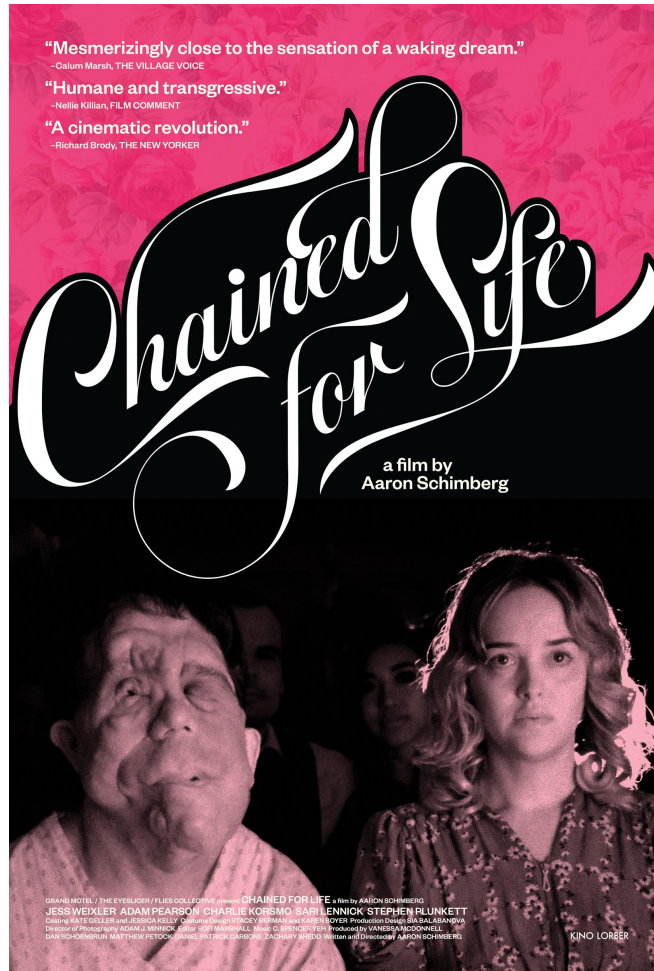


# KINO LORBER

## CHAINED FOR LIFE

A film by Aaron Schimberg



USA / 2018 / 91 minutes / Color / 1.85:1 / Super 16mm to DCP / 5.1 Surround / English

**\*\*World Premiere: BAM cinemaFEST 2018\*\***

**\*\*Fantasia Film Festival 2018\*\***

**\*\*BFI London Film Festival 2019\*\***

**\*\*Sarasota Film Festival 2019\*\***

**\*\*Chicago Underground Film Festival 2019\*\***

**\*\*Fantastic Fest 2019\*\***

**Distributor Contact:** Chris Wells, [cwells@kinolorber.com](mailto:cwells@kinolorber.com)

**Publicity Contact:** David Ninh, [dninh@kinolorber.com](mailto:dninh@kinolorber.com)

Kino Lorber, Inc., 333 West 39<sup>th</sup> St., Suite 503, New York, NY 10018, (212) 629-6880

## **Synopsis:**

"Building on the promise of his hallucinogenic debut *GO DOWN DEATH*, filmmaker Aaron Schimberg delivers another brilliantly oddball, acerbically funny foray into gonzo surrealism. In a deft tragicomic performance, Jess Weixler (*TEETH*) plays Mabel, a movie star "slumming it" in an outré art-horror film being shot in a semi-abandoned hospital. Cast opposite her is Rosenthal (*UNDER THE SKIN*'s Adam Pearson), a gentle-natured young man with a severe facial deformity. As their relationship evolves both on and offscreen, Schimberg raises provocative questions about cinematic notions of beauty, representation, and exploitation. Tod Browning crossed with Robert Altman crossed with David Lynch only begins to describe something this startlingly original and deeply felt." - BAMcinemaFest

## **Director's Statement:**

As a filmmaker with a facial difference, I have never seen my experience accurately represented on screen. This film - the first, as far as I know, made by and starring disfigured people - is my humble attempt to remedy that.

When disfigured characters are seen at all in films (usually played by handsome actors with disfiguring latex), they are trotted out to play monsters or objects of pity, made into vessels for the symbolic expression of cruelty, sin, villainy and other ills. "Bitter defectives," as a character in my film says. Even when they're portrayed sympathetically, they function only to impart inspirational lessons to the able-bodied people who encounter them.

