

CANADIAN SCREENWRITER

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FILM | TELEVISION | RADIO | DIGITAL MEDIA

The Law &
Order Issue

The Detectives: True
Crime Canadian-Style

Peter Mitchell
on Murdoch's
200th ep

Floyd Kane

Delves into class,
race & gender in legal
drama *Diggstown*

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Writers Guild of Canada

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We'll all get through this together

I don't know if any of you noticed, but the weirdness is reaching professional/military-grade quality.

We started planning for this issue before Christmas. The process is fairly straightforward. We look at what stories are possible and timely. We look at whether a theme is appropriate, who has or has not been on the cover before, what ideas merit a feature. Some stories will be kicked down the road; others will be pulled up to the front of the line. The first column I wrote for this issue was about how we try, in our decision-making, to look for variety and diversity to reflect the industry and the country.

But as they say, events have overtaken us. The decisions we're making now are so much more weighty.

If anyone back then had mentioned the remote possibility that the entire country — along with a lot of other countries — would be shut down over a virus, I would have sneered.

Who would have thought? I mean we were aware in January of what was happening in China and worried about the people there, as well as whether or not COVID-19 would land here. And as a trade magazine, we don't usually get sucked into current events.

But here we are, with the world shut down. That includes our industry, meaning a loss of jobs for thousands of people. Some lucky writers may still be working — a bit of development is still being financed and a few writers have been engaged to get a season's scripts ready, planning for the return to "normal."

All of us are wondering when that will be and, more importantly, when and if normal returns, whether we and our family and friends will make it through.

There's the double-whammy of the threat from the virus and the financial hit people are taking. Making good decisions is what's going to get us through this.

Now, not everyone I know is good at making sound choices. We all know people like this, people who think of themselves as rebels — or worse, invincible rebels.

But now is the time to exercise a little common sense, and to think of others. We have to work together. We have to ensure our industry is included in any government benefits package — and the Guild is working on that, along with other people in the industry.

More importantly, we have to try to keep ourselves — and each other — healthy.

Sometimes that means washing our hands; sometimes it means just staying home. But that doesn't mean you can't help. Just being in contact with people by phone or email or one of the many audio-visual conference programs can help. Keep your physical distance, not your emotional distance.

Get a grip, use the remote control on friendships and family if possible, and hold fast.

We'll get through this, possibly alone at times, but not by ourselves.

— Tom Villemaire

Spring 2020

Cameron Archer runs the Canadian TV and media site Gloryosky (www.gloryosky.ca) and is also a freelance arts and media writer. He currently lives in Eastern Ontario.

Mark Dillon is a Toronto-based freelance journalist and former editor of *Playback* magazine. He is author of the award-winning *Fifty Sides of the Beach Boys*.

Matthew Hays is a Montreal-based writer, author and university and college instructor. His articles have appeared in *The Globe and Mail*, *The New York Times*, *Maclean's*, *Toronto Star* and many others. His book, *The View from Here: Conversations with Gay and Lesbian Filmmakers* (Arsenal Pulp), won a 2008 Lambda Literary Award.

David Lee is a Winnipeg art school graduate now based in Toronto working as a freelance photographer and landscape painter. Over many years, he has provided photography services for a variety of top level editorial and corporate clients. He also works in the film industry as a unit stills photographer.

Li Robbins is a freelance writer and editor whose work has appeared in *The Globe and Mail*, *Toronto Star*, *The Walrus*, *Toronto Life* and on *CBC.ca* among other publications and websites.

Gary Rusak is a freelance writer who lives in Toronto. His work has appeared in *The Globe and Mail*, *The Toronto Sun*, *Post City Magazines*, *The Ryerson University Magazine* and *Kidscreen* magazine, among many others.



COVID-19 and the shape of work to come

It's hard to believe that just a few weeks ago, I couldn't figure out what I was going to write for this editorial. I was flip-flopping between possible subjects. I would either offer my (most likely smart-assed) assessment of the recently released BTLR report, or take a stab at Lana Castleman's newly minted Off Script feature. I took the latter for two reasons:

1. It was proving impossible for me to write anything remotely entertaining about the BTLR report, beyond whether the acronym should be pronounced as “Bitler,” “Butler” or “Betler.” 2. The Off Script questionnaire was more fun.

Then along came COVID-19. All the work of a zombie apocalypse. None of the fun.

If COVID-19 was a fictional disease imagined in a writers' room, I would argue that the methods of fighting it were a little too on the nose. Self isolate. Socially distance. Come on, guys. My note would be that this sounds like a virus created by a committee of writers for writers.

And all over social media, writers are discussing how this should be the perfect time to be writing that new pilot or that feature they've always wanted to write and how frustrating it is that they can't focus. And to them I say, “Be kind to yourself, these are extraordinary times we're living in and every feeling that you're feeling is valid.”

If there was ever a moment for social media to shine, it's right now. I'm sure all platforms have seen an uptick in usage over the last several weeks. I know my usage has skyrocketed. This is what I'm seeing: People are reaching out to each other, wanting to share experiences, wanting to stay connected, wanting to share stories.

It's easy to conceptualize this as “wasting time online when

I should be writing.” But I prefer to think of this as “doing my job.” I'm making jokes. I'm sharing anecdotes. I'm telling stories. Sure, I've always done that on social media. But now, I'm realizing that social media is a special connection, because for many of us right now, it's our only connection.

I have no doubt that when we come out on the other side of this event (and we will), things are going to be different. So, how is that going to look for writers?

For starters, I can guarantee you that how we negotiate our contracts will be different. “Pandemic” will be a specific item listed in any section on *force majeure*. There will be new language around schedule breakdowns and delays in production stages.

How we schedule our productions will change — at least in the immediate future. I'm sure there's going to be thought put towards how we make a show with the fewest number of people at any given time. We may even see a shift where the entire series is written before going into production in order to facilitate a more streamlined (and probably shortened) production schedule.

The stories themselves will possibly be reshaped: How many of the leads are in a scene? Could this be a two-hander? Do we really need *all* of those extras?

I also predict A LOT of pilot

itches about people living through a pandemic, and at least one pitch that postulates the world when it's hit by “COVID-20.”

Then there's the question of how COVID-19 will affect the writers' room. I've been talking with other writers and showrunners about their experiences with virtual rooms in terms of which conference software offers the most flexibility, and how they manage the course of conversation virtually. And I worry about how this will affect the construction of a writers' room going forward. How it will affect the spontaneity of the conversation and the alchemy of creativity that comes from amassing a group of writers in a single space? What will replace just giving them a stack of post-it notes and some jujubes and letting it rip?

To be clear, this is something I worry about *as a writer*. As a human, I am worried about eleventy-billion quadrillion other things, but that's not something that we need to discuss here.

We will get through this. Hell, it's entirely possible that by the time this issue lands in your mailbox, we will already be cuspings into a post COVID-19 world and you'll be reading this and thinking, “Whatever, worry-wart.” Until that time, be kind to yourself. Be kind to others. And for the love of God, wash your fucking hands.

— Dennis Heaton



WGC SCREENWRITING AWARDS 2020

CELEBRATING CANADIAN SCREENWRITERS

WGC Awards Ceremony, National Forum Cancelled

At press time, Canada continues to come to grips with an unprecedented situation in the efforts to stem the spread of COVID-19. In mid-March, the Guild had to make the call to cancel both its WGC Screenwriting Awards ceremony (April 27) and its annual National Forum (April 26/27).

We would like to take the opportunity to congratulate our 2020 nominees (see outside-back cover) and our recently elected Forum delegates.

The Guild will be producing a digital awards program that will be available on wgc.ca in late April and is also working on a virtual presentation of the award winners. Additionally, 2020 winners will take part in the 2021 ceremony, scheduled for April 26 at Toronto's Koerner Hall.

The WGC Screenwriting Awards will be marking their 25th anniversary in 2021. It's bound to be a celebration for the ages. ■

BTLR Panel Tables Report, WGC Encouraged

Roughly a year after its deadline for submissions passed, the Broadcasting and Telecommunications Legislative Review Panel released its final report, *Canada's Communications Future: Time to Act*, on Jan. 29.

The WGC commends the Panel on its hard work and the time and care spent compiling the report. And we wholeheartedly agree that it is, in fact, time to act. We are losing members daily to the film & TV industry in L.A. and they are not coming back for want of opportunity to make their stories in their own country. We believe key recommendations in this report, if adopted, will go some way to reversing this trend.

