implies a link to the mother of all social overreactions: The Salem Witch Trials, that grotesque episode of moral panic in 1692 that lead to deaths of twenty people. “There’s a parallel, insomuch as it’s a town that lost its mind and targeted innocent people, but I mostly saw Salem as just a heartland suburb,” says Levinson, adding: “There’s a Salem everywhere in America.”

GIRLS ON FILM

In conceiving of the story, Levinson made a decision to conjure the voice of 18-year-old Lily, who refuses to take the blame for the calamitous hack. And indeed, fights back with a fierce, focused sense of action and aggression.

"Japanese *Sukeban* films were a major influence for me" the director says. "It's one of the few sub-genres where young women have had permission to be angry."

S*ukeban* (or "girl boss" films) emerged in the 1970s and 80s, and bloomed into its own genre of comic books, films and TV series—presenting rebel girls in dyed hair and school uniforms who were also deadly fighters against injustice.

As particular influences, Levinson cites the Sukeban movies *Female Prisoner #701: Scorpion* (1972), the *Stray Cat Boss* series (1970) and *Delinquent Girl Boss: Worthless to Confess* (1971), the girl-gang film which Levinson pays homage with the shiny red trench coats of his four heroines.

"What I loved so much about those films was their full embrace of teenage anger," he says. "But at the same time there's a real theatricality to them, which is rare and it's something I wanted to bridge: the very real sources of anger and the fantasy of where these girls can take that anger."

Actress Hari Nef (*Transparent*), who plays Lily's friend Bex, explains why Levinson's approach intrigued her. "At first I thought, here's a white, straight, cisgendered thirtysomething man trying to write an edgy film about teen girls," she says. "But instead I found what he wrote felt remarkably true. Yes, I had a lot of questions, but Sam opened the door to them from day one. He wanted our input."

Odessa Young agrees. "I was blown away by Sam's foresight," the actress says. "On the page it's the story of teen girls fighting their town, but the more you look, the more you can see how much modern cultural machinery is working against them. I love that they fight back against it all."

Though it was written before the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements, the film nonetheless resonated by imbuing its female characters with agency and treating them with respect. From the start, Levinson set very clear ground rules. There was to be no nudity, no external objectification and very little actual sex.

"Since one of the themes of the film is exploitation, I didn't want to give people that lens to look through," he says. "I wanted to acknowledge that the internet has changed how we talk about sex and how it's coarsened things. That said, if you had four young guys talking as these girls do no one would be shocked by the language or find it taboo."

Levinson also points out that Lily isn't quite who she makes herself out to be online or in her salacious selfies. "I think the internet has split everyone into two versions of themselves—the person you are and the persona you project. What becomes tricky is reconciling the two."

No matter how unhinged things get in Salem, the bottom line for Levinson was keeping the foursome, the hazards they have to navigate, and their friendship palpably real. "I wanted to create four girls who were human, messy and make mistakes," he says. "But I also wanted to make them heroes who get to rewrite their story in their own way, to give them the chance to carve out a different reality."

RISK AND REWARD

Having finished a script glowing with radioactive subject matter, Levinson faced an early crucible. Would anyone take the risk to make ASSASSINATION NATION? Producer Kevin Turen of Phantom Four's gut reaction was. "How could I not make this?"

Turen recalls, "When I read this I thought wow, this is something I never expected or have even *seen* before. It was so in touch with the anxieties and anger of our times. I felt Sam had honed in on what it's like to be coming of age in a scarier world than ever. I loved that the film is structured as a genre film, but the stalker is the *internet*."

Key to the team was another producer, Aaron L. Gilbert of Bron Studios, who had teamed with Turen previously. "Kevin called and said you have *got* to read this script," Gilbert recalls. "It's about something so important—about how radically different our lives, our social interactions and growing up is now without any private space. But Sam was dealing with it all in the most crazy-ass, entertaining way."

