



SHOP KEEPING

By Matthew Hays

The creative forces behind *Kim's Convenience* on the burdens of success and heading into season two

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It’s a strange memory for Ins Choi. It was 2011, and he was mounting the first production of *Kim’s Convenience*, his play about the life of a Korean-Canadian family as they ran a corner store, at the Toronto Fringe Theatre Festival. “There was this line I had put in, where the parents pronounce Kentucky Fried Chicken as *Kenturkey* Fried Chicken,” he recalls.

“I mean, I thought that was hilarious,” he says, laughing hard enough to indicate he still does. “But the audience at the Fringe? They didn’t laugh at all. I realized it was something only my sisters and I found funny.”

This was one of the bumps of writing *Kim’s Convenience*, the show that would become a massive Fringe hit, then go on a cross-Canadian tour (winning over more audiences and critics) and then, last year, debut as a TV series. It’s a story actor, playwright and screenwriter Choi tells as a means of saying something he can’t state emphatically enough: the writing process is never over, and there’s always room for improvement. As well as being part of the success story that is Canada’s Fringe Theatre fest circuit (joining *The Drowsy Chaperone* and writers like Steve Galluccio and Brad Fraser who cut their teeth there), *Kim’s Convenience* has grown into one of those very rare cases: the show is both a crowd pleaser and a critical darling.

Last October, when the series was first hitting the airwaves, *Maclean’s* Adrian Lee identified the reason for success early on, “What makes *Kim’s Convenience* work, though, goes beyond the Korean heritage that the show refuses to leave behind — it’s because of the universality of its spirit.”

“Yes, we’ve been elated,” confirms Choi. “The show has been so successful, right from the beginning at the Fringe.”

Choi had in fact written the original script for *Kim’s Convenience* as a series of vignettes that would centre on a Korean-Canadian family that was experiencing some dysfunction amid their shop-keeping duties, doing so while taking breaks from

performances at the Stratford Theatre Festival. He had such high hopes for the play, he shopped it around to every major theatre company in Toronto only to face rejection. “They didn’t do it in a mean-spirited way,” Choi insists. “But I was surprised.”

Choi was left with a choice: give up or self-produce. He chose the latter, of course, and took his act to the Fringe, where before it was even mounted it won a best new play contest on the strength of the script alone.

“The Fringe was instrumental to the success of the play,” he says. “I learned so much. What is so important is to have that testing ground with an audience. As a writer, it’s all about editing and tinkering — it’s never finished. Like a stand-up routine, they try bits out, then adjust, they figure out what works.”

And oh what a difference a Fringe Festival makes: after the show sold out every performance and got rave reviews, Choi was inundated with offers from the very theatre companies that had once said no. He decided to go with Soulpepper, which mounted the play, where it again met with the success everyone yearns for.

Choi concedes the shift to a TV series was daunting, and knew he would have to collaborate with someone who had some greater experience in the medium. He was put on a “series of blind dates” with series writers and showrunners. When he met Kevin White, he got the strong sense that the seasoned writer and producer — with credits on *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, *Corner Gas* and *Schitt’s Creek* — had a passion for this play, which he had seen in its initial run at the Fringe.

The play’s central narrative thrust comes in the form of real estate salesmen, who want to buy the titular convenience store so they can build a condo development. The other conflict is the unhealed wounds after a nasty falling out between father and son. “In the play, you don’t know if he’s going to keep it or sell,” says White. “But we couldn’t have that as the



The room at work including (from left) Anita Kapila, Nadiya Chettiar, Kevin White, and Amelia Haller.

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central tension in the pilot, because then you’d know right away he wasn’t going to sell. We had to come up with other plotlines for the various episodes.”

As well, the characters of the son and daughter were made seven or eight years younger. “If we rolled back the clock,” says White, “we figured we could build to various stories that had been compressed in 90 minutes of the play.”

But essentially, Choi says, “it had to be about many of the same situations, and the characters had to be the same. We needed to expand the world of the play, but keep what everyone loved about the play intact. That was a big challenge.”

“I loved the play so much,” says White. “I didn’t want to have a hand in fucking up the TV adaptation.”

There was also a significant shift for Choi in terms of process: at the Fringe, the writing was his; in a TV season, you enter a room full of writers, and collaborate. “Writing in a group was a delight as well as a challenge,” he says. “Can I trust you with characters that I’ve loved for many years? And I had to trust entire new characters. You enter the room thinking, ‘My idea is the best idea.’ Then it morphs, and then the third idea is the best idea. You have to keep your ego in check. You have to listen, and you have to hear the best idea.”