"We entered this process with two clear messages," said WGC Executive Director, Maureen Parker. "The first is that online broadcasting players, both Canadian and foreign, must contribute to the production,

distribution and discoverability of Canadian content. Secondly, Canadian creators — in particular the Canadian screenwriters and showrunners who provide so much of that content with its unique, Canadian authorial voice — must be at the core of the system. The WGC is incredibly encouraged that the Panel has affirmed both of those principles in its report."

The Panel also clearly made the distinction between foreign service production, driven by large Hollywood studios, and domestic Canadian production, which is where Canadian stories are told and Canadian viewpoints are expressed. "It is this domestic production that is most under threat by digital disruption. And it is this content that is in greatest need of support," noted Parker.

"We hope the federal government soon requires the CRTC to hold hearings and issue a new

order so that those media content curators that derive revenue from Canada and are currently exempt from licensing, such as Netflix, are required to contribute to Canadian content through spending and discoverability requirements," added Parker.

"We thank the Panel for its hard work, and look forward to dealing with these issues promptly, through new legislation and regulation."

Heritage Minister Steven Guilbeault had promised to bring new legislation to parliament to enact some of the report's recommendations by June. However, as the response to the COVID-19 pandemic has consumed the work of all levels of government, and federal parliament has been recessed indefinitely, it's likely that legislation will not be tabled within that timeline. But we will continue to push for these all-important changes to be made. ■



Writers Talking TV

Diggstown creator and showrunner Floyd Kane (see “Going Deeper,” p. 6) was joined by the series’ writers Lynn Coady and Ellen Vanstone for our latest edition of Writers Talking TV on Feb. 25. JP Larocque led a lively conversation about the writing process for the groundbreaking CBC drama for a full house at Toronto’s TIFF Bell Lightbox.

It was a great note to go out on, temporarily. Public gatherings in Toronto have been suspended until June 30. Our planned Writers Talking TV events for April 21 and June 16 have been cancelled. We plan to announce new fall dates, if restrictions are lifted. Stay tuned. ■



Writers, Showrunners Mix It Up in March



Just before Ontario declared a state of emergency due to COVID-19, the Guild hosted a Writer-Showrunner Mixer on Mar. 10 in downtown Toronto. The initiative was led and organized by the WGC Diversity Committee.

Thirteen showrunners met with 25 WGC members who self-identify as diverse for a total of 117, eight-minute meetings. Showrunners in attendance included: Adam Barken (*Killjoys*), Morwyn Brebner (*Coroner*), Ian Carpenter (*Slasher*), Ken Cuperus (*Hudson*

& Rex), Joseph Kay (*Transplant*), Michelle Latimer (*The Trickster*), Derek Schreyer (*Hudson & Rex*), Kurt Smeaton (*Children Ruin Everything*), Patrick Tarr (*Cardinal*), Jennifer Whalen (*Baroness von Sketch Show*), Kevin White (*Kim's Convenience*), Sherry White (*Lady Dicks*), and Alex Zarowny (*Private Eyes*).

Pitchers and pitchees, alike, said they found it a valuable experience and hoped to see similar events in the future. We'll see what we can do! ■



WGC members who came out for the event included : Top (L-R) Priscilla White, Darren Anthony, Alejandro Alcoba, Amita Zamaan, Jeremy Cyril & Bottom (L-R) Devjani Raha, Aaron Bala, Sami Khan

Cont'd on p. 28 >>



Going Deeper

Creator Floyd Kane delves into the intersection of class, race and gender in the groundbreaking CBC legal drama *Diggstown*

By Li Robbins



Hailing from Nova Scotia, Diggstown creator and showrunner Floyd Kane seeks to present a previously unseen vision of Halifax through the legal drama

It's a stunning image: A wetsuit-clad surfer riding a sea-glass green wave. You know you're not in California anymore — the shoreline looks too stark, or maybe just too cold. And in another upending of likely preconceptions, the surfer is a black woman. She's Marcie Diggs (Vinessa Antoine), a corporate-turned-legal-aid lawyer and the lead character of *Diggstown*, which went into its second season on CBC in March. The scene, from season one, was shot at Nova Scotia's Martinique Beach, with *Diggstown* showrunner Floyd Kane fully anticipating its impact.

"I love Martinique Beach; I think it's one of the most beautiful beaches in the world," says Kane. "But in Nova Scotia there are certain places you don't traditionally see black people and I really wanted to have Marcie surfing, because it points to the fact that this person is not what you typically expect."

Not exactly *The Good Wife*

Actually, there's a lot about *Diggstown* you might not typically expect, both from a show set on Canada's East Coast, and from a legal procedural, particularly one created by a former entertainment lawyer who began his legal career on Bay Street: Canadian corporate law central. Kane could have created a show about the rich defending the even richer, but instead he chose to set *Diggstown* in what he characterizes as the "socio-economically challenged" world of legal aid clients.

"I wanted to do a show where the people are mostly poor, vulnerable people, individuals who can't afford the high-priced lawyers, the lawyers you see on *The Good Wife*," explains Kane.

This isn't to say that Kane dislikes more conventional legal dramas; in fact he loves the genre, citing David E. Kelley as his favourite writer and *The Practice* as one of his favourite legal shows. But, given his own background as someone from "a poor black community in Nova Scotia," he wanted to tell a different story.

"I grew up seeing how life is for people in the legal system who don't have access to resources," says Kane, "or have limited education and don't understand what all the legalese is referring to and can't afford someone who can make all that foreign language clear."

As it turns out, a deficit of resources can lead to an abundance of stories. In just three storylines from season one you see a young mother diagnosed with fetal alcohol syndrome battling for custody of her baby; a pregnant woman threatened with unfair eviction; and there's more than meets the eye to the low-income father accused of drunk driving. The drama of *Diggstown* isn't in flashy court goings-on, it's in

revealing how the smallest actions of the legal system can have serious ramifications on poor people's lives. It's also found in the personal lives of the scrappy bunch of legal aid lawyers who work at the show's fictional Halifax Legal Aid clinic.

Sally Catto, CBC general manager of entertainment, factual and sports, remembers being immediately struck by *Diggstown*'s premise.

"It's a fresh vision of Halifax, as seen through this lawyer who grew up in North Preston, the oldest black community in Canada," says Catto. "The fact that the show's taken the time to explore issues of racism and poverty and gender bias through that character, that specific lens, is what makes it unique. It's an inside look at this in a way that we don't always see."

That inside look is based largely on Kane's own experiences growing up in East Preston, a small black community outside of Dartmouth — experiences he's shared extensively with his writers' room. (He says, with a chuckle, that the show's writers probably know more about his family than his best friends do.) Those experiences, combined with topical real-life issues form the basis of the show's A stories, usually brought to the room by Kane himself. The room generates the B stories, with the show typically featuring two cases per episode, plus the "runners."

Digging deep in the writers' room

But crafting *Diggstown* goes well beyond distilling current affairs into fiction. Kane says that the writers have had to have "frank conversations about race and unconscious bias," and screenwriter Ellen Vanstone is candid about what that's meant for her.

"For the first time in my life, I was in the minority as a white person in a room that was predominantly people of colour," says Vanstone. "I learned a lot, starting with how I'm not as woke as I thought. I had so many ignorant assumptions about the characters, because I was so used to seeing my own white female experience as the default."

For *Diggstown* writer Priscilla White the biggest challenge has been "getting things right, portraying people's lived experiences truthfully and respectfully." And given that the show's characters include people of various racial and cultural backgrounds, the challenge is far from uncomplicated.

"It helps when we can mine our personal histories and use that to enrich or inform stories," says White. "Half the writers in the [season two] room are black, so we've all dealt with racism in many of its different forms ... these are our lived experiences so we can speak to that. More often

“I really wanted to have Marcie surfing, because it points to the fact that this person is not what you typically expect.”

- Floyd Kane



Showrunner Floyd Kane made a point of filming on Nova Scotia's Martinique Beach because it's not a place you traditionally see black people, and he wanted to upend those expectations in Diggstown

than not, those experiences mirror those from other marginalized communities.”

Of course, part of portraying people's lives truthfully on a legal procedural means getting the law bits right. Legal details are double checked to ensure they stand up to scrutiny, although there are deliberate exceptions. The decision not to have *Diggstown's* lawyers “gowned” in season two's higher court cases, for example, is because currently there are debates in Canadian legal circles about abandoning robes altogether. Since shows can live

on in digital perpetuity, Kane didn't want to risk *Diggstown* being seen in the future as some kind of time capsule. (Although in the present day he fully expects to “get a lot of flak” for having the lawyers appear in court in business attire.) All that to say, Kane's legal background on matters big and small is a huge help to the writers.