Reading the script a second time, Gilbert sensed even more going on. "I've been a first-hand witness to how young people communicate now," he says. "I see my son with the TV on while his iPhone's at his side and he's playing with his PS3 and that's just the reality of our world. Somehow Sam was able to tap into the texture of all that and write from the perspective of a young woman who is caught up in it but also sees through it."

Gilbert knew it would take threading a fine needle for the film to hit its tone. "The best part of my job is taking chances on films," says the producer. "But when I met Sam, and saw how much he loves movies, I knew we'd have no problems."

Producer Anita Gou (Marti Noxon's TO THE BONE) read the script and instantly hooked into the film's message. "I was deeply, deeply in love with the dialogue, the enormous and timely ideas, and just the fun of it," she says. "I like that the story specifically touches on what it means be a young woman thrust into public conversations without your permission and be judged in hypocritical ways. You don't often see films with four female leads, so that alone felt exciting."

What impressed Gou most was Levinson's respect for his characters. "It was really important to me that, despite taking on taboo subjects, Sam's approach to the female characters was so different. He took the time to create female characters who are funny and badass but also real and struggling and trying to figure out how to put up a front, which is who we are as a teenagers, if more so in this generation."

The film's more baroque touches weren't red flags for her. On the contrary. "My feeling was bring it on. I love that there's a shocking quality, that the film has an unabashed attitude, because I hope it will get people talking about all this constant judgment of each other, of women, of public figures, of teens. Those are all kinds of violence in our society that's been flying under the radar."

INSPIRATION NATION

In addition to the Japanese girl-gang S*ukeban* films of the 1970s, the DNA of ASSASSINATION NATION is bursting with cinematic inspirations.

As cinephiles might enjoy tracing the film's visual influences and cultural references, for Levinson they were simply part of reflecting the world as we approach it today—through a dizzying lens of visual influences and cultural references.

"I had this vision of *Valley of the Dolls* meets Wong Kar Wai," says Levinson, referring to the kinetic glam of the late 1960s classic of suburbia and the Hong Kong filmmaker renown for his lush revieries and dreamlike camerawork. "But then our cinematographer Marcell Rév came aboard and took it to a whole other level."

Rév is best known the stunning photography for Kornel Mondruzco's innovative *White God*, about a canine uprising, which won the Un Certain Regard prize at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival. Rév and Levinson discussed a sprawling range of influences.

A jumping off point for both was the work of Petra Collins, a 25-year-old Canadian photographer who has shaken up the art world with her glowingly warm photos of teen girls. Collins' portraits offer an emotional, empathetic alternative to the controlling male gaze that has long dominated art and film.

From there, the duo talked about the rotating colors of Jean-Luc Godard's 1963 movie-within-a-movie *Contempt (Le Mépris)* and the triptychs utilized by cinematic pioneer Abel Gance in his 1927 epic *Napoleon*. "We loved the idea of using triptychs but with the same aspect ratio as an iPhone," notes Levinson. "It's both paying homage to Gance and to the digital age while feeling worthy of a theatrical experience."

In terms of film influences, Levinson also includes Vincent Minnelli's Cinemascope classic *Some Came Running* (1958), Brian De Palma's teen rage classic *Carrie* (1976) and John Carpenter's *The Fog* (1980) and *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976). Levinson also rewatched three films that look at the shifting role of how we've mediated our lives since the advent of mass communications: Billy Wilder's *Ace in the Hole* (1951), Elia Kazan's *A Face in the Crowd* (1957) and Sidney Lumet's *Network* (1976).

The influences stretch beyond cinema as well. In the opening moments of ASSASSINATION NATION, Lily quotes an author who once said that "Ten percent of people are cruel, ten percent are merciful, and the remaining eighty percent can be swung in either direction." That author was the famed social critic Susan Sontag, who was remarking about the lessons she took from the Holocaust.

