

MOVIES

Destin Daniel Cretton: the calm in the eye of the Hollywood storm



Destin Daniel Cretton, a graduate of Point Loma Nazarene University and San Diego State University, is the director of Marvel's next superhero film, "Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings." (Gary Coronado/Los Angeles Times)

On the eve of his biggest movie yet, PLNU and SDSU grad Destin Daniel Cretton talks about how San Diego shaped his Hollywood life, filming during a pandemic and why directing a Marvel movie wasn't something he ever wanted to do

BY DEAN NELSON | WRITER



The deadline for finishing “Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings” was the next day, so I was surprised when my phone showed that its director, [Destin Daniel Cretton](#), was calling.

“Can I show you around the studio?”

We had been emailing off and on throughout the making of this newest superhero film in the Marvel Comics Universe Marvel Cinematic Universe. I figured he’d be hunkered down, frantic, on the edge of sanity, trying to get every last detail wrapped up once and for all.

Instead he sounded calm, as if he were just coming in from the beach.

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On FaceTime he walked through the doors, introduced me to people in the middle of virtual international meetings and in-person discussions. Everyone stopped, happy to see him.

“Say hello to my journalism professor,” he said, as he greeted the staff.

They too seemed calm, which surprised me, given the pressure I presumed they would be under in delivering a reported \$150-million budgeted film that was made during the pandemic. All that was left were some visual effects revisions and color adjustments.

As soon as those were done, he was headed to England to meet up with his wife and two young sons at her family’s farm. He’ll be back in the U.S. in time for the film’s release on Sept. 3.



On his time in San Diego, Destin Daniel Cretton said: “San Diego was my womb period. I felt nurtured and protected there. I needed San Diego to help me take steps to go a little deeper and then a little deeper.” (Gary Coronado/Los Angeles Times)

San Diego, then beyond

Cretton moved to San Diego in 1997 at age 19 from a small community on Maui to attend Point Loma Nazarene University, where I teach. He had been to the mainland just twice before, and both of those times were brief. He stayed in San Diego after

graduating from PLNU in 2001, then attended film school at San Diego State University. His thesis project at SDSU, a film called “Short Term 12,” won the jury award for short film at the Sundance Film Festival in 2009. He expanded that into a feature-length film starring unknowns such as Brie Larson, LaKeith Stanfield and Rami Malek, who have all become stars. Since then he has directed Jeannette Walls’ “The Glass Castle,” Bryan Stephenson’s “Just Mercy” and now Marvel’s “Shang-Chi.”

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While all of the movies he has done have had their challenges, as every creative endeavor does, the challenges of “Shang-Chi” were almost cosmic. Much of the film was shot in Australia while COVID-19 raged around the world. When Cretton realized he may have been exposed, he shut down production for weeks, causing speculation as to whether the film would ever be made.

“Our movie set was one of the safest places to be, at a time when Sydney was one of the safest cities for COVID,” he said. “It was a bit hairy when COVID started spreading. It wasn’t popular, and there was a lot of money on the line, but we did the responsible thing and shut the production down.”

Oh yeah — and his wife, Nikki, had a baby in the middle of it all.

“I’m not proud of it, but I did direct a scene on FaceTime from the maternity ward hallway,” he said. “It was a quiet, emotional scene that was part of a flashback. My

wife and baby were in a resting state, so I could step out of the room.”

Directing a Marvel superhero movie may seem like a departure from his previous heavier-themed features that dealt with mental illness, family dysfunction and racism in the American justice system. Regarding “Short Term 12,” the New York Times wrote, “Mr. Cretton manages to earn your tears honestly.” He had even told his agent to not ever let him do a Marvel movie. But when the studio announced it was interviewing directors for “Shang-Chi,” the first Asian superhero in the Marvel universe, Cretton called his agent again.

“I told him I take it all back,” he said, laughing. “I asked if he could get me a meeting.”



Writer-director Destin Daniel Cretton, left, and actress Brie Larson, photographed in Beverly Hills. (Gary Friedman / Los Angeles Times)

Asian stereotypes

The desire to direct this movie came in part because of his experience in San Diego, a city he had never visited before moving here.

Friends of his from Maui had attended PLNU, and he thought he would give it a try. He didn't know how the college experience worked. Would they feed him? He and a friend flew to Los Angeles with a bin they had filled with their own food — mostly ramen. They arrived at the campus late at night, and in the morning, he saw the ocean from his dorm window.

The other thing he didn't know was that he would be seen through the prism of Asian stereotypes. In California, he was told he had an accent. People asked if he knew Bruce Lee. His deliberate, soft-spoken manner cost him points in speech class. He spent a semester with a film studies organization in Los Angeles, and professors there told him he needed to be more assertive and driven if he was going to make it in Hollywood. He was too laid back. Too Hawaiian. One professor in particular told him to pursue another line of work because his personality would keep him from accomplishing anything.