*CHAINED FOR LIFE* is my response to the way people with disfigurements have been portrayed in films (for instance, in *FREAKS*, *THE ELEPHANT MAN*, *WONDER*) throughout cinema's history. It asks whether the sum of these portrayals has adversely affected the way we are regarded in real life. I consider it a comedy, but if you think it's a tragedy, I wouldn't argue with you.

## **Director and Screenwriter's Biography:**

**Aaron Schimberg** has enjoyed success as a filmmaker with his first feature-length film *Go Down Death* (2014), a harrowing tale set in a remote war-torn village and based on Jonathan Mallory Sinus's folktales. *Go Down Death* was an official selection at the Fantasia Film Festival, the Raindance Festival, and the Northside Film Festival, among others. Schimberg was born with a bilateral cleft palate and uses his experience to inspire his work, all of which deals with disability or disfigurement in some way. Schimberg has written and directed both of his films.

## Actors' Biographies:

**Jess Weixler** was born in Louisville, Kentucky and later studied theater at The Juilliard School. Her breakout lead role was as Dawn in Mitchell Lichtenstein's *Teeth* at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival, where she was awarded the Special Jury Prize for Acting. She is also known for her role as Katy in *The Disappearance of Eleanor Rigby: Them & Her/Him*, in which she stars alongside James McAvoy, Jessica Chastain and Viola Davis. In addition to her work as an actress, Weixler has worked behind the camera as well - she co-wrote and co-starred in *The Lie* (2011) and co-wrote, co-directed, and co-starred in *Apartment Troubles* (2014).

**Adam Pearson** is an award-winning actor, presenter, and campaigner from London. His work has been shown on BBC, ITV, and Channel 4 as well as in other countries and territories. Adam is also a very accomplished speaker and has given three TED talks advocating for the fair treatment of those with disabilities (he suffers from neurofibromatosis). He also regularly lectures in schools on disabilities and anti-bullying. Adam acted alongside Scarlett Johansson in Jonathan Glazer's *Under The Skin* (2013), where he appears in one of the film's most captivating scenes. He now makes his leading debut in Aaron Schimberg's beautifully dark satire *Chained for Life*.

**Charlie Korsmo** is a Professor of Law at the Case Western Reserve University School of Law. In 2011, President Obama appointed Korsmo to the Board of Trustees of the Barry Goldwater Scholarship and Excellence in Education Foundation. *Chained For Life* is Korsmo's first acting role in 20 years.

**Sari Lennick** was born and raised in Miami, Florida. She studied acting and philosophy at the University of Southern California and earned her MFA in acting from the New School. Lennick has co-starred in numerous independent films, including Woody Allen's *Café Society* (2016) and the Best Picture-nominated Coen Brothers' film *A Serious Man* (2009), which earned her a Gotham Award nomination for Best Ensemble and the Robert Altman Independent Spirit Award. Sari lives in Los Angeles.

**Stephen Plunkett** hails from Jacksonville, Texas. He recently portrayed Robert Saunders on NBC's *Rise*. Other credits include John Magary's Independent-Spirit-Award-nominated *The Mend* (2014) and Drew Britton's *Back at the Staircase* (2018).

## A Conversation with Aaron Schimberg:

*Can you speak a bit about the origins of the film, your inspirations and how it developed?*

All the work I've done is concerned, on some level, with disfigurement and disability. I view the world through that lens. And though I'm a filmmaker, I have to reconcile myself to the fact the cinema has not been particularly kind to people with disfigurements. If I've ever seen a person like myself represented on screen, which is not often, it's always been in a light that is unflattering at best. I can't get over the disconcerting feeling, is the cinema against me? Do my favorite artists hate me? And are these cinematic portrayals just a reflection of age-old beliefs - or some objective truth that I don't want to admit? Is the fear of disfigurement an innate impulse? Are symmetrical faces objectively more beautiful than asymmetrical ones? Can there truly be an objective standard of beauty? Or has cinema actively, perhaps purposefully, contributed to the marginalization of the disabled? After all, movies have always favored certain faces, and races, and defined, and continually re-define, standards of beauty, and this doesn't necessarily reflect intrinsic human inclinations but rather the tastes and desires of a small subset of the population. I think of Margarita Carmen Cansino being turned into Rita Hayworth...and, personally, I prefer Margarita. But I'm not Harry Cohn.