Levinson notes that Sontag's 1977 essay collection *On Photography*, which explores how ubiquitous imagery forever changed humanity into a society of witnesses, was on his mind as

he wrote the script. “I was very interested in her idea that we’ve became a world of voyeurs, watching passively in the face of tragedies and emergencies,” he says. “As for the ten percent quote, I wrote it on a note card years ago. I’ve hoped the percentages weren’t so frightening, but honestly who am I to argue with Susan Sontag?”

THE CONDEMNED: LILY

To play the film's primary scapegoat and heroine, Levinson decided to take a risk of his own. He wanted for the role an actress that audiences had not yet tagged with any labels or perceptions. After a long search, he came across 19-year-old [PLZ CHECK AGE - 19/20] Odessa Young, an Australian who garnered an Australian Academy Award for her lead performance in 2015's *The Daughter*.

Levinson remarks, "What I saw in Odessa was a mischievousness mixed with a wise confidence. That was Lily to me. The more we talked, the more I knew she was Lily. Her face is so open, you can see right through to her emotions. And she was able to tap into a slight kind of madness that is enthralling and so right for Lily."

From the cheeky dialogue to the frank sexuality to the turnabout in the second half of the film that transforms Lily into a teenage avenger, Young knew the role would be a major test.

"To be honest, when I read the script, I was terrified by it," she says. "It was so daring, so dramatic and it was unlike anything else I've read or seen. Even though it has so many huge ideas, Sam brings this very entertaining quality so it doesn't get bogged down in those ideas. It was fun, thrilling read."

Young notes that although Lily's life is quite different from her own, she still felt a connection to her character. "I didn't grow up in an American small town or was so heavily influenced by social media culture, but what I did relate to in her was this very universal sense of a teenage girl who has been told her entire life that she is going to be judged. The vitriol that she goes through is so confronting that it scared me. But I think the basis of it is very important to talk about."

To that point, Young comments on the film's arresting approach to the complexities of sexuality in a sex-drenched world of imagery. "I love that Sam makes poignant observations about teen sexuality in today's world—but also that he has just one sex scene in the film, and that's in silhouette. The film breaks the social stigma that still surrounds women talking about pleasure in the same way men do. But for all the ways Lily tries to own her sexuality, I also wanted to get to the idea that she is just really confused by all the social rules of love and sex."

One of most challenging scenes for Young was the intense argument between Lily and her boyfriend Mark (Bill Skarsgård). "I've been lucky in my life to have never have experienced that kind of a power struggle," she says. "So I was just reacting in the moment because it felt so new and that's how Lily feels also. She's never seen these kinds of demons come out before. And Bill is such an incredible actor. That's equally true of Joel McHale. He was wonderful to work with in a really challenging scene."

It all built up to the final scenes in which Lily finds her power. “We’d been put through so much in first part of the movie and we were ready for a reckoning,” she says with a laugh. “It felt like it was time to go all out, tooth-and-nail. But even in those scenes, the conversations with Sam never stopped. The amount of thought and discussion that went into this movie was very important to all of us. That’s part of what it makes it feel so special.”

THE OUTSPOKEN: BEX

To play Lily's closest friend Bex, whose peril mounts as Salem implodes, Levinson cast Hari Nef, an actress, model and writer best known for her role as Tante Gittel, a trans woman in 1930s Berlin, seen in flashbacks in the Emmy Award-winning Amazon series *Transparent*.

Levinson had expected it would take some time to find the right person for the challenging role, but Nef ended his search before it had even begun. "I remember so clearly the day Hari came in to read," the director recalls. "There was something so deep and real and funny about her—and she was able to hit about 9 notes all at once."

Nef was indeed drawn to Bex, but also to the ambitiousness of the entire piece. "Someone described Sam to me as having a go-for-the-jugular quality and I felt that in his work," she says. "The script had a real empathy for what it's like to a be a young woman at this moment in time. I also loved the black humor of it, the way Sam dares to laugh at the people and ideas in the world that are violent and weak, which I believe is the best way to reckon with those things. The script walked a really compelling tightrope—between humor and despair, reality and fantasy, optimism and nihilism—without losing the balance."

