

Welcome to Reality

Is there any way our country can support drama? The short answer: yes.

By Philip Moscovitch

Doom, doom, doom. Oh, and you can toss some gloom in there too—just for the sake of variety.

That pretty much sums up the attitude of screenwriters who make their living writing drama, as well as industry types hoping to see a turnaround in the continuing decline in indigenous production. Recently, I overheard one screenwriter holding forth on the subject. He was pointing out that this was a cyclical business. Always has been. Always will be. We're in one of the down cycles now—it's just a question of whether we've reached the bottom and, if not, how much farther we have to go.

Another writer interjected, "Maybe it's cyclical. Or maybe it's time for us all to give up fishing cod and start fishing shrimp instead."

Because writers are involved in the earliest stage of any production—development—we've been sounding the alarm on a

but destined primarily for audiences outside our borders—there were 753 hours of drama produced in 1999. By the end of 2002, that number had fallen. Dramatically. All the way to 486 hours. That's a drop of just over 35 percent.

Meanwhile, the few shows that remain get scheduled in abysmal time slots, or moved all over the dial so they can't build a following. You've heard that *The Associates* had a hard time gaining a loyal audience? I wonder why it was so tough for them. After all, CTV only changed the show's time slot 11 times during its first season.

And don't count on our public broadcaster to step in and save the day. Over at the CBC, funding for Canadian drama has gone from \$62.4 million in 1999-2000 to \$46.2 million in 2000-01 (the last year for which figures are available). Hardly a stellar performance. And the NFB, which has been responsible

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drama decline for quite some time. Now the rest of the industry is finally catching up.

For awhile there, broadcasters denied that there was any decline. Hey, they said. We've got more MOWs on the go. So really, it all just evens out.

Just the facts

Hold still for a minute and let me run a few figures by you. The source: a report on the state of English-language Canadian drama commissioned by the Canadian Coalition of Audio-Visual Unions—a group of 10 unions and guilds including the WGC, SARTEC, ACTRA, the DGC, and NABET 700. The report was released in late March.

In 1999, there were 293 hours of non-export drama produced in WGC jurisdiction. In 2002? 217 hours. That's a decline of 26 percent, folks.

All right. But how about all those MOWs and mini-series picking up the slack? In 1999, 52 hours were produced. By 2002 the number had climbed all the way to... uh... 52.

If you factor in the export shows—nominally Canadian programs like *Sue Thomas: F.B. Eye* produced in this country

for high-profile co-pros like *The Boys of St. Vincent*, has been forced out of the drama game by years of relentless budget cuts.

Back to the future

Back when quotas for Canadian programming were first introduced, in the 1960s, there was no requirement to produce Canadian drama. Throughout the '60s and '70s, as long as broadcasters met their Cancon requirements, they were OK. Naturally, they produced the cheapest possible Canadian programming: news, sports, and game shows. Sound familiar?

For 20 years, beginning in the late 1970s, the CRTC tightened regulations in order to promote more drama. (It's worth remembering that CTV appealed a CRTC ruling ordering it to carry 39 hours of drama by 1984 all the way to the Supreme Court). Some pretty damn memorable shows came out of those 20 years: *Degrassi Junior High*, *North of 60*, *Traders*, *Street Legal* and *Due South* among them.

But 1999 brought a disastrous new television policy—one that saw drama rolled into a category called "Priority Programs." A category that includes things like entertainment magazines, longform docs, and variety shows.

And this ruling dovetailed nicely (or not so nicely) with a trend looming south of the border and about to be exported all over the world: ostensibly unscripted, cheap-to-produce reality television. *Survivor* hit the airwaves in the spring of 2000, and the world hasn't been the same since. A long parade of shows followed—*Joe Millionaire* (3.5 million viewers for the finale in Toronto and Vancouver according to *Variety*), *The Osbournes*, *The Anna Nicole Show* (whose coming to Canadian television was big enough news to grab TV book covers), *Fear Factor*, *Extreme Makeover*. The list seems endless.

In spring 2003, Global's top-rated Canadian show was *Popstars*.

Canadians in the drama business are tearing their hair out. Not only do they now have to fight to get local drama on the air—they're fighting a trend that may be threatening all drama. The reality shows even get their own categories at the Emmys and Geminis this year.

Variety stringer Brendan Kelly quotes CHUM president and CEO Jay Switzer as saying, "The American reality stuff has really affected habit patterns in Canada... There's less drama on the schedules."

Kelley gets pissed off

David E. Kelley, creator of *Ally McBeal* and *The Practice* (among other shows) tore a strip off the reality trend in a speech given March 8. While accepting the Writers Guild of America Paddy



American über-writer David E. Kelley.

Chayefsky award, he launched into his attack by saying, "We live and work in a time where the medium is no longer respected by many of its guardians."

