

# NIAN

Written and  
Directed by  
Michelle Krusiec



# Director's Statement

The facing off of two monsters wherein the human one is more terrifying than the real monster is fascinating to me. Nian began as a simple idea of what if you could feed your bully to the “thing” that lives under your bed. When I learned about the Nian in my son's first grade class, I immediately knew it would make a great backdrop for something culturally specific yet universal. Nian is the Chinese boogey man for kids, a kind of anti-Santa. While the Nian is mostly depicted as a likable half lion/dragon beast in east Asian culture, I wanted something more terrorizing. Nian was my reaction to the heinous anti-Asian hate occurring during the pandemic. Memories of my own bullies as an adolescent resurrected themselves. What would happen if the justice served felt too violent, too real and no longer a fantasy? Can hate beget hate? Ultimately, I found solace in irreverence, empowering an older maternal figure to be the voice of irreverent reason. Nian is a fever dream gone wrong. It's also a cautionary tale to beware that there may be monsters in all of us.

- Michelle Krusiec

Film Poster



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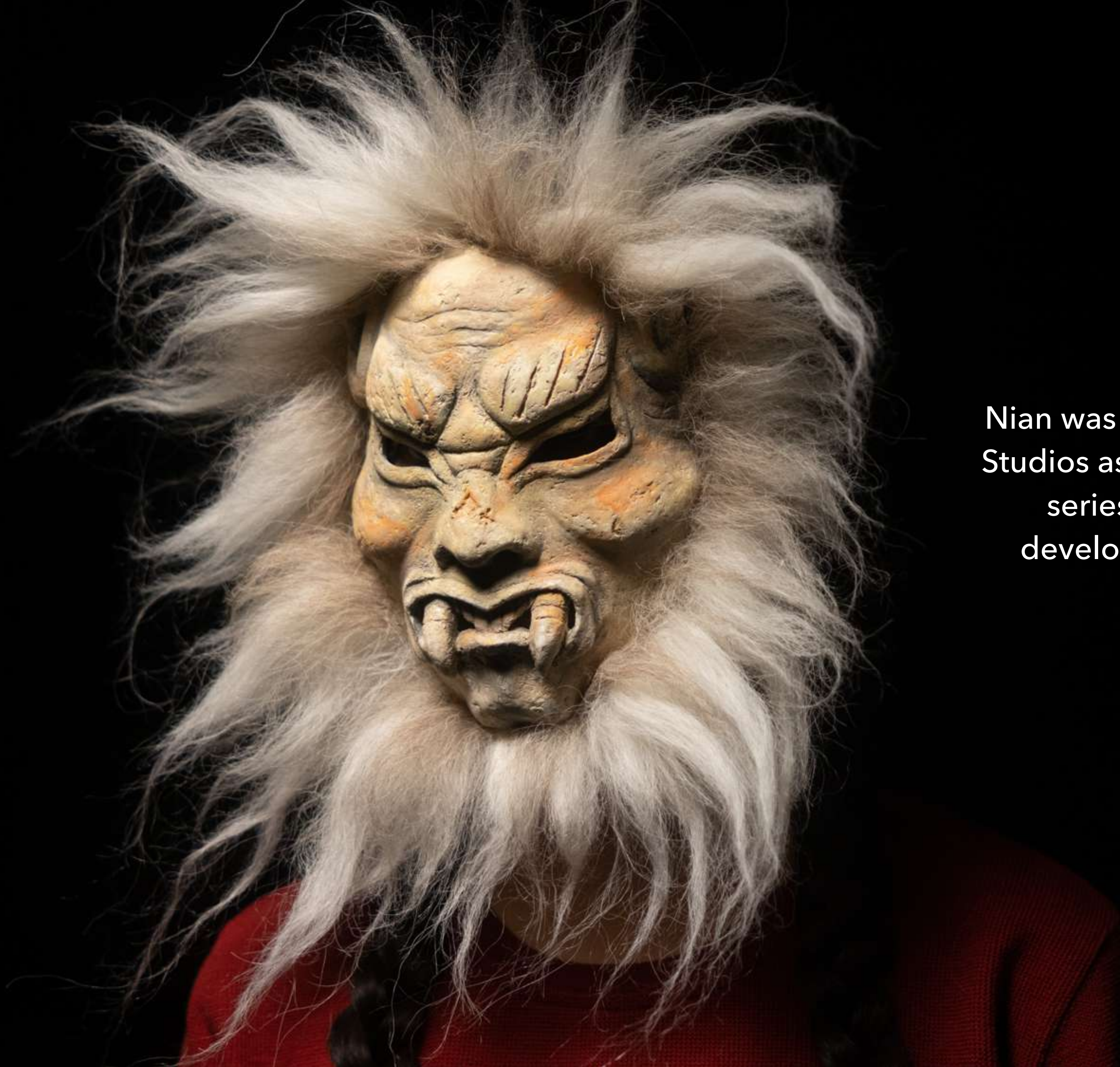
## Logline:

A Chinese American girl stands up to her racist bully with the help of the *Nian*, a mythological beast said to eat bad children.



