

# Elaine Del Valle and Traci Hays Found Their Passion for Filmmaking Through Life-Changing Experiences

BY MARGE AUX SIPPELL · | UPDATED: APRIL 2, 2024



Directors Traci Hays and Elaine Del Valle were inspired to make films because of life-changing experiences during their adolescent years — which made them perfect for an initiative between MarVista Entertainment and Tubi Originals to produce films aimed at young women.

Del Valle, a director and actress whose roles have included parts on *The Sopranos*, *Donnie Brasco*, and *Queens*, was walking in Brooklyn's Brownsville neighborhood, where she grew up, when a strange man attacked her. She successfully fought him off — a triumphant moment she would revisit, years later, in her stage play *Brownsville Bred*.

## Elaine Del Valle on Her Journey to Becoming a Filmmaker

"I was elated and proud. I was like, 'Yes, I beat him up. Yes, I did it,'" Del Valle recalls. "That's a great story that came out of being Brownsville-bred. And that's why I'm so encouraged to tell this story and show people that come out of generational poverty the journey out — not through stuff and things, but through attitude and experiences that grow you."

She adapted the play into a short film that premiered in 2022 at SXSW, and is currently in post production on the feature version. She has also made several other shorts, one of which, "All Is Well," led her to MarVista.

She directed "All Is Well" through the Moonshot Initiative, formerly known as the Women's Weekend Film Challenge, and it screened at NewFilmmakers Los Angeles, where it caught the attention of a MarVista executive who offered her the chance to pitch herself as the director for a feature film MarVista and Tubi were developing called *Midnight Hustle*.

She got the job, and the film was released on Tubi in 2023. It's a thriller starring Kyle Kankonde and Savoy Bailey as two ballerinas who get caught up in a world of stripping and crime.

"MarVista has really focused on authentic storytelling and supporting females in front of and behind the camera for years," says Ashley Squires, vice president of development and production at MarVista.

The production studio, which is known for holiday movies, rom-coms and thrillers, was acquired by Fox Entertainment in 2021, which shares its parent company, Fox Corporation, with the streaming service Tubi.

"All of our content is female forward, strong female leads. We do a lot of thrillers, and under that genre, it's been really interesting to explore the different kinds," Squires says.

## Traci Hays on the Experience That Inspired Her to Become a Filmmaker



Hays, meanwhile, underwent open heart surgery at age 15. It spoiled her dreams of playing soccer, but "led me to find my new dream of filmmaking, because I spent about three or four months in bed recovering from my surgery."

"I started watching more film and television than I had ever had before, because I was a very active kid and I was never much for sitting in front of the TV. So I ended up making little short films with my siblings and writing my own plays and little movies — and I decided to apply to film school," Hays recalls.

She began her career as a production designer working on films like *A Nice Girl Like You*, starring Lucy Hale, and *Darkness Falls*, with Gary Cole. Then she tried her hand at directing short films, including her 2021 short "40ish...", which won several festival awards and also screened at NFMLA. In 2022, she made her feature directorial debut with the rom-com *Tangled*, and is currently represented by Culture Creative Entertainment.

Her connection to MarVista started when she pitched them an idea for a feature film about a soccer player.

"At the end of the pitch, they were like, oh, that sounds great — do you still play soccer?" she recalled.

The MarVista executives invited her to join their soccer team made up of a group of Los Angeles women. She said yes.

"After the general meeting, I was seeing them every weekend, and they really loved my work and we got along really well. They referred me to another colleague of theirs who was prepping a movie, and that's how I ultimately got connected with them — I think because I started playing soccer," she says.

Hays has now directed two Tubi Original features produced by MarVista Entertainment. Her thriller *My Bloody Galentine* premiered on Tubi in February and stars Ella-Rae Smith, Miriam-Teak Lee and Cassie Clare as three women who seek revenge on exes who dumped them right before Valentine's Day.

She also directed Tubi's *Blood, Sweat and Cheer*, which came out last year and stars Tammin Sursok as a suburban mom who impersonates her daughter to audition for the high school cheer squad.

Hays is currently working on a third Tubi Original film set to begin production this spring through MarVista.

"They are giving filmmakers opportunities where a lot of companies aren't," Hays says.

*Main Image: Elaine Del Valle behind the scenes of of Midnight Hustle. Photo credit Dustin Ward, courtesy of Elaine Del Valle.*

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