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Before these Oscar-nominated filmmakers put on their tuxes, they taught class at San Quentin



Cinematographer Amy Vincent, director Greg Kwedar and incarcerated man Todd Winkler laugh during a filmmaking class at San Quentin Rehabilitation Center on Monday, Feb. 24.
Gabrielle Lurie/The Chronicle

By [G. Allen Johnson](#), Staff Writer March 2, 2025

When you're up for an Oscar, there are a lot of demands on your time. But as the week that would culminate in the 97th Academy Awards began, Greg Kwedar and Clint Bentley were exactly where they wanted to be.

The filmmakers were nominated for best adapted screenplay of "[Sing Sing](#)," which Kwedar directed, about a real-life theater troupe at the famed New York prison. It stars former San Francisco theater veteran [Colman Domingo](#), who is up for best actor at the Sunday, March 2, Academy Awards.

But on Monday, Feb. 24, the filmmakers gave up their cell phones and computers and spent the day at [San Quentin Rehabilitation Center](#), teaching a hands-on course in film production to incarcerated men.

"I'll remember moments of (Oscar night) for the rest of my life," Kwedar said as the day began. "But I think I'll remember every second of today, forever."



Professional actors Simon Rex and Sean San José perform as incarcerated man Miguel Munoz- Huerta, left, films during a filmmaking class for incarcerated men at San Quentin Rehabilitation Center. Gabrielle Lurie/The Chronicle

The filmmakers brought two professional actors in San Francisco native [Simon Rex](#), the star of [Sean Baker's "Red Rocket"](#) (2022), and San Francisco theater veteran [Sean San José](#), a supporting actor in "Sing Sing." Also included were cinematographer Amy Vincent ("Eve's Bayou," "Hustle and Flow"), representatives of Kodak and "Sing Sing" distributor A24 and three producers, [Scott Budnik](#), a friend of San Quentin warden Chance Andes, and Madison O'Leary, who are active in [justice reform issues](#); and Mara Burros-Sandler, who supported the roll-out of the event.

They were filming a scene written by Todd Winkler, who won a San Quentin screenplay contest and acted as director for the day, with Kwedar and Bentley advising. Ryan Pagan, an incarcerated man who helped make this day happen,

was a cinematographer and camera operator under Vincent's tutelage, lighting scenes, selecting lenses and changing reels of film.

Before filming began, Pagan asked a surprised and delighted Vincent to autograph a feature on her in the May 2024 issue of American Cinematographer magazine, to which Pagan subscribes.



Incarcerated man Ryan Pagan, center, gestures as he sets up a camera shot. Director Todd Winkler, second from left, and professional writer-director Clint Bentley, rear, assist. Gabrielle Lurie/The Chronicle

Other incarcerated men filled out the crew: sound men, boom mike operators, etc.

The genesis for the film class began in October, when the [San Quentin Film Festival](#), the first-ever such event [behind prison walls](#), was held. Although the competition — short films and documentaries — was open only to films made by the incarcerated or formerly incarcerated, there were special screenings of “Sing Sing” and “Daughters,” a Netflix documentary released in August about four young girls who attend a father-daughter dance at their incarcerated fathers’ prison.

Kwedar and Bentley were there to present “Sing Sing.” The event also drew actress [Kerry Washington](#) and comedian [Jerry Seinfeld](#) (Washington and Seinfeld’s

wife, Jessica Seinfeld, were executive producers of “Daughters”); “[American Fiction](#)” writer-director [Cord Jefferson](#); and Oakland comedian and documentarian [W. Kamau Bell](#), who covered the event with a camera crew.



Cinematographer Amy Vincent teaches with incarcerated men Saddiq David, left, and Miguel Munoz-Huerta, right.

Gabrielle Lurie/The Chronicle

Pagan, a knowledgeable movie fan who was well versed in videography through San Quentin’s media center, approached Kwedar at the event.

More Information

“**Sing Sing**” (R) is available to rent on major streaming platforms.

