



Matt Damon attends The Project Greenlight Season 4 premiere of 'The Leisure Class' in Los Angeles. — AP photos

Matt Damon apologizes for diversity comments

Matt Damon has apologized for comments regarding diversity in filmmaking that sparked widespread backlash, after a portion of a conversation from HBO's "Project Greenlight" circulated online. In the segment, Damon was shown shutting down producer Effie Brown ("Dear White People") who made a case that a script dealing with sensitive subjects like prostitution should have a diverse directing team behind it. Damon responded that diversity should be handled in "the casting of the film, not in the casting of the show."

In a statement, Damon said he believes "deeply that there need to be more diverse filmmakers making movies." His comments, he said, were part of a broader conversation that did not make the show. He also apologized for any offense caused, but is happy that it started a conversation. — AP

Wes Ball, Hollywood's new blockbuster visionary

Wes Ball didn't mean to have a signature hat. He can't even remember where he got the tattered, sweat-stained, beige baseball cap with the white embroidered "Catskill Mountains" stitching. But he knows one thing for sure - he's not taking it off anytime soon, and definitely not during production. During one of the busiest weeks near the end of filming "The Scorch Trials," the second movie in the "Maze Runner" trilogy, Ball thought he might try out a new hat, and everything went haywire. Not only were they shooting the most complicated sequence in the shortest amount of time, it was also at night in the New Mexico desert, where the temperature sometimes dropped to the single digits. Then the cast started having medical issues.

Ki Hong Lee got appendicitis. Kaya Scodelario had a kidney failure. Dexter Darden was hospitalized with sickle cell anemia. Then Dylan O'Brien contracted the flu, was out for two days, and came back only to break a leg in the middle of a scene. And yes, he used the take where he breaks his leg. "The whole end scene he's got a broken leg. You can see him hobbling," said Ball on a recent afternoon at his office in the San Fernando Valley. "I was like, 'I'm never taking off this hat again.'"

In the end, this perfect storm of chaos only added two days to the schedule and they still came in under budget. Not bad for a green director who was plucked out of near obscurity to set the tone for "The Maze Runner" franchise, Fox's attempt at making a "Hunger Games" of their own. With the first "Maze Runner," which was made for \$34 million and earned over \$340 million worldwide last year, Ball has proven himself to be a pro who can deliver. Fox loves him. His actors love him. It's the sort of reputation you need when you're making your name in Hollywood.



Director Wes Ball poses for a portrait in Los Angeles in promotion of his new film The Maze Runner. — AP

Ball's Studio City office, a multi-level loft that he shares with filmmaker friends, is a hub of creativity and a film geek's paradise. Among the workstations and flannel shirts strewn on the couches, there's a model of R2-D2, and posters for 1980s adventure cult classics like "The Goonies" and Joe Dante's "Explorers" are hanging about. He laughs that even the baseball cap is some "Indiana Jones"-style extension of his person, or from watching too many Steven Spielberg behind-the-scenes clips.

Public eye

The child-of-the-80s furnishings are no accident. Ball wants to tell small stories on a big canvas, like his idols. "Spielberg, Cameron and Zemeckis are the guys for me. They're guys who do big, awesome popcorn entertainment that also have authentic emotion and heart," he said. With storyboards for future projects lining the office walls, Ball is choosing his next steps carefully. He almost passed on the "Maze Runner" sequel because he didn't like the book.

At the pleas of his cast, and assurances that he could tweak the story, he decided to stay on. He'll also direct the third film in the series, "The Death Cure," set to start shooting in February. Then he'll tackle "Fall of Gods," a Norse mythology fantasy with a "dark edge." A feature-length "Ruin" will happen at some point, too. For now, Ball is happy to continue learning in the public eye with increasingly bigger budgets - and pressures. "His touchstones are Jim Cameron and Ridley Scott," said Godfrey. "There is going to be a guy who comes along who fills their shoes. We believe that Wes is that guy." —AP

Developed projects

"He doesn't waste money. He knows where he wants to spend. He knows what he needs to build and then what he can add on to with visual effects," said veteran producer Wyck Godfrey. "He has vision. That's the long and the short of it... It wasn't just talk." At 34, he's not exactly a wunderkind. He's paid his dues. Ball attended film school at Florida State University with dreams of directing. He won a Student Academy Award for an animated short that helped him get a foot in the door when he first moved to Los Angeles. That translated to jobs in VFX and post work, which paid the bills and continued his technical education while he developed projects on the side.

Then one took off. "Ruin," an 81/2-minute computer animated post-apocalyptic adventure, went viral. Suddenly he was getting calls from agents and taking meetings all over town. During this time, someone at Fox gave him James Dashner's "The Maze Runner" to look at. He did, developed a pitch, and within a few days he had sold "Ruin" and gotten the "Maze Runner" job, both at Fox. "It's rare that you give somebody a shot based on an animated short film to do a live action movie. You could see in the short that he had real cinematic flair," said Godfrey.



US actress Angelina Jolie speaks to Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen during a meeting at the Peace Palace in Phnom Penh yesterday. — AP

Cambodian PM backs Jolie's Khmer Rouge film

Cambodian premier Hun Sen yesterday voiced his support for Hollywood star Angelina Jolie's upcoming film about the murderous Khmer Rouge regime after the pair met in Phnom Penh. The actress-turned-director is adapting "First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers", a memoir by Cambodian rights activist Loung Ung about surviving the communist regime.

In its quest for an agrarian Marxist utopia, the brutal Khmer Rouge killed up to two million Cambodians between 1975-1979 by starvation, overwork or outright execution. Hun Sen said the film "reflects facts in Cambodia and will be a way for younger generations to understand the country", the prime minister's spokesman Eang Sophalleth told reporters after the meeting. Jolie has previously said the film helped her draw closer to the people of Cambodia, the homeland of Maddox, her adopted son with megastar husband Brad Pitt.

She will direct and produce the film for streaming giant Netflix from a script she co-wrote with Ung, while acclaimed Cambodian director Rithy Panh will also serve as a producer. After two top regime leaders were last year sentenced to life imprisonment for crimes against humanity, Hun Sen - a former mid-ranking Khmer Rouge cadre before he defected - spoke out against further prosecutions, warning it risked reigniting conflict. —AFP



Iraqi Kurdish youths perform on stage a play enacting the Peshmerga fight against the Islamic State (IS) group, at the end of the 3rd Dohuk International film festival, in Dohuk, 430 kms (260 miles) northwest of Baghdad. — AFP