So I wanted to explore, maybe confront, this cinematic legacy directly. Tod Browning's *Freaks* is the obvious touchstone because it's such a singular film. I have complicated feelings about it. It's a great film in many ways. It's an invaluable historical document, I love the performances, it's poetic, the way Browning seems to want entrée into this world, the way he occasionally romanticizes it, gives it a certain poignancy. But it's clearly made by someone who is an outsider to the experience of disfigurement, and to me the film feels, at its core, exploitative. There's an argument that it "humanizes" the disabled, but what kind of person doesn't understand that disabled people are fully human? It's interesting that *Freaks* takes a kind of documentary approach, which you rarely see in films of the era. Much of the film is plotless. Shots linger on mundane details - a man with no limbs rolling a cigarette for instance. Of course, on one hand, it's just a form of gawking. But it's also as if Browning thinks an unconventional approach is necessary in dealing with people who are not conventional. I think it's also a way of heightening a sense of dread, the way some horror films - it is a horror film - like *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, take a realistic, nominally objective approach which can be more effectively terrifying than something exaggerated. The movie in fact closely mirrors the conventions of the freakshow, which, for all its spectacle, often cloaked itself in the guise of scientific edification, and deftly manipulated the push-pull of your fear and fascination. I am a bit suspicious of people who embrace the film wholeheartedly as empathetic - and more wary still of people who fetishize it.

There's the ending of *Freaks*, where they get their revenge by making the villainous "normal" Cleopatra character "one of us" which I take to mean as: disfiguring a person is a crueller punishment than murdering her. Deformity is worse than death. On the other hand, you could argue that they've liberated her. The film's ending doesn't really support that, but this question - a fate worse than death, or a liberation, echoes one I've never stopped asking myself: Is having a

disfigurement just some major pain-in-the-ass, something that's just made my life demonstrably worse, or are there positive aspects to it? Would I change it if I could? This is not a strictly useless question because many disfigurements and disabilities are literally and systematically being phased out of existence, through various processes, and it's likely that eventually people will no longer be born with my condition, and that this will be considered by most people a blessing. But then again, I was born with a gaping hole in my face, and then it was surgically corrected, so who am I to argue against medical intervention?

Anyway, the initial spark for the film was to continue the narrative of *Freaks* after Cleopatra is disfigured. What's her life like now? Endless torment? Not worth living? Maybe her life has improved. Maybe she likes her new pals. Maybe her suffering, if she suffers, has given her strength or insight that she's grateful for. Maybe she's relieved to cast off the burdens of her former beauty, or the chains of her normalcy. Maybe, maybe not. In fact, this thread ended up just being one tiny part of the finished film, but the movie was built around these questions and that initial idea, some kind of a continuation of *Freaks*. Another element is the lore surrounding disabled actors working on films. You know, the boorish Munchkins and their drunken orgies at the Culver. The able-bodied cast and crew refusing to have their lunch near the disabled cast on the set of *Freaks*, because they'd lose their appetites. But I can't put that in a movie, not in that form. It would seem extreme, unrealistic - that kind of behavior, at the very least, is technically illegal. Prejudice is more subtle and insidious these days. These were some of the starting points for the film. Asking myself some of these questions which I can meditate on but not really answer. I wanted to add to this legacy of filmmaking from a first-person point of view, survey the history of this representation, and respond to it directly and obliquely.

***You've mentioned previously that your first feature's title was an homage to a mid-20th century film, does CHAINED FOR LIFE draw from the 1952 vaudeville movie of the same name?***

I think there's no significance to the fact that I've lifted both of my titles from these other films, though I realize that sounds disingenuous or delusional. My first film originally had a different title, which I couldn't use for complicated reasons, and after cycling through dozens of titles, I finally settled on *Go Down Death* to pay homage to Spencer Williams' *Go Down, Death!* Now I regret using that title because, though I thought the title was kind of funny, it maybe reads as morbid and makes the film seem like some kind of meditation on death specifically.

*Chained for Life* - this was always the title of my film, before I wrote the script or even had any kind of outline. I did steal it, but I don't like the original film, which stars the Hilton Sisters, the conjoined twins who were in *Freaks*. It was directed by Harry Fraser who made a million films, including one I really like, *Spirit of Youth*, starring Joe Louis as a fictionalized version of

himself. *Chained for Life*, though - I haven't seen it in years, I remember thinking it was mostly terrible. But it's a kind of unofficial companion to *Freaks*, which you could say my film is too. It seemed appropriate to make that connection explicit. *Chained for Life* could have a lot of different meanings, especially removed from its original context. It's a perfect title, every movie should be called *Chained for Life*.

