

The Multitalented Director

Yangzom Brauen



Yangzom at the set of *Station 19*

Yangzom Brauen has always wanted to shoot a Western movie. It's one thing she can now cross off her list: She is currently directing the season finale of the Western TV series *Walker: Independence* for The CW network. The particular challenge of the genre for her as a director, she says, is that intricate planning is required before the shoot. There are extras, horses, prop weapons, stunts, and special effects that have to be coordinated and choreographed — especially if a giant shootout is involved. While the logistics of it all may sound overly technical, Yangzom insists it's also a very creative process: "Simply choosing where to put the camera, for example, can have a huge influence on how the story is being told," she says.

The shoot for *Walker: Independence* takes place at the Bonanza Creek Ranch movie set in Santa Fe, NM. It's the first time her work has brought Yangzom to that part of the country. She loves the wide, open spaces, the desert, the abundant nature of the Southwest. Although obviously a very different scenery, her adopted home Los Angeles also has a lot to offer in terms of its many green spaces. It's what she loves about LA: how close it is to the sea, to the mountains and the desert.

“For me, it has definitely been the land of opportunity.”

Yangzom has recently “built a small oasis” for herself in this bustling city. After going through a divorce and spending much of the Covid-19 pandemic “working and living out of a suitcase like a nomad,” she was eager to find a new house in Los Angeles. A few months ago, she moved into a home in Shadow Hills, a neighborhood in the San Fernando Valley that is particularly popular among the equestrian community. Like many residential properties in the area, Yangzom’s features a paddock, and she has already put it to good use: It houses a goat that was left behind by the previous owners, and two rescue donkeys. “Today, many donkeys that are captured in the wild end up being killed for their skin, which is used to make Ejiao, a key ingredient in Traditional Chinese Medicine,” she explains. “I’m happy to have spared them this horrific fate.” Also, donkeys happen to be a good alternative to watchdogs — definitely an advantage in an area of the city where coyotes roam and the occasional snake finds its way into the paddock. And soon, yet another rescue animal will be joining the Shadow Hill home: a 9-year-old mustang, also captured in the wild. Yangzom loves taking care of her animals, and she has even taken up riding again. “Now I miss my farm animals when I’m gone for work,” she says.

These days, work mostly consists of directing jobs, although Yangzom originally started out as an actress. Over the past five years, she has directed close to thirty episodes for well-known TV series like *NCIS: Los Angeles*, *NCIS Hawaii*, *MacGyver*, and *Magnum P.I.* She recently also worked on two episodes of the detective drama *Career Opportunities in Murder and Mayhem* for Hulu, scheduled to be released in 2023. Luckily, she says, she has now progressed far enough in her directing career that she gets to be more selective and work on projects she’s really interested in. It’s a satisfying point to be at, especially because making the transition from acting to directing wasn’t always easy. Her ambitions were met with some resistance in the beginning, mostly by the men already established in the industry. “They didn’t take me seriously at first,” she says. “Because I



The view from Yangzom's house — her mustang and goat



Left: The set in Santa Fe, where Yangzom is preparing her next shoot
Right: Directing an episode of NCIS: Los Angeles



was a woman, and because I didn't have any formal training. But I knew I had the eye for it, and that I could learn to do it on the job." The career she has now, she's convinced, could not have manifested in Switzerland or in Germany. "That's the great thing about the USA — you get to try out different things. For me, it has definitely been the land of opportunity."

Yangzom spent a large part of her childhood in Bern, the capital of Switzerland. Her father, a Swiss anthropologist, and her mother, a Tibetan artist, still live in the house she grew up in. Yangzom knew from a very early age that she wanted to become an actress: "I loved to play dress-up," she says. "Or actually, what I loved even more was putting different clothes on other people and giving them directions. I remember dressing up my brother as Marilyn Monroe, for example, and telling him and his friends what to do in theater productions I was staging at our house. Maybe that was an early indicator of my passion for directing." At only 17, Yangzom successfully applied to the University of Theater and Music in Bern to study acting. It was an exciting and grueling education that left her wanting to quit many times, she says. Everyone around her was much older and more experienced, and she studied and worked incessantly to catch up.