## Synopsis

After confiding in her grandmother AH-MA about a racist remark made by a bully at school, GERTIE comes to class and presents a family heirloom: an ancient Chinese Demon Mask. The mask is said to ward off evil, including the NIAN, a mythological beast believed to come down after sunset on the eve of Lunar New Year to eat bad children. After school, Gertie's bully makes another racist remark and Gertie attempts to stand up to her, causing the bully to chase her back into the depths of the school. Gertie dons the mask and discovers its protective powers just as The Nian arrives. Much to Gertie's surprise, the beast closely resembles her grandmother. After witnessing The Nian devour Tammy, Gertie rips off the mask only to find there is no sign of her bully, or The Nian, anywhere in sight. Was it all a nightmare or is her grandmother...the Nian?



Nian was executive produced by 20th Digital Studios as part of the BITE SIZE HALLOWEEN series on *Hulu* and is currently being developed into a feature by 20th Digital Studios.

# Writer & Director Michelle Krusiec



For most of Michelle Krusiec's career spanning +25 years, Michelle has created socially relevant, darkly comedic, female forward characters and stories. As an actor, she starred in Alice Wu's beloved *Saving Face*, nominated for a Best Actress Golden Horse. As a writer, she studied Shakespeare and Women's Literature at Oxford University. She wrote her critically acclaimed solo show *MADE IN TAIWAN* in 2001 which premiered at the HBO Aspen Comedy Festival, the NYC International Fringe festival, landing her an ABC Talent Deal. As the co-host of *TRAVELERS*, Michelle traveled to over 50 destinations around the world making one of TV's earliest docu-series for the Discovery Channel. In 2012, Michelle completed UCLA's Professional Program in screenwriting and was subsequently named 2013 Center for Asian American Media's Screenwriting Fellow. Her feature adaptation of *Made in Taiwan* was selected as a finalist for the VC Media Fund. As a new mother, she explored parenthood and sexual intimacy in the digital series *SCENES FROM A REAL MARRIAGE* (LA Asian American Pacific Film Festival & Winner of Best New Digital Series at New Media Film Festival) which gained her a place in the 2022 AFI Directing Workshop for Women. After appearing in Ryan Murphy's *HOLLYWOOD*, Michelle's portrayal of Anna May Wong catalyzed her even more to create empowering stories that give AAPI visibility. As a director, Michelle made *NIAN* which premiered at Brussels International Fantastic Film Festival & LAAPFF. Michelle next stars alongside Ken Jeong in the dramedy *TIGER MOM* which she co-wrote.



# “Gertie” Lauren Mei

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Lauren Mei is an award winning Korean and Chinese American actor. She has been acting professionally since 2012 and will appear in indie film releases later this year. Her other credits include voiceovers for Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network. Additionally, Lauren has appeared in campaigns for Adidas, IBM, and The Sandy Hook Foundation. Lauren has a background in theater and was recognized for her theater social justice work as a National YoungArts Gold Finalist and Los Angeles Spotlight Finalist. Lauren is also an advocate for Asian American representation and is the founder of *yAhm*.™ - an AAPI youth led media company.

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# “Ah-Ma”

## Dawn Akemi Saito

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**Dawn Akemi Saito** is an actor, writer, director and teacher. Her own multi-disciplinary works (such as *Insects in Heat*, *Suns Are Suns*, *Knock on the Sky*, *Blood Cherries*, *HA*) as well as her other performances as an actor have been seen at venues such as the Public Theater, BAM, St. Ann’s Warehouse, Japan Society, New York Theater Workshop, Walker Art Center, Whitney Museum, Dance Theater Workshop, La Mama as well as on tour in Europe and Asia. She has also been seen in films such as *Household Saints* and *Picture Bride*. Dawn is an Associate Clinical Professor in the Theater Department at Fordham University and is a movement faculty member in Juilliard’s Drama Division. She is the co-founder and co-director of the Theater Intensive in Experimental Devising at Bard College Berlin.