“Floyd knows how a case might unfold, what kind of judges and opposing lawyers Marcie might meet, and all the tricks she could pull or have pulled on her,” says Vanstone. She also credits the show's

“terrific consultants” with helping with everything “from nitty gritty legal points to lawyer-lady fashion, to juicy in-real-life details that you can’t make up.”

But it’s the non-law-related nitty gritty that was a factor in Kane’s decision to seek out a white Nova Scotian writer for *Diggstown*, feeling he needed to include a perspective on life in Nova Scotia other than his own. He found it in Lynn Coady, a Scotiabank Giller Prize-winning author and a screenwriter who says she was “ashamed” when she realized that despite growing up in Nova Scotia she’d never heard of the communities of North and East Preston. But her own background meant she provided another, invaluable point of view.

“Fortunately, what I do know about is white Nova Scotians, and that’s the milieu within which Marcie has to operate professionally,” says Coady. “Floyd actually knows more about the upper echelons of white Halifax society than I do, having been a lawyer in that world. But my expertise comes into play, I think, when it comes to Marcie’s legal aid clients. I know about the province’s poor people, welfare recipients, substance abusers and petty criminals.”

Getting Diversity into the Room

Given the show’s focus, putting together the season one *Diggstown* writers’ room presented a specific challenge right off the bat: Finding a senior black Canadian woman screenwriter. The few writers who fit that bill were all working at the time — on the one hand positive, but less so on the other. CBC’s Catto acknowledges the challenge Kane faced, and says that the CBC “absolutely has a role to play” in improving diversity in writers’ rooms. She points to the broadcaster’s 2019 pledge to ensure that by 2025, CBC/Radio-Canada will have at least one of the key creatives in both scripted and factual commissioned programs held by a person “from a diverse background.” Another avenue, she says, is via writer internships on TV series — but she freely acknowledges that there’s “a lot more work to do.” And there is. Kane, for his part, views one aspect of his role as a showrunner as “a means of getting in people who are new.”

Diggstown writers’ rooms for both seasons have been diverse, and so are the show’s characters. And moving into its second season, Marcie Diggs and company take on cases featuring ever-higher legal stakes, including things like vehicular manslaughter, murder and arson. Throughout, the “sweet/tough, vulnerable/stubborn, surprising, endlessly watchable Marcie Diggs,” as Vanstone

describes her, is at the heart of the story, fighting the good fight. Diggs’ relationships with family, church, boyfriends, colleagues — and the legal system itself — are, in a word, complicated. Kane, who says the character is inspired both by the women of his own extensive family and his first-hand experiences in the legal world, wanted those complexities to deepen further still in season two, citing as one example a storyline about a young Indigenous woman charged with murder.

“I wanted to do an episode where Marcie really had to confront her own blind spots or lack of knowledge [about Indigenous people],” says Kane. “It felt a bit risky, because I know people don’t like to see the lead character not necessarily knowing shit, but it’s important to show that she doesn’t understand, and that people are different, we’re [black and Indigenous people] not a monolith.”

Season two viewers may also notice the introduction of a slightly skewed humour (a case involving a scent-sensitive judge and the actions of a ‘findom’ — aka a financial dominatrix — for example). As well, there’s a deepening of the aesthetic of the show itself, notably through the use of more close inserts. (Kane says the Michael Mann movie *The Insider* is one source of inspiration.) Of course, more inserts meant more time spent shooting, which in turn meant making other sacrifices in order to balance the books, all part of life as a showrunner. Kane says *Diggstown* has taught him a lot, noting that, “When you run a show every day, you really get a sense of what kind of a person you are.”

And while Kane feels the original show pitch is quite close to how the actual show turned out, he does worry that sometimes plot mechanics have obscured the driving force of the story, which includes “the ways in which the legal system impacts the lives of economically challenged people.” That said, he admits he’s his own harshest critic, acknowledging that it’s tough for him to even watch the show because he “knows where all the bodies are buried.” So, while he doesn’t consider *Diggstown* a passion project, it’s clearly a project about which he’s passionate.

Passion, of course, means every aspect of a show, including its marketing, ends up being sweated over. CBC’s season one marketing campaign for *Diggstown* leaned heavily on the phrase “for the first time in Canadian television, a black woman is starring in a primetime drama.” But the claim has been disputed. Some suggest that, for example, the 2006/07 CBC crime drama *Intelligence* got there first with the character of Mary Spalding (Klea Scott). Kane, for the record, views Spalding as more of the antagonist than the protagonist, but more importantly he doesn’t want the essence of *Diggstown* to get lost in that narrative.



Kane on the Diggstown set with Vinessa Antoine, who plays the show's lead, Marcie Diggs

"Because we get a lot of U.S. television here, Canadians are used to seeing shows with black leads," says Kane. "But it's a big deal in terms of our industry and where it's progressing. The bigger point to be made, though, is that it's the first time there's been a show in Canada that's really been about someone from a multi-generational black community."

Leaving debates over historical firsts aside, there's no question the show has a special place in the Canadian TV landscape. Show writer White puts it this way: "These stories matter; they reflect a part of Canada that's rarely allowed to be seen on screen, and I'm proud to have played a part in bringing these stories to light." Fellow scribe Coady concurs. "It's a thrill to feel like we're making a show that's really about something," she says. "Something as relevant and of-the-moment as issues like class, race, and poverty." And Vanstone calls working on *Diggstown* "a gift," in no small part because Kane, she says, "is a principled human being with a vision he refuses to compromise, and yet somehow he keeps a sense of humour while wrangling the giant, unwieldy, multi-headed behemoth that is a TV series — all of that shows up on the screen."

Ultimately, Kane's objective is to make what's on the screen connect with audiences in a way that goes deeper than the machinations of lawyers, judges and the courts.

"My whole thing with legal shows is that I always want you to feel something, to get emotionally wrapped up with what's happening to the characters," he says. "From a writing perspective the stories have to be ones where the audience feels moved at some point. That's what's important to me. It's not about tears."

That said, there may be tears, too; possibly as soon as the opening minutes of season two, with a gut-wrenching scene involving (spoiler alert) the death of a North Preston woman killed by a policeman during a high-speed chase. Or there could be tears of a different kind after watching the scene that follows: A group of young black girls taking surfing lessons from none other than Marcie Diggs. The backstory alone is touching. After the first season of *Diggstown* aired, a Nova Scotia surf school started a program for those girls in real life. Come season two, they're in the show, helping to fulfill Kane's mission to "tell stories about multi-generational black people who have been in this country since before Confederation." ■

Criminal Effect

With true crime doc/drama hybrid *The Detectives*, Petro Duszara and his writing team relate the real impact of violence

By Matthew Hays

Petro Duszara realizes the statement sounds mysterious. But he says it with such conviction, it's impossible not to believe him.

"I have mixed feelings about good reviews and awards," he says, referring to the success of *The Detectives*, the hit CBC show about true crimes and their subsequent fallout, now in its third season. "The content is really, really heavy," he continues. "We spend a lot of time with cops and families of victims. Of course there's a sense of pride, but the praise is always tempered by the fact that the show is not fictional. 'This is real' runs through your head. There are mixed emotions."

The Detectives is noteworthy for its success (it's a multiple CSA nominee), but also due to the fact that it's one of the only true crime shows Canada has ever done. Which does seem odd, given that the genre has exploded on American screens, and that Canada is famous for its keen documentary film and TV-making skills.

Duszara has a background in true crime screenwriting, including penning episodes for the series *The Case That Haunts Me* and *Real Detective*. But he makes a confession worthy of one of the plot twists in a *Detectives* episode as we speak: "I'm not

really a true crime guy," he says. "I don't really watch true crime shows regularly. I appreciate them when they're well done, *The Wire* being a great example. But I don't seek them out."

So, how on earth did a nice guy like Duszara get mixed up in the genre? As it turns out, there's a family connection. "My sister's father-in-law is a retired homicide detective. He also worked with the military," he admits. "At one point at a family gathering, I just said to him, 'You're a cop, you must have some crazy stories.' He's this six-foot-tall guy, a big guy, but very lovely and jolly. And as he opened up, I realized that he carries all of this dark stuff with him, wherever he goes. It's not like he can turn it off."