Levinson's research also charmed her. "Included with the script when I first got it was a Tumblr with an incredible array of reference images. Sam had absolutely immersed himself in teen girl Tumblr and this whole soft-grunge aesthetic. It was incredible to see."

Most of all, Bex hit Nef on a personal, emotional level as a young transwoman who had wrestled with similar things that Nef herself had gone through. "I feel very protective of Bex and also in awe of her. She's the way I wish I had been in high school. She allows herself to be very vulnerable and she understands herself in a way that is really impressive at that age."

Nef was exhilarated by Levinson's dedication to developing the character. "That's how it should be when a man is writing a woman," she notes. "Sam is an amazing artist but there were things I shared with him specific to Bex and creating a context for her. The warmth and safety that Sam created on set allowed us all to feel really comfortable not only with him but with how the camera was going to approach us as women."

As to what makes Lily and Bex so close, Nef observes: "I think Bex understands the yearning that lies at the core of Lily, which Lily doesn't show the world. They have that ability to cut through each other's veneers. I see them as having been childhood friends. But in high school, suddenly you are each testing out new versions of yourself—dressing a certain way, listening to certain music—even if a part of you is still the same and your friends see that. With all that is happening in the film, I think the truth of their friendship is what makes it feel timeless."

Odessa Young has nothing but praise for Nef as a costar and a friend. "Hari is an inspiration professionally but beyond that we connected very deeply as people. Hopefully what comes across is a tenderness and a lack of judgment between Lily and Bex. I love that they do butt

heads because I think it's exciting to see a female friendship on screen that has conflict yet comes from a deep well of love."

Though this is her first major film role, Nef was thrown right into the thick of things with scenes of intense fear and danger. "I did most of my own stunts," she admits with a note of pride, "but I think the harder scenes for me were the more subtle ones. When Bex is being threatened, she checks out, because the reality is too horrible for her to experience in her body. That's what a lot of people who suffer abuse go through. She does her best to project herself somewhere else in those scenes and so I also went somewhere else in my mind."

She cites as her most challenging scenes the ones opposite actor Danny Ramirez, who plays a handsome footballer named Danny, who engages in a secret romance with Bex. "Those were the scenes that get to this primal desire of Bex to be seen and be loved for who she is and how she is," Nef says. "I wanted to get that tug of war between the elation of being into somebody and that terrible, crushing feeling of being rejected. That's something all of us have gone through."

THE SOCIAL CIRCLE

The entire casting process was as meticulous as the film's design. Says producer Turen: "We used the tremendous talents of casting director Mary Vernieu and took our time finding exactly who was right for each role. Sam was determined to find people you might not have seen before or seen this way before."

Rounding out the main foursome are two young social media stars. R&B singer Abra, who got her start on YouTube, makes her feature film debut as Em, while cover model, social media entrepreneur and rising actor Suki Waterhouse plays Sarah. Along with Young and Nef, they embodied an unwavering bond that challenges the way female teen friendships are typically depicted on-screen.

"I'd seen some footage of Abra and I felt she had a really raw quality combined with a sweetness," says Levinson. "When we got her on tape, her tremendous charisma and potential was clear. And Suki has that manic playfulness I was looking for in Sarah. I was especially excited to see how all four of the actresses played off one another and pushed each other to get better and better. They became a girl gang of their own."

Says Young: "Sam had a hunch we'd all get along and his hunch proved so right. We had so much fun together. But I think that was part of Sam's strategy as well because out of that lightness comes a sense of truth."

Also taking key roles are former Disney star and Instagram sensation Bella Thorne and Maude Apatow, recently seen in Chris Kelly's *Other People* and Peter Livolsi's *The House of Tomorrow*. "With Bella, the opportunity to play with the pre-conceived nature people have of her and turn that on it head was exciting," says Levinson. "Bella was brilliant and a hundred percent game for anything. When Maude auditioned, what struck me most was her incredibly expressive eyes. She has this kind of Clara Bow silent film star presence."

