

# To Hollywood—And Back

To shoot *The Kill Room*, a crime comedy about money laundering in the art world, director Nicol Paone had to return to her native New Jersey, where people understand sarcasm.

**What typically draws you to a film is its trailer, cast and storyline.** *The Kill Room*, a new crime comedy film starring Uma Thurman, Samuel L. Jackson and Joe Manganiello, scores with all these—plus a director from Bergen County: Lyndhurst native Nicol Paone. *The Kill Room* premiered in theaters Sept. 29 and is now streaming on Amazon Prime Video and Apple TV+. It was a good excuse for a chat with Paone.

**How did you get into filmmaking?**

I started working on Wall Street when I was 21. I took acting classes and fell in love with it, and when the company I was working for fell apart, I decided to take acting classes full time. I did stand-up, student films, theater, improv. A friend called me and was like, “Hey, do you want to be in my cousin’s NYU student film?” I worked with those guys on the film and then we formed a production company called Cirque Productions, which started in Leonia. We did a few projects together and then, in 1999, I moved out here to Los Angeles to get my SAG [Screen Actors Guild] card. I’ve been here 24 years now.

**I imagine the lifestyle out in L.A. is very different.** Nobody understands sarcasm here! There’s a 3,000-mile delay. It’s so laid-back. You have to be cool. You have to just chill out and not seem like you want the thing you want. It’s a much healthier lifestyle, though, with the sun being out all year round.

**How did you come to make *The Kill Room*?**

Ironically, someone I’d worked with on Wall Street eventually funded *The Kill Room*, and another friend told me he had an amazing script he wanted me to read. In April 2019, I signed on as director and spent two years of the pandemic with the writer, Jonathan Jacobson, developing the script even further. I started



Nicol Paone with Samuel L. Jackson

bothering a friend of mine who was Uma Thurman’s manager, because Thurman was my ultimate choice for Patrice, the main character. Three weeks later, I was having lunch with Thurman, and she signed onto the film.

**You shot the movie in Hudson County and part of it in Lyndhurst, your hometown—was it important to you to represent your state?**

In the script the characters are from Staten Island and Brooklyn. New Jersey has such an incredible tax credit [for filming], so our producers asked me if we could shoot in New Jersey and I was like, “Are you kidding?” I’ve been going to Angelo’s restaurant in Lyndhurst my whole life, and it was such a wonderful place to bring Sam, Uma and Joe for a scene.

**What has been the biggest “pinch me” moment?**

We were shooting the last scene in Hoboken on a dock overlooking Manhattan, and Uma brought the jacket from *Kill Bill* for me to direct in. I got to ask Samuel L. Jackson to say “motherf—!” while wearing the jacket from *Kill Bill*. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to top that.

**What do you do when you come home to visit?**

I’m falling in love with Jersey City, and I love Upper Bergen County; I used to play soccer in Wyckoff and Allendale. I’m thinking about a move back to the East Coast.

**What do you miss most when you’re in L.A.?**

People in New Jersey lead with their heart. I’m not saying people out here [in L.A.] don’t, but—it’s just different. I’m a proud Italian Jersey girl. I slept on a friend’s couch in L.A. in 1999, and to make *The Kill Room* in my hometown now, it’s just full circle.

***The Kill Room* had a huge premiere at the Williams Center in Rutherford. Was that full circle too?**

It was a happy accident. I called a high school friend, and I was really just asking her how we can get the gang together to see the movie. I told her to pick a theater and a restaurant. And it turned into an event with State Senator Paul Sarlo, three mayors, a councilman, 500 people, a cocktail hour and a premiere at the Williams Center, where I went as a kid. It was truly surreal.

**What are your goals for 2024?**

I would like to make a female UFC [Ultimate Fighting Championship] comedy called *Bulldog Barb*. I also have a TV show I’m developing that takes place in New Jersey. I am vehemently interested in coming back, so whoever you are out there who develops TV shows, let’s talk.

—Haley Longman

Photo courtesy of Nicol Paone