That led Duszara to realize he had a show on his hands. "I thought about a true crime show from the perspective of the investigation. What are the consequences of violence? What impact does it have on families of victims, and on investigators?"

Duszara says inspiration for episodes comes from a broad range of sources, including crime reporters in different cities, contacts at the RCMP and various police departments, crime books and victim support groups. "Each episode is quite different from the others in terms of how we came up with the idea and how the research followed," he notes.



A scene from *The Detectives*' third season that went to air on CBC in January

Duszara says a central challenge is being true to the story, while making things fit into a 44-minute time frame. "It's about figuring out what you have room for," says Adriana Capozzi, who has written several episodes of the show. "We may use composite characters or change something, but it's about remaining honest and faithful to the story."

"It's about taking the case and then breaking it down into a story," adds Duszara. "There are always dozens of red herrings. You can't include all of them, there's just no way. We interview the detective, then we shoot and edit the drama. Then we shoot the actual documentary part. It seems counterintuitive, but it works best that way — we then know what we need from the detective."

The show's hybrid format proves trickier. "The interview with the detective has to be worked into the final cut," says Duszara. "We don't want the detective to be too present, but you want them to be present enough. Shifting gears is always tough." The hybrid nature of the show makes it really complicated, he contends. "Drama writers usually operate in fiction, and documentary culture is very different. Fiction writers come up with great ideas, but this show has to involve facts. That said, the hybrid form is what keeps *The Detectives* challenging and exciting."

Some of the details that need adjusting are due to matters of privacy. "A person's name might not be in the public record, in particular witnesses," Duszara notes. "In some cases we may change names. Or if a person is an Asian man, we may change that person to a white woman. It's about protecting identities. In some cases, the police may not want to share all of their procedures. The hope is to keep the essential story intact and true, even if some details are not revealed."

And some police work, Duszara concedes, "is incredibly dull." It turns out that investigating a case or cases can be a long, laborious process, and that doesn't necessarily lend itself to engaging drama.

Inevitably, screenwriters working on true crime series report that it takes an emotional toll. They are, after all, conducting extensive interviews with people whose lives have been touched by violence, often with fatal, irreversible results. When Capozzi began work on *The Detectives*, she had just completed the intensely demanding writing of the eight-part miniseries *Unspeakable* (2019), which told the stories of Canada's tainted-blood scandal, when thousands of Canadians were infected with HIV and Hepatitis C in the '80s and '90s. "I learned a skill set with that show, of writing drama, but reality-based drama," she says.

“The show is not fictional. ‘This is real’ runs through your head. There are mixed emotions.”

- Petro Duszara



Duszara got the idea for the series after hearing a retired homicide detective recount his experiences

That meant asking to avoid having to write certain kinds of episodes when she joined *The Detectives* writing team. “That project took a lot, as I had spent a lot of time reading about children dying of AIDS. So, I asked that any script I would be working on would not involve murdered or raped children,” admits Capozzi.

She says a gratifying part of doing the research was interviewing the detectives, “who are usually so kind and generous with their time, that part of the process was pleasing and fascinating.” But during the research process for the second episode of season three, “Out of Lies,” Capozzi acknowledges being overwhelmed. The episode tells the story of the police cracking the case of an elderly Lethbridge woman who was brutally murdered.

“Overall it wasn’t a difficult episode to work on,” she recalls. “But yes, a moment did take me off guard. I was talking through the case with two lovely and extremely helpful homicide detectives, and without warning, suddenly found myself looking at graphic crime scene photos. Up until that point, I was thinking about the case mostly in story terms — focusing on the facts, suspects, and the turns of the investigation. But in that moment, the brutality, horror and devastation of the crime became very real for me. Suddenly, I’m looking at a bludgeoned head.”

Still, despite the bump in that particular bit of research, Capozzi says *The Detectives* has real value, both as a dramatic series and as historical record. “It’s very important that these stories and the victims

are never forgotten. Minorities and women are often vulnerable. We tell those stories and show how detectives solved certain complex cases.”

For screenwriter Eric Sabbag, his most powerful experience working on the show came when he was interviewing the family members and detective involved with a crime that inspired the fourth episode of season two, “Jackie.” The brutal details of the story involve the kidnapping and murder of an eight-year-old girl and the subsequent investigation. “I went out to New Brunswick and met with Jackie’s mom and stepfather and the detective,” Sabbag recalls. “The parents and detective had not talked since the case in 1995. The officer had PTSD as he was so traumatized by the case. He would repeat over and over how guilty he felt about not communicating with them since then. They forgave him, and they shared a poem Jackie had written, which we included in the episode.”

Sabbag says one of the show’s key strengths is that it is never exploitative. “Yes, the show is entertaining, but it’s a crime show that doesn’t feel dirty. It never glorifies crime. In fact, we don’t show crime depicted — it is related by description.”

And Sabbag says one of the main reasons for that is the exhaustive research process the writing team employs for each episode. “The police and family members respect the process. A common request is that we keep it truthful, which of course we do. My experience has been that the families don’t want sympathy, but they do like an ear. Many



Adriana Capozzi says her experience on Unspeakable helped her in the writing of several Detectives eps



One of The Detectives' strengths, notes writer Eric Sabbag, is that it's never exploitative and doesn't glorify crime

survivors say they experience isolation after a horrific crime like some of the ones we get into. People in the community may feel like they don't want to pry, so once they have paid their initial respects, pull back. People can then feel like they never got to mourn their loss fully. So when they are asked to remember their loved ones, they often open up at length, and it can be very cathartic for them."

For Duszara, episodes four and five of season three presented an especially delicate set of challenges, given that they are based on the serial killer Bruce McArthur, who murdered at least eight gay men in Toronto. "In this case, there had been a lot of criticism of how police handled the crimes. Activists felt the police had dropped the ball. It's important for us to show that the police aren't perfect, which they clearly admitted to here. There was a lot of humility on the part of the investigators. This can't just be a show from the perspective of police alone.

"It was also important for me to acknowledge my blind spots, as this isn't my community," Duszara adds. "So that meant making sure we had done our research, going to the 519 [Toronto's LGBTQ community centre] and going to places like The Black Eagle [a popular bar in Toronto's LGBTQ village] to get a sense of what members of the community were feeling in the wake of the crimes."

In the writers' room, Duszara says support is an integral part of the process. "We check in with each other regularly. When you get really into a case, it's not unusual to shed tears. We have a psychologist

around in case anyone needs to talk to someone about what they're experiencing. Obviously, we are sensitive to the fact that this is very heavy material. You do have nightmares. It's important to be there for each other."

Jennifer Dettman, the executive director of unscripted content for CBC, says one of the reasons they were drawn to the show was its authenticity. "Each episode features a detective talking about why a specific case has stuck with them. You get a sense of the vulnerability of the investigators. There's a lot of true crime TV out there, but not a lot in Canada. I feel like a great deal of the success of this show is the fantastic group of writers they've assembled."

And Dettman adds that "the writers have managed to avoid sensationalism and a sense of exploitation, which is no easy thing. What parts of the story would be shared? This was always key to us at the CBC, to always be respectful and not gratuitous."

Duszara says the ultimate goal of *The Detectives* is "to show audiences, as clearly as we can, what detectives go through when they are investigating these cases. And what families experience. We also want the police to see that what we're doing is accurate, while never cheerleading. Because what detectives do and what families go through is extreme.

"Part of the sensation of writing the show is what I suspect audiences are also experiencing — these things, these horrible, unforgettable things, can and do happen." ■

Man of mystery

Showrunner Peter Mitchell reflects on 200-plus episodes of *Murdoch Mysteries*

By Mark Dillon

M*urdoch Mysteries* blew past 200 episodes in its recent 13th season, putting it in rarefied company in Canadian television. Only one hour-long drama has had a greater output: Fellow CBC series *Heartland*, which has logged 214 eps in 13 years compared to *Murdoch*'s 204. But *Murdoch* showrunner Peter Mitchell says he's up for the friendly challenge of outlasting the Western family drama.

Murdoch nearly didn't make it past season five — Mitchell's first on the show — when commissioning broadcaster Citytv pulled the plug back in 2011. But Christina Jennings, head of producer Shaftesbury, landed the show at CBC, where it has been the most-watched Canadian entertainment program since, consistently attracting north of 1.2 million viewers.

