

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Look at Your Scene Partner

*Writer-director Beth de Araújo, Gemma Chan, and newcomer Mason Reeves on *Josephine*, the Sundance double winner eleven years in the making. They talk about staying truthful in the hardest scenes, a director's outward gaze, a child who learned by watching, and the oldest advice in the book.*

Interview by Paul Salfen · AMFM Magazine

Some films announce themselves as difficult from the logline, and *Josephine* is one of them. Early one morning in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, eight-year-old Josephine and her father, Damien, are on their way to play football when they witness a jogger being sexually assaulted by a stranger. Damien gives chase. Afterward, Josephine asks what the man was doing to the woman, and her father dodges the question. So she looks the word up herself. From that moment the world starts to look dirtier and more dangerous to her. The film's official logline says she "acts out in search of a way to regain control of her safety while adults are helpless to console her." Her parents, played by Channing Tatum and Gemma Chan, split over how to help her and how to find something like justice.

The story is not invented from a distance. In the director's statement included in the film's production notes, writer-director Beth de Araújo writes that when she was eight years old she was running in Golden Gate Park with her father, "and we interrupted a rape. My father chased after him, and I stayed back with the woman while she picked herself up off the ground and put her clothes back on." She writes that witnessing the woman's pain "left me terrified of male violence and aggression," and that she has lived with hypervigilance ever since.

Josephine world-premiered on January 23, 2026, in the U.S. Dramatic Competition at the Sundance Film Festival and left Park City with both the Grand Jury Prize and the Audience Award. That pairing is rare. Recent films to win both of Sundance's top U.S. dramatic honors include *Minari* and *CODA*, and *CODA* went on to win Best Picture. The jury praised "the delicate and elegant execution of a challenging subject matter" and "the humanistic view of the filmmaker and how they withheld judgment of those dealing with the impact of victimization." Sumerian Pictures acquired the film, and it went on to compete for the Golden Bear at the 76th Berlin International Film Festival. Ahead of its theatrical release, AMFM Magazine's Paul Salfen sat down virtually with de Araújo, Chan, and the film's young star, Mason Reeves, in a five-minute press-day conversation that was brief but surprisingly revealing.

ELEVEN YEARS IN THE MAKING

"When is the right time to tell a child what rape means?" de Araújo asks at the opening of her statement. "I do not know the answer to this. It is so understudied, underreported, and underresourced."

The production notes trace how she worked through that question over most of her adult life. Looking to get out of the hypervigilance, she immersed herself in a community where she could talk about it openly. She became a certified Witness Advocate who accompanied victims to the hospital, and she worked for the Los Angeles Rape and Battering Crisis Hotline. She resists any easy summary of what that morning did to her. "I think it's reductive to say that I was left with trauma. Of course I was. But that is so unspecific," she writes. "The residual effects of that morning changed who I have become."

She describes the screenplay as something she wrote "in an act of desperation, never thinking about its future, only needing to write it because I simply couldn't do anything else to soothe my fears." By her account, the film is "eleven years in the making." The costume designers, Bridget Bruce and Jillian Johns, first met de Araújo about *Josephine* roughly a decade before cameras rolled, and in the meantime the three collaborated on her debut feature, *Soft & Quiet*. That unflinching portrait of a hate-fueled afternoon premiered at SXSW in 2022, was acquired by Blumhouse and distributed by eOne, and earned de Araújo a 2022 Gotham Award nomination for Breakthrough Director. When the team finally returned to *Josephine*, the notes say, they dressed the film partly in personal items from de Araújo and her family, mixed with pieces from San Francisco's small shops and independent designers.

The production notes also show how seriously the production took care on set. Its crew list includes intimacy coordinators, set medics, studio teachers for its young cast, and a trauma-informed counselor and therapist, Dr. Jamie Goldstein. De Araújo's goal, in her words, is "to share this story with a collective voice more powerful than my own," and she hopes the film "gives us all more freedom to speak on the matter."

A GIRL FROM THE FARMERS MARKET

The film's most important piece of casting was also its least conventional. According to the production notes, de Araújo met Mason Reeves at a San Francisco farmers market two months before production began. Reeves, a fourth-generation San Francisco native, was seven years old when she was discovered, and *Josephine* is her feature debut. "Acting was never a part of her world," de Araújo writes. "She has a depth of emotional intelligence beyond her years, which was exemplified by her instincts on set." The notes add that Reeves is trilingual and that when she isn't with her three siblings, two cats and a dog, she can usually be found at her jiu-jitsu academy, reading, or doing arts and crafts.