INTRO SPREAD PHOTO: CHRISTINA GAPIC

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Back row: Garry Campbell, Anita Kapila, Nadiya Chettiar, Matt Kippen, Amelia Haller and Carly Stone.
Front row: Ins Choi and Kevin White.

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Kim’s Convenience has drawn a lot of press for its groundbreaking status: this is the first show with an entirely Asian cast in Canadian TV history. The show and play it was based on clearly have a lot of fun with stereotypes, something that audiences of all backgrounds have enjoyed. Watching the show, I’m struck by something Oscar-winning filmmaker Denys Arcand told me about writing about the Quebecois very specifically: the paradox, he pointed out, was that if a writer tries to be universal, they almost certainly fail. It’s when they are honest and very specific “that the material will actually be the most universal.”

“That’s a really interesting point, and it’s very true,” says Choi. “It’s sort of counterintuitive. You want other people to relate to it, but ultimately you have to write what’s true to you. I write what I know and what I find to be funny. People who aren’t Korean have loved it and found it funny.”

But in a sense, Choi and White feel that the universalism of *Kim’s Convenience* is obvious, given the family as locus point, both for conflict and humour. “In the play, Ins wrote thoughtfully and compassionately about people and a family that transcended where they were from or where I was

from as an audience member,” says White. “And at the end of the day, as the drag queen character in the pilot says, family is family. When I saw the play, in fact, it seemed more familiar to me than probably any play I’d seen.”

“At the core, it’s about a family that’s struggling to be together and to survive,” says Choi. “People can relate. It’s always hard. The fact that so many Canadians are immigrants probably doesn’t hurt.”

People are so eager to see diversity, and Choi says he understands that, but he has his own reservations about his new status as a champion of the cause. “I’ve been desiring stories like this to be told, in a good way, like *Moonlight* or *Fences*, with creators of colour. I’m aware of how *Kim’s Convenience* is landing. But I don’t think about it too much. Sometimes it comes into the conversation. I will get invited to some function to be a guest speaker and it’s totally about diversity. I’m basically being asked to be the Diversity Guy. I politely decline.

“I’m a writer, and I’m kind of an actor. But there’s that desire to pigeonhole. My next play is about being a bad parent, not about being Korean. Being Korean is a part of me. But I’m a son, I’m an uncle, I’m a bike rider. There are lots of things to write about. But I know there’s money in writing about being Korean because it’s sold.

“Obviously, I am so happy and grateful for the success of *Kim’s Convenience*. The play and now the show, and season two is going very well. If I’m only known for it, I’m grateful. But if I’m only known as the Korean-Canadian guy, that kind of bugs me. I’m trying to do something else, but I’m also realistic that there may be no demand for that. Failure is great — it feels bad, but you learn so much from it. Success feels good, but there are negative things that come with it, like being pigeonholed.

“I’m also well aware that if I can create more opportunities for actors and writers of colour and women, then that’s obviously a good thing. I have influence with *Kim’s Convenience*, which I appreciate.”

Choi adds that some of his most revelatory moments came during failure. “I did a show called *Subway Stations of the Cross* at Fringes across Canada a couple of years ago. It was inspired by a homeless person. Some people liked the show, others didn’t, while most didn’t know what to make of it. I felt crappy in the moment. But I knew I got something from it. It wasn’t a huge success like *Kim’s Convenience*. I thought, ‘I’m still human, I don’t have the Midas touch. I have to work like anyone else.’ That was important to realize.

“It’s important to stay grounded.” ■

Steve Galluccio dishes on writing about his heritage

Fugeddabout holding back

Steve Galluccio has one word of advice for writers who are worried about stepping over the line when musing about their ethnic heritage: fugeddaboutit.

“I’ve never held back or thought about it,” he says. “It’s about my experience.”

And Galluccio is experienced in the art of writing about being Italian. His hit play, *Mambo Italiano*, was eventually transformed into a hit 2003 movie. He also wrote the 2004-05 TV series, *Ciao Bella*, which screened in both English and French versions on CBC. In 2013, he wrote *The Saint Leonard Chronicles*, all about the intricacies of being Italian in Montreal.

“It’s interesting, because it’s the critics who take issue with the characters I write — especially non-Italian critics. Italians, on the other hand, will come up after a show and say, ‘This is exactly who we are!’

“The non-Italian critics will say I’m being silly, stereotypical, and will go on and on about how that’s not really how Italians behave or what they say. They will actually tell me I’m mistaken and that this is not my culture.

“I attribute it to a certain political correctness. I know that I’m not the voice of the Italian community, nor have I ever pretended to be, but I am writing what I know.

“Rule number one: I never censor myself. I just always find it amusing that non-Italians say it’s an unreal stereotype, while Italian Italians — the real thing — say it’s like being in their living rooms.” ■