



The writers' room: sitting left to right: James Hurst, Jessie Gabe, Carol Hay, Andrew Burrows-Trotman. Standing left to right: Keri Ferenz, John Callaghan

GREAT DAMES

The women of *Frankie Drake Mysteries*

By Diane Wild

The fictional Frankie Drake exists in 1920s Toronto, in the window of time between the First World War and the Great Depression, a period of optimism, communism, and booze running; when women had the vote and more opportunities for independence but would never be suspected of being a private detective.

As writers on *Murdoch Mysteries*, Carol Hay and Michelle Ricci shared an office, a passion for period mysteries, and an interest in that window of time. While working on *Murdoch*, they found themselves throwing around ideas for cases from a woman's perspective. When *Murdoch* producer Shaftesbury heard CBC was looking for a series to fit the post-*Murdoch* timeslot, their *Frankie Drake Mysteries* was born.

Ricci and Hay found themselves in development on the concept a week after CBC bought the pitch. "Three months later we delivered three of the five scripts we had written to CBC, and within a couple of weeks we were greenlit with a fall airdate," says Ricci. "From ground zero to on the air in almost exactly one year. It was amazingly fast and a once-in-a-lifetime circumstance."

Their office banter had prepared them for the whirlwind their professional lives were about to become. "We often found things researching for *Murdoch* that were too late in time or not right for a

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cop show that would work really well for a PI in the 1920s,” says Ricci. “So we already had quite a few things in our back pockets when Frankie was put into development.”

Ricci had already been developing a project based on her great aunt, a wannabe gun moll in the 1920s, and both women were drawn to the era.

“It was a period of an explosion in so many things, in fashion, in music — everything was changing,” says Hay. “After the horror of the first World War, there was a sense of ‘let’s put that behind us. Let’s embrace life.’”

“Suddenly there was an incredible flush of early feminism, of gals being out and about, and we always loved the idea that it was about women getting themselves into a little bit of trouble.”

The show is often grounded in research, with historical characters such as Ernest Hemingway — who wrote for the *Toronto Star* in the early ‘20s — popping up, and books such as *Toronto’s Girl Problem* by Carolyn Strange acting as something of a touchstone.

Knowing their show would be timeslot mates with a long-running period mystery show, the writers did put thought into what makes *Frankie Drake* distinctive. The answer lies not just in the era and the female leads, but the difference in the story engine between a cop and private eye show, and the relationship of Frankie (Lauren Lee Smith) with those around her.

“The show was always about women making their way in the world, and the relationship between two female leads was always at the heart,” Ricci says. “We always wanted the main relationship of the show to be a female friendship, not a romance or a rivalry.”

“It was important that we took that first season to separate ourselves from *Murdoch* by not copying a world or a case that had already happened on *Murdoch*,” says Ricci. “But that said, you can’t do the 1920s and not do a movie set.”

While William Murdoch operates within the police institution, writing for *Frankie Drake* means finding other ways to have cases come to her.

“There’s not the same kind of template as there is in *Murdoch*,” says Hay. “He’s a policeman, therefore cases come to him. He can walk out, flash his badge, and talk to anybody. He has a certain amount of authority. Given that she’s a private detective, who brings the case to her? How does she get involved? Why aren’t the cops brought in?”

“The types of cases were more flexible as we weren’t forced to have a murder every week, and we wanted to explore a different cross-section of society than *Murdoch*,” adds Ricci. “The idea was to try and be with the unrepresented, the unseen parts of society, the people who couldn’t go to the police for whatever reason.”

That flexibility in cases also gave them some flexibility in who would populate the series. “It was intentional to have more diversity in the show, which is a challenge for period shows in general,” says Ricci. “We worked hard at the beginning to try and establish the cases as being from those sections of society who didn’t have the confidence or the social standing to go through the police. Toronto in the 1920s was mostly white and Protestant. If you were Catholic, or any other race, you were in the minority, and marginalized. So that’s the side of Toronto Frankie lives in, which is why she hangs out at a Chinese speakeasy in the Ward, in turn run by a Chinese woman (played by Grace Lynn Kung), for example.”

Hay considers the characters ahead of their time in many ways, including the character of Trudy (Chantel Riley), a black woman who is Frankie’s partner. “We play some of the reality of how a black woman would have been treated in the 1920s, which is a) she’d be invisible and b) she would have absolutely no power whatsoever,” says Hay. “Sometimes we allow Trudy to play those to her



The cast of *Frankie Drake Mysteries*.

advantages. She’ll be in a situation where she literally is the wallpaper and this allowed her to do some of her detective work unnoticed.”

But their research also helped them discover an explosion of “women doing fabulous things,” such as Bessie Coleman, the first African-American woman to earn a pilot’s licence, in the early ‘20s. “There were these women who were stepping out of what the gender reality was at the time,” says Hay.

“The thing that’s sometimes surprising is how we would come up with a notion for the story and then dig into research and find out we were absolutely bang-on, or sometimes we would find things way more progressive than we realized.”

The intention was always for the two leads, Frankie and Trudy, to have a network of informants across the city. But when Hay and Ricci saw what two actors in particular brought to their initially small parts, they felt drawn to further develop police morality officer Mary (Rebecca Liddiard) and

morgue attendant Flo (Sharron Matthews) into a core foursome going forward.

With Cal Coons as showrunner on the first season and James Hurst taking on showrunning duties for the upcoming season two, the show will continue to immerse itself in the world of the ‘20s while offering perspective on and escape from the current day.

“If you want to comment on gender equality it can feel like you’re being strident, but you can explore something historically, and then you realize, when you watch it here in 2018, how very little has actually changed,” says Hay. “We’re doing a story right now set in women’s baseball and how appallingly badly women professional baseball players were paid. You can talk about that, and therefore you’re shining a light on pay equity.”

“With the lightness of touch that we try and bring to the episodes, it’s fun to write,” says Hay. “And the sense of optimism of the show is something we all need right now.”