Around her, de Araújo assembled a cast of seasoned performers. Chan, whose credits run from *Crazy Rich Asians* and *Captain Marvel* to Marvel's *Eternals* and Gareth Edwards' *The Creator*, plays Josephine's mother, Claire. Tatum, fresh off Derek Cianfrance's *Roofman*, plays her father, Damien. Both actors also serve as producers on the film. "Gemma and Channing's respect, care, and sense of duty instilled a tone of respect that I am so grateful for," de Araújo writes in her statement. The ensemble also includes Philip Ettinger (*First Reformed*) as Greg, Syra McCarthy as Sandra, and Eleanore Pienta as Kerry.

Paul opened the conversation with the question that hangs over a film like this one. With material this heavy, what mindset did each of them bring to set?

IN THE MOMENT

Gemma Chan answered first. She doesn't describe a fixed technique. She describes staying open.

"Honestly, each day was different," Chan said. "We did some really challenging and emotional scenes, but honestly, the main thing for me, I wanted to just be able to be completely in the moment and spontaneous and truthful in these scenes."

Claire is a parent trying to reach a daughter who is pulling away into fear and fury. Chan credited her fellow actors with making that kind of truthfulness possible.

"Because I had a scene partner like Mason and also Channing, both of whom are such intuitive, present, good listeners, it made my job easier," she said.

"When it came to the scenes themselves, I just had to look at my scene partner and I was there."

— Gemma Chan

Chan acknowledged that some days demanded preparation before the camera rolled. "There were scenes where your character's coming into it in a particular emotional state," she explained, "and whatever you have to do to get to that place. I mean, sometimes I would be listening to music or whatever." Once the scene began, though, the work became simpler and more direct. "When it came to the scenes themselves, I just had to look at my scene partner and I was there."

In a film about a family whose ability to communicate is breaking down, much of the drama lives in what passes between actors when they're simply looking at one another and listening.

"I CANNOT BE LAUGHING RIGHT NOW"

When Paul turned to Mason Reeves, the young actor did what plenty of seasoned performers wish they could do on a press junket. She asked him to repeat the question. Then she gave one of the most candid answers of the day.

"Well, Beth would give me her vision for the scene and tell me what emotion she's feeling," Reeves said. "And then based on what my lines were, I would kind of use my imagination to fill in the gaps."

Her example offers a rare look at the practical side of filmmaking. It also shows how a child can stay grounded in material that is anything but light. In one car scene, Josephine is so frightened that she wets herself. On set, Reeves explained, the moment was achieved with decidedly unglamorous equipment.

"For me, I thought it was super funny and embarrassing," she said, "because there was somebody in the trunk of the car with a water pouch, and then a tube connected into my pants. And then when they squeezed the water pouch, water came out, and I thought the whole scene was just super silly and embarrassing, I guess."

"Gemma's acting was so good and she was so serious, so that I was like, okay, I cannot be laughing right now. This is a very serious scene. I got to be serious."

— *Mason Reeves*

What brought her back into the scene was the performance across from her. "Gemma's acting was so good and she was so serious," Reeves said, "so that I was like, okay, I cannot be laughing right now. This is a very serious scene. I got to be serious."

Her answer is funny, but it also tells you something about the film. Reeves had no need to understand the full weight of what Josephine endures in order to play it truthfully. She needed a clear sense of what her director wanted, the freedom to imagine, and a scene partner committed enough to pull her into the moment. Chan's answer and Reeves' answer turn out to describe the same thing from opposite sides of the frame.

THE DIRECTOR'S GAZE

Paul then turned to de Araújo and observed that *Josephine* is, in every sense, her baby. Given that the film grows out of her own experience, he asked whether she carried those emotions with her through production.

Her answer separates the private work of writing from the public work of directing.

"To be honest, I have a lot of emotions more when I'm writing," de Araújo said, "because it's just me by myself, sort of thinking through and processing and looking inward."

Once the film moved into pre-production and onto set, she said, that inward focus disappeared entirely. "When I am in pre-production, when I'm on set, it's about everybody else," she said. "I don't think about myself at all because once you're there, it's the director's job to make sure that everybody else really gets everything that they need to do their best work, to feel safe."

"The gaze becomes really outward then at that point, towards all of my collaborators, and to see how they are."

— *Beth de Araújo*

"I have zero considerations for myself," she continued. "The gaze becomes really outward then at that point, towards all of my collaborators, and to see how they are."

She chose the word "safe," and on this production it carries real weight. A film about the aftermath of sexual violence, told through the eyes of a child and starring a child making her first feature, depends on its director protecting everyone involved. Reeves' description of a director who explained her vision and the emotion of each scene, and who left room for her to fill in the rest, shows what that outward gaze looked like in practice. Reeves' story about trying not to laugh at a water pouch suggests the set never became a place she had to dread.

