

OPTIMISM RULES!

BY MATTHEW HAYS

The landscape for writers has always been treacherous, and everyone knows if you want to hear the truth, the best thing to do is to find a writer and ask them how things are going. But there are cases for optimism, and *Canadian Screenwriter* felt that anniversary celebrations presented a good moment to survey a few of the most successful scribes in the business to let us in on their best moments and related points of advice.



Clockwise from above: Tassie Cameron; Stephanie Morgenstern and Mark Ellis; Simon Barry

Start Your Own Production Company

Stephanie Morgenstern and Mark Ellis, the co-showrunners and co-executive producers of the CBC series *X Company* (which heads into its third season this fall), say one of the best things they ever did was form their own production company. There was one main reason the writing-producing duo felt this was in order: “We just wanted to make sure that our creativity was protected through the development phase,” says Ellis. “It helped to have the blessing of the CBC, which meant we could file our applications through the CMF.”

Some of doing their own producing work meant simply that “there was more money for hiring writers and filling a room,” says Morgenstern. “Some of the strongest shows have producers who are also writers.”

Both are quick to add that as they grew close to a green light, they approached another production house with a strong record, Temple Street (they also produce *Orphan Black*). And they realize that part of being able to set up their own shop for developing was because of their landmark hit *Flashpoint*, the cop episodic that sold on both sides of the border. No matter your level of experience, Ellis says, “you should still try to set up your own production company. It’s something everyone should try.”

Remember: You’re a Content Creator

Simon Barry, who created *Continuum*, a show he wrote, produced, and directed for, says it’s important for writers to keep a certain fact in mind: without writers, shows simply wouldn’t exist. “Something that was very important for me was to realize that everything I write is content,” says Barry, who’s now writing for the series *Van Helsing*. “Portraying yourself as a content creator, and thinking of yourself that way, is vital. You’re providing something the marketplace is hungry for. There’s actually a ton of demand, given how much TV is being created. Take your ideas directly to that marketplace. I would urge people to be far more independent, and to figure out what your brand is early on. What’s your specialty? Horror? Comedy? The type of show and genre you are enthusiastic about will help you to find your work.”

No concerns about being pigeonholed? “It’s only pigeonholing if you’re doing stuff you don’t want to do. Most writers are happy to find that sweet spot where you’re writing what you love. Frankly, if you’re worried about being pigeonholed, that means you’ve done something right. You can always diversify once you’ve found that success. You can reinvent yourself — writers do it all the time.”

Stop Thinking About Money and Write the Script of Your Dreams

Tassie Cameron (*Rookie Blue*) says she knows what people will say about this bit of advice: “I realize I was able to do this after the luxury of coming off of six seasons of a show,” she concedes. But, insists the writer now showrunning for *Mary Kills People* (slated for broadcast in 2017), it remains great, sage advice: “Write a spec script, something completely new, something you know you may never be able to sell, but something you really love and really believe in.”

And yes, this recommendation is born of personal experience. “In the past year, since *Rookie Blue* ended, it was a pivotal time for me. It would have been easy in a way for me to take another writing job right away, but instead I forced myself to take some time to stare out the window. And then, I just worked to have faith in myself. What if I just wrote something that I really loved, and didn’t consider it particularly saleable? I broke my own rules. I rebranded myself in a way as a different kind of writer. I really strove to write from the heart.

“I came up with a spec script, titled *Ten*

Days in the Valley. And then I ended up pitching it around L.A. It’s about a showrunner of a cop show whose daughter goes missing. It’s set within the industry — a major no-no — but I wasn’t concerned about breaking the rules. It’s a world I know really well, and an interesting one. Again, I didn’t worry about selling it, I wanted to take as many chances as I felt I wanted to, and write something really personal. And then, when it was done, I did find someone who was interested: Skydance Media. So it’s in development now.

“I can’t really even put into words what a great sense of freedom there was in writing with no network, no notes, no partner, no cast in mind. Sometimes taking all expectations off of something is very important. To not even consider getting paid for something is in a strange way really liberating. I realize I had six seasons of *Rookie Blue* behind me, but writing the spec script wasn’t actually that time consuming: it took me a month to write it. Sit down and write from your gut. Don’t be afraid to not get paid to write something you love.”