

# DOING GOD'S WORK

By Diane Wild

A certain dogged faith is required to work for nearly a decade on an idea for a television show, optioning and re-optioning the source material, despite years of rejection. Michael Amo's vision for *Pure*, the six-part CBC series that premiered in January 2017, stems in part from a non-fiction magazine article about the Mennonite mob in Canada and Mexico called "The Wages of Sin," by Andrew Mitrovica and Susan Bourette. Amo laughs when asked about development funds in those early days. This was a passion project.

"Whenever I feel sorry for myself as a writer, I always console myself with the fact that we do have the power to write whatever we want," Amo said. "No one's stopping us."

He wanted to write this particular story so on his own time and own dime he used those omniscient powers to create a pitch document to go along with the article he'd optioned ... and got no traction. Then he wrote the *Pure* pilot and shopped that around to networks in Canada and the United States ... "again, crickets." He knew others had tried and failed with a similar concept — he was once scolded with "you can't imagine how many times we've been pitched this story!" — but he had faith in the concept, so he kept writing, kept re-optioning that article, kept re-pitching to networks after executive turnover.

"It was such a unique story, I just loved it. I loved the characters, I loved the world, and I loved particularly the fact that I was mixing drama with very black comedy," is his explanation for persevering. "That's not something we do a lot of in Canada, though I think we're wired that way."

He was a true believer in a land of skeptics at first. "I felt if I didn't push it forward, nobody would. And as I moved it forward, other people came on board who were just as enthusiastic as me, so that bolstered me as well. There were times when the project seemed well and truly dead and I had to take the paddles to it and start it up again. But if you talk to other writers, like the people who did *Orphan Black*, I don't think that story is too dissimilar. Anything that is off the beaten path, there is going to be more resistance to it."

He credits *True Detective* and *Fargo* with helping networks become converts to limited series and noir-ish series, meaning he finally got a yes. He developed four of six *Pure* scripts with a Canadian broadcaster before they decided the series wasn't for them after all, "so we were back on the street." When he pitched again to CBC he was astonished and grateful they picked it up this time.

CBC saw the series as a distinctive and distinctively Canadian story. "We loved how Michael had created a rich, character-driven crime thriller set in a community we don't see depicted on television every day," said Tara Ellis, executive director of scripted content. "The story tackles good versus evil in a community that, relative to mainstream society, feels pure and untouched by the ills of contemporary society."

Given the places to pitch a show in Canada are dwindling and network brands very mainstream, CBC's recent focus on more cable-like dramas was the miracle Amo needed. "*Pure*, with its violence and black humour — I'm not surprised it didn't find a home at the other networks," he said. "We had four out of six already written so in some ways it might have been easier to pull the trigger on something that was unproven, but kudos to them, and they were a joy to work with."

Amo pitched *Pure* as a "spiritual thriller." The plot revolves around Noah Funk, a family man and newly minted pastor for an Old Colony Mennonite community forced to participate in the drug trade but determined to work from within to destroy it, joining forces with a cop who embodies much of the hedonism the Mennonites reject from *auslanders* (outsiders). "I always saw the engine of the whole series as Noah's spiritual journey. He's trying to get closer to God at the same time as he rids his community of these evil incidences."

Mennonites, who eschew many of the trappings of modern society, are not a likely audience for the series, but Amo is aiming for a broader theme amid the specificity of his setting. "We all have a strong



Gord Rand as Abel Funk and Ryan Robbins as Noah Funk head to town in the television series, *Pure*.

spiritual impulse within us, and all the characters are looking for a sense of redemption and purpose in their lives. I think that's the universal impulse behind the story that anybody, regardless of who they are, can relate to."

While the "Menno mob" is real, *Pure* offers a fictional representation that blends elements of customs and clothing from various conservative Mennonite communities. "I felt it would have been unfair to point a finger at a particular community and say these are the drug dealers," he explained. "Mennonite communities would say it's not factual and I would agree. It's not intended to be factual. For me it was more interesting to get at the spiritual journey of this one individual because that's what interested me most."

Amo used books and documents to research the tight-knit religious community that is determinedly not outward-facing, and he hired a consultant who had lived in one of the more conservative communities to review scripts and assist with the Low German language that peppers the dialogue.

