

# LAURIE FINSTAD-KNIZHNIK RULES HER *STRANGE EMPIRE*

By Diane Wild

In the beginning, there was a logline: The men go hunting and they don't come back to their women.

Laurie Finstad-Knizhnik had tucked a western in her bottom drawer when she was busy with *Durham County*, so she was primed when producers Jeff Sagansky and Timothy O. Johnson approached her with an idea for a female-centred western.

Musing on the ripple effects of that seminal event, Finstad-Knizhnik immersed herself in the history and the art of the time to build the story, characters and voice of the show. She'd landed on the time of 1869, just after Canadian confederation and a place, just north of the Montana Territory. But *Strange Empire* is no extended *Heritage Minute*.

"Canada has an extremely interesting history if we can get over the fact of the railway going through and three cheers for John A. Macdonald," said Finstad-Knizhnik, likening the history her show is steeped in to "a sex trafficking story."

Finstad-Knizhnik wasn't interested in the stock Western characters either, except to toy with them. Her central women include a Metis sheriff, a half-black madam and wife, and an Asperger's-like doctor, all women with a semblance of power in a nascent town built around mining and prostitution, under the unstable rule of a tormented madman.

She focused on the marginalized people, the Chinese, native and black populations who were often in conflict with or used by those arriving in the West to make their fortune: "The eccentrics, the crazy people. Remarkable people who threw themselves into the woods."

They speak in stylized, poetic dialogue she credits to her research that included reading journals

and books from that era. "There's a kind of language that lodges itself in your ear and the characters start to speak it."

She mentions inspirations such as John Ralston Saul's *A Fair Country* to help her access "who we are as Canadians from our history, understanding the spirit of the adventurer and non-European power hierarchies." She's also fascinated and inspired by the difference between Elmore Leonard, exploring story through action and dialogue, versus Cormac McCarthy in *Blood Meridian* — "one of my favourite books ever. Read one paragraph of description and it's right there in front of your face. It lifts and puts you in a wholly different place."

Like *Durham County*, *Strange Empire* is highly cinematic, using visual imagery to draw viewers into the strange world. "I'm tight with the DP on *Strange Empire*," she explains. "He and I were the continuity through the 13 episodes. We looked at a lot of early colour photography, glass-plate photography and newspaper photography to get a sense of how we wanted things to look. I like to be able to look at a picture and be able to see the narrative emerging from it."

She gives the answers you might expect about her television influences coming from shows such as *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, and *Homicide*, but she also mentions Bergman and Fellini as well as surrealist art,



Laurie Finstad-Knizhnik in her office.

including Joseph Cornell's shadow boxes. "I feel that's what you're doing when you're writing a script — you're trying to make a picture."

It's not hard to see why Katrina Onstad, the novelist and now a CBC executive in charge of production, calls Finstad-Knizhnik "a walking library."

"I felt like my job was sitting back and letting her work through her own process to shape all of this into the novel it really is," says Onstad. "She's really the novelist. She has such a grand sense of scale and scope for what she's trying to do with this show, and we respect that and wanted to make a safe space for her to create this unique project."

Given the genre, complex serialization, violence and sexuality, *Strange Empire* was not the most obvious fit for the public broadcaster — unless you heard CBC management's declaration at last year's Banff World Media Festival that they were changing course into more premium cable waters.

*Strange Empire* was originally pitched in early 2012 to a CBC that was about to go through a regime change. "We went through a lot of execs," Finstad-Knizhnik says.

She credits its survival to the strength of the concept. "If the story works, then why not make it? If you're thinking things like 'TV landscape' and what network execs like, you're putting yourself on a wrong

path." She was confident, given their knowledge of *Durham County*, that CBC knew what they were signing up for all along.

"It was a perfect marriage," says Helen Asimakis, CBC's senior director, drama, commissioned and scripted programming. "The material was here and in development already and when we made the decision to go a little more cable we didn't have to shut it down or ask it to make a 180-degree turn."

All three are baffled by questions about whether the female focus was ever a point of discussion or concern. "The fact that it's female-focused is what sets it apart from every other show in the western genre, so it's not something we shied away from," says Onstad. Finstad-Knizhnik points to the plethora of female-led shows on television today, as well as the strong male characters in *Strange Empire*, including Aaron Poole's John Slotter and Tahmoh Penikett's Marshal Caleb Mercredi.

She says she wanted to explore gender and desire through these characters. Rebecca, the socially awkward doctor played by Melissa Farman, has a love interest who's revealed slowly — to the audience and to Rebecca — to be a woman dressed as a man.

"It was really normal back then if you wanted to be safe to put on men's clothes and support yourself that way," explains Finstad-Knizhnik. "If you needed