

In Proximity
Season 3 Episode 15
Prox Gems: Sinners
Final Transcript

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[00:22 - “In Proximity Theme” by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: You're watching and listening to In Proximity. I'm Paola Mardo, and today is another edition of our Prox Gems episodes. So for today's episode, we're gonna focus on Sinners. We know a lot of you really enjoyed the deep dives into the film that we've had on this show, so we wanted to bring back some of the favorite moments and favorite stories from this season.

So on this mini episode, you'll hear from Dolly Li, cultural consultant on the film; Steve Gehrke, the script supervisor; and you'll hear from Todd Harris, the storyboard artist for the juke joint musical montage within the film Sinners. It's a fun one! Enjoy.

[1:07 - “KN 9 to 5” by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: I want to go back to that—what you mentioned earlier. You would get concepts of scenes, and then you have to figure something out about it?

Dolly Li: Yes, yes.

Paola Mardo: Can you name some examples?

Dolly Li: I remember being asked about these lines about—about licking.

[LAUGHTER]

Dolly Li: And being asked whether those lines—like, what dialect those lines should be in. And I—I was just like—

Paola Mardo: First of all, was this on email, or was this, like, a very important Zoom call where they were like—

[LAUGHTER]

Dolly Li: This was—this first started over email. This is, like, after we had already started working together.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Do you remember who, who emailed you or who contacted you first?

Dolly Li: Yeah, I believe it was Sev, or it might have been Wai as well.

Paola Mardo: Yes, Sev Ohanian, our founder and a producer on the film, and also Wai Wing Lau, Sev's assistant.

Dolly Li: But I get this email about what dialect this line should be in, and it's something about being licked, right? And I was just like, [GASPS] whose line is this? I was like, what's happening for them?

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: It's, like, a dry email, "Can you please advise?"

Dolly Li: And they're like, "What dialect should this be in?" And I'm like [GASPS].

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: And, and you responded with?

Dolly Li: I responded with that era, most of the immigrants came from either Canton or Taishan. But the early, early immigrants really did come from Taishan. And a lot of them could speak Cantonese. But I was like, "If you want to be super accurate, Taishan. But how many people will understand it? Not that many. You know, you could go with Cantonese and easily get away with it, and maybe a smaller, not-very-big—or, like, a slightly larger, not-very-big community would understand. But I love that they went all the way and chose Taishan.

Paola Mardo: I think I know what this scene is. Taishan and Cantonese, those are the two communities that were of the era?

Dolly Li: The earliest immigrants, most of them were from Taishan or Canton.

Paola Mardo: Canton, okay.

Dolly Li: Or Guangdong now.

Paola Mardo: Oh, okay. Where's Taishan? What part of China?

Dolly Li: It's basically—it's a similar part of China. It's like, within Southern China. It's within the Canton region, but they speak their own dialect.

Paola Mardo: Gotcha.

Dolly Li: And I think—it's a very—it's a very old-school dialect. So, when you hear it, it sounds, like—

Paola Mardo: Formal and—

Dolly Li: It's not even formal. It's so informal. It sounds very much like a village dialect, right?

Paola Mardo: Oh, interesting.

Dolly Li: Almost like a pidgin dialect. So, to hear that on screen is also just so wild and so crazy. And I was like, "You guys really went in for it!" Like—

Paola Mardo: Love the dedication.

Dolly Li: Exactly.

Paola Mardo: Any other scenes whether it's a dialogue or, or details or even character stuff with the actors?

Dolly Li: Yeah. I really—I mean, I—the first time I saw it, I was really impressed by Li Jun Li's work and her acting. Like, I was surprised that she played such a prominent role, not that, you know, I didn't have faith in her, but more like I think I've been so accustomed to Asian characters in movies being a side character or a just, like, kind of superfluous or accessory character. Maybe accessory is really the right word. I'm so used to Asian people and Asian characters in movies being accessories to the plot that I didn't imagine that she would really be part of the plot, right?

