

Boundary-pushing realism not for all

Topics and language on APTN series can make viewers uncomfortable



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Unflinching.

That's what the APTN series *Blackstone* has been during its first three seasons, mining a variety of hot-button topics -- corruption in First Nations government, gang violence, drug addiction and alcoholism, teen suicide, the tragic legacy of the residential-school system, the under-examined issue of missing and murdered aboriginal women -- in order to create an ongoing story that is gripping while also remaining determined to reflect current socio-cultural realities in Canada.

Series creator Ron E. Scott says he has, on occasion, encountered resistance from viewers who feel the



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Andy Fraser (Eric Schweig, right) talks to his son Alan Fraser (Justin Rain) while in prison trying to elude a murder charge.

TV PREVIEW

Blackstone

Starring Eric Schweig, Carmen Moore, Michelle Thrush, Nathaniel Arcand and Jennifer Podemski

Tuesday at 11 p.m.

APTN

show pushes its boundaries beyond conventional comfort levels.

"Obviously, I'll listen to anyone's comments on the show," Scott says during a telephone interview in the lead-up to *Blackstone*'s fourth-season premiere (Tuesday at 11 p.m., APTN). "Everyone's opinion is valid to me, from the 18-year-old who goes, 'Oh, that's a cool show,' to an elder who says, 'I don't like all the swearing.' People are always going to have an opinion, and that's all valid."

"But for me, as a content creator, I need to look past that; I take what people say seriously, but at the same time, this is an

entertainment show, and as a writer, I need to respect that medium. And I think we've done that -- no one can argue that this isn't an entertaining show."

Blackstone, which remains something of an under-the-radar commodity in its home country despite having earned international acclaim, follows the politics and interpersonal struggles on the fictional *Blackstone* First Nation in rural Alberta.

As the fourth season opens, *Blackstone* residents are scrambling to keep their community functioning in the aftermath of a devastating fire. Ruthless band leader Andy Fraser (Eric Schweig), the well-established villain in the serialized drama, is behind bars, awaiting trial on a murder charge.

Given his history of nasty behaviour, it goes without saying he has enemies in the prison population.

"I think there's a big payoff for a lot of (viewers) who don't like Andy," says Scott. "He's facing some serious jail time, and people are going to come on a journey this season to see what it's like to be incarcerated and for Andy to have his rights removed and his whole world changed."

Taking one of the series' core characters out of the community in which most of the story is told creates a challenge for Blackstone's writers. To fill the void left by Andy's imprisonment, Scott and company have added a couple of new characters: Jennifer Podemski as Dr. Crowshoe, a psychologist specializing in post-traumatic stress disorder, and Glen Gould as Smokey Stoney, the estranged brother of Leona (Carmen Moore) and Gail (Michelle Thrush).

As in seasons past, Blackstone's dialogue is heavily weighted with the blunt and consistently profane language one might expect to find in a world inhabited by lawless and often desperate people. In the season opener, as expected, F-bombs abound.

"The show was designed to be authentic," says Scott. "There are pockets of society where rough language is just a way of life, and this show was always intended to show that aggressive, confrontational language. I know it's offensive to some people, but what they're seeing is part of a world they've never seen before. But for other people, this will be something they're very familiar with."

Surf, sand, spies: With the first serious snowfall of the year just waiting for the "Go" signal from Mother Nature, it's time to start thinking about getting away to a sun-soaked locale.

PBS's Masterpiece Contemporary's latest offering serves dual purposes by offering a tropic-isle travelogue wrapped around a well-crafted mystery in the form of Worricker: Turks & Caicos, which airs Sunday at 9 p.m.

Bill Nighy, who first played master spy Johnny Worricker in 2011's Page Eight, returns in this meticulously paced thriller that finds the former MI-5 operative in a self-imposed retirement/exile on the titular Caribbean island.

Everything's chilled-out until Johnny encounters a mysterious American businessman named Curtis (Christopher Walken) who invites him to a nightly cocktail gathering. As it turns out, the other regulars at this not-so-happy hour are pretty bad dudes, and a chance meeting with the woman who acts as their publicist (Winona Ryder) produces a few tidbits of information that convince Worricker it's time to dust off his sleuthing shoes.

Languid and laid-back, but also sharply written and smoothly performed, Turks & Caicos is a treat. Nighy is the very definition of cool, and he's surrounded by a tremendous supporting cast, including, but not limited to, the aforementioned American stars as well as fellow Brits Helena Bonham Carter and Ralph Fiennes.