Based on the Detective Murdoch novels by Maureen Jennings (no relation), the series has chronicled the turn-of-the-20th-century murders of 300 Torontonians — as counted by fans — although resourceful, button-down detective William Murdoch (Yannick Bisson), his pathologist wife Dr. Julia Ogden (Hélène Joy) and their colleagues always get their man — or woman.

Mitchell grabbed a coffee with *Canadian Screenwriter* to discuss the task of keeping a long-running series fresh, *Murdoch*'s highly committed viewership, and an ill-fated flying machine.

Two-hundred episodes is huge. How did you and the writers' room — Paul Aitken, Noelle Girard, Mary Pederson, Dan Trotta and Simon McNabb — approach that milestone ep, "Staring Blindly into the Future"?

My intention was for it to be a love letter to the fans with moments that would make them go, 'The balloon ride—that's just like episode [2.13].' There's also the weird hotel bellman, which nods to the earlier episode "Murdoch Takes Manhattan." Murdoch nearly loses his hat, which is reminiscent of the "Murdoch Ahoy" episode. There had to be historical characters and characters fans wanted back, such as Thomas Edison. The whole thing was a turn-of-the-century TED Talk with the most famous people, like Marie Curie and Albert Einstein.

I was thinking of the group viewing experience. I knew there would be a [panel and screening] at TIFF,



Mitchell joined Murdoch Mysteries as showrunner in its fifth season, and eight seasons later, says the writers' room is far from worn out: "Mysteries are eternal. Every day there's something in the newspaper."



"The whole thing was like a turn-of-the-century TED Talk with the most famous people, like Marie Curie and Albert Einstein," says Mitchell of landmark episode 200, "Staring Blindly into the Future."

so I didn't want it to be heavy. You should be able to laugh at it. It had to be a ridiculous adventure and needed a crazy invention, so we had a laser beam. We needed all the things that make it *Murdoch*: Inspector Brackenreid [Thomas Craig] has to punch someone; Julia has to punch somebody; Constable Crabtree [Jonny Harris] has to have a theory. And then Murdoch makes a ridiculous prediction of what the future is going to be, and it's that the Internet will save us.

The show has a fervent fan base. You have 138,000 followers on Facebook and more than 33,000 on Twitter. Do their comments feed into your decisions?

From time to time. I think of them as the 'hardcores' and treat them like the canary in the coal mine. If they're giving me the sense we're going off the rails — and I won't necessarily agree with their reasoning as to why — then I know something's kind of off and I at least have to pay attention. But I'm also a firm believer in always leaving them hungry and never giving them all of what they want so they come back. I don't take story ideas from them and I don't say, 'Then this is the direction we should go,' but I'm aware that

serving the audience matters. The fans and I would disagree on how much I serve them. I interact with them sometimes at public events or via various social media platforms and we have a fun relationship. As a Canadian writer it's astounding to have people engage with your show.

CBC hasn't announced a 14th season, although it looks likely. How challenging is it at this point to keep the series fresh?

When we start developing a new season there's an initial feeling of 'We've done it all — what can we do?' It's like the long layoff after a sports season. But then the first new idea will come out, and hopefully the environment in which the show is created allows people to strive for a new idea. Eventually we click. We try to stay away from comparing ourselves to other TV shows and thoughts like, 'Well, they did something like that on *blah blah*.' We don't settle.

Producer Stephen Montgomery and I are thinking of what will make us excited. Last year it was shooting in the Kingston Penitentiary — not many shows do that — and the 200th episode. And it's

the question of how will we do things on our budget, like make an underground world below Toronto, or a balloon ride, or use CG. I am proud that the writers are still enthused to do the show, because I've been on shows where near the end it's like pulling teeth to get anybody to do anything.

Are there any other differences between this writers' room and others you've been in?

We're uniquely blessed in that [CBC] basically allows us to make the show we want. The only custodians of quality are the writers, so we fight like animals. We have the occasional storming out of the room. We argue a point until it's beaten to the ground. It's about the execution of the episode: 'That's so obvious.' 'I don't want to start it like that.' 'That's way too simple — it has to be more complicated.' 'Now, it's too complicated.' It's largely about content, not about show politics. It's arguing about what's a better story. People stand their ground. But we all like each other and still go out for a beer afterward.

How structured is each script and how much have you ever veered away from that?

They're structured as classic, old-school TV — teaser, four acts and tag. What sometimes makes it feel different is the tone of the story or particular bent of the characters. We do the odd ones that have flashback narratives like *Rashomon*, where we start the story late, go back in time, and catch up.

The Halloween episode I wrote ["Sir. Sir? Sir!!!"] was completely off the rails and has the lowest fan appreciation in *Murdoch* history. People loved it or hated it and there was no in-between. It was a riff on sci-fi movies — primarily *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, and [*spoiler alert*] the *Murdoch* characters all die at the end. Fans were like, 'What?!'

Are you and the other writers ever critical of past episodes?

We can all do a standard *Murdoch* episode and figure it's fine, fans won't really mind — Julia's got a pretty dress, that's a cool little invention he made — but we know it's no good. Every once in a while we know we've been a little lazy and someone will say, 'Pretty convenient that he found that out' and we'll agree we should have done this or that instead. We do a bit of self-evaluation at the end of the season as to what worked and what didn't. And of course we don't always agree on that either.

A lot of life happens in the time this show has aired. What have been the low points?

We lost Jordan Christianson and Graham Clegg, both writers on the show. We've been on for 13 years, and some crew members have passed away as well. Jordan and Graham were low points, as were the losses of key grip Chris Faulkner and transportation captain Glen McGugan and others, and some wives and husbands as well.

What would be a big moment on the Murdoch blooper reel?

The first test of the airplane in the episode "Murdoch Air," in which Murdoch and James Pendrick [Peter Stebbings] fly over Niagara Falls. We didn't actually put it in the air, but we had to have something roll around on the ground like it was going to take off. You know that old footage of airplanes that used to just fall apart? That was us.

What are some favourite episodes?

I like the two-part ["Stroll on the Wild Side" written by Daphne Ballon and Carol Hay] from my first season as showrunner. It involved pornography as well as a woman from Murdoch's life coming back. The scope of that episode showed me what we could do, that it's not just 'case of the week.' I think "Who Killed the Electric Carriage?" by Paul and Graham about Henry Ford [Todd Holfey] vs. Pendrick was just straight-up fun. And then there's the two-part "On the Waterfront" about the suffragette movement and a strike at the docks that had a more cinematic scope than most. There are things like that a couple of times a season that convince me we've still got it.

You have a lot to proudly look back on. How many more episodes do you and the writers have in you?

I don't think 200 means you're worn-out. Mysteries are eternal. Every day there's something in the newspaper. There's a mystery every 10 seconds. And our characters have lives of their own now. We can always fall into 'What's going on with Brackenreid this year? There has to be a soap opera for him.' That stuff could drive a show for years. And there are always stories we need to get to. We have a pile of 30 or 40 we haven't figured out yet. It's really dependent on viewership. If that drops to the point where it no longer makes sense to make the show, we will hopefully exit gracefully. ■

Parenthood

Kurt Smeaton brings his new series *Children Ruin Everything* to life

By Li Robbins

Want to have a long, fulfilling life? A marriage that won't end in divorce? Don't have kids.

At least that was the message Kurt Smeaton was bombarded with just at about the time his first, of what would be three children, was an infant. Little did he know then that the dire warnings against procreating that seemed to be everywhere in the media would one day be the basis for his show, *Children Ruin Everything*, recently greenlit as an eight-episode series from New Metric Media by Bell Media for its streamer Crave.

"There didn't seem to be too many points of view that having children was also worthwhile and wonderful and hilarious, too," Smeaton recalls. "I mean, those articles were right, so much of your life comes crashing down when you have kids. But there's also this amazing other stuff that happens, and I wanted to tell both stories."

Smeaton notes that while there are plenty of shows about parents, *Children Ruin Everything* is specifically about the act of parenting, focusing on one couple's struggles to balance becoming parents with their pre-parenthood identities. He contends the show stays focused on real-life situations that parents encounter after being "stuck with these tiny screaming bumbling roommates you made."

"The situations themselves are the punchline," he says. "I want to keep it real, not make caricatures of kids with snappy dialogue ... It may be funny to have a kid speak like a grownup but it's more fun to have realistic kids."