The jury's citation pointed to de Araújo's refusal to judge "those dealing with the impact of victimization," and that refusal is part of the same instinct. The film offers, in the jury's words, "an empathetic view into the many different ways we as humans cope and try to set the wrongs right." Damien reaches for kung fu lessons and

action, and Claire reaches for something else. The film doesn't pick a winner. It watches, the way its director says she watches her collaborators.

LEARNING BY WATCHING

With a newcomer at the center of a film opposite two established stars, Paul asked Chan what advice she gave her young co-star.

The answer started as a team effort. "I didn't have to give much advice, to be honest," came the first reply, before Reeves jumped in with her own account of how she learned.

"I guess I mostly kind of just learn by watching you and Channing," Reeves said, turning to Chan, "because I guess I'm very perceptive. I'll watch what you and Channing do, and then I'll change it around and see if I can use that method and utilize it."

"You are very perceptive," Paul told her. Anyone who has seen her performance will likely agree.

The process she describes is how many actors learn their craft: watch the people around you, borrow what works, and make it your own. Reeves simply learned it by working opposite Chan and Channing Tatum, Hollywood veterans whom Chan had already described as "intuitive, present, good listeners."

STAY IN SCHOOL

Chan's own answer to the advice question was the most disarming moment of the conversation.

"What would I say? I mean, I'm going to sound very old when I say this," she said with a laugh, "but my first advice is to stay in school. Education comes first."

"I didn't really have to give much advice, truthfully, because she's such an intuitive performer and such a good listener."

— Gemma Chan

Then she returned to the point she had made at the start, the one that runs through the whole conversation. "But, yeah, I didn't really have to give much advice, truthfully," Chan said, "because she's such an intuitive performer and such a good listener."

"Stay in school," Paul replied. "That's always good advice."

It's a fitting place to land. In a film where a child is forced to grow up too quickly and becomes, as the Berlinale synopsis puts it, "wise beyond her young years," her co-star's wish for her in real life is the opposite: be a kid, go to class, and let education come first.

WHY IT MATTERS

Josephine doesn't promise easy viewing. It runs 119 minutes and deals directly with sexual assault and its effects on a child and a marriage. Yet three people who made it came across as unexpectedly warm in conversation. One is a director who sets her own feelings aside once filming starts. One is a star who keeps her eyes on her scene partner. One is a first-time actor perceptive enough to learn from everyone around her and honest enough to admit a scene made her want to giggle.

That combination of seriousness about the subject and care for the people telling it seems to be what moved juries in Park City and Berlin. It also explains why a five-minute conversation can say so much. In her statement, de Araújo writes that it was important to her "that we had collaborators who showed up every day, generous, focused, and caring in order to tell *Josephine's* story." Every answer in the interview comes back to that kind of trust: trusting a scene partner, trusting a director's vision, trusting a child's instincts, and a director making sure everyone on set feels safe enough to do their best work.

Josephine opens in theaters on November 20, 2026, from Sumerian Pictures, and expands nationwide on December 4.

FIND JOSEPHINE

Written and Directed by: Beth de Araújo

Produced by: David Kaplan, Josh Peters, Beth de Araújo, Marina Stabile, Channing Tatum, Gemma Chan, Mark H. Rapaport, Josh Beirne-Golden, Crystine Zhang

Executive Producers: Emanuel Nuñez, Jordan Rapaport, Robina Riccitiello, Jennifer Pritzker, Oleg Nodelman, Heather Nodelman, Hannah Janal, Brantley Gong, Diana Chen, Reid Carolin, Eve Brigham, Norman Chen, Michelle K. Sugihara, Masum Momaya, Rhian Moore

Production Companies: Kaplan Morrison, Vibrato · **Financed by:** Kinematics, Spark Features, Yintai Entertainment

Starring: Mason Reeves (*Josephine*), Channing Tatum (*Damien*), Gemma Chan (*Claire*), Philip Ettinger (*Greg*), Syra McCarthy (*Sandra*), Eleanore Pienta (*Kerry*)

Director of Photography: Greta Zozula · **Production Designer:** Tom Castronovo · **Edited by:** Anisha Acharya, Nico Leunen, ACE, Kyle Reiter, ACE · **Music by:** Miles Ross · **Lead Costume Supervisors:** Bridget Bruce, Jillian Johns · **Sound Design:** William Tabanou · **Casting by:** Nina Henninger, Sarah Kliban, Nafisa Kaptownwala

Honors: Grand Jury Prize, U.S. Dramatic, and Audience Award, U.S. Dramatic, 2026 Sundance Film Festival · Competition, 76th Berlin International Film Festival

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Paul Salfen is Managing Editor of AMFM Magazine and a veteran interviewer of film, television, music, and sports figures. He is the author of Going For It!, a collection of Hail Mary moments from the artists and athletes he has spent two decades putting on the record.