

Drama Goes Down the Tubes

by Karen Hill

After the dust settled following the spring Canadian Television Fund announcement, it became clear that the day of one-hour series drama is nearly done. *Blue Murder* (Global), *Da Vinci's Inquest* (CBC), *Tom Stone* (CBC), *Cold Squad* (CTV) and *The 11th Hour* (CTV) are all that remain. Both emerging writers and industry old-timers are left scratching their heads as they survey the dearth of story department gigs or even freelance work.

Some are casting longing glances south of the border. Others are looking to new opportunities at home and are breaking into the still-booming animation field. What the hell happened? And how can writers function in this new Darwinian environment? The short answer: adapt or die.

While many writers are looking at different opportunities within television, others are getting out of the game altogether. Paul Gross says he deliberately bailed on series in favour of his feature *Men With Brooms*. "The reality of series in Canada [is that] they're almost doomed before they get out of the gate. You never have enough money. I don't know where we're going to end up but I suspect we're going to see drama disappear unless we can figure out some way of financing them properly.

"There were times in *Due South* when we'd have weakish scripts and you'd throw some money at it with a car chase and you could kind of get around it," Gross says. "But if you can't do anything about it, then that script sits out there baldly, and an audience doesn't give a shit how much money you spent. They don't know. There's no disclaimer at the front of it. That was one of the biggest issues, worrying about whether or not anything I undertook in a series venture would be any good." Executive producer Peter Lauterman has been writing for more than 20 years and is a veteran of one-hour dramas including *Night Heat*, *Adderly*, *Street Legal*, *E.N.G.*, *North of 60* and *Cover Me*. He has a clear-eyed, unsentimental view of the downward turn. "I don't want to sound negative. I don't want to whine. I've been very fortunate in this industry in terms of series television. Win or lose, I have nothing to complain about, personally," he says. But, he adds, "I believe the world that gave me, and a dozen other people like me, this opportunity is gone."

Who's to Blame?

Lauterman points squarely at the softening of CRTC regulations mandating the number of drama hours networks must broadcast, as well as at changes in content rules and cuts to the CBC. The lack of a major hue and cry from audiences about those same cutbacks illustrates the absence of a national will to support an indigenous cultural television industry.

"There are so many choices out there that no one in Canada feels as passionate about Canadian content as they did 20 years ago. The issue is going away. My sense of it is the younger generation of people under 30 are not going to martyr themselves on the cross of Canadian nationalism."

Major policy changes at the federal level, the rise of reality shows, the evaporation of foreign pre-sales, the absence of a strong personality à la Robert Lantos rallying the industry, and a funding squeeze have all conspired to lay to rest the heady days of yore. There's also the CBC's near-death by a thousand cuts-which has driven the public broadcaster to eschew hour-long and become more reliant on half-hour series, lower budget comedies and a mix of mini-series and MOWs.

But perhaps most responsible for the recent downward spiral is the federal regulatory body that once played such a critical role in getting Canadian stories onto television screens, the Canadian Radio-Television & Telecommunications Commission. In 1999, before the CRTC loosened the requirements of networks to air drama, 11 indigenous series were airing. During 2000 and 2001, that number was down to five. Over the same period, the level of export series-co-productions which aren't discernibly Canadian but are shot here to take advantage of the low dollar and various tax breaks-has remained static at around 15.

The CRTC helped start the ball rolling downhill when it announced a new content framework for major broadcasters CTV and Global. The old framework labelled drama, variety, arts and entertainment as "underrepresented programming." That definition morphed into "priority programming" which required the major broadcasters to run eight hours per week of priority programming in prime time. The stake through the heart of drama, however, was the broadening of the definition of priority programming to include regional programs and entertainment magazines such as *E!Now*. And though the guilds and associations representing writers, directors and producers all lobbied for a spending commitment tied to programming, the CRTC ignored their call.

Without that key requirement, it became too tempting for broadcasters to opt for cheaper shows-ones that don't carry a million-dollar price tag per episode. That meant drama, essentially, became optional. As if that weren't bad enough, the CRTC created another drama disincentive. So-called Super Canadian programs with 10 out of 10 points got a 150-percent time credit, meaning that 60 minutes of drama counted as 90 minutes of priority programming. While that actually looked like an incentive for broadcasters to weigh in with indigenous drama, that's not how it played out. The CRTC gave with one hand while it took away with another: export dramas with a range of six to nine out of 10 points for Canadian content were given a 125-percent time credit. Again, in English, that means a 60-minute show qualified as 75 minutes.

Export dramas such as *Relic Hunter* were already cheaper to license for Canadian broadcasters because the driver was the US licence fee. The difference in licence fees for programmers was significant since it costs about \$100,000 per hour to license a one-hour export drama and up to \$250,000 for indigenous one-hours. With broadcasters viewing Canadian content as loss leaders, it became more attractive for them to run exports. They still get a 125-percent credit and pay less than half of what it costs for indigenous drama.

