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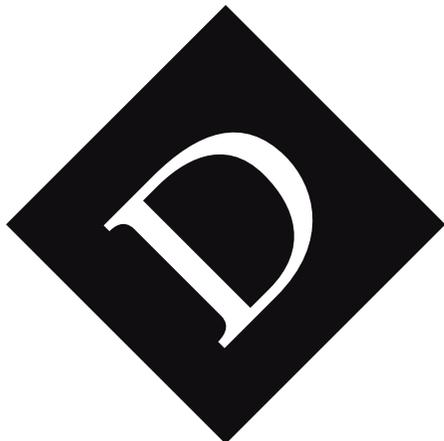
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Driver's Seat

After years as Hollywood's top African-American talent agent, Charles King is building an audacious new production company ~ with a vision for bringing long-neglected stories to the screen.

By Calvin
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uring the 10-day run of the Sundance Film Festival each January, the otherwise-unassuming ski hamlet of Park City, Utah, begins to look like the Hamptons on Fourth of July weekend. Traffic inches anxiously along the snow-carpeted Main Street, littered with the accidents of those unused to driving on snow or unused to driving at all. Angelenos and New Yorkers line the sidewalks in the gathering darkness, presenting their bona fides or tall tales to the nearest bouncer, straining their necks to find old friends — or new connections who might see in them what they see in themselves. They are easily distinguishable from the locals by their attire, everything from freshly purchased skiwear to full-length furs to homemade-looking get-ups sparkling with the jewels of American self-invention.

At the end of a grueling day and a half trying to sell his slate of new projects, Charles D. King — the 48-year-old founder of a two-year-old media start-up called Macro — piled with his associates into the back of a black S.U.V. to make his way to the house that was serving as their festival hub. Until recently, King was one of Hollywood's top agents, the only African-American to make partner at William Morris Endeavor in the firm's long history. (If you've turned on a television, watched a movie or listened to popular music in the past decade, you've almost surely witnessed the other side of a deal King brokered.) As difficult as any midcareer job change can be, King's was an even rarer thing: Starting Macro meant stepping down from a rarefied perch he'd spent his entire professional life fighting to reach. The uncertainty of starting a new business was only compounded by the audacity of King's vision. He announced Macro not simply as a production house but as an entire media company, one whose content would reflect the new demographics of America — solving a problem the media industry only fitfully, grudgingly acknowledges is even real.

King's rented bungalow sat at the top of a residential street on a small foothill, but with a blizzard still pummeling the town, the Uber driver found his S.U.V. sliding down the icy grade. Backing up and gunning uphill again only sent the car spinning sideways. After one last halfhearted, face-saving attempt, King and an entourage that included his wife, Stacey Walker King, nodded sympathetically before bundling into their parkas to walk the rest of the way. On the trudge uphill, everyone lashed by the wind and complaining of hunger, King alone seemed enraptured by the falling snow and went loping energetically up the slope, pulling the rest of the party along with his enthusiasm.

Macro has made waves with some early projects, like Denzel Washington's

Oscar-nominated film adaptation of August Wilson's "Fences," but it's still a new venture, and it has a start-up's shoot-the-moon sense of urgency and excitement. Inside the house, a boisterous late-night crew — including several Macro executives and part of the youthful cast and crew of "Gente-fied," a digital project about generational and class tension in the Los Angeles Mexican-American community — was already joking, decompressing and discussing the day's films, panels and deal-making. King had brought several titles to the festival, each of them carefully positioned and, so far, enthusiastically received. One of them had become a darling of the festival: Dee Rees's "Mudbound," a World War II drama about two families from opposite sides of the race line. Still, at 10 p.m., as he sat down to eat, King didn't have distribution in place for any of his projects. Before starting on the turkey sandwich he'd made himself, he placed two cellphones on the table, next to a glass of sweet tea. "It's an old agent's trick," he explained. "You always carry two phones, in case one dies or loses reception."

In his past life as an agent, King carried no real financial risk: Agents are paid a percentage of the deals they negotiate. As the founder of a media company, each deal he strikes has a material impact not only on his own fate but also on those of his employees and investors. Perhaps the most formidable obstacle to Macro's success is a body of received wisdom about why the world on our screens looks so different from the real world it ostensibly mirrors — ideas about how films starring black actors don't do as well in crucial overseas markets, or that Hollywood has no bias against women, or that Asian men can't be leading men. There are countless claims like these, almost all of them unsubstantiated, tautological or otherwise self-serving. King's project is to break down these barriers, and he exudes a quiet confidence in his vision: that there is vast cultural and economic opportunity in telling meaningful stories to diverse audiences. He describes this effort as "a front in the civil rights battle." Past generations marched for things the law could do, like dismantling housing segregation or securing voting rights. King wants to accomplish something the law cannot: using film to fill in the subtle degrees of experience that reveal our lives to one another. When people look at all the ubiquitous screens that surround us, King wants us to see ourselves. Not only African-Americans, but everyone.