As the film's high-minded but compassionate school leader Principal Turrell, Levinson knew exactly who wanted. Colman Domingo, a Tony Award nominee for his towering performance in *The Scottsboro Boys*, is known to TV audiences as outbreak survivor Vincent Strand in *Fear the Walking Dead*. "I thought right away of Colman while writing the part," Levinson explains. "He's a genius and I knew without hesitation he'd take the role to a high level because that is what he does. He has such a deep humanity to him."

Domingo views Turrell as a man who tries to see his students as kids full of potential even as they might make crazy mistakes. "I did feel a responsibility not so much to be a mentor as to kind of provide a kind of grounding for all their energy," the veteran actor explains. "That energy was so infectious, everyone was so bold and had something profound to say. TK TK MORE

The other male cast members includes Bill Skarsgård, recently seen in the hit horror film *IT*, as Lily's first love Mark; Joel McHale (TV's *Community*) as Lily's secret acquaintance Nick; and Cody Christian (*Teen Wolf*) as school quarterback Johnny.

"Bill Skarsgård is so handsome but with an exciting unpredictability to him," remarks Levinson. "Joel McHale has a quality where you can kind of project whatever motivations you feel onto him which was great for this character. And Cody came in with an incredible level of commitment and crafted a terrifying performance. The character of Johnny is the kind of person I spent my entire high school life afraid of."

ASSASSINATION AESTHETIC

Like the hyperkinetic online world it reflects, ASSASSINATION NATION is a feast for the senses. Says Odessa Young, “Social media has its own aesthetic and Sam always said he wanted this movie has to have images that could be GIFs and memes. So he brought that to every element: the dialogue, the framing, the costumes and design.”

The unique synchronicity between Levinson and cinematographer Marcell Rév led to a lot of unconventional ideas. Recalls producer Aaron L. Gilbert, “Marcell was using bulbs he found at Walmart and and it gives the film an amazing look. I love how much of the story is told without words. There’s a lot of quotable dialogue in the film but there are also whole portions where it’s just the visuals pushing the narrative.”

The wardrobe was another area wide open for expressiveness—thanks to the work of costume designer Rachel Dainer-Best, who immersed herself in a world where fashion is discovered not in the pages of magazines but via blogs, forums and apps. “The idea was that the girls would all look like they just walked off of some Tumblr page,” Levinson says. “Rachel and I talked about the idea that each character would have a kind of signature outfit with variations. We worked almost entirely in a pastel range with no bold or primary colors, so much so that it’s on the edge of fantasy. It’s the world as these four girls want it to look.”

He continues: “At the same time, we were very cognizant of not making it a rarefied world. I wanted clothes that were affordable and attainable. The rule was that everything onscreen could be bought for under thirty dollars. And everything had to look GIF-able. We followed those same rules for the makeup, taking ideas from YouTube makeup tutorials, K-Pop, anime and Tumblr fashion stuff.”

The pastel tones only shift at the end of the film when the quartet dons their shiny red trench coats. “Rachel took that idea and ran with it,” Levinson praises. “The coats she designed were better than anything I ever expected.”

Says Hari Nef of the costumes, “Rachel did an incredible job of articulating the very specific taste and style of these girls. It felt very accurate to the ways that girls carve out a space for themselves as members of their own subcultures. They wear their hardcore individuality on their sleeves. I love how it reminds you of teen films of the eighties and nineties while being so right now.”

She adds, “Because what it means to be ‘right now’ is to look like you’ve been in a time machine collecting things you like from the last 30 years.”

STAGING THE SIEGE

The coup de grace of the ASSASSINATION NATION production was the film's climactic home invasion sequence, an ambitious, five-minute continuous take. Levinson and his team wanted to bust the norms of the often-done sequence and take a fresh look.