Kelley went on to say, "I do believe there are studio heads who would rather make a show with Aaron Sorkin than have lunch with the next contestant of *How to Marry a Terrorist*. There are executives at the news corporations and at Disney or Viacom who truly do consider it a privilege to be in the business with the likes of a David Chase, a John Wells, or a Larry David, or an Alan Ball. The voices of those executives and presidents have gone silent for now, but I believe that they are out there.

And believe it or not, I think that many of them got into this business for the same reason that I did... To make a television show. To tell stories."

Kelley also took a shot at reality with the "Les Is More" episode of *The Practice*, which aired in April. In the episode, CBS president Les Moonves is taken hostage by a woman who then pitches the network a reality show based on their boss's kidnapping—and possible murder.

Victoria Riskin, president of the Writers Guild of America, west, says the WGAw is taking a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, they hope that the reality trend will burn out. On the other, they realize it won't vanish completely—so they want to organize the writers.

While reality shows are usually referred to as unscripted, there is a whole lot of writing that goes into creating them. None of the work on Canadian or on most of the American shows is union.

Riskin says, "There's more writing or less writing on a given show. Somebody comes up with the concept, they organize what the various events, games or challenges are going to be. They put together the concept of the setting, and while much that happens on the location may be spontaneous, then they come back and edit them and put them together. Just as documentaries contain quite a bit of writing, so do these reality programs. And of course, the material delivered by the host is scripted too."

She adds, "I think this summer will be a real significant test. About 14 percent of the prime time schedule will be reality programming, and we will see whether the public gravitates towards that or not. The risk the networks take is that if they put too many of these on and the viewers are turned off, they may have trouble getting them back to the scripted programming. Television is a habit, and once people realize they can lose that habit—that they can spend time on the Internet or doing other things—it's harder then to drag viewers back to the television."

Entertainment research firm Kagan World Media released a report, Riskin says, saying that networks' over-reliance on reality puts their schedules at risk. "There is not enough scripted programming in the pipeline, and they will be in trouble as [reality shows] start to fade."

The end of reality?

And Riskin is "cautiously optimistic" that fade they will. "There's only so much of these kinds of programs people are willing to watch."

Partly that's because, while reality shows may be cheap for the networks and may pull in big numbers, they don't always sit well with the advertisers.

"We're happy to have six or seven weeks of *Joe Millionaire*, but these shows are not as predictable as regular series, and they're not as easy to sell to advertisers," CHUM's Switzer told *Variety*. "The problem with reality is that you're in and out in six weeks. You're not developing a meaningful relationship with your viewers."

As Meg James of the *LA Times* reported in late April, reality shows make advertisers queasy for several reasons—one of them being that some may be huge hits, while others have been among the worst flops of the year.

James quotes Tom DeCabia, executive vice-president of the large US ad-buying firm PHD USA as saying, "Anything that ends up in a hot tub, you don't want to be around. Reality is not something that a lot of advertisers are beating down the door to get into."



Victoria Riskin, president of the Writers Guild of America, west.

And while NBC's summer schedule is chock-a-block full of reality programming, most of the American networks seem to be backing off reality for fall. ABC Entertainment president Susan Lyne told *Variety* in late March, "The best way for us to succeed is with character-driven dramas."

Of course, trends south of the border have this habit of spilling over up here. And Steve Lucas, writer-producer on *Blue Murder*, says he too is "cautiously optimistic" that drama will bounce back.

"I've got to tell you, typically what happens in Canada is if enough people are focussing on a problem it gets addressed, and I'm cautiously optimistic that we'll address this one too. I have to be. I know that's wishy-washy, but I have to believe it. Every guild in the country, every producer's group knows this is a problem."



Steve Lucas of *Blue Murder*.

Speaking near the end of the US-led war with Iraq, Lucas says, "The war—that was reality. It made people realize, 'what I was watching wasn't real.' It made it all seem," here, he gets a look of distaste, "tacky. And what kind of second views are they going to get? Who's going to watch those shows the second time around? Meanwhile, look at the numbers the networks get for reruns of *Law and Order* or *NYPD Blue*. The numbers are huge—huge—for shows that are 10 or 12 years old."

In a funny way, Lucas says that the interest in reality may actually spur a resurgence in serialized drama—as opposed to shows that are designed so that each episode can stand alone. Viewers are caught up in the drama of the situation. Or, as Lucas puts it, "Oh my God, is she going to go with him?"

Doing it the Australian way

Let's assume that reality starts to buckle under its weight here in Canada too, and that we're not all going to wind up packing in the writing gear in favour of jobs as Wal-Mart greeters.

If we want to get people watching, caring about, even (gasp!) loving Canadian drama, we'll need to make some changes to the industry.

And yes, it can be done. Just look at the Australian free-to-air networks.

Back in 1963, a year after the Australian Writers Guild was founded, there was exactly one Australian drama on the air. Australian content regulations had only been around three years, and the requirements were minimal: 40 percent of overall transmission time. A two percent drama requirement was introduced in 1967.