“We just started talking, and he had this boundless curiosity around why we chose to shoot ‘Sing Sing’ on film, which was actually the first time I had ever shot on film in my 15-year career,” recalled Kwedar, who had worked mostly in digital video. “I started trying to answer his question, which was followed by another question and then another question and another question because his mind is so alive.”

Kwedar promised to bring film to San Quentin for a class, and enlisted the help of “Sing Sing” distributor A24 and Kodak, which had provided film stock for the production. The creatives also collaborated with Oakland resident [Rahsaan “New York” Thomas](#), a former San Quentin inmate who is the Executive Director of

Empowerment Avenue, which works to develop the careers of incarcerated writers, artists, journalists and filmmakers pre-entry.



Director Greg Kwedar puts his hand on incarcerated man Ryan Pagan during a filmmaking class at San Quentin Rehabilitation Center.

Gabrielle Lurie/The Chronicle

Pagan was touched that the day happened because of the questions he asked, and treasured his time with Vincent, who at one point praised a camera set-up and shouted out, “You’re hired!”

“I came in a little nervous because I’m amongst individuals that are in the industry, and here I am just messing with cameras in prison,” Pagan said. “She was very welcoming and very open to sharing her knowledge with me, yet also left it up to me to decide what I wanted. I’m always going to remember that.”

Winkler’s scene, set outdoors and shot near San Quentin’s exercise fields, was a comic exchange between an egotistical action star (Rex) and his put-upon director (San José). As they went through take after take, Winkler would confer with his actors, with Kwedar supervising. It was obvious that Winkler, quieter in the beginning, gained confidence throughout the day.



Cinematographer Amy Vincent, director Greg Kwedar and incarcerated man Todd Winkler laugh during a filmmaking class at San Quentin Rehabilitation Center.

Gabrielle Lurie/The Chronicle

“I was super deferential in the beginning because as inmates, when outside people come in, it’s just the go-to place, right? Just be humble, be deferential,” said an emotional Winkler, who took a moment to compose himself before continuing. “But Greg and Clint were so kind to me and really valued my thoughts and my ideas. And I saw, ‘OK, I can actually collaborate with them.’ They were encouraging me because they want to see me get better.”

The honor, according to Rex and San José, was all theirs.

“It’s been a real gift to work with this crew,” San José said. “Whatever we can do to help the programs and the opportunities to open these doors and walls up.”



Professional actors Simon Rex and Sean San José perform during a scene filmed by a crew made up of incarcerated men.

Gabrielle Lurie/The Chronicle

Rex called the day eye-opening.

"These people are so sweet and they're so eager to learn," he said. "When Todd said, 'I wasn't a prisoner for a day' and cried, that was the most moving, beautiful experience. You could see how excited he was to see us bring his words to life." Pagan laughed and said of Rex, "I can't believe I set up a shot featuring the guy who was in 'Scary Movie 3.'"

But this wasn't just playtime. The work that the inmates do at the media center and on days like this could lead to real work when they are paroled. Budnick told the men that on Hollywood film sets, "they don't care what your background is, as long as you can show up on time and work hard."



Writer-director Clint Bentley, left, producer Madison O'Leary, cinematographer Amy Vincent and writer-director Greg Kwedar laugh as they watch a take during a filmmaking class for incarcerated men at San Quentin Rehabilitation Center.

Gabrielle Lurie/The Chronicle

"There's real jobs that pay unbelievably well," added Budnick, who produced the "Hangover" movies. "It can be blue collar, less creative stuff like gripper or construction where you're building sets and you're hanging rigging, etc. Or it could be very creative things like camera or editing, etc. So whichever way your mind works, there's a job for you in this business."

At the end of the day, it was hard to tell who benefitted more: the professional filmmakers or their students. Bentley's latest film as a director, "Train Dreams", starring Joel Edgerton and Felicity Jones and co-written by Kwedar, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January.

But he told his San Quentin students, "We've been on a lot of film sets, and I gotta say, this is one of the most fun ones that I've been on in a very, very long time.

"Thank you for giving us the gift of today."

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