In King's own career, breaking down barriers has meant keeping cool and taking his lumps — some of them simply for being an outsider — as he studied the business and fought his way up from a subminimum-wage position in the William Morris mailroom. Macro is the culmination of his life's work and the realization of dreams he has nursed since he was just another scrawny kid in Georgia. If the projects the company champions do well, then King, and everything he serves, will do well, too. If not, he will have made a life-defining miscalculation. So as the rest of Park City partied or slept, King swiveled back and forth between his sandwich and his phones. His face, which has a boyish enthusiasm when he's excited, turns profoundly focused when he considers the business aspect of things; in unguarded moments he sometimes looks as beatific as a Dostoyevsky character. You get the sense of a man whose neural network is wired differently — so much so that I felt compelled to ask his wife, Stacey, about these reveries when I ran into her in the Salt Lake City airport. "Oh, you saw that?" she asked. "Charles daydreams. He stares into space. I didn't understand at first. Now I get it. He's processing, making connections. There's a real vision there."

Aside from jazz, with its blending of European and African musical sensibilities, film might be the most American of all art forms. Certainly few forms have been as integral in shaping how we Americans see ourselves, and how the world sees us. But in film's very beginnings, approximately 120 years ago, African-Americans' role in the new medium was merely a collection of stereotypes borrowed from vaudeville. Thomas Edison's own peep-show company featured such cultural uplift as "The Pickaninnies Doing a Dance."

Ever since, African-American actors, writers and directors have struggled to create roles in mainstream cinema that depicted the full range of black humanity and to finance and distribute films of their own making.

Both efforts have been slow but steady going, marked by sporadic success and cyclical setbacks. In the early 20th century, they were led by figures like Oscar Micheaux, a writer and producer of all-black “race films.” In the middle of the century, figures like Dorothy Dandridge, Sidney Poitier and Sammy Davis Jr. challenged filmic segregation. The ’70s saw the birth of blaxploitation (Richard Roundtree, Pam Grier), diverse independent efforts (Melvin Van Peebles, Gordon Parks) and huge comedic presences (Bill Cosby, Richard Pryor). By the turn of the 21st century, a new wave of filmmaking had fought its way to true crossover stardom, with directors like Spike Lee, Julie Dash and John Singleton and a generation of actors including Forest Whitaker, Dave Chappelle and Halle Berry. More recently, the success of films like “Get Out,” “Moonlight” and “I Am Not Your Negro” has made it easy to forget that, only a year ago, Hollywood faced the uncomfortable truth that not a single black actor had been nominated for an Academy Award.

Yet each of those recent success stories was an independent production, with origins outside the clubby confines of Hollywood studios. Making film and television is an expensive gamble, and when the people making the wagers all come from a single demographic, the only certainty is that their own point of view will always be well represented. “It think it’s pretty simple,” says the ICM agent Andrea Nelson Meigs, whose clients include Beyoncé and Quvenzhané Wallis. “People buy what they relate to. People buy what they’re familiar with. If the person behind the desk doesn’t relate to the experience of the person in front of it, it’s 50-50.” She illustrated this with a story from her own office, where she was surprised to learn that of several young assistants, only one, an African-American woman, was aware of the iconic activist Angela Davis, the subject of a potential biopic. “If that’s the room we’re pitching,” Nelson Meigs says, “that story doesn’t get made.”

It doesn’t help that Hollywood relies on tweaking proven formulas, meaning any filmmaker without successful antecedents they can use to back up their ideas will face high hurdles. The one area where African-Americans have found relatively consistent recent success in the industry has been the popular work of directors like Lee Daniels, F. Gary Gray or Tyler Perry, to which audiences flock for the same reason whole neighborhoods once gathered around the television: because they will see themselves on the screen, and because they know they will not feel insulted by what they see. It has not been easy to secure even that much, let alone opportunities to make more psychologically and artistically ambitious films. “When I started it was

the age of Spike Lee,” says Poppy Hanks, Macro’s senior vice president for production, who attended the University of Southern California at the same time as John Singleton, and whose early career coincided with the commercial success of movies like “Soul Food” (which she worked on) and “Waiting to Exhale.” “There was just a wave that gave us a sense it was all possible.” As she made her way into the business, though, she saw how difficult it could be to push such films through the industry. “It’s always shocking to them when something succeeds,” she says. “Not to us, but to them.”