***How did you go about casting Adam Pearson, Jess Weixler, Stephen Plunkett, Charlie Korsmo and the rest of the cast, background, etc.?***

Jess we got through our casting agent. I've loved her work for years and I loved working with her. The character of Mabel was, on the page, a little cold and detached, but Jess has such a warm presence, so she immediately gave Mabel much more complexity. She's very hard to pin down in the film, and the moments when she does become distant feel more upsetting.

In the screenplay's description of Rosenthal, I wrote that he has neurofibromatosis and is possibly British. I was about 30 pages into the script when *Under the Skin* came out, and there was Adam Pearson, someone with neurofibromatosis who was British, and who was charismatic and upstaging Scarlett Johansson. I usually don't write roles for specific people, because you end up disappointed when you can't get them - I wrote a role for Mike Tyson in my first film, and I still haven't gotten over the loss. But from page 31 on, I was writing with Adam in mind. The truth is, I didn't know if he could handle the role, because it's a small scene in *Under the Skin*, I'd heard it was mostly improvised and I'd never seen him in anything else. I didn't know he was a television personality in the England. I was lucky, he's one of the most naturally talented actors I've ever seen. I hope he gets the recognition he deserves.

Our casting agent found Stephen too, but I'd seen him in *The Mend*. That's one side of him, but when I saw him I thought he could also play a priest in a Bergman film. I wanted Sari for my first film, but it wasn't a SAG project and I wasn't allowed to use her. She's great - a comic genius. Charlie Korsmo hadn't acted in 20 years, he walked away from it. He's got a successful legal career and he really has no desire to be in films. I wrote him an impassioned e-mail, and the next day he said he loved the script and happened to be on sabbatical. I think he enjoyed himself. This was the lowest-budget project he's done by tens of millions of dollars, which was embarrassing for me, but he said it was basically the same as *Hook*, with worse catering. But I think he prefers *Chained for Life* to *Hook*. I don't know, ask him. I don't think he'll ever act again.

Some people were in my first film, many are friends of mine who had never acted before, we auditioned a few people. Our casting agent got us some key roles - they went on a nationwide search to find someone to play Nora, and Diana Tenney is so perfect. One of our producers, Dan

Schoenbrun, hoodwinked his filmmaker friends, Joanna Arnow, Colin Healey, Eleanore Pienta, into doing this. Essentially, we cast by any means necessary. I like to think I'm really good at casting, but I guess I shouldn't be the judge of that.

***Where were the hospital scenes shot and how did the locations impact the filmmaking process?***

My producer Vanessa and I took a road trip every weekend for 3 months to scout various locations. We were looking for something like an old sanatorium, so that included not only hospitals, but hotels, prisons, mansions. Almost every place we looked at was abandoned. That was the initial idea - we'd find an abandoned location, and we'd show how the fictional film crew restores one part of it, so there's this functional working set in the middle of total desolation, and this set would transform into something more polished over the course of the film. But the places were complete death-traps, I fell through the floor of one hotel and cut myself pretty badly - and there was no power, no plumbing, no electricity, there was asbestos, they were too far gone for us to be able to afford to repair even a small section of it. It was not safe, and the cost of fixing things, of bringing in generators, trailers, bathrooms - it would have been a rough and treacherous shoot. We finally happened upon this hospital but it was pristine. Even though it was not as run-down as I had originally envisioned, it had the right feel, a warm color palette, and I could immediately see how I was going to shoot some of the more complicated scenes. It was a comfortable location and, best of all, they gave it to us for free.

***Logistically speaking, what was most noteworthy about the film's production process? Anything stand out as particularly complex or daunting to shoot?***

The hardest thing I've ever done was to make a film in which I needed a fictional film crew. My films have very limited budgets, and I'm always aware of that while I'm writing, so I do as much as I can from the beginning to contain the process. That's one reason I confined a large portion of this film to a single location, something I also did for my first film. I need to do things like that to free myself from my neuroses, because, for instance, every time I set a scene in a new place, I worry about how I'm going to find the perfect location, how much time that's going to take, how that's going to affect the budget, and on and on, and these kinds of thoughts interfere with my ability to just let the mind wander and write.

