

# THE BENCHMARKS OF OUR SUCCESS

By Diane Wild

What would you rather have for your TV show: great ratings, great Twitter buzz, or a great review in the mainstream media?

Trick question. If it were me, I'd want all three. Plus a pony.

But realistically, what means the most when measuring success in the Canadian television industry?

Wait, that was another trick question. First we have to know what our definition of success is: creative vision, degree of fan devotion, sheer numbers of viewers, renewal, all of the above?

To help untangle these tricky questions, we talked to three writers (Graeme Manson of *Orphan Black*, Emily Andras of *Lost Girl*, and Tassie Cameron of *Rookie Blue*), three professional critics (John Doyle of *The Globe and Mail* and freelancers Bill Brioux and Amber Dowling), and three network executives (Phil King of Bell, Christine Shipton of Shaw and Richard Kane of CBC).

## What Is This Success You Speak Of?

"It's hard as a writer not to go down the path of saying 'Was my vision realized? Did we put on screen what we set out to do?'" says Emily Andras. "But even in this day and age if you create something and no one sees it, you haven't succeeded. The cold hard truth comes down to: are people watching it and are people enjoying it?"

Graeme Manson defines success as "a green light on season three with a potentially growing fanbase, coupled with a returning, dedicated writing and production team."

"I think the two most obvious ways to measure a show's success are ratings and critical acclaim," Tassie Cameron comments. "Ideally, you have both, but in many cases, you're relying on one or the other to gauge whether your show is hitting the mark. Numbers aren't an exact science, as we all know, but

they're a pretty crucial part in determining whether your show is reaching its audience, and whether you're going to get another season."

Foreign sales are another measure of success on the business side, because they add to a show's financial viability.

But Amber Dowling sees value in independence, too. "Co-productions especially might make sense financially, but creatively they can be a nightmare because there are so many network opinions to consider and balance. I consider something like *Saving Hope* or *The Listener* a success because despite being cancelled in the U.S., they continued here."

The sense that a show sings creatively, a cadre of passionate fans, critical acclaim — they're all great individually, but getting another season is a common thread. Another season means at least some of those elements and maybe more came together in a complex and capricious formula to justify another greenlight.

Some renewal decisions even seem simple. *Saving Hope* got over a million-and-a-half viewers; it got a new season. *Cracked* got a third of that and it didn't. But don't try to do the math, there's no magic number networks look for, and different networks have different ratings expectations and financial considerations.

"There're so many factors that go into ratings. If you look at the competition, if there's a live event we're up against. You want to look at the repeat factor. You have to look at how much of our marketing budget was apportioned to the show," says Shaw's Christine Shipton. "You take all of that into account so it's never one specific number."

*Murdoch Mysteries* was famously cancelled by City despite good ratings while *The Listener* took its bow near the top of its ratings game. *Seed* and



Clockwise from top left: Amber Dowling, Christine Shipton, Graeme Manson, Phil King, Emily Andras

*Package Deal* were renewed despite sagging between higher-rated shows.

So there's no magic number, but there's often a magic story. Some higher-rated shows likely become too expensive as they age; some don't fit the network brand anymore. Some lower-rated shows might get another chance because they were up against stiff competition, aren't as expensive as others, lend the network some critical cachet, or the executives aren't confident that what they have in development is ready to do better.

*Flashpoint* seemed to be one of the rare shows where the creators genuinely wanted to move on and were allowed to end the show on their terms.

## It's A Numbers Game

"If nobody watches you're not a success even if you think it's the best show ever," says Bell's Phil King, who says ratings are paramount, including PVR and VOD numbers. He points out he's more interested in trends than averages. If a show's ratings are growing, it may be a better bet for renewal as opposed to one that would end up starting the next season with a diminishing audience base.

"And then there's financial success — what does it cost to produce versus what does the advertising revenue bring in. You can get a show that gets massive ratings but it costs too much to produce."