When did you first arrive in the United States?

Yangzom: 2005 or 2006

What do you call home?

Los Angeles, California

What's your favorite place in the United States?

Valley of the Gods, Utah



With Queen Latifah and Jada Pinkett Smith from *The Equalizer*

At age 21, she accompanied her grandmother, a Tibetan nun, on a pilgrimage in India. She captured the experience on film and turned it into her first documentary, *Pilgrimage in Exile*. It was Yangzom's first taste of directing, which she found much more demanding and multifaceted than acting. Still, upon graduation, she focused on a career in acting and was cast for roles in theater and TV productions in Switzerland and Germany. In her early twenties, she relocated to Berlin, where she landed a role in the science fiction movie *Æon Flux* alongside Hollywood star Charlize Theron in 2004. It was then that she decided she would try her luck in Los Angeles. The move made sense for Yangzom, given that "Switzerland had always felt a little bit too small and limited, and Germany too cold and negative."

In Los Angeles, Yangzom "basically just did what all the other actors were doing." She started working with a dialect coach, went to castings, did voiceovers, even waited tables. There were many more castings to go to, but the competition was fierce. Since her ethnic background and accent were hard to pin down, she often found herself cast for roles in science fiction movies and

Do you have a favorite American tradition or national holiday?

Yangzom: Not really
— Tibetan New Year, if I had to pick one

What's your favorite American food?

Any authentic immigrant food



Miki and Kimi, Yangzom's two rescue donkeys

TV commercials that required someone with a “generically foreign” look. During the first two years, she still went back to Europe for the occasional role; but over time, she steadily built her career overseas. She even successfully branched out into writing: In 2009, she published *Across Many Mountains*, a bestselling memoir about three generations of Tibetan women that has since been translated into twelve languages. And, in 2016, she wrote, directed and produced the award-winning short film *Born in Battle* about a former child soldier.

Being successful in this industry requires a lot of discipline, Yangzom insists: “Nobody tells you to get up in the morning; to work out, educate yourself, or go to castings and find work.” It’s the life she has always known, but she finds that the motivation comes more easily to her in California: “It definitely helps when the sun is out all the time. I feel healthier and more creative here.”

When asked whether she feels more Swiss or American after living and working in the United States for so

What's your favorite American song?

Yangzom: Currently,
No Time to Die
by Billie Eilish

When was the last time you visited Switzerland?

Last Christmas
and New Year's

What characteristic of yours is most "Swiss"?

I'm very punctual

many years — she even became a US citizen five years ago — she says: “Strangely, when people ask me where I’m from, I’ll still tell them I’m from Switzerland.” While she enjoys the flexibility that comes with having two passports, she admits she doesn’t really feel patriotic about one country or the other. She does still visit her native country regularly — usually over Christmas and New Year’s — and she’s happy when her parents and brother go to see her in Los Angeles. As for whether she would ever move back: “Maybe, someday,” she says hesitantly. “Most of my friends and my work are here, so I can’t really picture myself anywhere else right now. But it would be nice not having to drive everywhere,” she adds, referring to the reliable public transport system in Switzerland. “Traffic is horrible in LA.”

In terms of future ambitions for her professional life, there is one project she would love to get involved in: “I’m a big fan of the James Bond franchise. And I think it’s about time a woman gets to be the director of the next Bond movie,” she says with a wink.

Yangzom Brauen is a Swiss-Tibetan director, actress and writer. She was born in Bern, Switzerland, where she studied acting at the University for Theater and Music. After starring in various TV and theater productions in Switzerland and Germany, Yangzom got her Hollywood breakthrough in the science fiction movie *Aeon Flux*. She has since established herself as an award-winning filmmaker and director and has also written a bestselling memoir. She currently lives in Los Angeles.