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He channeled all of this when he met with the Marvel studio executives.

“I had been processing those psychological repercussions when the Marvel announcement came,” he said. “If I could be part of the conversation of what this superhero could be for a new generation of kids, then it was something worth trying for. My pitch to them was very personal and emotional. I wanted to represent my friends, family and life.”

The meeting with Marvel did not go well, though. He felt like his pitch wasn't really a pitch. He didn't exude confidence, he thought. One of the last questions they asked him was whether directing a Marvel movie was something he'd always wanted to do. Before counting the cost of his response, he made what he later figured was a tactical mistake — professionally suicidal. He told them what he had told his agent about never wanting to do a Marvel movie. It was a long walk back to his car when the meeting ended. He knew he had blown it with his honesty.

Later, when they told him he had the job, one of the studio executives said that Cretton's statement about never wanting to do a Marvel movie was what convinced him that Cretton was the perfect choice.



Simu Liu is the title hero in Marvel Studios' in "Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings." (Jasin Boland/Marvel Studios)

Despite his experience of feeling like an island boy in the big city, Cretton's time in San Diego was the perfect setup for his success today, he says. Had he gone directly to Los Angeles from Maui, he would not have lasted long.

"San Diego was my womb period," he said. "I felt nurtured and protected there. I needed San Diego to help me take steps to go a little deeper and then a little deeper.

For my brain, I needed to be exposed to the world in layers. At both schools, I had professors who believed in me the way they believed in all their students. I would leave their classrooms thinking, ‘Maybe I could do something worthwhile.’”

At PLNU, he wrote emotionally deep stories for my classes that usually involved a main character who was in an awkward situation. He and his friends made movies constantly. They became almost campus-wide efforts because everyone wanted to be part of them. And those films usually involved a character who was in an awkward situation.

Then he and his friend Lowell Frank decided they wanted to go to film school at SDSU. They contacted professor Greg Durbin, and he invited them in for a conversation.

“They hardly knew anything,” Durbin said, “and it was way past the deadline to apply to our MFA program, but I could tell they were so clearly talented and had such a clear enthusiasm for film. They had learned everything on their own, not by reading how-to books.”

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Durbin watched a movie they made at PLNU called “Longbranch.”

“I wished I had made that movie,” he said.

SDSU introduced Cretton to the artistic dimension of cinema, especially emotionally charged international film that challenged and expanded his view of the world.

Durbin said that Cretton is the opposite of the chest-pounding, self-promoting image that film students think they need to project as directors. At Sundance, Cretton would talk to people, and then if he liked them, he would invite them to his showing.

“He is fully free of ego,” Durbin said.

Cretton said he still leans on his former professors for encouragement.



Author Jeannette Walls and Destin Daniel Cretton on the set of "The Glass Castle." (Jake Giles Netter / Lionsgate)

Changing Hollywood

He also still leans on the creative community he met in San Diego. While living in South Park, he got an assignment from the Learning Channel for a documentary. The film needed music, so he asked his roommate, Joel P. West, to help. West, also a

PLNU alum, had created a band called The Tree Ring that was recording and performing locally.

West had never scored music for a film. He didn't even know how to read music.

"Destin didn't tell me what to do," West said. "We just talked it through, and he let me figure it out."

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West has scored every Cretton movie since then.

"He gets the best results because he hires people he trusts and then lets them go to work," West said. "He tells you what's working and what's not. He's always willing to have another conversation. You're always heard."

The vibe Cretton creates on the set seeps into every aspect of the film, West said. When a Cretton project ends, he said, it is like the last day of summer camp. People want to keep in touch and work with him again.

People like Jeannette Walls, who wrote "The Glass Castle." The memoir, which was on the New York Times best-seller list for 271 weeks, had many suitors who wanted to make it into a film. She rebuffed them all, until she met Cretton. I called her and asked what made him unique.

Again, it was the vibe he creates that drew her in.

“I think he is changing the nature of Hollywood,” she said. “Fear is contagious on a movie set. But so is kindness. The actors had such a reverence for him. They would remind each other that not every movie set is like this.”

One experience in particular still stands out for her. Cretton often talks through a scene with the actors, and tells them it’s fine to depart from the script. In fact, he has said, he hopes they do depart from the script, reach inside themselves and say something even better. Woody Harrelson was playing the role of Walls’ father, and during one scene the actor reached so deeply into the character that he said something that wasn’t written anywhere.

“What Woody said was exactly what my father had said — and I had never told that to anyone,” Walls said. “It gave me chills. Seeing Destin work was life-changing for me. I learned so much from him about storytelling. I still think of him daily.”

About that vibe that Cretton creates? He doesn’t always start from a place of calm, he told me.

“I’m a fairly insecure person, and I get panic attacks before I start a project,” he said. “But when we start, there are very few things as fulfilling as telling a story. And the stories I love to tell are about people who are forgotten, or on the outside, or looked down on, and they make sense of the world despite that.”