In the Beginning, There Was Night Heat

Another huge factor at play is the absence of a passionate advocate capable of rallying industry players and politicians around the notion of a strong cultural identity playing on the small screen. Lantos played a key role in persuading Telefilm to get into funding television, which led to *Night Heat*, a CBS/CTV RSL (Lantos' production company) show that aired in prime time on CTV and at midnight in the US.

As Lauterman says, Telefilm's investment in the series lured in the Americans. "From the American point of view, they were getting free money. That was subsidy, that was social engineering-cultural engineering, if you will." The resulting use of Canadian writers, directors and actors helped launch 15 years worth of Canadian television. "*Night Heat* begat everything. Out of *Night Heat* came most of the showrunners and the A-list writers of the next 15 years. It spawned *Adderly*, it spawned *North of 60*, it spawned *E.N.G.*, it spawned *Due South* in one way or another."

But it wasn't simply the raw numbers game that made everything happen. "It was also just simply Lantos' passion for having a Canadian product. Which was risky and illogical, and he covered his ass many different ways. And in the end he remained committed to it. It takes nerve and it's not necessarily a rational thing to do from a business point of view but he did it," he adds. "You had real Canadian series on the air and being watched by substantial audiences and creating

constant opportunities for younger writers to come into the system. All that has essentially gone away now." Part of Lantos' juggling act was foreign pre-sales for series. He gambled that if he could get a five-year run out of a show, he could market it abroad. Lauterman says other countries studied Canada's success and copied it, learning how to make their own medium and low-cost drama. Because of that, there is no longer the same access to 20 percent of the funding pot available to producers that they used to be able to bank on from overseas. Dwindling pre-sales from foreign territories are putting a further squeeze on already tight bottom lines. The fact that there's less public money and less money coming in from distribution has put a boot on the throat of producers. Also, in a strange way, the increase in the monies available to drama through the CTF has led to a corresponding decrease when distributors slash the pre-sale fee.

"I was one of the beneficiaries of that system, me and all my generation in the business were given a glorious opportunity to write adult drama in prime time with great colleagues in a really creative environment," Lauterman says.

Bureaucracy vs. Creativity

The existing system has been governed by political machinations—"social engineering and cultural mandates"—which has been the key to the way series have been made in Canada, Lauterman adds. The bureaucrats have been driving the bus. The \$1-million price tag for an hour of indigenous drama only garners about \$250,000 in licence fees from networks. The need to cobble together financing from the various agencies has put too much power into the hands of people who are answerable to politicians: the bureaucrats. "Inherently, the instinct of a bureaucrat is antithetical to the creative instinct because the artistic instinct is all about taking risk and breaking new ground and stirring things up," says Lauterman. "The instinct of the bureaucrat is to manage and control and make things palatable and safe and rational. Business is creative, writing is creative. That's why there's this unholy marriage.

"In a bureaucratic situation, you end up not doing what's good or passionate or ground-breaking. You do what is manageable. When you're answering to the government for your money, it's very difficult for government people to want to do *Oz*. It's very difficult to do *Queer as Folk*, or *The Sopranos* or *The West Wing*. The instinct is to do something safer."

However, the new, tough environment is breeding a more realistic assessment of what writers need to succeed. New programming is going to emerge and reveal a much different landscape on Canadian televisions within the next 10 years. Something's got to give and that's series drama. "People are going to have to say, 'Hour long, million-dollar series is dead. Long live whatever's new.' Something new is emerging," Lauterman says. "It's going to be different. It's going to be more doable because it's going to be based on a much more rational cost basis. It's going to be something we can actually afford to do which isn't going to require so much subsidy."

Ann MacNaughton, another veteran of the hour-long game, agrees. She's currently making her living in family drama and animation but built a successful career as a freelance writer and story department mainstay. Her dramatic series credits include *Wind at My Back*, *Traders*, *Twice in a Lifetime*, *Destiny Ridge*, *E.N.G.*, *Friday the 13th*, *Street Legal* and *Road to Avonlea*. The days of multi-character shows are behind us, she says, as are hour-long family dramas. Broadcasters are simply getting out of the drama game and MacNaughton says writers need to change their approach and cope with the realities of the changing market.

"Without having the CRTC holding a gun to their heads, [broadcasters] are never going to do an expensive Canadian drama," she says. "On the other hand, people are finding ways to do strange and interesting stuff, like *Puppets Who Kill*. You have to start out aiming to be a low-budget cult hit. The only way they can afford to take those risks is on something really low budget. I don't see anyone out there at this particular time, of the producers, willing to spend money on things that can't be sold internationally."