Rather than shoot tightly with the characters, the camera instead stands apart, outside the house, becoming its own kind of voyeuristic character, floating to its own rhythm and stopping to gaze upon the characters through windows as if puncturing their privacy and contemplating the reaction.

"The scene was originally written as a fire, but due to budgetary restrictions it became a home invasion," Levinson reveals. "And that really opened it up visually. We had our production designer Michael Grasley build a mock 3-D scale model of the house early on and then [cinematographer] Marcell Rév and I would just sit in the production office for hours, playing with the model and coming up with ideas about how to shoot a home invasion sequence like no one has never seen before."

For inspiration, the filmmaking team rewatched many anxiety-inducing entries from the domestic terror hall of fame, from John Carpenter's original *Halloween* (1978) to *Black Christmas* (1974) to the Austrian horror shocker *Angst* (1983).

Levinson notes the scene's power as a visual analogy for computer hacking. "When we came up with the idea of watching the entire thing unfold from the outside, it felt like the right metaphor. It was very suggestive of the fact that there's always a back door a hacker can get into."

To create a from-the-outside-looking-in sensation, Rev's team used a techno-crane arm mounted on dolly tracks so it could move fluidly from window to window. Lacking time and resources, Levinson did not storyboard the entire choreographed sequence. But after he and his team worked out the details, the crew spent six weeks rehearsing, first shooting with an iPhone, then bringing in the cameras, and then the actors. The entire exterior scene was shot in a single day, with shooting inside the house completed on a different day.

"We were moving so fast you just had to kind of close your eyes and hope it all came out," says Levinson with a laugh. "But it was really exciting because the crew was so motivated to solve the technical challenges and the actors were game to rehearse until we could pull it off."

THE FINAL MARCH

The memorable last shots of ASSASSINATION NATION—of a marching band parading through a wrecked Salem, led by a defiant young majorette—nearly didn't happen at all.

"We shot that scene with just 25 minutes of light left," recalls Levinson. "We had recruited this unbelievable marching band from a local Louisiana high school, but we had no rehearsal and were only able to get a few takes off. Still, I felt there was something beautiful about it, the way that baton twirler keeps marching forward through the mayhem."

Levinson himself kept marching once photography wrapped. "I edited for 9 months and it was a humbling process," he says. "There were so many ideas at play that any cut could be more angry or more funny or more emotional. It was arduous but I was incredibly grateful to have producers who were so supportive and had what was really an almost blind kind of faith in me."

Meanwhile, the director was collaborating with Ian Hultquist, known for his electro-pop band Passion Pit and his innovative synth scores. Matching the rest of the film, Levinson wanted the unexpected. "We had a big breakthrough when Ian started chopping and screwing up the tracks, focusing on the hi-hats and a percussive quality," says Levinson. "Ian would send over tracks and I'd slow them down and play them backwards and send it back to him to show him how crazy I wanted it. Then we brought in Isabella Summers from Florence + the Machine to do some original music. That opened up the floodgates even more."

With the film locked, the producers felt that blind faith paid off. "For every ten people who see it," says Gilbert, "there are probably going to be ten different points of view. That is going to be part of the fun."

Adds Gou, "I think we all expect the film to spark some debate. But since it is made for the internet generation, a lot of the debate might happen online. In that sense, we hope the conversation will go viral."

Hari Nef shares her hopes for how ASSASSINATION NATION is received by audiences. "I'd like people to walk away with a sense of both gravity and levity—to think about what's happening in 2018 but also to think about what they want out of their country, their community, and the men in their life. It feels we've come to a point now where it isn't even worth taking a stance on anything at all, because truth isn't truth anymore. But what I love about the movie is that since everything in Salem is kind of blown up at the end, it makes us ask ourselves: Where do we go next?"

She adds with an emphatic point, "That's what art should do. Art should be explosive."