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# “Tammy” Ava DeVoe

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Ava DeVoe is a Junior at the Orange County School of The Arts in the Acting Conservatory. She has been acting for nine years both for Television and Theatre. Previous credits include Greys Anatomy and This Is Us. She loves improv and performed with the Hollywood Second City Teen Troupe. In her spare time she enjoys riding horses, writing short stories, and spending time with friends and family.

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# Producer Matthew Keene Smith



Matthew Keene Smith is an award-winning independent film producer and the founder of Twice Told Films where he focuses on director-driven narratives. Matthew's feature credits include Heidi Saman's *Namour* that won the LA Muse Jury Award at the 2016 Los Angeles Film Festival and Neil Drumming's *Big Words*, a NY Times Critic's Pick that premiered at Slamdance, both released by Ava DuVernay and her distribution collective ARRAY; and *9 Rides* from Oscar-winning Director Matthew A. Cherry that was shot on the iPhone and world-premiered at the 2016 South by Southwest Film Festival and was distributed by Gravitas.

Other credits include short films *The Thing About Us* from Director Keely Weiss and Executive Producer Joey Soloway that premiered at Outfest 2019; Marie Jamora's *Flip the Record* that won Best Short at Urbanworld 2017 and Jamora's *Harana* won Best Narrative Short at the Sarasota Film Festival in 2021 and was produced for AFI's Directing Workshop for Women; Sharmila Ray's *Devotee* that premiered at the 2021 Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival; Vernon Jordan III's *One Magenta Afternoon* that premiered at Outfest Fusion 2022; Tiffany Frances's *Dot* that premiered at the 2022 Dances With Films Festival; Frances's short documentary *Temple Beauty* that premiered at the 2022 Sarasota Film Festival; Michelle Krusiec's *The Nian* that premiered on Hulu in October 2022; and Elodie Yung's *Happy Ending* that will premiere at festivals in 2023.

Matthew began his career at Marmont Productions working for legendary director Bob Rafelson on HBO's *Poodle Springs* starring James Can and as Associate Producer on Rafelson's *No Good Deed* starring Samuel L. Jackson and Milla Jovovich.

# Producer Jason McLagan



**JASON McLAGAN** is an award-winning producer, director, and animator. He is the Executive Producer and Animation Director for FAMILY STYLE (HBO Max), an Asian foodie show with Warner Bros./Stage 13 which has won at the Pro Awards, The Taste Awards, and The Telly Awards. He produced the short films HARANA (Grand Jury Prize, Sarasota Film Festival 2021), HOOK UP 2.0 (Tribeca Film Festival 2019), and FLIP THE RECORD (Grand Jury Prize, Urbanworld 2017). He also produced SLAMDANCE TV from 2016-2018. Jason was Animation Director for the Student Academy Award Nominated film, TERRACOTTA WARRIOR which won "Best Experimental Film" at the Finger Lakes Film Festival, and he was Animation Director of LEGO® The Build Zone, a hit web series on LEGO's Official YouTube with over 100 million views in its 90 episodes. He is the co-founder and Board Member of CINEMA SALA, a film and workshop series promoting Filipino Diaspora in the film and performing arts industries.

# Producer Brian Yang



Brian Yang is a producer whose documentary credits include LATE LIFE, the Golden Horse Best Documentary Award nominated feature on former New York Yankees pitcher Chien-Ming Wang, the Jeremy Lin documentary LINSANITY which premiered at Sundance Film Festival, and LIFESIZE, an ESPN short about WNBA star Brittney Griner's time in China. His narrative work includes Shanghai International Film Festival award winning biopic ANOTHER SHOT, on former NBA player Stephon Marbury's life in China, I CAN I WILL I DID starring Tony Award and BAFTA nominee Mike Faist, SNAKEHEAD which made its international premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival and can now be found on Hulu, and the upcoming films DEALING WITH DAD and A GREAT DIVIDE. He is currently also producing Sung Kang's unscripted podcast CAR STORIES with iHeartMedia.

# Co-Producer James Heim



**James Heim** is a L.A.-based producer and director. A recent graduate of Chapman University's Dodge College of Film and Media Arts, he has produced and directed several short films and music videos that have screened at festivals across the United States. He is the founder of Heim House Films and currently interns in development at The Kennedy/Marshall Company and Priority Pictures. James aims to explore the fragility of the human condition in his work with an keen interest in identity, purpose, and transformation..

