

Jail time for gritty Blackstone TV series

Award-winning show shooting in old Edmonton remand centre

BY ELIZABETH WITHEY, EDMONTON JOURNAL MAY 16, 2014



EDMONTON - The city's old remand centre no doubt saw plenty of drama during the more than three decades it held inmates awaiting trial, but the action never made it onto prime time television.

This week, however, the eerily hollow jail in Edmonton's downtown turned into a TV set as crews from the award-winning APTN series [Blackstone](#) shot on location for the show's upcoming fourth season. Local production company [Prairie Dog Film + Television](#) has spent 10 days inside the six-storey building just off 97th Street near the central police station, including the gang unit on the fourth floor.

The old remand centre closed in 2013, and inmates were moved to the new Edmonton Remand Centre at the north edge of the city.

Which *Blackstone* character ends up in the slammer? We wouldn't want to spoil the plot, but rest assured, the series about the residents of a fictional aboriginal reserve is as gritty, gripping and true-to life as ever.

"There are some choices we made this season that are ripped right from the headlines," says executive producer, writer and director Ron E. Scott.

Scott says one of this season's themes is girls luring other young girls off the reserve and into prostitution, using drugs and material goods like handbags as bait. Yes, girls, Scott reiterates, not the "creepy old men" one might imagine as the pimps. It's a perfect example of the serious issues facing aboriginal communities that *Blackstone* bravely and successfully tackles. "It's the promise of a better

life but, to simplify, the grass isn't greener," he says. The storyline echoes a human trafficking theme from Season 2.

With an enormous, largely aboriginal cast — including Carmen Moore, Alberta-born Michelle Thrush, Eric Schweig, Steven Cree Molison and Nathaniel Arcand — Blackstone is a dark one-hour drama that's picked up a slew of accolades since it premiered in 2011. It has been nominated for 72 awards and has won 20 of them, including two Gemini, four Leo Awards and a multitude of Rosies for excellence in Alberta's film and television. This spring, the show received a prestigious nomination for best dramatic series at the Canadian Screen Awards (the new combo of Genies and Gemini).

Prairie Dog will spend a total of seven weeks filming the eight episodes for the new series, which will air on APTN (short for Aboriginal Peoples Television Network) in September. Much of the filming is done at Namao, with a flat, open prairie landscape that effectively resembles a veritable reserve.

Ten-year-old Miika Whiskeyjack, a Grade 5 student at Menisa Elementary School, is the youngest cast member and returns for Season 4. Her schoolfriends have found out she's on TV. "They're like, 'Can we have your autograph?' and stuff," she says. "I didn't actually tell them but they figured it out searching my name."

Of her character, Wendy, Miika says "she's a bit more tomboy than me and she doesn't really have that, like, girliness in her. She's really calm and she doesn't really want to ruin the surprises and stuff. She just goes with the flow."

Her mom, Teneil Whiskeyjack, also has a role in the show.

This season of Blackstone will also delve into the ongoing cultural and emotional impact of residential schools on aboriginal people, using jail as a metaphor for the prison-like setting aboriginal children experienced and the ripple effects on their descendants. "Obviously there are differences but there are some scary similarities between residential schools and the prison system," Scott says.

The show's fearless willingness to address real-life issues facing aboriginal people in Canada, coupled with a strong cast, are why Mi'kmaq actor [Glen Gould](#) has wanted in since the beginning. This season, Scott finally found a perfect role for Gould: Smoky Stoney, a new character who has been away from the community for 10 years.

Blackstone "is reality, it's not candy-coated," the Cape Breton-born, Toronto-based Gould said after filming a tense scene with Cheri Maracle, who plays Smoky's ex-girlfriend Sarah Bull. The character of Smoky is a "juicy role," meaning "you get to strut your stuff, show your emotional range as an actor: violent, in tears, drunk, hard-nosed, with a soft side, a humorous side, a flirtatious side."

Working on Blackstone is living up to all his expectations. "Everyone in the cast is like family," says Gould. "I've known these people for 20 years. Tantoo Cardinal is like my mother, Michelle Thrush is like my sister, Carmen Moore is like my sister, and they're both playing my sisters in the show."