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Andras and The Making of *Wynonna* and The *Revenants* Relevant

It took more than a Band-Aid solution

By Katherine Brodsky

Who would have thought that an American cult ‘90s comic about a gun-slinging, demon-slaying heroine and her posse of dysfunctional allies would end up a Canadian hit? But that’s exactly what happened.

Beau Smith’s comic was out of print for a long time before it landed in showrunner Emily Andras’ lap. IDW Publishing had been shopping the series for some time — at one point, Jessica Simpson was attached. At another, it was resting at FOX.

Andras spent four seasons on another progressive feminist LGBTQ show, *Lost Girl*, and was on IDW’s radar, so they brought the project to her. “When I picked up the comic — I honestly got all tingly,” recalls Andras.

The comic was a bit different then though — a reflection of its time. “I mean the Wynonna Earp character is basically wearing like Band-Aids over her boobs while she fights mummies — as you do,” explains Andras. “So I was really honest when I got the comic. I was like, ‘I love the spirit of this but it would have to be much more grounded to become a TV series.’”

What remained consistent between the comic and the show was the irreverent tone and spirit, and, of course, Wynonna herself.

“I really like the idea of Wynonna being forced to be a hero, even though she is obviously the most effed-up character of all time. She’s the last person who should be a hero at all.”

And so, a supernatural Western-like TV series was born. The comic itself got a new lease on life too — re-launching with characters that were specifically invented for the show, as a bit of a companion piece, existing in a parallel universe.

It did well, winning fans who eagerly tuned into Syfy in the U.S. and CHCH-DT in Canada. Now it’s back for season two, continuing on Syfy and moving to Space channel in Canada. It is now also on Netflix. The most passionate of fans call themselves “Earpers.”

Wynonna Earp even managed to sneak into Variety’s top 20 shows of 2017 alongside the likes of *Stranger Things* and *The Crown*.

“We really didn’t know. It just is such a crazy show, I can tell you without any false modesty, I was like, I don’t know, we’re having a great time running around the woods of Alberta. But is anyone gonna watch this? It’s just gone nuts.”

Brendon Yorke, supervising producer and one of the writers on the series, knows firsthand how hard the directors and crew worked to make what he refers to as “this little underdog show,” punch above its weight class. “I think that sense of being an underdog somehow translates to the audience.”

“Well I mean the joke about Wynonna Earp that I think is so funny is that it’s like making a Canadian show called *Georgina Washington*,” quips Andras,

“But I would say the attitude of Wynonna Earp really reflects Canadian values and things that are super progressive.”

Super progressive.

That means not shying away from feminist and LGBTQ components. “We do a lot of themes about being an underdog and trying to succeed and trying to define your identity and whatnot, so I feel like the tone of it is very Canadian.”

There’s a ravenous hunger for strong female characters and female-driven genre. “I just think that women consider themselves natural outsiders in society and natural fighters insofar as they’re always fighting a little harder for respect and representation and to be taken seriously.”

“We just don’t have the budget to do a *Game of Thrones* battle sequence necessarily, so what we have is we really have to deliver three-dimensional characters that people fall in love with. So if I just have a scene of two of my characters sitting on a couch talking, hopefully, it’s almost as compelling as a big *Walking Dead* slaughter-fest.”

Something that many people don’t realize, says Andras, is that Canadian sci-fi/fantasy genre is “killing it” internationally, whether it’s a show like *Wynonna Earp*, *Lost Girl*, *Bitten*, *Continuum*, *Orphan Black*, or *Killjoys*. “It really feels like Canadian writers have found their niche in this area and internationally the stuff is selling really, really well. There’s a huge audience for it, so it’s something that Canada does really well [and] it’s one of the big success stories of Canadian television.”

The genre is an area in television that really celebrates the outsider and the underdog, and their constant fight for legitimacy.

As for the show’s growing fan base? *Wynonna Earp* came at the right time. “People really wanted something really action-packed, hilarious, and fun. It

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feels fresh, and it feels saucy, and it feels witty, and at the end of the day it’s a story about these two sisters, so it’s really, really emotional.”

Given the current landscape both politically and culturally, Andras believes that what people want to do when they come home is enjoy themselves. “They want something that feels like an escape — takes them on a journey that maybe makes them smile for an hour and I think there’s a lot of worth in that, and I think that’s what *Wynonna Earp* has.”

As such, *Wynonna Earp* has found itself embraced by the LGBTQ community — a fandom largely fueled by the romance between Wynonna’s sister Waverly and Officer Nicole.

“They are just desperate to see themselves represented in a way that doesn’t end in tragedy, that is inspiring and progressive and not a cliché,” says Andras. “They will really back shows, and entertainment and content that they think represents themselves fairly, and they’ll make their voices heard.”

Andras set out to write a relationship that’s between women with flaws and problems, not some sort of cliché.