# Cinematographer Laura Merians Goncalves



Laura Merians Gonçalves is an award-winning Cinematographer behind the Darren Aronofsky produced drama PACIFIED (aka PACIFICADO), which won the Jury Prize for Best Cinematography at the San Sebastián International Film Festival and the Cinematographers' Debut Competition at the Camerimage Film Festival.

Her music video work has been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art NY, PS1 and the Museum of Contemporary Art, LA.

Goncalves was a cinematographer Beyoncé's highly anticipated film, BLACK IS KING.

Other credits include Generation for HBO max and Dead Ringers for Amazon + Annapura.

She was selected as a rising star of the ASC and a participant in the pilot mentorship program for the International Cinematographers Guild.

Certified underwater cinematographer.

# Production Designer

## Angran Li



Angran Li graduated from Parsons School of Design at The New School, with a BFA in Interior Design. During school, she served as a design assistant to the scenic designer on two musicals on Broadway-George Takei's *Allegiance* and Off-Broadway musicals. She also worked on New York Fashion Week 2016 and the Costume Institute's Spring 2016 Exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, assisted the Sukhishvili Georgian National Ballet performance at Lincoln Center, and worked on interior residential projects. And Now Angran Li has designed and art directed more than 20 film projects that all won awards and screened on major international film festivals. She continues to follow her passion as a Production Designer for narrative storytelling film productions now.

# Costume Designer Grace Yim



Grace was born in Morgantown, West Virginia to Korean parents, Yong Jai a chemical engineer and Sarah a fine arts graduate from USC.

At an early age, Grace's love of costumes was shaped by watching classic films with her mother as well as glitzy Bob Mackie designed shows such as Sonny & Cher and the Carol Burnett Show.

During her last year as an undergraduate at UCLA, Grace took a class in costume design taught by Alan Armstrong who encouraged her to attend NYU-Tisch School of the Arts for further studies. One year later, she was 1 of 11 students accepted into the NYU graduate program for Costume Design.

While at UCLA, Grace started her career working as a summer intern at Western Costume Co. Since then, she has worked on costume crews for *RENT* on Broadway, *Kill Bill Vol. 1/Vol. 2*, *Black Monday*, *Bullet Train*, *Respect*, *Wakanda Forever*, *the Sympathizer* and many other shows, commercials and photo shoots.

# Editor Cynthia Chen



Cynthia Chen is an award winning editor/colorist based in LA. She is also the founder of Xin Studio, which provides post production services for Film & TV. She is always passionate about crafting stories, exploring culture and creating artistic images. The projects she worked on won awards from Oscar, Golden Globes Awards and film festivals like Cannes Film Festival, Palm Spring International Film Festival, FrightFest, etc..

She previously worked for Technicolor and assisted colorist Maxine Gervais (Black Panther, Alpha, American Sniper). Credits include Oscar Award Nominated feature - Missing Link, Richard Jewell and Netflix Series - Messiah etc.. Cynthia recently worked on feature film - Good For Nothing (Editor & Colorist, Xin Studio, 2022), TV Series - Car Lot directed by Mark Brown (Editor & Colorist, Xin Studio, 2022), Student Oscar short film - Fragile Moon (Editor & Colorist, Xin Studio, 2020). She will continue to bridge the culture between eastern and western and create high quality motion pictures.





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A close-up profile of a person's face, showing a heavily textured, cracked, and peeling surface, possibly representing a prosthetic or a specific character effect. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture against a dark blue background. In the background, there are blurred, out-of-focus lights, suggesting a stage or studio environment.

**Behind the Scenes**

Dawn Akemi Saito/Nian appears.



Dawn Akemi Saito as the Nian.



Matt Pope SFX preps a prosthetic next to Ava DeVoe, Art Brainard 1st AD monitors.

L Costume designer Grace Yim adjusts Dawn Akemi Saito's costume.



Cinematographer Laura M. Goncalves frames up actress Lauren Mei.

Makeup artist Mercedez Alvarez, Dawn Akemi Saito, SFX Rachael Wagner prep.

L to R Art Brainard, Jesse Noel, James Heim, Michelle Krusiec, Brian Yang, Matt Keene Smith.



Michelle Krusiec directs Ava DeVoe (front) and Dawn Akemi Saito (back).



Ava DeVoe watches as Dawn Saito arrives as the Nian.

L to R, Art Brainard, James Heim, Michelle Krusiec, Angran Li set up a shot.



Orange County School of Arts students performed as background alongside their teacher John Walcutt.