He had a more personal advantage as well: his grandparents were Mennonites who arrived in Canada after the Russian revolution. Though they raised their children outside of the community, his

grandfather had written a memoir of his life, and an interest in the culture was handed down to Amo through his mother. The magazine article about the drug trade became his "narrative Trojan horse" into a contemporary exploration of the culture that he'd wanted to do for years, and he noted the crime drama element makes for a compelling television story engine.

Set in Ontario, Texas and Mexico, *Pure* was shot on a no-U.S.-presale-sized budget in Nova Scotia, which bears little resemblance to at least two of those three settings — a production challenge overcome with visual effects but also with the discovery of an abandoned, decrepit factory that became the Mexican drug compound and a gypsum mine that could fill in for a quarry in Texas. Besides, as he laughed: "There's green areas of Mexico, I swear." Amo credits production designer Jennifer Stewart with pulling off the visual style on a minimal budget, including the bucolic Ontario village that contrasts with the diabolical workings within it.

Amo knows that audiences don't grade on a curve so he and the rest of the creative team worked hard to ensure the show punched above its budgetary weight. "You're up against some very incredible and well-financed shows, and audiences don't care



“It was such a unique story, I just loved it. I loved the characters, I loved the world, and I loved particularly the fact that I was mixing drama with very black comedy”

how much a show cost to make, they just care if it's entertaining or not. It was a challenge to make a show that would cut through the noise of all the other shows.” *Pure* has been blessed, then: the premiere cracked the Numeris top 30 for that week, with over a million viewers.

After working for so many years on the project, on his own time and with his own money, Amo wanted to preserve his creative vision as much as possible once the series was picked up. Working with production partner David MacLeod helped allow creative decisions to be made by a small group of people. “As a consequence there's a fairly undiluted vision to the show, and either you like it or you don't,” said Amo. “But for me as a creator, writer and showrunner, it's afforded me the kinds of freedoms I enjoy.”

He worked with one director, Ken Girotti, throughout the series, a partnership that also allowed for more streamlined creative decision-making. “Good things can happen when you have good people who know what they're doing empowered to do their jobs.”

Perhaps most importantly in service of the singular vision, Amo wrote all six episodes and was on set every day to take advantage of opportunities and respond to challenges. He did have invaluable assistance from Tassie Cameron as story consultant and, when production was imminent, Andrew Wreggitt. Wreggitt, who served as creative consultant, is a screenwriter friend whose family came from the same Russian Mennonite diaspora as Amo's, and who was recruited to help “wrestle the scripts down to a suitable size and help focus the characters' journeys.”

*Pure* was initially conceived as a cable show, meaning Amo had planned for closer to 55 minutes per episode rather than the 42 he had to work with on CBC. Plus he'd planned for eight episodes rather than

six. With the sheer compression of taking the scope of a cable show and squeezing it into a network timeslot, Amo feels an unintended consequence was to make the show's plotting more taut, though he mourns the “personal moments we had to walk past, and quieter moments we had to leave behind.”

His original intention was to create a Mennonite pace and Mennonite sensibility through quiet scenes that stood in stark contrast to the high adrenaline scenes, and most viewers would likely think he succeeded. “I think those were the moments that got squeezed a bit, but for people used to conventional TV I don't think they're going to miss it. It just feels kind of normal.”

CBC has marketed the show as a limited run series, though Amo has plans for three seasons if given the chance. “If it is one and done, so be it, and the ending provides a sense of closure to the journeys of the characters, but I would describe it as a door for further seasons too.”

After the years of struggle and rejection, the compromises made for time and budget, Amo asks the question: “Is it the show I had in mind? It changed, it evolved, for a whole bunch of different reasons. Some in positive ways, some in ways that were frustrating because we couldn't do this or that, but I don't think an audience watching the show is going to notice all the things that drive me crazy.” And he counts his blessings in many ways — for instance the cast that includes Ryan Robbins, Alex Paxton-Beesley, Peter Outerbridge, A.J. Buckley and Rosie Perez. “I would go on set and forget I was the person who wrote it, I'd get so drawn into it. Sometimes the stars align and you get lucky.”

