



## BARONESS VON SKETCH SHOW REIGNS IN SEASON TWO

**These funny ladies are serious about getting laughs.**

By Greg David

*Baroness von Sketch Show* stands out from the rest of the CBC's primetime schedule in a couple of ways, not the least of which because of the network notes they've gotten during production on Season two. Case in point? A scene where a mother is describing the joys of menstruation to her young daughter — poking fun at commercials celebrating the event with blue liquid poured on a sanitary napkin, horseback riding and white sun dresses — until it happens.

"They've seen the script, but what was interesting was having the shade of blood discussion," says executive producer Meredith MacNeill. "A lot of times with blood on the CBC, it all depends on the shade. We've also had a poop discussion."

"There's a lot of interesting email," fellow executive producer Jennifer Whalen says. "Re: Poop. Re: Hairy mole."

"Generally, that's not the content of our show," executive producer and showrunner Carolyn Taylor counters. What *is* the content of *Baroness von Sketch Show*? Slices of life everyone can



From left: Aurora Browne; Carolyn Taylor; Jennifer Whalen; Meredith MacNeill

relate to, twisted and made totally absurd. Season one landed with a splash in June 2015, skewering — among other things — our dependence on social media when a friend request made by a stranger got way out of hand, how pumped-up job resumés affected a Mars landing and the struggles of using a wonky debit card reader. All three sketches — and the others on *Baroness von Sketch Show* — go off in wild directions but are firmly grounded in something viewers can relate to.

“One of the things we like to say is, ‘isn’t it funny that?’ instead of, ‘wouldn’t it be funny if?’ Taylor explains. “How is this character relatable, even if you’re going to Mars? It’s not about whether someone has been to Mars, but have you lied on your resumé before? Have your ambitions led you to compromise the safety of a project?”

Taylor, MacNeill, Whalen and Aurora Browne are all veterans of Canadian comedy, with years of writing and performing experience, and took creating their own show seriously. Taylor conceived

of the idea and pitched it to Frantic Films over two years ago. She knew what *Baroness von Sketch Show* was, and wasn’t.

“You’re not going to see us doing impersonations,” Taylor says. “It’s also not the politics of the day. We’re small ‘p’ politics. We won’t do movie parodies. We’re not doing a commercial parody. We might skewer the world in which those forms exist, but we’re not a sketch show that does that.” After bringing MacNeill, Browne and Whalen on board, the quartet made a sizzle reel and shopped it around, not only to give network executives a feel for what *Baroness von Sketch Show* was about, but the writers’ room too.

“It’s harder, sometimes, to know what the tone is on the page,” Whalen says. “Some people think it’s about this one thing and somebody else can see the full vision. It was about hiring writers who really got the tone of the show and were in the batting zone and letting them do their thing.” Writing and story editing on season two of *Baroness* was done by

a variety of women from the sketch, standup and writing world, including award-winning author and poet Zoe Whittall (*The Best Kind of People*), author Monica Heisey (*I Can’t Believe It’s Not Better: A Woman’s Guide to Coping with Life*), Jennifer Goodhue (*This Hour Has 22 Minutes*), standups Mae Martin, Elvira Kurt and Dawn Whitwell, Ann Pornel and Alex Tindal (*The Sketchersons*), playwright Donna-Michelle St. Bernard, Ify Chiwetelu, artist and writer Mariko Tamaki, Evany Rosen and Nelu Handa. As Whalen explains, successful comedy is written using a multitude of voices providing copious viewpoints and providing inspiration for others. One team member’s strength may be writing jokes while another excels at putting together a scene; team them up and you’ve got a sketch.

Taylor serves as showrunner and head writer, listening to pitches on Monday mornings and deciding which make for potential sketches and setting aside those that don’t. The former senior writer for CBC’s *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* and YTV’s

*That’s So Weird*, and Second City member, keeps everyone on track to ensure the series’ voice is kept intact.

“We intensely worked out what the tone was, what the look was and the feel was,” MacNeill, who was once part of the Royal Shakespeare Company, says. “We knew it so well that when we hit the writing room and were tossing ideas around they were staying within that framework.”