King’s career has spanned both reliable franchises like the “Barbershop” movies and more ambitious films like “Fruitvale Station.” He understands what pleases crowds, but he also understands the narrowness of current cinema and the pent-up creative energies outside it. “The specific message I want to resonate,” he says, “is people of color have stories to tell.” Part of this conviction comes from his youth, when he watched his mother try to publish the novel she worked on every day after coming home, only to be met with rejection by industry gatekeepers. “I remember the impact that had on her,” he says. “It made her question whether she was a gifted writer, and she was.” He does not say it, but it is clear in his tone that he still thinks the rejections had less to do with merit than with other forces. The business of culture is one of the most subjective in American society, and its executive suites are all filled with unintentional, unexamined biases. Added together, those biases can still accomplish nearly the same ends as the outright aggression directed at people of color a century ago. There was no animus toward King’s mother. They simply couldn’t see her, or her story.

Charles David King was born in Harlem in 1969, when his father was a pediatrics resident at Harlem Hospital. After stints in North Carolina and Atlanta, the family settled in suburban Decatur, Ga., among the first African-Americans in an area that soon fell into a pattern of white flight. When I asked him, over lunch one afternoon, the first time he remembers being treated differently, he had to think only a moment before replying, “Third grade.” His family had just arrived in Georgia, and when he started school, “it was the height of being bused. They tried to put me on a lower learning track.” To compensate, “I just did what we always do, you know. Work twice as hard.” As a young African-American male, however bourgeois, he remembers being accosted by the police in malls or on campus at Vanderbilt University, where he studied political science and communications.

After Vanderbilt, King enrolled at the historically black Howard University for law school. It was a summer internship at MTV that gave him his first real exposure to the media industry, and it was while living in 1990s New York that he met Stacey Walker, a 22-year-old recent Duke graduate. She recalls their first meeting as anything but fateful: She was leaving a party with friends, and King and his friends were on their way in, an encounter he claimed not to remember when they ran into each other again shortly afterward. Nonetheless, they were soon dating seriously. He moved to Los Angeles a year later; after a year and half, Stacey joined him. They’ve been together some 20 years.

Before heading West, at the suggestion of a mentor in New York, King wrote what he describes as “hundreds of Unabomber letters,” which yielded dozens of informational interviews and, ultimately, four job offers, one of them a coveted spot in the William Morris mailroom. He turned out to be the only African-American trainee in film and television. The William Morris Agency was founded in 1898 as William Morris, Vaudeville Agent; it’s so old that its original client list included Charlie Chaplin and Mae West. Its mailroom is actually an extremely competitive internship program, offering trainees an opportunity to learn the business and prove themselves from the inside. As with many such programs, privilege, connections and nepotism were often at least as important as ability. “I don’t think there had been an African-American trainee there in years,” King says, shaking his head with grim bemusement. To celebrate his new role, he invited Stacey to dinner at Spago, one of Hollywood’s old-school

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‘It’s always shocking to them when something succeeds.’

watering holes. As they waited in line for their table, Stacey learned for the first time how much he was making. She told him she didn't feel well. "We left," she says, smiling mischievously. "We never ate together at Spago Hollywood."

"While all the sons and daughters of studio heads were out with each other, I would stay behind and talk to Rick," King recalls — meaning Rick Palacio, the assistant supervisor of the mailroom. Despite the meager pay, King saw the mailroom as "a gold mine" of information and possibility. He was promoted to assistant on the desk of an agent, then quickly removed. "I was not a great assistant," he admits. "I was too focused on the big picture. What I really needed to learn was that paying your dues was more than going through the motions." When he found himself with a second shot in the mailroom, he redoubled his efforts: "I was going to get fired or promoted."

He credits the firm's African-American clients — and their managers and other assorted "people" — with making sure it was the promotion. He may have been a junior employee, but some bigger industry players gravitated toward him, in part because he understood their clients' value in ways others in the agency did not. He also had a talent for building community. "Because there are so few people of color, we all know each other," Hanks says. "There was an unspoken locking of the arms. We were all kids figuring it out. I don't even know if Charles knows this, but I know both my bosses were putting pressure on his bosses to promote him."

Eventually, King says, "there was a groundswell" of people lobbying his cause. In 2000, he escaped the mailroom for good. Still, there were many within the office who "were sniggering at the things I was suggesting," he remembers. One such incident, which I first heard about from Mike Palank, his assistant at the time and now an executive at Macro, concerned a weekly meeting in which agents at William Morris speculated about how the firm's movie openings would do in each weekend's box office. The week before one of King's projects opened, he attended expectantly, only to find his client's movie wasn't even on the agenda. He was vindicated by Monday morning, when the receipts were counted — and Tyler Perry's "Diary of a Mad Black Woman" turned out to have the highest gross in the country.

