



Shebli Zarghami

He gets the last laugh

By Greg David

Shebli Zarghami's love of comedy comes naturally, but writing it for television didn't. Growing up in Montreal, he was exposed to Woody Allen and Charlie Chaplin films by his parents; as a young adult he devoured stand-up comedy. But writing for laughs wasn't even considered. Zarghami regarded it as "a magical box that was there for watching and enjoying."

It wasn't until Zarghami, working as a copy editor at McGill University, considered screenwriting as a career after hearing from some friends who were doing it. After writing and producing the webseries *Agnes & Harold* in 2011, Zarghami applied to the Canadian Film Centre's Bell Media Prime Time TV Program. He had just one week to go before completing the course when he was plucked from the CFC to work on CBC's long-running comedy, *Mr. D*.

You wrote and produced the webseries *Agnes & Harold* in 2011. It really was ahead of its time predating the current popularity of webseries.

It was right at a time when it felt more accessible to get things like that made. At the time, the web was seen as a starting point and

TV was the place you wanted to get to. Now, there is a lot of web stuff where that might be the best way to actually get things seen. I love following the evolution of mediums and the platforms, and trying to figure out what's next.

How did the CFC Prime Time TV Program benefit you as a writer?

Comedy was always something I felt comfortable with and knowledgeable in, but structure was a huge thing I learned about at the CFC. I had done *Agnes & Harold*, but doing the CFC's short film meant you were really like the showrunner of this small project. That was very helpful leading into *Mr. D*. I would have had a much more difficult on-set experience on *Mr. D* without that experience. It was really important to me to get that validation of having people read my writing, get feedback, and get accepted into a program that I had gone into knowing that it was very difficult to get into.

What scripts did you write when you applied to the CFC?

I did two. At the time they wanted one original and one spec. The spec script was for *Modern Family*, which I think everybody did back

when it started. The original was called *Retail* and I wrote about my experience working in a retail store when I finished university. It was sort of cathartic for me. It was a job that I was sort of embarrassed about and at the time I felt down about myself. I had gone into university thinking I would have a job when I got out. I was disappointed in the fact that I was working in retail, which was the job I could have gotten before I went into university. To turn that down period in my life into the show that got me into the CFC was a very cathartic thing.

Working on *Mr. D* reunited you with Jessie Gabe, who was a producer with you on *Agnes & Harold*. She is the head writer and executive producer on *Mr. D*. You've been with the show the last four seasons; what has this experience been like?

It's a really supportive place. When I first started, I was so excited to be doing it as a career. It was my goal to make it, as a living, in comedy and that was officially it when the paycheques started coming in. It was also my objective not to become jaded over time.

Season 7 of *Mr. D* is currently airing on CBC. ■