

PLAYBACK

How Blackstone gives a TV reckoning to real-life drama



November 28, 2014 by Etan Vlesing

Ron E. Scott, while in Toronto last week for the Canadian International Television Festival, picked up his Globe and Mail newspaper and noticed at once a page-one story about a heartbreak hotel in Winnipeg housing vulnerable aboriginal children in care.

For the creator, writer and director of Blackstone, the APTN drama about corruption and power politics on a fictional First Nation reserve, sadly it was déjà vu.

“You have 65 kids living in hotel rooms in Winnipeg. We did that in season one. And it’s just getting worse,” Scott told Playback Daily.

The Blackstone showrunner may well have added the newspaper clipping to his files as he looks to give his characters something big to contend on a drama-pumped fifth season now in development.



It’s early days as Scott maps out the moving parts for another season, or, as he describes, puts “the big blocks in.”

His immediate challenge as the showrunner of a long-running drama is to keep Blackstone from going stale.

In Hollywood, a big writer’s room helps inject new life into characters and storylines over multiple seasons.

But for Scott, who certainly has no studio budget to play with, keeping Blackstone emotionally driven and relevant for Canadians calls for exploiting still more major news stories to keep the ripped-from-the-headlines drama fresh.

“That’s just such a big topic that we can’t avoid,” he says of continuing to weave in headlines about missing and murdered aboriginal women in the fifth season.

And there’s no shortage of new real-life stories to introduce, including sexual abuse of children in remote northern communities.

“That’s really disturbing, some of the research we’ve been doing. We’re working with some health professionals,” Scott said.

Also likely to find its way further into the storyline is northern oil and gas exploration and development, and its impact on aboriginal communities choosing between economic gains and protecting their environment.

The drama’s fourth season dipped its toes into oil exploration on native reserves, and is headed into the deep end

for the fifth season.

“It’s just starting to get a lot more complicated when you introduce pipelines and fracking. And not every First Nation reserve is opposed to that,” Scott said.

If there wasn’t TV, you get the sense the Blackstone showrunner would be an activist or community organizer, shaking things up to address real-life and dire social issues many First Nations face.

Returning to last week’s newspaper headline, Scott cites the continuing mismanagement of foster care for fifth season treatment.

“We did it in season two to some degree, but there’s been 826 child deaths in the Alberta foster system in the last 10 years. The numbers are outrageous,” he said.

Blackstone will also add new characters in the fifth season, and established characters will die off. But as much as Scott looks to keep Blackstone fresh, there won’t be tinkering with the drama’s winning formula of mixing fact and fiction for dramatic impact.

“We want to keep it fresh, but the heart of Blackstone is creating a certain style and chemistry and we won’t deviate a whole lot from that,” Scott said.

The series, produced by Edmonton-based Prairie Dog Film + Television, is shot in Edmonton and the surrounding area.

Besides Scott, Jesse Szymanski is co-executive producer, and Damon Vignale is a writer/producer on the series.

Blackstone is produced in association with APTN and has financing from the Canada Media Fund, the Alberta Media Fund, the Rogers Cable Network Fund and Canadian tax credits.