



Edmonton TV series *Blackstone* premieres fifth and final season



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Kidnapping, alcoholism, buried bodies, violence against women — all bad things must come to an end.

But as locally produced *Blackstone* kicks open its fifth and final season with a giant f-bomb, the seething melodrama balances its ample despair with moments of humour, community, redemption and hope.

Just don't hold your breath on a happy ending for everyone involved. One of *Blackstone's* great strengths is its acid-scarred realism, portrayed grittily by a terrific cast, including Steven Cree Molison, Carmen Moore, Eric Schweig and Michelle Thrush. Not to mention Ashley Burnham — currently Mrs. Universe — returning to the show this season after a two-year hiatus.

Filmed in and around Edmonton by Prairie Dog Film + Television, running on APTN (Aboriginal Peoples Television Network) and Showcase, with a second run on CBC, the show's creator Ron E. Scott describes his fourth and most awarded series. “*Blackstone* is a raw, authentic, one-hour drama on the power and politics and everyday life on a reserve on the Prairies. And how the people on reserves interact with the city, with a lot of non-native characters: doctors, Child and Family Services, the police.”

Compared to the cautious way aboriginal life is often written for TV, Scott laughs: “*Blackstone's* goal was to rip the carpet up.” Stories involved addiction, leadership corruption, homelessness, systemic racism and the embarrassingly low availability of drinking water on reserves.

So why is *Blackstone* ending?

“It's a great question,” Scott says in his office/production studio, in the Film Alberta building where SCTV was made in the '80s. “The broadcaster came to me when we were shooting Season 4 and said, ‘We want to do Season 5. Tell me why you want Season 6.’ I thought, ‘We've done so much — what else is there to do? We've hit the major hot buttons.’”

“What it came down to is *Blackstone* was built a certain way, and after five seasons the production model was a challenge because of escalating costs in a full union shop. Everyone in Canadian television knows how tight it is. And it was time to move on. There are more stories to tell, new worlds.

“Knowing it was the end, obviously there were some things I wanted to do, that I hadn't said in the previous four years. The series finale has a lot of interesting moments, and there are things left open, just like there are in life. Life goes on.

“And,” he adds, “life doesn't go on.”

The series finale will air Dec. 22.

One of the show's signatures is its willingness to let aboriginal characters be flawed, even villainous. "The show was always designed that we're not going to shy away from the realities, which a lot of shows do because it steps over boundaries. Being part native, I grew up and saw a lot of stuff. I played hockey on reserves; friends of mine still live on reserves. A lot of the actors come from there. You have this core group of people who understand that world.

"Showcase (network) would get on the phone and say, 'You can't do that!' But we'd get on the phone with APTN and say, 'This is true! It's really happening!'

"Blackstone pushed the reality envelope, the raw. And when you do that, you're able to have things that are real, not big budget ... We couldn't go to the moon, you know? We couldn't even shoot in West Edmonton Mall."

Season 5 will tackle the topic of missing aboriginal women, a controversial issue that helped defeat the Harper government. Says Thrush, who thinks she'll one day run for office: "I don't remember in my lifetime a prime minister who was so hated. I'm actually sort of grateful because he put a fire under indigenous people's asses. We really rose up to the occasion."

Scott explains: "Both the Rinelle Harper and the Tina Fontaine story really touched me. I wanted to build an arc on the commentary and the narrative really focusing in on, 'Who are these girls, what happened and why did it happen?' We don't answer all those questions, but we present it in a dramatic thread."

Scott thinks the show's popularity — including being well-loved in Australia and New Zealand — is as much about the people as the setting. "It was all about the human element, universal stories. Someone might watch and go, 'I'm not native, but my aunt was an alcoholic so I get that.'"

Thrush won a Gemini for her portrayal of Gail Stoney, a good person often consumed by her addictions. "It's one of the most interesting arcs in the whole show," she says. "It was an absolute gift as an actor. Last season she had it really rough, OD'd — and died. This season she's back on track again.

"It's hard to even talk about," Thrush says, her voice breaking, "because I am so close to my character. So, oh my gosh, I'm trying to say this without crying, on the last day when they clapped for Carmen (Moore) and myself and the people in that scene, we just burst into tears. There was so much trust between those two characters, and love. Oh, it was hard."

Scott smiles, thinking of the last few days of shooting over the summer. "There were some moments where I realized we're not going to do this again. I put on a pretty good face.

"At the same time, the last five seasons have been just a dream, to be able to write, direct and finish the show. But it's OK to let the characters go. I'm developing another series right now and I don't find that I'm pulling them over from Blackstone."

One of Scott's new projects also focuses on the missing women. Thrush, meanwhile, is filming a sci-fi called *Northlander*, set 2000 years from now, being produced in southern Alberta.

Scott stresses that one of the most important factors in the series' success was the crew and cast from all over



Alberta. “We had people make choices to work on Blackstone and not on bigger shows.

“We do have some great resources in Alberta, and especially Edmonton, people helping us, these great pockets of inspiration. And it’s something I never want to overlook.

“People in Toronto are still asking, ‘How the hell did you do it?’”