And so I was very impressed to see that. I thought her acting was incredible. And I think—of course, it, like, opened up so many conversations, all the think pieces, which—you know, that's the beauty of movies, right? You allow people to have space to really think about what all of these things mean. But I just love that she played such a critical role in the story itself.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. I mean, very pivotal. I mean, spoiler alert, she—I mean, both of them, Bo and Grace, are quite—I mean, they're part of the community. They sort of help in this grand adventure to build the juke and kind of like, open up for the night. And then, obviously, when

things go awry, certain things happen. I mean, most people have seen this by now, so we can talk about it.

Dolly Li: Most people have seen it. If you haven't seen it by now, you need to leave.

Paola Mardo: Pause right here. Pause right here.

Dolly Li: And go watch the film.

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: Go watch the film and come back. And, yeah, can we talk about that? Because I feel like you've talked about it online, maybe, and then you're mentioning think pieces. Can you talk about—yeah, what was Grace's role, and what are sort of the discussions around that?

Dolly Li: Yeah. I mean, certainly there's, like, Ryan's version of this, right, and my interpretation. And then there's, like, the internet's interpretation, which, you know, you can't stop the internet from interpreting as they please. I think that—well, I'll start with what people online, at least, what the hot-button topic seems to be—

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Dolly Li: The hot-button topic seems to be that Grace was the person who, as a character, invited in the vampires, which essentially means that she betrayed the community that was—that had invited her to be a part of this party and this celebration. Right? And so, not only was she betraying them, she also happened to be, you know, someone who was not Black betraying this community.

Paola Mardo: Mm hm.

Dolly Li: But how I really see this film, especially, you know, having translated that line about being licked, and then seeing it all come together, the fact that the vampire, Remmick, that he was—she was the only person that he spoke to in a foreign language. And I think when you're an immigrant in America arriving here and English not being your first language, it made sense to me how that could trigger this, like, guttural, animalistic reaction to wanting to, like, set the place ablaze and, like, do whatever you can to save yourself and your family.

Because when you're an immigrant in America, and you don't speak English, right, and someone speaks to you in your native language, it evokes this emotion in you that is so hard to describe, right? It's not just like code-switching. You're, like, unlocking a totally different side of the brain. And I think—this was why I think the film was also so brilliant in that moment where you have this Irish vampire who's able to, like, embody the soul of her husband to the degree where he could tap into this really deep language to really mess with her and her emotions. I was like, that is—that is some really dark, dark spiritual stuff, right?

Paola Mardo: Yeah, and also threaten, you know, essentially to harm your daughter.

Dolly Li: Yes, exactly, like threatening their daughter, speaking their native language. I mean, I can't even imagine if someone, like, walked up to my parents when we were children and, like, threatened their family and their children but in their own native language. Like, that's wild.

[8:00 - "In Proximity '90s" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: So Steve, now we're going to go through a little bit more of your process. And you've brought something to show us and talk us through. Can you talk a little bit about what this is and explain, actually, for the listeners who can't even see what this is what we're looking at right now?

Steve Gehrke: I brought the copy of the original script. The original script stays with the editors. But I've got a copy of the script that I keep with me.

Paola Mardo: And it's in a binder. It's, like, a thick script in a binder, lots of lines and numbers. And he's got his notes all over this. So specifically, we're going to go through a scene. And what scene is this?

Steve Gehrke: This was Scene 6. This is when Smoke and Stack are standing outside the lumber mill waiting for Hogwood to arrive. It's an interesting scene because we actually did some camera tests because we wanted one still frame, one master, and two people, who happened to both be Michael B. Jordan, in the frame.

So we had to shoot the frame with Michael as Stack, and then Percy Bell, our photo double, played Smoke. And so they have to interact. They have to pass a cigarette to each other. They have to light a cigarette, play with their guns. They move back and forth, they grab a bag, and then they exit frame. It all seems, you know, like a small little sequence. It's about a minute long.

Paola Mardo: And on the page itself, it's like less than half a page of script, right?

Steve Gehrke: Yeah. It's—it's literally three-eighths of a page of description.

Paola Mardo: And next to this script page are your notes. And can you explain a little bit about what this is and what it is in relation to this three-eighths of a page of script?