He has a singular criterion for choosing which story to tell.

“I ask, ‘Will telling this story make me a better person?’” he said. “It’s a weirdly selfish way to choose a story, I suppose.”

Three weeks after “Shang-Chi” was completed, I got another call from Destin, relaxing on the farm. The pressure of the film drained out of him on his flight to England, he said. He’s been taking walks, playing with his kids, and even built a soccer goal for them in his father-in-law’s tool shed. He knows there will be a lot of promoting to do once he gets back to the U.S., which he doesn’t dread. But for right now?

“It’s a ‘Pride and Prejudice’ setting where I am,” he said.

Sounds about right.

Calm.

Nelson is the founder and director of the journalism program at Point Loma Nazarene University. His also the founder and host of the annual Writer’s Symposium By The Sea. His latest book is “Talk to Me: How To Ask Better Questions, Get Better Answers, and Interview Anyone Like a Pro,” published by HarperCollins.

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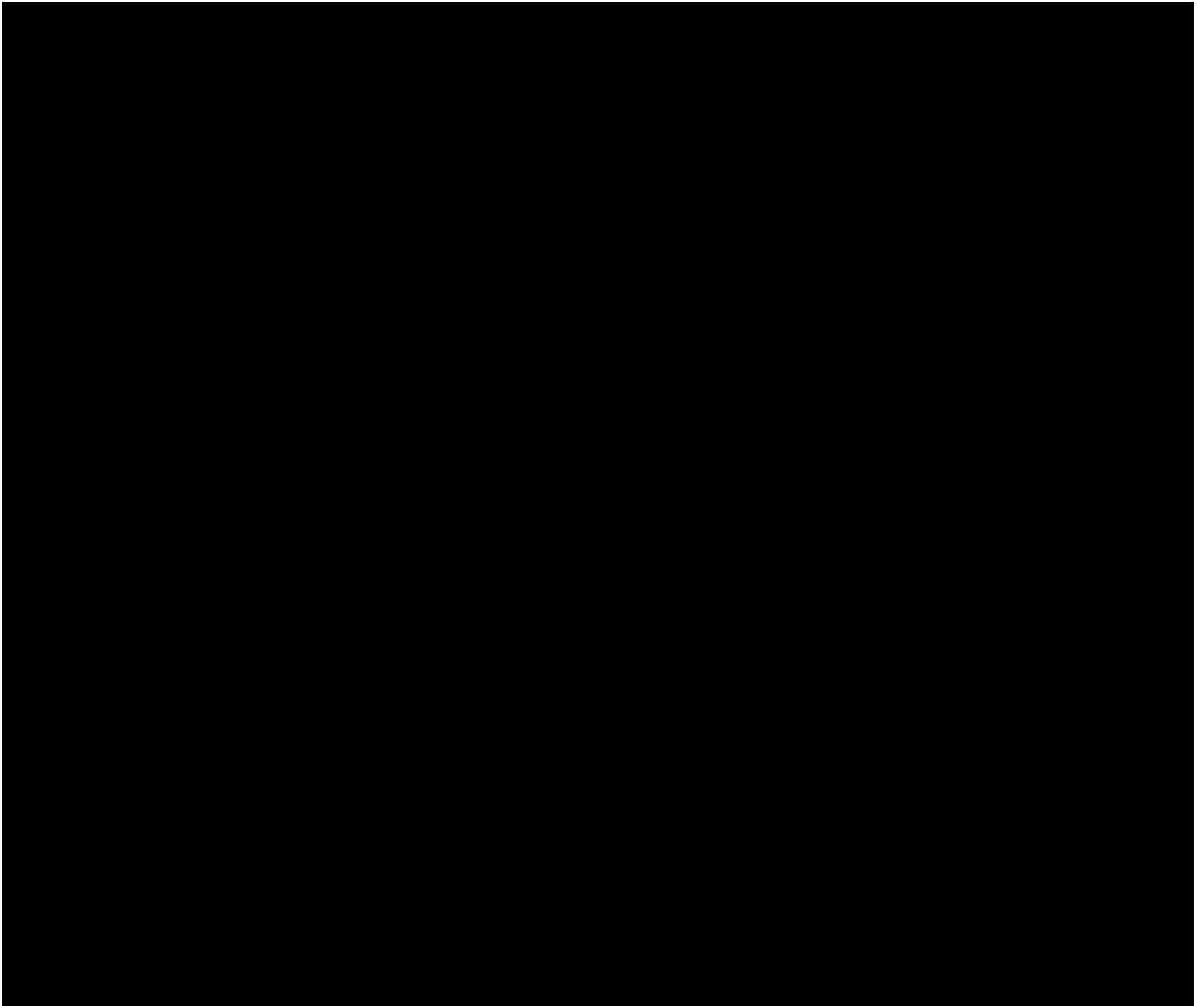
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