That framework began on Monday mornings, when everyone got together to share weekend experiences. An argument with a partner or neighbour or — in the case of MacNeill, stepping on a nail and tearing her foot open — could lead to a sketch. Just the inkling of an idea or incident sparked something because the rest of the room riffed on that nugget and mined it for laughs.

“It’s important to state that it is a very supportive thing,” Whalen says. “I came in one day and said, ‘Guys, I have this really funny riff on a eulogy. I don’t have a beginning, a middle or an end.’

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I felt comfortable enough to come in and say that. It’s a really safe place.”

By the end of Monday, sketches were assigned to individual writers, partnerships or groups. All day Tuesday and the following Wednesday mornings were devoted to writing and casting who would play what character. The first table read came on Wednesday afternoons when strong sketches were kept and weaker ones cut. But, no sketch was ever truly dead. Though, as Taylor says, nixed sketches on other television shows could never be brought back, passionate *Baroness* writers could keep their idea alive, perhaps as an ending to another scene or storing it to pitch in subsequent seasons. (“The week when you have nothing new to pitch, you go back in your file and say, ‘Please God, let there be something funny in here,’” Whalen says.) They’ll also, on the fly, jump in to help someone else.

Speaking to the cast, you can’t help but come to the following conclusion: writing sketch comedy for television is *difficult*. They agree.

“I can honestly say sketch is a science,” MacNeill admits. “You gotta break it down.”

“I feel like it doesn’t get the respect it deserves because with a television drama you’ve got an hour to tell a story, create the world, the characters and set up their motivations,” Whalen says. “In sketch, you’ve got two minutes to set up the world, have believable relationships, and ground it with something people know. It’s really hard to do.”

“And you know *immediately* if you’re failing,” Browne says with a laugh.

Thursday mornings are used for rewrites, with a second table read in the afternoon; it’s not uncommon for a sketch to go through up to nine revisions. Friday morning brings final revisions on the latest sketches and new blackouts (a quick, one-scene sketch to break up two settings or head into commercial). On Friday afternoons, Taylor, MacNeill, Whalen and Browne read through all of the sketches and put them in the following piles: Good to Go, Need Revision then Good to Go, Revise and Reread, and Limbo. Limbo is the step before dead, when the carcass can be picked over for a humorous

line, character or premise. By end of day Friday, final notes are given to the writers.

Over 500 sketches were written for season two. After consulting with production, that number was trimmed to around 131. MacNeill says approximately 118 will be kept to build the upcoming season’s seven episodes. Everyone was very aware of keeping sketches lean and mean — hence the number of rewrites — catching the viewer with a quick laugh before moving on. Conversely, some sketches were allowed to breathe and expand the world with more fleshed-out characters. But even then, it had to meet exacting demands.

“One of the rules for a longer sketch is to make sure the logic is there and the skeleton is there,” Taylor says. “Can I follow the logic? Does the character’s motivation make sense throughout? It can change, but is there logic to the scene? If the logic is sound, then we can improvise or embellish on the day when we’re shooting.”

Knowing where *Baroness von Sketch Show* was filmed was as important as knowing *what* the show’s voice was. The quartet always knew on-location shoots were part of the series’ DNA.

“I was on a sketch show in the U.K. that was 100 per cent location and we felt that that would really add to the show and make it relatable to be on location,” MacNeill says. That meant guerrilla-style filming for season one across the Greater Toronto Area in such locations as Woodbine Racetrack, Queen St. West, Trinity Bellwoods Park, Dundas St., and Scarborough. They also had to make changes on the fly: a wedding chapel was converted into a massage parlour for one skit.

As for season two locations, a *Mad Max*-inspired sketch was filmed on a Toronto beach with the cast decked out as leather and studded monstrosities, a space-themed bit sees the troupe using a green screen, and a home in Roncesvalles Village was the site of the aforementioned period sketch.

“I’m less naked than I was last season,” MacNeill reveals.

“Oh, and we got to go to Body Blitz Spa,” Taylor says with a twinkle in her eye. ■