By the time he was brokering Perry's first television deal, he had learned to use being underestimated to their advantage. The two men were "shocked" by how small an audience the network thought Perry's "House of Payne" would attract, so they arranged a unique kind of deal: If the show's first 10 episodes, which Perry self-produced, reached their target numbers, the network would agree to order 90 more. This was a pioneering example of what would become known in the industry as a "10-90

deal," and it made Perry and King a great deal more powerful. Soon King had built a staggering list of clients, including Oprah Winfrey, Tim Story (the highest-grossing black director in the industry), Missy Elliott, Andre Benjamin of Outkast, Prince, Janet Jackson and Terrence Howard.

Agents negotiate between talent and money. They can connect, nurture and translate, but the ultimate decision-making power lies elsewhere. With Macro, finally, the decisions are King's. He has designed the company with great care: Macro is situated at the intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley, combining the core elements of a production company with an aggressive focus on digital platforms. The companies King cites as similar to Macro include both content behemoths like Vice and nimble midsize production companies like Legendary, whose movies — including "Interstellar" and "Kong: Skull Island" — punch above their weight. Shortly after I saw him at Sundance, "Mudbound" won the largest distribution deal of any movie at the festival. "Gente-fied" ignited a bidding war among six networks. "Fences" won an Oscar for Viola Davis. Maybe most remarkable, King closed a second round of funding — just announced in recent days — to the tune of \$150 million. "I think there's an enormous hunger for these stories," says one lead investor, Laurene Powell Jobs, who has known King since they worked together on the board of a nonprofit. "He's at the forefront. All of us who saw something special in Charles are just seeing what he's capable of."

Stacey has known longer than most. "Charles told me he was going to build a media company on our first date," she says. "Things never look exactly as you imagine them, but it's what he always said he wanted to do." King plans to produce or co-produce between four and six films a year, with a maximum investment of \$35 million, in addition to "at least three shows on streaming, or television and cable," an unspecified number of digital shows and a portfolio of investments in pure technology companies. Projects in development include another project with Washington, as well as collaborations with Ava DuVernay, Ryan Coogler, Van Jones, Eva Longoria and Justin Simien. "Charles and I have been fighting this fight for 18 years," says Hanks, one of Macro's first hires. "I know we've done really well. Now we have to keep it up."

All of this almost didn't happen. When King began trying to raise money for Macro, no one seemed to have much faith in his ability to start a company, and the early fund-raising effort proved to be as great a challenge as he had faced in his career. "Let's just say we're extremely lucky for the investors we have," he says, maneuvering his black Tesla absent-mindedly through traffic on the way to his son Julian's basketball game. King is modest in conversation, but he has a deep competitive drive, and his superhuman effectiveness actually had me wondering what he *wasn't* good at, right

until I first got in his car and discovered what a terrifyingly bad driver he is. When I mentioned this one morning at Macro's Hollywood office, the entire room burst into laughter. "Were his hands even on the wheel?" asked Aaliyah Williams, Macro's vice president for digital content and production. "Or was he driving with his knee?"

The offices are in a rapidly transforming corridor of Los Angeles. The work of up-and-coming artists adorns the walls; the soundtrack is classic rap, and the work force looks as harmoniously multicultural and gender-balanced as America imagines itself. These employees aren't just betting their fates on the movie business but on interlocking shifts in demographics, culture and technology. Macro, King believes, is in the vanguard of a new cultural universe, one made possible by the shrinking space between technology and film. "We're building a global company for a new majority. We won't be the only one." He begins listing mighty firms that fell (MGM, Blockbuster, Time Warner), noting new entities that sprang up seemingly from nowhere (Netflix) and theorizing what the landscape may look like decades from now — before going abruptly silent, to keep from tipping too much of his own hand. "Well, you can imagine," he concludes, cutting across several lanes of rush-hour traffic on the freeway after missing an exit.

King is not the first to see the problem of diversity in popular culture; it has been apparent since the beginning, and like every struggle for equality in this post-civil rights country, in this post-colonial world, it has been a generation-over-generation battle. His challenge to us — to imagine new cultural possibilities — also challenges the sense everyone in the old order has of being an expert about the culture. What if the world we think we know is only a tiny, myopic fraction of it? What if the things we believe we understand are nothing but learned patterns? We imagine that wanting to be inclusive and cosmopolitan makes us so, but we continue to be produced by and inhabit the structures that create oppression. This is precisely what makes it so important that Hollywood be truly democratic: It represents so much of the inner, the hidden and exceptional, of this country. If there is no space for the visions of the most talented among us no matter where they come from — or how strange their ideas may seem to those who cannot comprehend them — what possible future can we really have but the most ordinary?

As the sun set, King piloted his Tesla noiselessly down the 101, oblivious to the way he was disrupting traffic. He finished his final call of the day in the last amber hour of light on this side of the Pacific, and I watched him stare intently into the distance behind his sunglasses in the silent interior of the car. White-knuckling the corner of my seat, something Stacey said returned to me — his processing, his making connections. I understood he was dreaming. ♦