But this film, no matter how many times I tried to come up with alternative solutions, I couldn't escape the fact that I needed this fictional film crew. I had no interest in showing the actual inner-workings of a film set. Any dialogue spoken by the crew had to relate in some way to the themes of the film. But this fictional crew serves several important functions. I wanted the

relationship between Mabel and Rosenthal to unfold in a contained environment. We understand why they're together: they're co-stars. And we know that the people around them, the film crew, understands that, and we can't expect to learn anything from their reactions. Therefore you get certain cinematic tropes out of the way - for instance, the reactions of outsiders - and then you can start probing a little deeper, ask other questions.

Keeping this crew was a necessity and a lot of mental energy went into figuring out how to accomplish this logistically. How many people do you need to sell the illusion of a working film set? What is the bare minimum? Five? Fifteen? Fifty? Will the audience buy it, or care, or notice slight discrepancies - what if the gaffer is suddenly missing, or the person playing the DP can't be on set every day? Will the audience even be aware of their jobs or recognize them as consistent characters? Will one or two characters overshadow everyone else? Should I just use one proxy character to speak for all the rest? I worried about this the whole time while writing, and I was correct to worry, because it was also the biggest logistical problem on set. I wanted to do it right, and have a consistent set of people hanging around in the background, only occasionally speaking lines, but the actors playing them have to be there all the time. If it were a Hollywood film, you'd just hire 30 people who'd show up every day. But I had to ask people to travel out of town and commit to hanging around for most of the shoot just so they might walk around in the background here and there, utter an occasional line. I always had to be specific about who was in what scene, and the bare minimum I could get away with to keep things credible and not overwhelming. A complex puzzle that I hope I solved, but which slowed me down every step of the way. There were advantages, because with so many people hanging around, the set's atmosphere was festive, but on the other hand, I always had this nagging guilt because people sat around for weeks with a lot of downtime. Maybe some of them were a little cranky about it. It was really a burden, figuring out how to arrange all these characters who recur throughout the film, while ensuring that you don't get too emotionally invested in any of them. I'm happy with the end result, but I'm not sure I would do it again.



CREDITS:

Written and Directed by  
Aaron Schimberg

Produced by  
Vanessa McDonnell  
Daniel Patrick Carbone  
Matthew Petock  
Dan Schoenbrun  
Zachary Shedd

CAST

Jess Weixler as Mabel  
Adam Pearson as Rosenthal  
Charlie Korsmo as Herr Director  
Sari Lennick as Sarah  
Stephen Plunkett as Max  
Joanna Arnow as The Hospital Liaison  
Cosmo Bjorkenheim as The Grip  
Will Blomker as The Waiter  
Rayvin Disla as The Butler  
Daniel Gilchrist as Demby  
Avi Glickstein as Doctor Glickstein  
Miranda Gruss as Miriam  
Rebecca Gruss as Eva  
Colin Healey as The Boom Operator  
William Huntley as Aristotle  
Joaquina Kalukango as Michelle  
Lucy Kaminsky as A Nurse  
John Klacsmann as The Gaffer  
Sarah Grace Lee as The Unknown Woman  
Eric Magnus as The P.A.  
Tiffany Manning as Phrosa  
Vanessa McDonnell as The Script-Girl  
Sammy Mena as Brutto  
Alison Midstokke as Stella  
Jennifer Miller as Clementine  
Frank Mosley as Frank  
Gina Murdock as Jack-Jacqueline

Kossim Ossen as The Driver  
Bryant Pappas as The Policeman  
Eleanore Pienta as Molly  
Sayra Player as Beckett  
Keith Poulson as An Asshole  
David Regelman as Launcelot  
Kati Skelton as A Medical Student  
Diana Tenney as Nora  
Anu Valia as Another Nurse