Sell it Overseas or Die

Low ratings and poor international sales led to the demise of the heavily hyped series *The Associates* after just two seasons. Steve Blackman was a co-creator, writer and producer on the series, with writing partner Greg Ball. He says Canadian drama is having trouble competing for a couple of reasons. "Canadian television is trapped between two places. You've got British television on the one side, which tends to be very smart, really well written character-driven stuff that really has a market. On the other hand you have the American flash, \$2.8 million per episode *The West Wing* where the sky's the limit. "We're stuck in between because we don't have the money to make it flashy and no one is willing to take the risk to make it edgy enough to justify why a viewer would watch our show over the American show. For the 25 American shows they can choose from and two Canadian shows, we have to be so much more edgy and smart to get them to watch. We don't because people in Canada are afraid to take risks, to offend, to do anything. So we make watered down television."

He says that's exactly what happened on *The Associates*. "We were constantly cut off at the knees. We were constantly told that we couldn't do [certain stories] because people wouldn't want to see a dark story. We couldn't do a rape because it might offend some viewers. They thought that edgy meant we had a bit of swearing or a little bit of nudity. That's not what we were talking about. How can you possibly compete with *Law & Order* and these shows at their level?" With Alliance Atlantis backing out of the one-hour series game, the buzz through the writing community is increasingly to head south, or stay here and get into animation or family drama. Blackman says he and his writing partner are LA-bound. There's more of a chance to be innovative south of the border due to the sheer volume of production companies competing with one another, as well as networks that take bigger risks.

"There's great talent here. That's the sad part," Blackman says. "But someone has to be visionary at the network level and say we're going to take a chance and make a show that makes people sit up in their seats and say, 'Whoa, that I haven't seen. That is smart, that is edgy, that's dark.'" He says writers like Chris Haddock had the right idea: go to the States, build a rep, then come back to Canadian television and do things your way. He adds that Haddock "makes great television. If [*Da Vinci's Inquest*] had the budget of *The West Wing*, it would be phenomenal."

Is Popstars Drama?

Christine Shipton has worked in the film and television industry for over 20 years. She's been executive director of Canadian television for Landscape Entertainment, as well as executive vice president of television at Alliance Atlantis. She's long been known among writers as a champion of Canadian series drama. In her current incarnation as an executive in programming and development for W (formerly WTN), Shipton says her five-year view of drama isn't dependent upon the funding agencies, and won't rely on traditional one-hour, million-dollar series dramas. Joining forces with another Canadian network and taking a second window isn't necessarily a solution, either. So she's casting her net abroad for broadcast partners. "I have to have alternatives to offer the audience. That means we looked outside the borders which immediately means you may be compromised in your storytelling because it means you're expanding your audience base beyond just Canada.

"We've all said there are universal stories to be told that can appeal to many audiences. If a broadcast partner is either in the UK, Australia or the US, we look for those universal stories so that they're going to appeal to all of the partners and audiences. It takes away specificity of place and that is a real shame for our kids. I'm going to use the Sheila Copps take. It's a real shame that again, Canadians won't recognizably be seeing their own country on the screens. It's not in every case, but that's the risk we're taking by being put in the box of having to move to this financing scenario."

Shipton points to Global and the way it's using the wiggle room under the new CRTC regulations to create new programming. "In all fairness, the way the Canadian content is being fulfilled, there

is a narrative if you look at *No Boundaries* or *Popstars*. They would call that narrative Canadian drama. They're not wrong. They're being really creative with that. People are tuning into that. But it's not scripted drama the way the production industry would like to see us licensing." The problem, she says, all starts with the audience and the failure of creators to take viewers into account. "The first thing we have to say is does an audience want to watch this? Why would they want to watch it? And how can we make it even more attractive to them so they will watch it?"

Broadcasters are forced into becoming "creative" within the regulations laid out by the CRTC, she says. Global's hour-long reality program *No Boundaries* is a prime example of a co-marketing initiative driving a show. Ford has been using the show's title as the marketing slogan for their SUVs for several years. Teaming up with Lion's Gate and Ford, Global has created an hour-long series that fits the definition of Canadian content.

"You can't fault them," Shipton says. "The broadcaster is trying to get the advertisers involved in Canadian product, and unless they are, broadcasters cannot continue to order Canadian product. You have to make sales. It's a business. You have to sell the ad time in and around the programming. We've got to this point where advertisers run away from Canadian drama. That's just never going to give us an industry."

Shipton says the networks need to be able to take a greater role in determining what gets made based on ratings, rather than producers and funding agencies. Otherwise the industry is simply propped up by the wrong forces. The old system was set up to jump-start the industry but the time has come to do things differently. "The power of the production company and distributor, i.e. Alliance, was so huge because they were bringing other monies to the table and broadcasters had to bow to that. They weren't in control."

MacNaughton says 2002 is the year of ignominy for writers. "I think this is the year that you're seeing the horrible shrinking on the screens" as far as indigenous series go. She says the next wave for writers who want to do live-action series is "guerrilla TV" like Steve Smith's *Red Green Show*: half-hour and cheap to produce. Otherwise, it's into the animation industry, which can be a welcome change after the tribulations of financially challenged live-action drama, she adds. "It's very freeing to write animation because as real budgets shrink, there are only so many ways you can tell those stories within those budget constraints, like with three characters in a room, over and over again. With animation, you have doors opening in a weird way."

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