L to R, Ava DeVoe, Lauren Mei, Michelle Krusiec discuss a scene.

## Production Notables

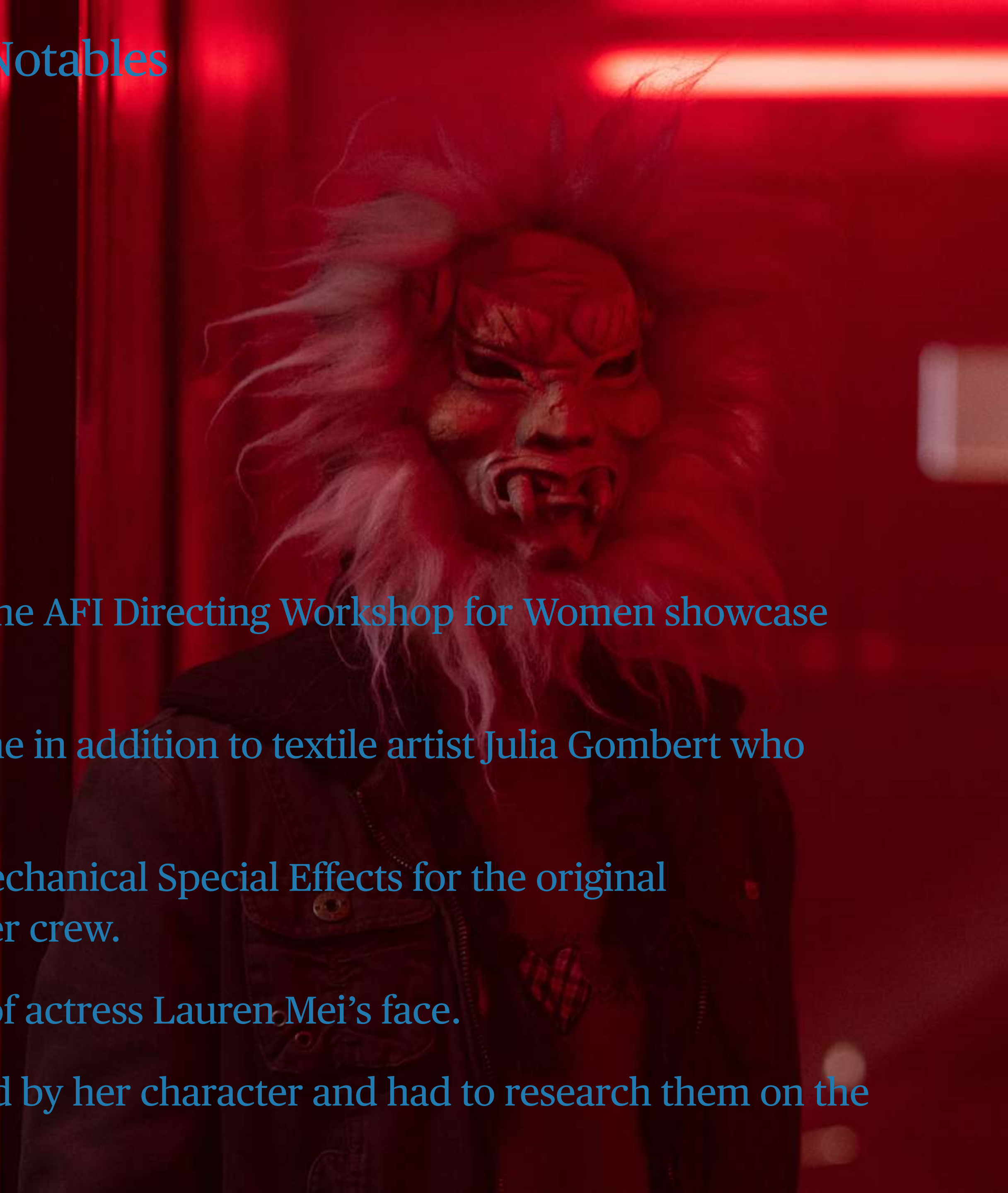
20th Digital Studio spotted Michelle Krusiec's short BITE at the AFI Directing Workshop for Women showcase where she was then invited to pitch horror ideas.

Costume designer Grace Yim hand painted the Nian's costume in addition to textile artist Julia Gombert who previously worked with Grace's muse Eiko Ishioka.

Michelle Krusiec's husband Matt Pope holds an OSCAR for Mechanical Special Effects for the original INDEPENDENCE DAY and he served as a *swing* and SFX on her crew.