“Emily and I come from the land of *Lost Girl* where sexuality was defined by the individuality of each character and explored on a spectrum rather than through socially acceptable labels,” explains Alexandra Zarowny, *Wynonna Earp* co-exec producer and writer on the show, “Our succubus lead was in love with both a male shapeshifter and a human female doctor ... *Lost Girl* attracted an audience that was hungry for stories that reflected their sexual experiences, stories that played out relationships without social commentary.” The audience response, particularly through social media, let them know they’ve hit a “sweet spot” previously underexplored.

“2016 was an incredibly poor year for LGBTQ deaths on television,” says Andras. “There is this whole trope in television called Bury Your Gays, which is basically the concept that as soon as TV characters, particularly lesbians, find happiness or get together or consummate their relationship, one of them usually ends up dead.”

There was an outcry in the LGBTQ community. “What we did on *Wynonna Earp* is we did something... unprecedented and which I would never do as a writer because it goes against every instinct I have, to keep things quiet. But we basically put out an announcement guaranteeing that both Nicole and Waverly Earp were going to live to the end of the year; just because there was so much trauma in the LGBTQ community.”

Spoiler alert: There’s still plenty of tragedy and violence involved, but the couple is alive by the end of the season. Andras did not want to punish them for their sexuality.

“When in doubt, go back to what the character would do.”

It can be hard enough to grow up in this world as it is. “So if you’re a young woman who is struggling with your sexuality, and you just want to see yourself represented on TV and be told that maybe it’s gonna be okay, to see yourself get killed over and over and over again, just because you’re queer or gay, is awful.”

Andras and her writers were sensitive to the trauma this community has been through.

“When it comes to addressing the LGBTQ audience, we just want to give them compelling, unexpected stories involving three-dimensional characters regardless of how they identify themselves,” says Yorke.

“I think it just doubled the interest in that show amongst that community because they felt like they could come to the show and know that we would treat those characters respectfully,” agrees Andras.

Andras’ writers’ room is a diverse one, with more female writers than men. “That’s just the way it worked out,” she says, “but also because it’s obviously a show with huge female representation.”

Andras runs the room in a democratic fashion, meaning that the best idea wins.

“She’s not precious about her writing and doesn’t care where the good ideas come from just as long as someone tosses them on the table,” says Zarowny. “As a writer who’s worked with her for over five years now, I know how lucky I am to be spending much of my creative time with someone who is so secure in her own voice that she allows mine to shine through.”

Andras’ only rule: “When in doubt, go back to what the character would do. I think you have to work a little harder and take the time to make sure that people are reacting — you want your crazy characters reacting in character.”

“The fun of *Wynonna Earp* is it’s just such a crazy show, just nuts. I like my writers to feel free to pitch anything. I really think it’s okay to be brave and try anything on a supernatural show — as long as it’s in character, that’s my only rule.”

Most genre series, says Zarowny, are written to service the engine of the show, but what tends to get buried are the character moments. “Emily’s created a show that fills a void for audience members who were starving for authentic personal relationships played out on a supernatural battlefield.”

She pushes the writers to dig deeper. “For their dirt, their vices, their beauty and their gems. She doesn’t shy away from throwing her babies into the worst situations with the worst people at the worst times because she knows that this is the birthplace of drama.”

And in the spirit of the show, Andras likes to make sure that the writers’ room is fun, not competitive or political. “I really try my best just to make it a safe place for people to pitch insane ideas.” Many of the writers are former collaborators who put up with her “crazy brain as it ping-pongs everywhere.”

As Zarowny cautions: “Anyone who’s ever met Emily knows that you need to take a deep breath, buckle-up and get ready for the ride of a lifetime. Her brain moves that fast. It’s dizzying and exciting and inspiring.”

Jeremy Boxen, a creative consultant on the series who has worked with Andras on various shows (*Lost Girl*, *Killjoys*) over the years, happens to be a big fan. “The term is Fandras, right?” he asks. Whatever room she’s in, he says, it’s high-energy, fiercely verbal, and funny as hell. “All you can do is try to hang on as Emily takes you for a ride in that monstrous fun park of hers she calls a brain.” But it’s a welcoming, generous space, for big-hearted writers who love the characters they write. “Every TV series success is like capturing lightning in a bottle ... she knows how to spin a yarn, she knows how to put a team together to turn that yarn into actual television, and she knows how to connect with fans. Probably her parents were bitten by radioactive television sets just as she was being conceived.”

As important as writing ability is, Andras ultimately looks to bring on people she likes, people she wouldn’t mind being stuck in a room with for fourteen hours a day. “Television writing is incredibly collaborative,” she says, “At the end of the day you honestly have to figure out if you can tolerate each other, if you can tolerate each other’s bad jokes and stupid lunch habits and whatnot.” She gravitates towards the verbose type.

“It’s a very safe place to be both brilliant and stupid, all in the name of making the show as awesome as it can be,” says Yorke. ■