He says his own experience writing comedy about families (he's worked on *Kim's Convenience*, *Cavendish* and *Schitt's Creek*) has honed his ability to develop characters, episodes and seasons. (He credits *Kim's Convenience* showrunners Keven White and Ins Choi with skillfully demonstrating how to realistically take a small problem and use it as fuel for an entire episode.) But in terms of tone, he hasn't worked on anything quite comparable to *Children Ruin Everything*.



"When you're working on someone else's show, you're really trying to help them realize their vision, and you make decisions based on the tone of that show. When you create a show from scratch based on your own whims and preferences it's a different animal ... there's no one to blame but yourself," he says, with a laugh.

Smeaton does have a seasoned collaborator in Chuck Tatham, whose resume includes family-centric comedies *Modern Family* and *Arrested Development*. Alongside Smeaton and Mark Montefiore of New Metric Media, he is also executive producing. Among other things, Tatham has been great at warding off series' "traps" that could lead to structural problems down the road, says Smeaton. Another influence has been a distinctively Canadian comedy attitude that's come to the fore in recent years.

"I was reading something about how people love the gentle, low-stakesness of shows like *Schitt's Creek* and *Kim's Convenience*, and I hope *Children Ruin Everything* has something of the same quality. Though the stakes with kids are always just a little bit higher. You know, 'Is that a needle in the sandbox?' But that's kind of what's funny about it. Everything with kids is always a little bit of a three-alarm fire." ■



Mika Collins

Mining a unique upbringing for writing inspiration

By Gary Rusak

Mika Collins is a triple threat. As a writer, producer and actor, she has mined her unique upbringing to establish herself as a sought-after creative force in the Canadian film and television industry. As a writer on *Vagrant Queen*, she helped to craft the “fun, feminist space opera” that debuted on Citytv in Canada and on SYFY in the U.S. at the end of March.

How does your background influence your writing?

I grew up in South Africa during Apartheid. It was a violent and tumultuous time, and I witnessed chaos and violence as an everyday part of my childhood. It wasn't until I was 12 that I came to Canada. So, my childhood really influences my writing. It makes me interested in bigger, socially relevant topics.

What first attracted you to writing?

There was great theatre in South Africa. It was the one place where black and white artists and activists had a voice and worked together. It was harder to censor because they were using analogies and being subversive in clever

ways. I saw incredibly provocative and moving theatre there.

What advice would you give to someone who is just starting out as a screenwriter?

What makes you feel like an outsider is often what is going to make your writing stand out. I'm always interested in where people came from. I often think the reason I'm hired is because of my background. Let's face it, I can write a mean action scene because I have actually seen it happening. You can draw from your weird, strange and unusual background. Even if you think it is a 'normal' background, it probably isn't. It will be interesting if you are willing to tell what's terrifyingly personal about it.

How do you view sci-fi as a genre in general?

I think sci-fi has always been progressive in terms of social issues and I really appreciate that, but I don't consider myself a genre writer exclusively. I am brought in as a character writer, so that tends to be what I can contribute. Generally, I feel like we are moving away from overly dark and edgy themes because people are looking for more inspiration and wonder — sci-fi

can do anything. I find it to be a very interesting playground, but I also enjoy other genres like medical dramas and comedies. Creating, no matter the genre, is always exciting for me.

How does your acting inform your writing and vice-versa?

My theatre training gave me a focus on the emotion of the story and trying to really *feel* it. So, I end up writing from an emotional and intuitive place as opposed to a conceptual place. I was a writer first, and acting was something that happened after. Acting can kind of screw you up, but writing keeps me sane.

How would you describe the experience of adapting Vagrant Queen from comic book to TV?

I loved it. I thought it was fantastic to work within an existing universe, especially one that was so vibrant and alive. It was a tight budget and a small room of only two writers plus the showrunner, Jem Garrard — she had a vision that was remarkable. I would describe it as fun feminist space opera. It has a black, queer, female protagonist, as well as a female writing room with female directors. It's been an amazing experience. ■

Unfair Engagers

The Guild has declared the following engagers “unfair” for failing to abide by grievance procedures or the decision of a joint standing committee. The WGC’s working rules prohibit members from working with unfair engagers.

3620425 Canada Inc.

Principal: Louis-Philippe Rochon

All I Want Productions Inc.

Principal: Kirk Shaw

Battered Productions Inc.

Principal: Kirk Shaw

Christmas Town Productions Inc.

Principal: Kirk Shaw

FOTP Productions Inc.

Principal: Richard Rapkowski

Guardian Films Inc. / En Garde Films Inc.

Principal: Kirk Shaw

H & S Films

Principal: Nicolas Stiliadis

Hiding Productions Inc.

Principal: Kirk Shaw

High Seas Rescue Productions Inc.

Principal: F. Whitman Trecartin

Ice Planet (1) Canada Ltd.

Principal: Philip Jackson

Justice Productions Inc.

Principal: Kirk Shaw

Kangaroo Court Productions Ltd.

Principal: Robin Payne

Les Productions les Plus Belles Routes du Monde Inc.

Principal: Andre Belanger
(not affiliated with Spectra Animation Inc.)

Lester Beach Entertainment

Principal: Jeff Lester

Mikisew Keemiwan Productions, Ltd.

Principal: Norman Champagne

Nikolai Productions

Principal: Cindy Lamb

Norfolk International Ltd.

Principal: William Macadam

Numb Productions Inc.

Principal: Kirk Shaw

Perfect Stranger Productions Inc.

Principal: Kirk Shaw

Prospero Entertainment Group Inc.

Principal: John Lambert

Richard Lowry Productions Inc.

Principal: Richard Lowry

She Productions Inc.

Principal: Kirk Shaw

Spiritual Productions Inc.

Principal: Kirk Shaw

System Productions Inc.

Principal: Kirk Shaw

T Man Productions Inc.

Principal: Kirk Shaw

Zolar Productions Inc.

Principal: Kirk Shaw

Please Help Us Find These Writers!

The CSCS is holding foreign secondary authors' levies for writers

The Canadian Screenwriters Collection Society (CSCS) is holding foreign secondary authors' levies for a number of writers and uncredited productions. As CSCS does not have a current address for these writers or the productions do not have complete credit information we have not been able to forward any monies to the entitled writers. The complete list of writers and productions is available on the CSCS website at:

<https://www.wgc.ca/screenwriters/cscs>

If you have any information that would allow us to contact any of these writers or their agents, or if you are a credited writer on the listed production, please contact:

Marisa King at m.king@wgc.ca

or call (416) 979.7907 ext. 5231 or

1.800.567.9974 ext. 5231.

Please note that CSCS may require writers to furnish contracts in support of their claim. According to CSCS regulations, if a writer does not claim his or her monies within two years of being posted on our website these monies revert to the operating expenses of CSCS.



Sami Khan

Transplanting to TV writing

By Cameron Archer

With a 2020 Oscar nomination in-hand for his work on documentary short *St. Louis Superman*, Sarnia, Ont.-born Sami Khan is dipping his toe into the TV world. Signed on as a screenwriter for the recently debuted CTV medical drama *Transplant*, Kahn talks about transitioning from writing documentary features to television and what he's learned so far.

How did you handle your transition to scripted television with *Transplant*, with the level of anticipation a network show brings?

My transition to TV was aided immeasurably by being mentored by experienced writers, especially showrunner Joseph Kay. You learn so much from just watching a great TV writer pitch ideas, day in and day out.

I think some people are built to tell stories and respectfully collaborate with others, and some aren't. I've made a low-budget film in India, spent time in a Middle Eastern jail trying to make another project, and dealt with all kinds of hair-brained narcissists along the way. After all that, the pressure of a TV show doesn't seem so bad. I know I couldn't

have succeeded with the day-to-day work on *Transplant* without those other amazing writers who showed me the ropes.

Transplant's main character Dr. Bashir "Bash" Hamed is a Syrian refugee, so ethnic background is central to the show's premise. What are the challenges in keeping his and other characters' voices authentic?

Authenticity will always be elusive, but TV shows need to work hard to make sure they're telling stories *with* communities, not just about those communities. That means incorporating members of those communities into the key creative processes as decision-makers. Those are important considerations for the *Transplant* team, and they're always working hard to make sure the production adheres to that concept.

How has your father, Dr. Rauf Khan, influenced and helped your writing on *Transplant*?

My dad is a Muslim immigrant and has been practicing medicine in Canada for 40 years, so there are some similarities to Bash, the protagonist of *Transplant*. My dad is also a huge film and

TV nerd, so storytelling was something he taught me. I was inspired by him to pursue a career in film and TV. Honestly, he was the spark that started it all for me.