Steve Gehrke: Sure. Sure. On the right side of the page, we have the words of the description of the shot, and on the left side are the actual takes that we did. It shows that we did 23 takes. Not every one is complete. Sometimes the cigarette didn't light. Sometimes the eyeline wasn't correct. Sometimes the actor grabs the wrong bag at the end of the scene. So you can get through the whole scene, and you have mistakes, but we're able to redo and select. We selected Take 21, which is kind of nice. We should go to Vegas with that.

But it takes time. Things don't happen in one or two takes, but the actors had to pass the cigarettes back and forth. They had to, you know, match the action.

Paola Mardo: I just want to go back to your script page real quick. Can you talk about the lines and the squiggles? Because I am not a script supervisor, I don't see things like this often. So, like, what do those mean?

Steve Gehrke: The beginning of the scene here, there's 6 and 6A. That represented the shot of Michael and Percy, the two different coverages. Then they walked out of that frame. So the shot starts at the beginning of the scene, and it leaves when they exit the frame. Then we had—

Paola Mardo: And really quick, for the listeners, so basically you've drawn—you've notched, like, the top of that section of the script and, like, made notches at the bottom of that section, and then you draw a straight line.

Steve Gehrke: Yes, and the number at the top of the line signifies the scene and the information on the left side of the script. And then Hogwood character walks up to them, and we did six more setups of walking towards him, meeting him, two shot of Michael and Percy as Smoke and Stack, and then another setup where we changed them in costume.

So we were constantly changing costumes back and forth. It wasn't like Michael B. stayed in one character for half a day, and then we went and did the other character but that we would do wide shots, and we would do closeups. Then we would do the closeup of Hogwood. And then, like, there was a line of dialogue that was added when Hogwood says, "Follow me, fellas." So any adlibs or information, I just put it in, and then they'll use it or not use it. They easily could, you know, cut out of it if they feel the show's too long or they don't need it. But—

Paola Mardo: And what are these squiggly things? Because those fascinate me.

Steve Gehrke: The squiggle is very interesting. That means that that line of dialogue was delivered off-camera. So, like here, you see in the three shot, all lines were delivered on camera. Now that we do a two shot, Hogwood is off-camera, so he gets a squiggle. So the microphone may not be pointing towards him. So it lets the editor know, okay, his dialogue might not be that good, but we have it in four other takes.

Paola Mardo: Is this, like, old-school scripty technique, or is this something you developed, or how did you learn?

Steve Gehrke: I did a script job once. The director said, "Hey, how'd you like to be my script supervisor." And I said, "What do I have to do?" And I ended up doing the job. I was so self-taught, it was, like, horrible. I looked at my notes later, and I was like, what was I doing?

Paola Mardo: We should've asked you to bring that. We could've compared the two.

Steve Gehrke: Oh, no. No. That one's—that one's burned.

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: We will find a way.

Steve Gehrke: So then I went back to doing my regular job, which was craft service. Two completely different jobs.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. You started in craft services, right?

Steve Gehrke: I started in craft service on the—

Paola Mardo: 1984 Olympics, I read.

Steve Gehrke: 1984 Olympics.

Paola Mardo: Incredible.

Steve Gehrke: So I'm now—you know, I've done script supervising, but I go back to my safety, which is buying donuts and making coffee. And one day, they said, "Will you take the notes to the office for the script supervisor? Leave a copy at the office, and then bring the originals back?"

And I said, "Okay." And so what I did is I made an extra set for myself because I wanted to see what a real script supervisor did. And when I saw that, I was like, "I could do that job." And—

Paola Mardo: There you go.

Steve Gehrke: I guess I'm doing it.

Paola Mardo: You definitely are! I have just learned a lot from this.

Steve Gehrke: So totally self-taught. So then I read that there were books about it. And then I looked. I'm like, "Oh, I'm doing that." And it's like, just do it.

[14:25 - "In Proximity '90s" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: You worked on Sinners as well.

Todd Harris: Yes.