Casting

Kate Geller  
Jessica Kelly

Costume Design

Stacey Berman  
Karen Boyer

Production Design

Sia Balabanova

Director of Photography

Adam J. Minnick

Editor

Sofi Marshall

Music

C. Spencer Yeh

Executive Producers

Adam Regelman

Nathan Slott

Jess Weixler

Co-producers

Chris Foster

Isaac Kiener

Adam Pearson

Ryan Zacarias

Carlos Zozaya

Line Producer  
Jon Dieringer

Script Supervisor  
Sam Evoy

1st Assistant Director  
Annalise Lockhart

2nd Assistant Director  
William McGee

2nd 2nd Assistant Director  
Jason Gaines

1st Assistant Camera  
Calvin Snead

2nd Assistant Camera  
Dave J. Ross

Gaffer  
Dan Debrey

Key Grip  
Kenneth Kildee

Best Boy Grip  
Rachel Kessler

Best Boy Electric  
Matthew Atwood

Grips  
Nick Bartram  
Evan Childs  
Gabriel Solorzano

Electric & Swings  
Yori Ben-Haim

Alexa Wolf  
Haitao Zeng  
Sound Mixer  
Gillian Arthur

Boom Operator  
Gideon Jensen

Supervising Sound Editor/  
Re-recording mixer  
Chris Foster

Sound design  
Chris Foster  
Aaron Schimberg

Sound effects editor  
Nora Linde

Additional sound  
YongSoo Lee

Hair Department Head  
Elvira Gonzalez

Makeup Department Head  
Jessie Eden

Special Effects Makeup  
Bethany Serpico

Additional Hair and Makeup  
Chelsea Paige  
Art Director  
Alina Uzlov  
Set Dresser  
Fred Boccia  
Property Master  
Robert Dancy

Assistant Costume Designer  
Nell Simon

Costume Dept. Intern  
Louisa Mascuch

Production Coordinator  
Rachel Thompson

Production Assistants  
Pratap Amalraj  
Alex Backus  
Tamera Davis  
Ian Herman  
Erica Severson

Colorist  
Nat Jencks

Post-Production Services  
Goldcrest

Film Processing  
Colorlab

Still Photographer  
Carly Zavala

Titles  
Benjamin Tuttle

BACKGROUND  
Lauren Brown  
Danielle Burgos  
Kate Christiansen  
Steve Cossman  
Prema Cruz  
Tamera Davis  
Bradley Eros  
Joshua Gerst

Leah Giblin  
Caroline Golum  
John Grunewald  
Amanda Hammett  
Jeremy Hanks  
Jacob Hopkins  
Andrew Lampert  
Bob Langdon  
Tyler Macri  
Charles Mattern  
Willy McGee  
Tavish Miller  
Hannah Myers  
Evangeline Nicholson  
Annelise Ogaard  
Chris Osborn  
Oscar Pavlo  
Kristen Radford  
Elizaveta Rakhilkina  
Leah Shore  
Merrill Sterritt  
Troy Swain  
Leslie Synn  
C. Breanne Thomas  
Natoya Layelle Thomas  
Orlando Twyford

With Support From:

Frontières  
Cinereach  
Sag Aftra

Filmed on Kodak

Filmed with the support of the New York State Governor's Office of  
Motion Picture & Television Development

Additional Music:

THE REST IS ADVERTISING (Harp Prologue)  
Written by Nora Linde & Aaron Schimberg

Arranged and Performed by Nora Linde

BELLOWS

Written and Performed by Max Heath  
Courtesy of Overcoast

HI MOM!

Written and Performed by Viva Schimberg

JEW'S DAUGHTER THEME

Written and Performed by Aaron Schimberg

LIGHTS OUT! (f/Kroba)

Written and performed by MIL KDU DES

THE IMPERFECT IS ALIVE

Written and Performed by Aaron Schimberg

WISH SOMEONE WOULD CARE

Written and Performed by Irma Thomas  
Courtesy of Sony ATV and Universal Music Enterprises  
©2018

**About Kino Lorber:**

With a library of over 2,800 titles, Kino Lorber Inc. has been a leader in independent art house distribution for 35 years, releasing 30 films per year theatrically under its Kino Lorber, Kino Classics, and Alive Mind Cinema banners, garnering seven Academy Award® nominations in nine years, including documentary nominees *Fire at Sea* (2017) and *Of Fathers & Sons* (2019). In addition, the company brings over 350 titles yearly to the home entertainment and educational markets through physical and digital media releases. With an expanding family of distributed labels, Kino Lorber handles releases in ancillary media for Zeitgeist Films, Carlotta USA, Adopt Films, Raro Video, and others, placing physical titles through all wholesale, retail, and direct to consumer channels, as well as direct digital distribution through over 40 OTT services including all major TVOD and SVOD platforms.