How does television differ from other screenwriting disciplines, given you've written for film and radio drama in the past?

With teasers and act breaks, the hook forward is so key to television writing. It should be key to all kinds of writing, but it's often overlooked in feature writing because structure is more fluid. I think the hook is probably the biggest practical thing I learned from the other *Transplant* writers.

The biggest soft skill I learned was just how to be empathetic and collaborate in a room. You're spending months on end with these people heatedly debating all sorts of stuff, so I learned you don't have to be the smartest person in the room. You just have to be someone people want to be around and who adds value to the show. Sometimes adding value just means a well-timed joke during a particularly stressful day. Sometimes it means just shutting up. ■

News from WGC Members

Writing team **Dianna Bodnar** and **Andrew Pope** have been awarded a development grant from Ontario Creates' Interactive Digital Media Fund: Futures Program for their comedy-drama webseries *Down To Earth* — a coming-of-age fantasy about feeling insubstantial in a chaotic world, a clash of quests, and a massively inconvenient hero. They also have a true crime series in development with Lark Productions.

With the support of WGC, **Yung Chang** presented the first act of his feature film *Eggplant* at a special live-reading event as part of the Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival where he was the Spotlight Artist. **Vivian Lin** was the moderator for the post-reading discussion. Chang is in the process of completing the final draft of the script, a journey that began in 2015 at the Sundance Screenwriters and Directors Labs and continued its slow-burn process to the 2018 TIFF Writers Studio. He's looking forward to making

this film come to life in the next couple years.

David Cormican and **Dwayne Hill** have been commissioned to adapt the WWII-era memoir *Escape From Plauen* into a six-part miniseries. The commission follows the writing duo's successful launch of the family drama *Northern Rescue* for CBC and Netflix (where they served as co-creators, writers and EPs). Cormican is also executive producing the upcoming adaptation of Mark Sakamoto's novel, *Forgiveness*, being developed for the CBC, in addition to the in-progress adaptation of the New York Times bestseller vampire book franchise, *House of Night*.

Shelley Eriksen and **Dennis Heaton** are in a room developing a project they co-created along with Steve Cochrane, Gorman Lee and LA Smith, and that's literally all they can say right now.

Cat Girczyc is very pleased to be one of the 2020 winners of the WIF From Our Dark Side contest. The win allows her

to develop her winning pitch into a pilot and TV series plan, complete with graphic designer and story editor mentors.

A short film based on **Garner Haines's** science fiction TV pilot *The Time Is Right*, starring Ellen Dubin and Sebastian Spence, directed by Diane Carol Harder and produced by Rebeka Herron and Heidi Tan, is now in post production.

Jennica Harper just finished post on her second season as showrunner of *JANN* (CTV/Crave). She's developing *Atomic*, a grounded sci-fi drama with Piazza Entertainment/eOne/Bell, as well as the TV adaptation of the bestselling book *The Marrow Thieves*, alongside author Cherie Dimaline (Thunderbird/CBC).

Peter Hume is proud to announce the release of *Spides*. The Berlin-based genre series will air in 40 territories on SYFY. The series follows a police investigation into an underground club drug that changes users' behaviour and is revealed to be the vector for an



alien consciousness. Hume wrote all episodes based on the original German scripts.

Peter Meech's new book *Billy (the Kid): A Novel*, was published in February.

British/Canadian writer **Nicholas Kinsey** has just completed his fourth novel *Remembrance Man* based on an original script for a feature-length drama. It follows three other historical novels based on television drama series: *Shipwrecked Lives* (2018), *An Absolute Secret* (2017), and *Playing Rudolf Hess* (2016). *Remembrance Man* is a thriller and a whodunit with a touch of horror. It tells a story of fear and despair during the 1832 Cholera epidemic in Upper Canada.

Bruce Pirrie is looking forward to the April 2020 broadcast debut of a six-episode series *MAXXX*, which he co-wrote, consulted on, and story-edited for Channel 4 in the U.K. It stars O.T. Fagbenle (upcoming Marvel feature film, *Black Widow*) as a former boyband member trying to make

a solo comeback battling his own bad reputation. The series was produced by Ali Caron and Luti Fagbenle for Portobello Productions (U.K.).

Barbara Radecki's second novel *Messenger 93* drops on April 19.

Daniela Saioni won Best Screenplay and Best Fresh Voice at the 2019 Female Eye Film Festival for her screenplay *Jiyan*, based on a concept by filmmaker Mazdak Taebi and made possible under the WGC Low Budget Feature Film Agreement. This was the first time in the 17-year history of the festival that one screenplay took home two awards.

Robert J. Sawyer's 24th novel, *The Oppenheimer Alternative*, will be published June 2 by Red Deer Press.

NarcoLeap, a sci-fi webseries written and executive produced by **David Schmidt**, has received 22 awards and nominations from 15 organizations/festivals, including the Canadian Screen Awards and the WGC Screenwriting Awards. David also story edited the

Robert Downey Jr.-produced-and-hosted series, *The Age of A.I.*, which attracted more than 40 million views on YouTube in the first two months of release.

In the last year, Canadian screenwriter **Kraig Wenman** landed on Netflix's Top 10 Most Popular Movies in the U.S. for 2019 for his film *Secret Obsession* and had three original features premiere on the Hallmark Channel.

Bettyjane Wylie's new book *Endings: A Book for Almost Everyone* is now available on Amazon in North America. It's a memoir, a history of her career and travelogue, full of literary references and anecdotes. It is not about death or dying. It's titled *Endings* because Wylie's first book, 40 projects ago, was called *Beginnings*.

Nathalie Younglai is the proud recipient of the 2020 Humanitarian Award from the Academy of Canadian Cinema & Television, in recognition for her contributions to increasing diversity in the Canadian media industry via BIPOC TV & Film. ■

Money for Missing Writers

The Writers Guild of Canada is holding monies for the writers listed below. The WGC has been unable to locate the writers and forward the money to them. If you have any information that would help us reach these writers (or their agents or estates), please contact the staff member indicated below. These writers would thank you.

IPA - contact Aaron Unrau at a.unrau@wgc.ca
1-800-567-9974 ext. 5270

NFB - contact Aaron Unrau at a.unrau@wgc.ca
1-800-567-9974 ext. 5270

Dawn Cumberbatch — *Top Cops*

Elana Devine — *Student Bodies*

Warren Easton — *Odyssey II*

Joe Flanigan — *Stargate*

Gerald Fourier — *Littlest Hobo*

John Hollard — *Littlest Hobo*

Laszlo Gefin — *Revolution's Orphans*

János Szanyi — *Revolution's Orphans*

Gilles Toupin — *Cycling: Still the Greatest*

Peter Vogler — *Ernie's Idea*

CANADIAN SCREENWRITERS ARE...

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Writers Guild of Canada

www.wgc.ca

Welcome (Oct. 28, 2019 - Mar. 23, 2020)

Jon Affolter Vancouver BC

Nathan Affolter New Westminster BC

Thomas Affolter Vancouver BC

Steven Altman Los Angeles CA

Darren Anthony Etobicoke ON

Brittany Ashley Los Angeles CA

Bart Baker St. Louis MO

Cory Bowles Toronto ON

Sophie Buddle Vancouver BC

Leslie Ann Coles Woodbridge ON

Pierluigi Cothran Los Angeles CA

Gwenlyn Cumyn Toronto ON

George Elliott Brampton ON

Sophia Fabiilli Toronto ON

Daniel Harroch Toronto ON

Julia Holdway Hamilton ON

Karen Knox Toronto ON

Thomas Krajewski Toluca Lake CA

Heidi Lasi Ottawa ON

Nancy Lees Coquitlam BC

Corey Liu Vancouver BC

Barbara Mamabolo Toronto ON

Alice Moran Toronto ON

Zlatina Pacheva Toronto ON

Janine Parkinson Montreal QC

Ian Rashid London

Lila Scott Los Angeles CA

Christopher Sey Los Angeles CA

Michelle Shephard Toronto ON

Kate Spurgeon Pasadena CA

Eric Steinhart Toronto ON

Amita Zamaan Toronto ON

Our condolences

D.C. Fontana Studio City CA

John Kastner Toronto ON

Bruce Martin Toronto ON

Peg McKelvey Toronto ON

Desmond Scott Toronto ON

Munroe Scott Lindsay ON

Alf Silver Ardoise NS



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WGC members take on Kidscreen



Highlights for WGC members at Kidscreen Summit 2020 included a showrunner panel featuring Lienne Sawatsky and Ed Kay (top) and a jam-packed mixer with development execs

WGC members descended en masse on Kidscreen Summit 2020, which took place in Miami from Feb. 10 to Feb. 14. In all, more than 45 WGC members attended the four day international kids and family entertainment industry event that's chock-a-block with pitching, panels and networking.

