

TO DIE FOR

By Matthew Hays

Tara Armstrong and Tassie Cameron on their hit series about medically assisted suicide, *Mary Kills People*

As Tara Armstrong tells it, it all started with the end. “I was always death-obsessed,” confesses the creator and a writer of the hit series *Mary Kills People*, season two of which is now airing. “Ever since I was a kid. And I know that sounds crazy, but I always thought, ‘Why aren’t we talking about this every five seconds?’”

By the time Armstrong figured out she was a writer, she recalls, “everything I wrote about was about death.” She was also a student in UBC’s creative writing program, where she took a screenwriting course, followed by a directed study with Peggy Thompson, a prof who turned out to be especially influential.

“This creative nonfiction assignment I worked on required that I immerse myself in something in order to understand it more completely. I chose a hospice for people who were facing death. So I got to speak with the doctors, nurses and volunteers extensively. Death was part of their work, and that fascinated me, because we live in a death-denying society.”

Armstrong developed her research into *Mary Kills People*, a spec script about a doctor who covertly freelances in cases of physician-assisted euthanasia, acts she sees as ethical and moral despite their criminal status. And when Armstrong did a stint at the Canadian Film Centre, Entertainment One optioned the script. Then after some networking at the Banff TV Festival, Corus signed on. Armstrong was in the writers’ room for the series *Private Eyes*, and that’s when Tassie Cameron first read the script.

“I was doing more producing at that point,” Cameron recalls. “I remember thinking how incredibly entertaining the script was. Given the subject, it was unexpected. It was funny and dark, beautifully written, and so much shone through in that first script. Not only was it a great script on its own, but I could sense how many different places it could go. There was tons of potential for a limited series. I thought at the time, ‘I’d love to produce something like this.’”

Cameron says she was also drawn “to the complicated female lead. It was something I was trying to do when I was writing for *Rookie Blue*, to portray a young woman, flaws and all. That gave me a taste for really pushing an anti-heroine.”

Working with a producer, writer and showrunner with Cameron’s considerable track record was “incredible,” says Armstrong. “Tassie knows how to assemble a great team of people in the writers’ room. Having Holly Dale direct all of the first season also meant I had a female-led team of people with a considerable track record.”

But the process of writing the first season was “unconventional,” says Armstrong. “We had a very small writers’ room. A lot happens in the pilot. We had three weeks, which was crazy. We had to work extremely hard to break the episodes down. Much of it was intuitive; you know when the story is working and when it’s not. I love breaking the stories down, but it’s very challenging. It’s a heavily-plotted series. We had to figure out which scenes to explore and expand, and where the character arcs are.”



PHOTO: CHRISTINA GAPIC

Tassie Cameron, left and Tara Armstrong.

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And it presented its challenges for Cameron, too: “Breaking the seasons for *Mary Kills People* has been quite a different experience for me. This was my first time working on a six-episode arc, which in some ways, requires a different set of story skills — it’s almost more like breaking a six-hour movie, than it is writing a traditional television series. It’s also been interesting to work on a show that doesn’t have a conventional mystery to “solve” by the end of each episode or season. Mary herself is the mystery of this show, and it’s her interactions with the other characters — the good guys and the bad guys, and everyone in between — that really drives the narrative forward. The “cat and mouse” of it all has been very interesting to write and get right.”

Cameron also opted to produce and showrun, only writing half of a single episode. “Putting a team together, figuring out how to put a season together, getting creative approval and giving notes. I didn’t want to overload,” she says. “I knew I’d have my hands full.”

And she adds, “Tara is very much a perfectionist. I share that. We were pushing those scripts to make them as entertaining as we possibly could.”

Approaching this subject, Cameron knew one thing for sure: “I would never have come on board if it were an issue piece. I’m not into preaching to people about issues, and it was never a goal to shove it down people’s throats. I’m not an earnest person. The question must linger, is she doing the right thing or is she a monster? And the questions that come up shift with each particular case that she’s handling.”

“We wanted to explore the issue, but through the character of Mary,” Armstrong adds. “It was important to recognize what a complex issue this is. We’re not ever going to come to a consensus about it. So much of what she’s doing is illegal, and to some people, deeply immoral.”

“I think if you watch the show, you can see where we’re coming from,” says Cameron. “We have to share some of Mary’s beliefs. But we’re always trying to look at it from different angles, to acknowledge that many see it from a range of different perspectives.”