Paola Mardo: Can you share a little bit? Because I actually didn't know that until we first met because you talked about it, and I was like, "What! Why didn't I know this?" So can you talk a little bit about what was your role on Sinners and what was the scene or—

Todd Harris: I wish it was bigger. They called me at the tail end of Eyes of Wakanda. I was deep in post and, you know, I was juggling four chainsaws. And for some reason Zinzi called me up, that's Ryan's wife.

Paola Mardo: And producer on the film.

Todd Harris: And producer. And I was like, "Why is she calling me?" And she was so sweet. She was like, "Listen, I know you're busy." And I was like, "Yeah, what's going on?" And it's like, "Ryan really wants you to work on this movie or specifically a scene." And I was like, "Sure!" 'Cause I can't be that busy. Of course I'm going to help Ryan out. But Ryan's such a nice guy, he forgets he's a boss sometimes.

And I was like, yeah, he could have called me and he'd be like, "Listen man, I need you to storyboard this scene and do some hair." Like, I would've done it because Ryan's ace. And so they called me up and they asked me to do the scene inside the speakeasy when it was the time transition scene where we get to see all the music and the big one that happens. And Ryan had some ideas, I pitched back some ideas and he let me go as ambitious as I wanted.

And it kind of turned to what it turned into. And it was, you know, it was shockingly close to the boards because it was very early on in production.

But Ryan had a very—he was like, "This is going to be a centerpiece of the movie." And I was just happy enough that he would think of me to help make that possible. So...

Paola Mardo: I mean, it's such a iconic—so many iconic moments in film, but that one I think stood out to a lot of people for a lot of reasons. And honestly, I think you've just never seen that done ever before.

Todd Harris: Oh, he was—he was anxious. He was so—when I delivered the first storyboard, he was audibly happy about it because you could tell how much it meant to him to communicate that.

Paola Mardo: So yeah. Can you talk a little bit about the ideas you guys were pitching or what were the conversations and how to choreograph or draw it out, I guess?

Todd Harris: Well, that's the illusion of language. Because you can be abstract and the thought experiment in your head is crystal clear, but once you start to put it on paper, the things, the parts of your imagination that kind of propped it up quickly fall apart. And so I'm the first one to deal with what's falling through the cracks.

And so I try to solve the problem as much as I can, send it over to Ryan, and I'm like, "Listen man, this is my stab at it." I was able to kind of—because also knowing your director's taste is a big part of it too, because you're an extension of that taste. So kind of absorbing Ryan's pitch and contributing to it in a way that I thought forwarded his agenda in terms of what he wanted to communicate was—that's kind of what I led with. And I got pretty close to the mark and it was a lot of high fives and "Could we do this and that?"

And I'm like, "Yeah, no problem." And by the end of it, it only took maybe two or three passes—

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Todd Harris: And we were off to the races.

Paola Mardo: Did he tell you specifically what to include? Because there's so many kinds of music genres? You know what I mean, through history? Was there a list?

Todd Harris: Some of them were in there.

Paola Mardo: Yeah, yeah.

Todd Harris: I like to keep everything I do as simple as possible. So I draw, like, a really broad brush to give more of an impressionistic—lots of shadows and shapes and strong composition. One of the things—'cause you can play with it more—is a foreground, middle ground, background when you're just using pen and ink. So, like, having a B-Boy kind of passing the foreground on top of a bar, have things and wash past lights, and trying to find ways to keep that camera involved in the abstractness of the sequence.

So that was the big thing about it. So—because also a continuous camera is very hard to communicate in static drawings. So for their purposes, I gave them a little animatic. I gave them boards you can print out, and I gave them click-throughs you can click through so you can control the time.

Paola Mardo: That's awesome.

[18:53 - "In Proximity Theme" by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: In Proximity is a production of Proximity Media.

The show is hosted, directed, and produced by Paola Mardo.

Executive producers are Ryan Coogler, Zinzi Coogler, and Sev Ohanian.

Theme song and additional music by Ludwig Göransson.

Patrick Epino is our co-director and director of photography.

Ken Nana is our sound designer and mix engineer.

The production team includes Brittani Brown, Isabella Miller, and Alexandria Santana.

Follow us on social media @proximitymedia.

For transcripts and more information, head to proximitymedia.com.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]