

# PLAYBACK

## Blackstone and the puzzle of Canadian drama authenticity

May 15, 2013 by Etan Vlessing

John Cassini recalls his first day playing a detective in *Blackstone*, the APTN drama about the darker side of a First Nations reserve.

The Vancouver actor, who played cops in earlier Canadian dramas like *Intelligence*, *Shattered* and *DaVinci's Inquest*, asked on set whether his detective badge should be pinned on, flashed or just left hanging on his belt to let everyone know he's laying down the law.

"They chuckled and then told me a white guy on a reserve and in a suit - everyone knows you're a cop," Cassini recalls.

That was a useful lesson as the trials, tears and talent of *Blackstone* come not just from tension between police and First Nation members, but from a raw, authentic drama about community, power and politics on a fictional reservation made from the aboriginal point of view.



It's Monday morning on the third season set in Edmonton for the Gemini award-winning *Blackstone* drama.



Cassini

Series mastermind Ron E. Scott is blocking a scene where Eric Schweig, who plays corrupt reserve chief Andy Fraser, is confronted in a police station by his father's ghost, Tom Fraser, performed by Ray Thunderchild.

Cassini and Schweig are relaxing between scenes and rehearsing their lines while Scott and his DOP set camera lines.

But if the early third season danger, death and malice storylines for the APTN drama is anything to go by - Cassini's recurring detective character is investigating the murder of a dancer in a strip club and closing in on Andy Fraser - the police station scene is unlikely to end well as the cameras start rolling.

The *Blackstone* chief, now a baffled and battered gangster battling a possible murder charge, listens quietly as his ghost father recounts how an uncle who everyone assumed had died alone in his home was in reality the victim of police brutality.

"Why didn't you tell anyone?" the son asks his father.

"In those days it was different to be an Indian. In these parts if you were stopped off rez without your treaty card you usually went to jail or ended up in a fuckin snow bank," the ghost father recalls.

With Tom Fraser as the conscience of his ruthlessly powerful, yet emotional vulnerable son, the *Blackstone* scene resembles Tony Soprano opening up to his psychiatrist Dr. Melfi in *The Sopranos*, or the red room dream sequence in *Twin Peaks*, David Lynch's schoolgirl murder mystery.

But the apportion of blame in *Blackstone* is also key to the First Nation drama as Ron E. Scott, executive producer, director and writer, wants his characters to



Schweig

take responsibility for their dark, violent world, and move on with their lives.

"It's a legacy issue – sins of the father," Scott begins as he explains the motivation of Andy Fraser, a sociopath coming unstuck in the third season of Blackstone.

Here's a bad blood drama that could just as easily fit into an HBO or Showtime schedule, and as it happens is close to a U.S. sale.

"We are in active discussions with a (U.S.) cable network," says Ritch Colbert, a principal at PPI Releasing, which is distributing Blackstone internationally.

"I have no doubt that we will find a U.S. customer. It's glossy and well crafted and well written and well acted series as there is on TV," he adds.

Yet precisely because the world of the native reservation was created by a vanquishing white Canadian society and a legacy of residential schools, poverty and addiction, Blackstone characters too often appear unable or unwilling to change their lives for the better.

"It's a reflection of human nature, It reflects a true story," Scott adds of the ripped-from-headlines story of a card-carrying native Canadian whose death at the hands of the police is swept under the carpet on the reservation.

"People don't like to hear it, but it's true," he adds.

And Canadians are hearing Blackstone's truth-telling, via APTN.

Even if it too often is a fool's errand to make epic TV in Canada on a tight budget, Scott, with a poet's taste for drama and complexity, has managed to make a drum tight First Nation drama that blends unprecedented realism with social commentary.



Moore

To embrace a mainstream audience, Scott looks to universal storylines. That includes a first season filled with Shakespearean tropes, including two feuding families jockeying for position – the bad seeds in the Frasers and the beneficent Stoney clan, led by Leona Stoney, played by Carmen Moore.

"The characters are well-rounded: we have the evil villain, we have the do-gooder, we have an elder, we have a raging alcoholic," says Moore of the Blackstone cast.

But the series creative and actors, many the product of broken homes, are also summoning their own stories to shape storylines and characters.

And if you ask the actors who play Blackstone villains, many don't see their characters as bad guys.

Schweig remembers coming upon a t-shirt that sums up Andy Fraser's character: "I'm not mean. You're just a sissy."

Okay, Andy Fraser is a "little bad," Schweig concedes.

But the Blackstone chief is also a product of his culture.

"If you take the life cycle of a reservation and put it right besides the outside world, you'll see the same dynamic. We learn from the masters," Schweig insists.

Steven Cree Molison, who plays Daryl Fraser, Andy's brother and owner of the Roxy Rolla strip club, recalls being at a Vancouver aboriginal fund-raiser and being signaled out from the audience by fellow Blackstone actor Michelle Thrush.

As the spotlight fell across Molison's face, the audience boomed.

"I didn't know he (Daryl Fraser) was a bad guy," the actor insisted, as he adds his character respects his father and protects his brother Andy.

Then again, for an actor playing a villain, booing is a compliment.

"I felt he's good. But I'd done my job," Molison said.

He's not alone in approaching Blackstone as equal parts acting and storytelling to impart truths to APTN's

First Nation audience.

For Michelle Thrush, who won a Gemini for her star-turn in *Blackstone* in the role of Gail Stoney, an alcoholic battling the demons of addiction, the Canadian drama is a chance to speak directly to First Nation communities.

"Our leadership has learnt how to oppress one another because they are playing a game they have learnt to play," Thrush insisted.

"We don't go deep into that stuff. But it's a fact up here. I don't want it to look like the native people got themselves into this mess," she adds.

*Blackstone* will not in itself change the plight of Canada's First Nations, or shame Canadians into doing so.

But Steven Cree Molison argues vital First Nation issues need to be confronted as *Blackstone* portrays a community struggling to forge a better life for itself.

"We've got to bring in these issues. You have to accept responsibility so we can move on. We've shown them choices. Now we've given them hope," Molison argued.



Molison

He adds *Blackstone* and its story of hope and reconciliation has already begun to change how First Nations communities see themselves, in part as a catalyst for the Idle No More movement.

"We've put out a smoke signal. It has made a difference," Molison insisted.

The third season of *Blackstone* is slated to air on APTN in fall 2013.

Edmonton's Prairie Dog Film + Television produces the series, with Jesse Szymanski as producer and Damon Vignale as producer and writer.

*Blackstone* also airs in New Zealand on Maori Television.



Thrush