In the timing-is-everything department, things couldn’t have been stranger for the team behind *Mary Kills People*. As the show was airing, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was acting on a campaign promise, to legalize doctor-assisted suicide. “I was very keen to see that stalled,” says Cameron. “I’m kidding, I didn’t really want to see it stalled. But I did want it to be illegal for our purposes. Obviously it makes the show more compelling if Mary is doing something illegal. It just meant we invented a city, Anytown, North America. So we came up with “Port Denver,” where doctor-assisted suicide is still illegal.”

Cameron was always struck by the tone of Armstrong’s spec script. A big part of the challenge was arriving and staying in that distinctive, complex place, where humour meets death meets possible pathos. “That tone was amazing. We wanted to maintain a balance during the incredibly emotional moments, especially the deaths themselves. There are moments of absurdity, humanity, friendship and romance. The writers in that room were so talented in the way they brought all of those things together simultaneously. There’s a scene where a teen pulls out a gun and holds it at Mary, forcing her to help a woman die at gunpoint. As that happens, a schmaltzy song begins playing. It makes it all feel entirely absurd.”

“We talked a lot about that in the writers’ room,” Cameron says. “It was about trying to reflect reality. There’s something very sad about death, but there’s also something funny about it. We had to ask the question as we were writing: does it feel real, even if it’s entirely absurd?”

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Perfectly reflecting the show’s blunt-yet-nuanced tone is the show’s title, evoking the existential, in-your-face, ostensibly simple style of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (another work mired in death obsession). “When I was first writing the script,” Armstrong recalls, “the opening line was “Mary kills people for a living.” It just leapt out at me. Oh my God, that’s the title! I texted it to a friend immediately. Everyone from that friend to the writers to the producers to the network has been entirely down with that title.”

Handing the show a lifeline was the response to season one, which was tremendous, both in terms of audience callout and critical raves, as well as nine Canadian Screen Award nominations. *Variety* critic Maureen Ryan led the charge, citing the show as one of the best of 2017. “*Mary Kills People* is a smart, entertaining series that understands, on a core level, that nobody really wants to watch a TV show about medically assisted suicide,” Ryan gushed, adding, it’s “an energetic, savvy program that combines elements of crime thrillers, medical soaps, and propulsive character drama, employing all of those recognizable forms to illuminate the complexity of the knotty issues at its core.”

In other words, the first season got the kind of reviews writers dream of. And Cameron and Armstrong concede the reviews were gratifying and gave them more momentum. “That *Variety* review really understood what it was we were working to get at,” Armstrong says.

Penning a second season is an odd mix of confidence and challenge, Armstrong reports. “In the first season, we were dealing with a lot of unknowns. The real energy of the first season is that you still don’t know what you have, and are showing parts of the character to the audience. With the second season, there are expectations about what made the show

successful. What worked for season one? What characters did we love from the first season? How can we push them into new territory, into new situations?”

Season two meant upping the ante, Cameron says. “What if Mary is asked to help a healthy man die? What if a very young person wants to die? What if a woman wants to die with her husband when he is dying of a terminal illness, but she is perfectly healthy? It’s dilemmas like these that keep the show fresh and intriguing, and it’s part of what made that initial script so inspiring, because I could see possibilities like this from the start.”

Armstrong says that having a central character who is actually euthanizing people means audience identification is a strong point of consideration: “We spent a lot of time talking about whether or not people will go along with this character. Will people root for her? I think for me, the most engaging characters I see on TV are the ones I’m constantly wondering about. The ones who are enigmatic, the ones who are compelling precisely because I don’t know everything about them. This is what I was aiming for with Mary.”

Armstrong says season two was also easier because now they were writing the characters with actors in mind. “Caroline Dhavernas is phenomenal, as is our entire cast.”

But for Cameron, the ongoing dark territory of *Mary Kills People* has been a crucial part of the fun. “It’s also a wonderful tonal challenge. We have to strike a delicate balance between the deep emotion of the patient stories — the absurd humour that we explore with Des — the romance and the police work with Ben — the dark and violent nature of Mary’s criminal antagonists — and Mary’s familial relationship with her daughters and sister.

“We try to keep it real, honest, dark and light, emotional and funny... Like life and death, I suppose.” ■