FILMMAKER BIO:

SAM LEVINSON (WRITER & DIRECTOR)

Sam Levinson is a writer-director whose debut film ANOTHER HAPPY DAY (2011) was awarded the Waldo Salt screenwriting award at the Sundance Film Festival. He recently co-wrote the Emmy nominated HBO movie WIZARD OF LIES (2017).

He is proud to debut his second feature, ASSASSINATION NATION, which he also wrote and directed.

CAST BIOS:

ODESSA YOUNG (LILY)

ODESSA YOUNG will be seen this September as the lead of this year's much buzzed-about Sundance hit ASSASSINATION NATION written and directed by Sam Levinson. The film tells the story of a mysterious hacker who leaks inflammatory personal information about the citizens of a small town - leading to ruined lives, destroyed reputations and an increasingly deadly mob intent on tracking down the culprit. Odessa plays "Lily", a disaffected and brilliant young artist who must survive by her wits when she is suspected to be the source of the chaos. She is currently shooting a lead role in Killer Films' SHIRLEY opposite Elisabeth Moss. Set in 1948 Vermont, Odessa plays "Rose", a pregnant woman who moves with her husband into the home of a professor and his reclusive and troubled wife, writer Shirley Jackson. Rose soon becomes immersed in the dark, compelling inner life of Shirley as she writes her latest novel. Odessa will next be seen in two independent features: Sam Taylor Johnson's A MILLION LITTLE PIECES, the screen adaptation of James Frey's controversial novel, opposite Aaron Taylor-Johnson and Wayne Roberts' RICHARD SAYS GOODBYE opposite Johnny Depp. Previous credits include Jamie M. Dagg's thriller SWEET VIRGINIA opposite Jon Bernthal and the Australian feature THE DAUGHTER opposite Geoffrey Rush. This performance earned Odessa a win as Best Lead Actress at the Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Awards.

HARI NEF (BEX)

Hari Nef is a celebrated actress, writer, and model best known for her work as 'Gittel' on Amazon's Emmy award-winning series TRANSPARENT. Born in Philadelphia and raised in Newton, Massachusetts, Nef is a graduate of Columbia University with a degree in theatre.

Nef will next star in a leading role in Sam Levinson's ASSASSINATION NATION. The film follows four teenage girls in a small suburb who become the focus of unwanted, world-wide media attention after their personal information is leaked by an anonymous hacker. She will star alongside Suki Waterhouse, Odessa Young, Abra, Bill Skarsgård, Joel McHale, and Anika Noni Rose. ASSASSINATION NATION first premiered at the 2018 Sundance Film Festival and will be released by Neon on September 21, 2018.

Nef recently wrapped production on the upcoming Lifetime series YOU, opposite Penn Badgley, Shay Mitchell, and Elizabeth Lail. Developed by Greg Berlanti and Sera Gamble, the series is based on Caroline Kepnes' best-selling novel of the same name, which is described as a 21st century love story. The series will launch on September 9, 2018 and has already been renewed for a second season.

Additionally, Nef completed production in a cameo role on MAPPLETHORPE, directed by Ondi Timoner and also starring Matt Smith and Mariane Rendon. The film is a biopic of the American artist and photographer, Robert Mapplethorpe, known for his art that pushed boundaries in

nudity, fetishism, sexuality, and sensuality. It premiered at the 2018 Tribeca Film Festival and is slated for release by Samuel Goldwyn Films.

Nef starred in the 2017 short film LET ME DIE A NUN, created by Sarah Salovaara. The short film is a twisted comedy about a lesbian nun (Ana Fabrega) and her Jewish stalker (Nef), and was nominated for a Gotham Independent Film Award for "Breakthrough Series in Short Form."

Additional acting credits include shorts such as LOVE ADVENT, CRUSH, FAMILY TREE, SELF AWARE, SHE TOLD ME SHE WAS DEAD, as well as the comedy film HELLAWARE.

Nef can currently be seen in the Gucci Bloom fragrance campaign alongside Dakota Johnson and Petra Collins. Launched in May 2015, Bloom is Gucci creative director Alessandro Michele's first women's scent for the label.

