EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

The Institute Goes Off the Books: Screamo, Nerf Wars, and Season 2's Dark New Territory

Simone Miller, Fionn Laird and Arlen So on taking MGM+'s Stephen King series past the novel in Season 2, the off-camera pranks, and how they find the darkness in Kalisha, Nicky and George.

Interview by Paul Salfen · AMFM Magazine

Season 1 had Stephen King's novel as a map. Season 2 of MGM+'s *The Institute* does not, and its young stars sound thrilled about it. Simone Miller, who plays Kalisha, Fionn Laird, who plays Nicky, and Arlen So, who plays George, return as the horror thriller heads into brand new territory, premiering Sunday, November 8, 2026, at 8 p.m. CST on MGM+. Paul Salfen caught up with the trio for AMFM Magazine to talk Nerf ambushes, a lightsaber waiting in the dark, screamo playlists, and why stories about young people with agency matter right now.



The Institute, Season 2, Episode 201. Source: Publicity still supplied via Amazon MGM Studios press site.

OFF THE BOOKS

Returning to a hit show carries a particular kind of excitement, and for this cast it comes with a twist. Season 1 drew on King's novel. Season 2 does not have that map.

"It's super, super exciting getting back into it," one of the actors told Salfen. "Familiarity but still brand new territory because we're off the books. So it's a real treat."

Salfen admitted he was not surprised by how well the first season landed. The cast, though, tried not to predict it. As one of them put it, film and television work means "you're in it for however many months you're filming and then you kind of just cast it out into the ether and hope it resonates with people."

"I didn't really have any premonition of how it was going to be received," the actor continued. "I try not to think about that too much, because I feel like I'd get in my head a little bit. But it's so lovely to see the people who are enjoying it."

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A LIGHTSABER IN THE DARK

On screen, *The Institute* is a story about children held captive and tested. Off screen, it sounds like a sleepover that never ended.

Asked for a favorite memory, one cast member reached for a prank that backfired on the pranksters. "My favorite memory is going into Joe Freeman's apartment thinking that we were being super sneaky," the actor said, "and he was sitting inside with a lightsaber in the dark."

Freeman, who plays lead Luke Ellis, apparently saw them coming.

Season 2 brought its own escalation. "The Nerf gun fights became quite a big thing this season, where we would kind of like ambush one another," another cast member recalled. That actor's strategy was simple: do not get caught. "I never got ambushed, which I'm happy about, which is why it's my favorite."

So agreed that being a spectator was the better seat, and he had the best view in the building. "Me and Finn, for the last part of *Institute*, we actually lived in the same building, on the same floor," he said. "So I was privy to Finn getting Nerf ambushed many, many times across the hall from me."

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FINDING THE DARK

The levity matters because the work does not leave much room for it. Salfen asked each of them how they flip the switch when it is time to step into the Institute's world.

For Miller, it starts in the body. "For me, it was kind of my mannerisms," she said. "I am someone who kind of tends to stand with my hands behind my back, whereas Kalisha definitely has a lot more of a cross-armed stance. So I think just little things that got me into her body were really helpful for me."

Then comes the sound. "I would often hum a little song or something that kind of brought me into the mind space of the emotion that I needed to tap into, depending on what scene we were doing," she said. "Music is always something that transports me emotionally, almost instantly."

So credits director and executive producer Jack Bender with advice that changed how he approached George. While working through a particularly emotional scene the three of them share, Bender told him "to conjure up scenarios from my own life that would maybe put me in a similar emotional position."

"Whenever I was trying to get into George's character, I would stop thinking about all the light things as much and just think a little heavier," So said, "try to bring some of the more serious aspects of my life forward into my consciousness, and I guess help me represent the character in that way."

Laird went louder. "I listen to screamo music," he said. "That's kind of how I got into it specifically for Nicky, because he's a rocker, of course." For the darker places, he draws on what the character has endured, "conjuring that up on a personal level."

He also found Nicky in his face. "I do this pout when I play Nicky. I kind of have this downturned mouth a lot of the time," Laird said. "It just kind of became a habit in Season 1, and I've just kind of stuck with it."

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THE LITTLE GUYS AND THE BIG GUY

Beneath the scares, *The Institute* has always been about kids who refuse to stay powerless. Salfen asked what the cast hopes viewers take away beyond a fun night of television, and the answers came quickly.

One of the actors pointed to a conversation the group had been having all day "about children and young people and their agency and their ability to change the world despite the things that may make them outcasts or not necessarily powerful or in a position of power." No matter how small or how repressed, the actor said, young people "can have a huge impact and can change the world."

Another picked up the thread. "The theme of the little guys taking down the big guy is definitely always pertinent and always honestly can be really inspiring to people, especially in the world we live in today," the actor said. "It's always a good story to tell that you have agency, you have power, and the things that differentiate you can actually be the things that help you make a difference."

Miller brought it home. "I hope young people take away that you always have a choice," she said. "You can choose levity in the face of adversity. You can choose to make a difference. Even if it's the smallest thing in your eyes, it's still the active choice to work towards change."

> *"You can choose levity in the face of adversity."*

It is a fitting summary for a cast that spent its downtime ambushing each other with foam darts and its working hours playing kids who outsmart a sinister machine. *The Institute* Season 2 premieres Sunday, November 8, 2026, at 8 p.m. CST on MGM+, with new episodes weekly on Sundays through December 20.

FIND *THE INSTITUTE*

Series: *The Institute*, Season 2 (MGM+)

Based on: The novel by Stephen King

Premiere: Sunday, November 8, 2026, 8 p.m. CST on MGM+; new episodes weekly through Sunday, December 20

Cast: Joe Freeman, Ben Barnes, Mary Louise Parker, Alfie Allen, Simone Miller, Fionn Laird, Arlen So, Robert Joy and Hannah Galway

Directed by: Jack Bender

Teleplay by: Benjamin Cavell

Executive producers: Stephen King, Jack Bender, Benjamin Cavell, Gary Barber, Sam Sheridan, Ed Redlich, Michael Mahoney

Interview conducted by Paul Salfen for AMFM Magazine.

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.