



# REACH FOR THE STARZ

*A new initiative prepares writers for premium networks*

**BY MARGEAX SIPPILL**

**“O**UR WORK IS NOT done until everybody gets a job,” says Daria Overby, executive director of creative diversity at Starz, home of beloved shows like *Power*, *Outlander*, *P-Valley* and *VIDA*.

The premium network collaborated with NewFilmmakers Los Angeles and the National Association of Latino Independent Producers on the #TakeTheLead Writer’s Intensive, named for the #TakeTheLead initiative that kicked off in 2021 to boost stories by and about women and people in historically marginalized groups.



**COREY DASHAUN**

“One of our commitments was to amplify voices for underrepresented audiences and behind the camera as well,” Overby says. “We looked at all of our data for all of our writers, directors, and on-screen talent, and we saw that we had pretty good numbers. One of the things we wanted to bump up was, of course, writers of color. So we decided to launch a pipeline program. And that’s where the conversation started.”

One thing that sets the #TakeTheLead Writer’s Intensive apart from other programs of its kind is that it focuses specifically on writing for premium cable networks.

“What we really wanted was to have people be able to write for Starz



**TENNESSEE MARTIN**

or for premium cable — because a lot of times, you go through these programs and people are writing broadcast scripts, or we’re looking at their films, and it’s not really the right fit,” Overby adds. “So we thought, if they develop treatments for shows, for our actual programming, that would give them a better shot, and they would get an education that they probably wouldn’t have gotten somewhere else.”

Starz, NALIP and NFMLA aligned when they all realized they had the same goals. They launched the program and began taking submissions last July, from which they selected a cohort of 10 talented screenwriters: Alejandra Lopez, Corey Dashaun, Ida Yazdi, Gabby Revilla Lugo, Nzinga Kemp, Jorge Thomson, John Lowe, Naiyah Ambros, Raymond Arturo Perez, and Tennessee Martin.

Perez, a Los Angeles-based film and television writer originally from San



## THE INTENSIVE PARTICIPANTS LISTEN TO CAA AGENT LAUREN JANE HOLLAND

Antonio, became a staff writer on Season 2 of Netflix's *Selena: The Series*.

"The reason I thought the program was fascinating and definitely of interest was because a lot of the writing programs in the industry tend to focus on folks who haven't been staffed yet. And this program was one of the few that focused on that, but also focused on folks who may have gotten staffed once but are having trouble jumping into that second writer's room. And that's kind of where I found myself," Perez says.

Fellow finalist Lugo, who worked on the series *Brujas* and currently has a TV project in development with Gina Rodriguez, feels similarly.

"It was great to commune with other writers, many of whom, like me, had been staffed before and sold material and were just trying to navigate the current waters of our business," Lugo says. "It provided a sense of community and support and gave me the opportunity to stretch my writing muscle in a different way than I have in other writing programs."

During the first phase of the program, the cohort met virtually for a few hours each weekday morning to develop an episode treatment pitch for one of the existing series at Starz. They also met with speakers from across the industry, including executives at Starz and other networks, literary agents, and supervising producers. On the fourth week, they pitched their episodes to a jury that included Starz executive vice president of original programming Karen Bailey and senior vice president of original programming Kathryn Tyus-Adair.

Next, the cohort was narrowed down

to six finalists: Dashuan, Lugo, Lowe, Ambros, Perez and Martin. In the next phase, they spent six hours a week in virtual sessions, meeting with Starz executives and mentors to hone and refine their spec scripts, culminating in a final pitch to a jury of six Starz executives.

Ambros, who is based in Los Angeles, joined the intensive because she identifies with the type of content she sees on Starz.

"They especially make a lot of content for Black folks and other people of color, and they just have a really diverse slate. That's definitely the type of content that I like to write," Ambros says. "Throughout the program, we met not only executives from Starz, but also some writers and showrunners. Getting to

understand that network better and sort of getting integrated was really exciting."

Ambros currently attends the MFA Film Production program at USC's School of Cinematic Arts, where she is a recipient of the George Lucas Family Foundation Scholarship. Her film "Grammable"

won Best Dark Comedy Film at the Oregon Short Film Festival, and is currently on the festival circuit. Naiyah was previously a scripted development coordinator for Vice Studios, where she helped develop television projects for platforms like Hulu, Showtime and Amazon.

Lowe, a 2021 Humanitas New Voices Winner who has written for Netflix's *Virgin River*, has a pilot in development based on the events that led to the Stonewall uprising of 1969.

Dashaun has written for Peacock's *One of Us Is Lying*, and his short film "HARD" won the Sony Pictures Enter-

tainment grant from Film Independent's Project Involve.

"They're the next generation of writers for our industry, and such wonderful storytellers," Martin says of her fellow participants. "I've gotten to read the work of a lot of people since, and these are people who are right there on the cusp of being future staff writers, story editors, showrunners. ... I was just really proud to be in that level of program and with that kind of cohort."

Martin's Southern Gothic drama *Sutton Holler* was recently a finalist in the Screen Craft Action & Adventure screenplay competition. Before joining the cohort, Martin worked at Starz as a coordinator in original programming, where she led the creation of the "Starz — Beyond Gender Casting Database," which gave visibility to trans and non-binary actors in the industry.

NFMLA executive director Larry Laboe says he wanted the initiative to help the screenwriters "not only during the program, but continuing after the program to try to get these writers in front of staffing opportunities at Starz."

Diana Luna, executive director of NALIP, is loving what she's seen so far.

"I'm really looking forward to having more collaborations to be really involved with writers, with producers, with directors, with all different kinds of areas, so that we can really actively promote their work," she says. "It's very hands-on, the advice is right there, the support is right there."

"One of the greatest components of the program was intentional relationship building," adds NALIP program director Vanessa Sanchez. "Seeing how everybody opened up throughout the weeks and then became an advocate for each other was just a great end result of the program."



GABBY REVILLA LUGO



NAIYAH AMBROS



JOHN LOWE



RAYMOND ARTURO PEREZ





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