The mask was hand made by a team of mask makers cast off of actress Lauren Mei's face.

Actress Ava DeVoe was unaware of the racist terminology used by her character and had to research them on the internet.



# Credits

Written and Directed by Michelle Krusiec

Produced by Michelle Krusiec

Jason McLagan

Matthew Keene Smith

Brian Yang

Executive Producers

David Worthen

Jenna Cavelle

Arbi Pedrossian

Valerie Steinberg

Co-Producer James A. Heim

Consulting Producer Laura Merians Goncalves

Director of Photography Laura Merians Goncalves

Production Designer Angran Li

Editor Cynthia Chen

Casting Director John Walcutt

Costume Designer Grace Yim

Sound Designer Mingxin Qiguan

Composer Daniel Walter

# Cast

Gertie Lauren Mei  
Ah-Ma/Nian Dawn Akemi Saito  
Tammy Ava DeVoe

Students	Sophia Zavala
	Grace Wilcox
	Jack Stone
	Logan Langevin
	Elora Sparnicht
	Kaya Sparnicht
	River Zylstra
	Kate McCollum-Van Hoosear
	Siena Stark
	Vlad Ghepes
	Justin Jacobson
	Simone Ponsford
	Jack Ireland
	Joshua Harracksingh
Teacher	John Walcutt

# Crew

Unit Production Manager Jason McLagan

Matthew Keene Smith

First Assistant Director Art Brainard

Second Assistant Director Bartow Weiss

Script Supervisor James A. Heim

Production Sound Mixer Scott Neff

Key Makeup Artist Mercedes Gonzalez

SPFX Makeup Rachael Wagner

Visual Effects Tunnel Post

VFX Producer Shirley Luong

VFX Artist May Satsuki Asai

VFX Artist James Bristow

Chris Tenore-Nortrup

Re-Recording Mix Mingxin Qiguan

Color and Finishing by XIN STUDIO

Colorist Cynthia Chen

Finishing Artist Yuan Hong

Assistant Camera Joe Cheung

Second Assistant Camera Brian Morataya

DIT Isidro "Cid" Pineda

Gaffer Anthony Van Dyk

Best Boy Electric Tony Louis Cantor

Key Grip Ron Speed

Best Boy Grip Bill Tricario

Art Director Miao "Mojo" Wen

On Set Art Director Robbie Rivas

Prop Master Emily Joe

Mask Makers Rachael Wagner

Alejandro Carrasquilla

Ashley Steeves

Textile Artist Julia Gombert

Tailor Laleh Motamed Amin

Stills Photographer Melly Lee

Supervising SFX Consultant

Mike Mekash

SFX Supervisor Jesse Noel

SFX Technician Matt Pope

Studio Teacher Daryl Chou

Covid Officer Jennifer Scelsi

Assistant Editor Yi Yang

# 20th Digital Studio

Director, Production MILES ALVA

Coordinator, Production TANI SHUKLA

Consultant, Development CARL REID

Coordinator, Development ELIZABETH GELI

Post Production Supervisor DAGMAWI ABEBE

Post Production Manager MONIQUE MCNEIL

Studio Assistant Editor EMMA REISIG

Administrative Assistant, Executives DANI LAVI

Intern, Production ERIK MARTINEZ GONZALEZ

Health and Safety Supervisor KIM KEYES

# Special Thanks

The Orange County School of the Arts

Harry Yoon

AFI DWW and Cohort

David Keeps

Michael Kowalski

Tunea-Cuevas Family

David & Timothy F. Douglas

Alan Pao

Avery Belser

Allison Sie

Andy Huang

Bridget Moloney

Sarah Seligman

Maria, Penny and Truman

Marie and Harana

Nadine Truong, Bodhi and Naia Yang

Emily Thomas and Baby Zadie

Matt, Chance and Wemberly Pope

Elizabeth Geli

Barbara Alvarez

Dan Kwong

Eryn Mekash

Chapman University

Luna Family

Mary-Lou Belli

Jie Meng

Kelly Pike

Thomas Mikusz

Hantman-Igell Family

Kimberly-Rose Wolter

Amanda Lovejoy Street

Brandon Espy

Thomas Bond

Jerry Ma

Mary Kate-Satori

Sister Kathleen and Ramona Convent



# Press Inquiries

[MichelleKrusiecDirects.com](https://michellekrusiecdirects.com)

[Nianshortfilm@gmail.com](mailto:Nianshortfilm@gmail.com)

Instagram @ Michelle Krusiec

Photos by Melly Lee