Highlights for the group included:

- WGC members Ed Kay and Lienne Sawatsky participating in Kidscreen Summit's first-ever showrunner-focused panel on Monday, Feb. 10: "Showrunners: Not Just For Grown-Ups Anymore." They were joined by U.S. showrunners Chris Nee (*Doc McStuffins*) and Valerie Walsh Valdes (*Dora the Explorer*) in this session moderated by WGC
- Director of Communications, Lana Castleman.
- Fellow WGC member Ken Cuperus taking part in the "Fear Factor" panel about creating horror series for kids earlier that day. He was joined by executives from the BBC, Mattel and The Jim Henson Company.
- The WGC hosting a very successful in-suite mixer on Tuesday, Feb. 11 for members and development executives from companies including 9 Story Media Group, Nelvana, Shaftesbury, Sesame Workshop, Hulu and Apple. The suite reached capacity. Many meet-and-greets were had and connections made! ■

WGC Weighs in on CBC Licence Renewal

The WGC by-and-large supports the renewal application of the CBC's broadcasting licence, and has filed its full submission to the CRTC, which issued an open call for comments in late 2019.

The Guild fully believes in the crucial importance of public broadcasting in Canada and the role the CBC should continue to play. We supported the broad objectives of the renewal, including support for Canadian programming, diversity, distribution and access to the CBC's services. We contended that the CBC should continue to ensure that spending on Canadian programming is its top priority, should maximize Canadian talent in key creative roles, and should work to improve its capacity to take creative risks.

At the same time, the WGC disagreed with the regulatory framework put forward by the national public broadcaster, which would see its digital services brought under the umbrella of Canadian content requirements at the cost of reducing those requirements on traditional platforms, like the CBC television network. We argued that such an approach would treat all platforms as if they were identical, which we feel they are not. We believe a multiplatform lens for regulation would be better considered in a policy review that can consider all players in the system, not just the CBC. That said, if the CBC does wish to pursue its multiplatform plan, it would be better to do so with respect to expenditure requirements for Canadian content – and not the exhibition requirements currently in place.

You can read our full submission on wgca.ca, located in the Policy section. The CRTC will start holding public hearings regarding the CBC's licence renewal in the coming months. The WGC will be there to represent the views of Canadian screenwriters. ■



Naledi Jackson

While she wishes she could have been a fly on the wall in the *Game of Thrones* writers' room, Naledi Jackson has been honing her Canadian TV experience writing for series including *The Detail*, *Another Life* and *Anne With An "E"*

Who is your greatest influence when it comes to screenwriting? Probably Tarantino, though lately I've been learning a lot from Phoebe Waller-Bridge. • **What TV writers' rooms do you wish you had been in?** *Game of Thrones* • **If you had to listen to one song on repeat until you finished your next script, what would it be?** "On the Nature of Daylight" by Max Richter • **What are your preferred snack foods for a writers' room?** Cheese-flavoured Almond Thin crackers. • **What is one of your favourite TV series of all time?** *Game of Thrones* • **What is one of your favourite TV series right now?** *Succession*

• **What is one of your favourite films, past, present?** Past — *The Matrix*. Present — *Mad Max: Fury Road* • **How do you overcome procrastination aka writer's block?** A big fat glass of wine and some Cheetos • **What is the most over-used plot device in a script?** Comms breakdown • **What one do you think will never disappear and shouldn't?** The Reluctant Hero • **Who are your favourite writers?** Phillip Pullman, Carl Sagan, JK Rowling, JRR Tolkien • **Who is your favourite fictional character and why?** Yoda. Because he's awesome and The Force is real. • **Who is your most despised?** The Night King from *GOT*. I just

wish he was a bit more dynamic. • **What are you reading and listening to right now?** Reading: *The Three Body Problem* by Cixin Liu. Listening: the 1917 score by Thomas Newman. • **What are you obsessed with right now?** Chris Hadfield's Masterclass on Space Exploration • **What do you wish would go away (trend, TV series, snack food, you decide)?** Comments in any social media platform • **What do you wish would come back (same as above)?** Kindness and humanity. • **What is your most treasured possession?** My laptop (yikes). • **If you weren't a screenwriter, you would be a _____?** An environmental docuseries host! ■



WGC SCREENWRITING AWARDS 2020

CONGRATULATIONS TO THIS YEAR'S FINALISTS!

CHILDREN'S

Corn & Peg, "To Taste or Not to Taste"
Written by **Jennifer Daley**

Cupcake & Dino: General Services,
"Big City: The Documentary"
Written by **Jeff Sager**

Ghostwriter, "Ghost in Wonderland,
Part 1"
Written by **Andrew Orenstein**

Hotel Transylvania: The Series,
"Better Know Your Mavis"
Written by **Mark Steinberg**

The Most Magnificent Thing
Story by **Ashley Spires** and **John**
van Bruggen, Teleplay by **John van**
Bruggen

Odd Squad, "Who Is Agent Otis?"
Written by **Tim McKeon**

COMEDY SERIES

Corner Gas Animated, "Tag You're I.T."
Written by **Diana Frances**

JANN, "The Big House"
Story by **Jann Arden & Jennica**
Harper, Teleplay by **Jennica Harper**

JANN, "Weeknd at Charley's"
Written by **Mike McPhaden**

Schitt's Creek, "Love Letters"
Written by **David West Read**

Schitt's Creek, "Meet the Parents"
Written by **Daniel Levy**

DOCUMENTARY

Assholes: A Theory
Written by **John Walker & Robert**
Sandler

Conviction

Written by **Nance Ackerman &**
Ariella Pahlke & Teresa MacInnes

Pugly: A Pug's Life
Written by **Michael McNamara**

DRAMA SERIES

Coroner, "All's Well"
Written by **Noelle Carbone**

Coroner, "Confetti Heart"
Written by **Seneca Aaron**

Killjoys, "Three Killjoys and a Lady"
Written by **Vivian Lin &**
Derek Robertson

Murdoch Mysteries, "Sins of the Father"
Written by **Simon McNabb**

Travelers, "Archive"
Written by **Ken Kabatoff**

FEATURE FILM

American Hangman
Written by **Wilson Coneybeare**

Goalie
Written by **Adriana Maggs &**
Jane Maggs

Justice Dot Net
Written by **Thom Richardson**

Riot Girls
Written by **Katherine Collins**

Sweetness in the Belly
Written by **Laura Phillips**

MOW & MINISERIES

Christmas Jars
Written by **Andrea Stevens**

Thicker Than Water
Written by **David Elver &**
Andrea Stevens

PRESCHOOL

Abby Hatcher, "When Abby Met Bozzly"
Written by **Rob Hoegge**

Dino Dana, "Dino Flyer"
Written by **J.J. Johnson**

Dino Dana, "Dino Prints"
Written by **J.J. Johnson &**
Christin Simms & Amish Patel

The Remarkable Mr. King,
"Mr. King's Quiet Time"
Written by **Andrew Sabiston**

Xavier Riddle and the Secret Museum,
"I Am Johann Sebastian Bach"
Written by **Jennifer Daley**

SHORTS & WEBSERIES

The AfterLifetime of Colm Feore
Written by **Hannah Cheesman**

Detention Adventure, "The Catalyst"
Written by **Joe Kicak & Carmen**
Albano

One Last Last Heist
Written by **Darrin Rose**

Save Me, "Birdie's End"
Written by **Fabrizio Filippio**

TWEENS & TEENS

Bajillionaires, "Corporate Retreat"
Written by **Jesse Shamata**

Creeped Out, "The Takedown"
Written by **Emma Campbell**

Holly Hobbie, "The Dauntless Daughter"
Written by **Cole Bastedo**

Holly Hobbie, "The Salty Songstress"
Written by **Sarah Glinski**

Holly Hobbie, "A Whole New Holly"
Written by **Courtney Jane Walker**



Writers Guild of Canada

CELEBRATING CANADIAN SCREENWRITERS