

CBC answers call for edgier TV fare with aboriginal series

Bill Brioux / The Canadian Press

June 11, 2015 10:32 AM

If you can't make 'em, acquire 'em.

That seems to be the mantra these days at the CBC. Faced with budget cuts and dealing with the steep loss of NHL advertising revenues, the public broadcaster — when it isn't fending off scandals — has been forced to take its content where it can find it.

That paid off big time with the acquisition of "Murdoch Mysteries" a few seasons ago. Originally on City, it soared in the ratings after moving to CBC.

Lately, CBC has forged partnerships with other broadcasters in sharing shows. Deals with sitcoms such as "Mr. D" and "Young Drunk Punk" see those Canadian-made comedies getting showcased on both CBC and City. Starting later this month, the Super Channel family drama "When Calls the Heart" — also airing in the U.S. on Hallmark — gets a berth behind "Heartland" on CBC's summer schedule.

A bolder step, and one more in keeping with the CBC brass' call for edgy, HBO-like fare, is the addition of "Blackstone" to the summer lineup. Beginning Monday through July 7, CBC will run seasons 1 and 2 of the APTN original nightly at 11:30 p.m.

A Gemini Award winner and Canadian Screen Awards nominee, "Blackstone" will also be available on iTunes.

Co-creator and showrunner Ron E. Scott is a big fan of American television auteurs such as Vince Gilligan ("Breaking Bad," "Better Call Saul") and Matthew Weiner ("Mad Men"). He sees their shows as little miracles that would have never got past the pitch stage if a network hungry to make a name for itself, AMC, hadn't stepped up and taken a chance.

Over the past five years, Scott has been determined to take similar creative risks in Canada — on a smaller budget — with "Blackstone." Set in the fictional Blackstone First Nations territory (and shot in Alberta), the APTN series offers a searing look at modern-day life on a reserve rife with corruption and addiction. It will likely jolt CBC viewers used to, as Scott puts it, "fluffier" fare such as "North of 60" or "Arctic Air."

Season 1 focuses on political corruption as well as the sometimes grim realities of education on a reserve.

"There's a really powerful message about consequences," says Scott, who praises the mostly first-time actors who took on the roles of "bad ass kids."

Among the large, ensemble cast on "Blackstone" are Carmen Moore, Eric Schweig, Michelle Thrush, Nathaathaniel Arcand and Gordon Tootoosis. Tantoo Cardinal, Cameron Bancroft and others appear

as season 2 unfolds.

Subsequent seasons dealt with issues such as gambling addiction and the many unsolved murders of aboriginal women.

In the past, APTN shared the series with Showcase, where Scott says feedback ranged from, “How can you air that?” to, “Finally you aired that.”

That kind of controversy, Scott feels, “will be good for CBC.”

The series’ edgy, adult content might explain, however, why CBC is airing it in such a late-night time-slot. There had been talks earlier of showcasing it Sundays at 10 p.m., a move that might have offered some flow out of HBO’s popular 9 o’clock dramas.

But Scott’s just happy that CBC has optioned it at all, after years of back-and-forth on the prospect. He’s wrapped production on season 5, which he says is “really ripped from the current headlines.” It will air this fall on APTN.

The new season will look at how a disproportionate number of aboriginal children die in foster care.

“There are some hard-hitting things in season 5 as well as some stories of hope,” he adds.

“We’ve always been aware that there has to be a counter balance in the dramatic world. We never want to depict native peoples as all screwed up and dysfunctional.”

Quite the opposite, in fact. Scott is proud to showcase aboriginal talent and, thanks to CBC, expose their work to a wider audience.

“It does take people into a world that I don’t think has ever been seen before on Canadian television.”

— Bill Brioux is a freelance TV columnist based in Brampton, Ont.

© Copyright Times Colonist