Megan Elliott, acting executive director of the AWG, says the fight to get Australian programming on the air has not been easy. "Predictably the broadcasters opposed the introduction of the quota system. It was much cheaper to continually import British and US drama than make Australian programs. In the '60s and '70s there was a massive public campaign mounted by writers, directors, actors, producers and so on, called "Make It Australian," which pretty much forced the government to regulate. However, it's important to note here that the AWG also had an ongoing battle in the '70s, which was to stop production companies importing British and American writers to write for Australian content. We won."

Today, the requirements are much higher, and in order to qualify as Australian content, dramas have to be new and must air between six and 11 p.m. Compare that to Canada, where reruns count as priority programming.

One of the reasons quotas have been getting tougher is that they have enjoyed bipartisan support for decades. Elliott says, "It's been a strategy of nation builders. Likewise, having local coverage on television has also been an important strategy in overcoming the rural-urban divide, characteristic in many countries of large landmass and small population...Content quotas haven't kept [American programs] out of our lounge-rooms, but they take up less space on our screens than they would otherwise."

Five of the top 10 prime time dramas on Australian TV are locally made. And all three of the top three are Aussie shows. Are the Australian broadcasters suffering as a result?

"Per capita, our commercial broadcasters are the most profitable in the world and to suggest that they would continue to broadcast local content without screen quotas is pretty naïve," Elliott says. "Ultimately it's a question of the survival of the Australian industry. Without quotas, I'm not thinking that

we'd have one. Some good news is the ongoing support of the Australian population for Australian television. In a recent poll of 1,000 Australians over the age of 18, 71 percent said they would not support a free trade agreement with the US if it resulted in fewer Australian television programs."

Interestingly enough, the network that airs the least drama is called Ten—and it's part-owned by Canwest. But even Ten, Elliott says, has had a few hits in the drama sweepstakes.

How about licence fees? The typical Australian MOW costs \$3 million, with the broadcaster ponying up about a quarter. When it comes to one-hour drama, licence fees are in the 62- to- 75 percent range.

Elliott says success of Australians in Hollywood is a direct result of a healthy TV drama industry.

"At the end of the day, while we're recognized internationally for the talent and product we produce, it's the quota system which ensures that our market is not flooded with cheap overseas TV programs or cheap 'reality' shows. Under the quota system, the Australian TV industry has developed into a dynamic training

"You can't have a feature film industry without this. You can't even have MOWs without this. Series television is the foundation."

Meanwhile, in the UK...

Across the Atlantic, UK viewers live in a country where all 10 of the top 10 dramas are locally produced.

Yes, the UK has a lot more people than Canada, but even there local drama is not a given.

"There was a period in the 1980s when shows like *Dallas* and *Dynasty* were very popular, but that was temporary," says John Wilsher, president of the Writers' Guild of Great Britain. "Before and since, British audiences have preferred home produced drama. We have an odd situation at the moment where US imports are often highly rated by critics in the serious newspapers, but they are transmitted on the minority channels or at non-peak times—they just don't attract big audiences. The mass of viewers seem to want drama that reflects their own lives, and they don't identify with American characters and

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Photo courtesy WGGGB.

John Wilsher, president of the Writers' Guild of Great Britain.

ground for an outward-looking industry. We all know what dumping and bundling means to an indigenous production industry—the end of it."

Lucas echoes her words, saying that television drama "is Triple A." And no, he doesn't mean it's a minor-league business. He means that it's where you go to cut your teeth in the industry.

"If we're going to do hit shows here, first we have to do shows," Lucas says. "You don't get better at something by not doing it. Sooner or later, someone is going to hit. We can do it, but it's been awhile.

situations. Personally I think we in the UK are becoming more and more American in our culture, so the US product may become more dominant (but I'm getting old). If the current Communications Bill goes through Parliament as it stands, a US company would be allowed to take over Channel 5. The fear here is that Rupert Murdoch will swallow it, and use it to dump US product."

Writer Anji Loman Field has been doing episodic television for a decade. Her many credits include the long-running *Eastenders*, and the medical dramas *Doctors* and *Holby City*.

She doesn't see reality television as posing any long-term threat to drama. In fact, she says writers should use the shows to their advantage. "I don't think reality shows should be seen as a threat—more of a cross between a distraction (from work) and an inspiration! As a study in human nature and the dynamics of relationships, the better ones can be extremely enlightening. However, broadcasters would be mad to think they could saturate the schedules with such cheap entertainment and get away with it. I think people will be getting bored with it soon."

March ratings showed that the top 10 in Britain included five cop/detective shows, two medical dramas and three quirky serials.

Loman Field says, "The best American cop and medical shows are usually better written, acted, directed and so on. But Brits seem to prefer the familiarity and coziness of homegrown shows. The landscape is familiar. We can relate to the characters—and I would say casting is key."

And even though these shows appeal to the British audience because they are familiar, that doesn't prevent them from selling well abroad, Loman Field notes.

She ends with a word of advice: "So perhaps Canadian broadcasters would do well to commission more quirky, place-specific, homegrown dramas featuring strong and typically Canadian characters."

Imagine that. ■