Nef currently resides in Los Angeles.

SUKI WATERHOUSE (SARAH)

In 2017 The Daily Telegraph cited Suki as their "new favourite amputee action heroine' after she led the stellar cast of critically acclaimed filmmaker Ana Lily Amirpour's THE BAD BATCH (2016) including Keanu Reeves, Jason Momoa and Jim Carey.

2012 saw her make the successful transition into acting, landing her first film role in the award nominated crime thriller, PUSHER. Other roles have included Bethany in LOVE, ROSIE (2014), a comedy romance alongside Lily Collins, Sam Claflin and in 2015, Suki starred as Marlene in INSURGENT, alongside Kate Winslet, Naomi Watts and Shailene Woodley.

Suki appeared as Kitty Bennett in the cinematic adaptation of Seth Grahame-Smith's international best seller, PRIDE AND PREJUDICE AND ZOMBIES in 2016 as part of a stellar cast including Charles Dance, Lena Headey and Lily James.

She has most recently finished filming the highly anticipated DETECTIVE PIKACHU. Based on the characters from the much-loved Nintendo game, Pokemon. The star-studded cast will see Suki star alongside Ryan Reynolds who will voice Pikachu as well as Bill Nighy and Chris Geere.

Suki is soon to star in original sci-fi drama JONATHAN led by Ansel Elgort. She will also star opposite Matt Smith as a member of the Manson 'Family' Mary Brunner in the Charles Manson biopic CHARLIE SAYS.

Suki's further credits include; THE GIRL WHO INVENTED KISSING, THE WHITE PRINCESS, FUTURE WORLD and BILLIONAIRE BOYS CLUB.

ABRA (EM)

Born in Queens, New York, Abra spent the first eight years of her childhood in London, England. After London, her family settled in the quiet suburbs outside Atlanta. At 14, Abra began playing guitar. Later in her teens, she began uploading her acoustic covers of rap songs onto YouTube. This led to her being discovered by Awful Records founder, Father, who encouraged her to make original music. She joined the label in 2014.

Her first LP, ROSE, was released in 2015. The song "Fruit" was featured in an article on the best R&B songs of 2016 by The Guardian. On July 15, 2016, Abra dropped off her second EP, PRINCESS, a co-branded release between True Panther and Awful Records. Vogue commented in 2016 that Abra's "deliberate contrasts are part of her artistic identity on the whole: Abra is a member of the mostly male-dominated Awful Records coterie, an outlier crew swiftly taking over Atlanta with a sound that stands apart from ATL's rap oeuvre".

MAIN CREDITS:

Written and Directed by: Sam Levinson

Produced by: David S. Goyer, Kevin Turen, Anita Gou, Matthew J. Malek, Manu Gargi, Aaron L. Gilbert

Executive Producers: Steven Thibault, Jason Cloth, Andy Pollack, Christopher Conover, Mike Novogratz, J.E. Moore, Will Greenfield, David Gendron, Ali Jazayeri

Co-Executive Producers: Milan Chakraborty, Brenda Gilbert

Co-Producers: Matthias Mellinghaus, Harrison Kreiss, Katia Washington, Phoebe Fisher

Casting by: Mary Vernieu, C.S.A. and Jessica Kelly, C.S.A.

Starring: Odessa Young, Suki Waterhouse, Hari Nef, Abra, Anika Noni Rose, Colman Domingo, Maude Apatow, Cody Christian, Kathryn Erbe, Susie Misner, Danny Ramirez, Kelvin Harrison, Jr. Noah Galvin, Joe Chrest, Jeff Pope, Jennifer Morrison, JD Evermore, Lukas Gage with Bill Skarsgård with Joel McHale and Bella Thorne

Music by: Ian Hultquist

Director of Photography: Marcell Rév

Production Designer: Michael Grasley

Editor: Ron Patane

Costume Designer: Rachel Dainer-Best

Music Supervisor: Mary Ramos