“Funny thing is I don't think getting a ‘commercial idea’ into production would be any easier,” he says. “So if you're going to pitch something, it might as well be something you love.” ■

## Canadian Noir

### The next big thing?

Dark, and darkly funny, crime dramas. Morally conflicted protagonists, malevolent antagonists. Stark worlds and world-views. Film noir-like shows are currently in vogue, and Scandinavian noir in particular has become a brand with worldwide appeal. With CBC's *Pure* and CTV's *Cardinal* both launching this year to good reviews and ratings, is it possible Canadian noir could become a trend?

Michael Amo's influences include the Coen brothers and Scandinavian crime dramas, and Tara Ellis, CBC's executive director of scripted content, sees those influences onscreen. “*Pure* shares elements with Scandi-noir, including a journey for our characters that is rife with moral dilemma and jeopardy,” she said. “Aesthetically, one can also compare the beautifully stark world that director Ken Girotti created for the series, which plays the simplicity of the Mennonite community's rural setting off of the outsider and cop world, with shows in the Scandinavian noir genre.”

Ellis is non-committal on CBC actively seeking similar shows, but the door is open. “Canadian audiences will continue to be enthralled and intrigued by a good mystery story, and it is our responsibility as commissioners to find new ways to tell those stories, including but not limited to the noir genre.”

“These elements make for satisfying TV [to watch and to write] because they allow for genuine unpredictability,” says *Cardinal* showrunner Aubrey Nealon. “In a noir, it's never certain the good guys are going to prevail — and if they do, it usually comes at a tremendous cost.”

“In film noir, you never know who you can trust. Even the heroes have secrets and sins and ambiguous motives. In *Cardinal*, we see this in our two leads, Cardinal and Delorme — lying to each other from the moment they meet, suspicious of each other even as they grow to admire one another.”

“The term noir seems to have expanded since the forties and fifties films it used to describe,” says Giles Blunt, the author whose book *Forty Words for Sorrow* is the basis for *Cardinal*. “I mean, you had the troubled or haunted protagonist, and also a certain brutality and cynicism of tone whether in the protagonist or the narrator. Lately noir is used mostly to distinguish dark, gritty stories from the more upbeat, even cozy, whodunits — which leaves a lot of room.”

“*Cardinal* is certainly haunted — at least in the first outing — and the murders he has to solve are often brutal. But he himself is not brutal, nor are the cops he usually works with. And he isn't cynical. In fact, his own inner struggle revolves around the high ideals he maintains and his failure, in the past, to live up to them,” Blunt says about the character he created in a series of novels. “I certainly think his guilt and his being, in a psychological sense, on the run, puts it in the noir ballpark. (Director) Daniel Grou and (star) Billy Campbell, in particular, are doing great work to put that across — all that frozen terrain, and *Cardinal*'s sense of being trapped start to form a single geography. You only have to see a few frames of those exteriors or a closeup of Billy's face to know we're deep in noir territory.”

Showrunner Nealon points to the show's setting as well. “Film noir also tends to have menacing settings — usually dark cities with danger lurking around every corner. In the case of *Cardinal*, that menace takes the form of the bitter frozen north. It's a landscape that can kill you in a heartbeat, and that threat hangs over the characters at all times.”

Given *Cardinal*'s snowy backdrop and *Pure*'s stark sunniness, the term film noir might be more apropos if the term weren't already co-opted to mean feel-good fantasies. But though this emerging Canadian noir might have better lighting, darkness shows up in plot and character. It's a tone audiences are more used to seeing on cable, but *Pure* and *Cardinal* both air on broadcast networks.

Despite that, Amo has found that the audience for *Pure* is also CBC's core audience. “It's not alienating them and I think there's an appetite. Canadian viewers are insanely sophisticated, so are they surprised it's on CBC? Yes. But now that it's on there, they're already watching all these great cable shows so why can't they watch it on CBC too?”

“Luckily for me, TV viewers seem to love this sort of show right now,” said Blunt. “Novelists have been turning out noir for a long time — it's just that now, with limited series being all the rage, such shows are in demand. Tastes go in phases — one year it's car chases and cool fashions, the next it's cute grannies and country houses. Right now it's cops with psychological issues doing the best they can in a dark world.” ■