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EXTRA:

KNOW YOUR SHOW...

LEARN HOW TO PICK THE BEST SPEC TO WRITE FOR THE **SPRING STAFFING SEASON**

BY **SHELLEY GABERT**

Mirror, mirror on the wall, what's the show to spec this fall? If only it were that easy, but the television landscape is less like a fairy tale these days and more like a minefield. Writing jobs are fewer. Signature shows that were once sound spec choices are gone or aging, while newer ones can quickly become obsolete, cancelled by fearful, trigger-happy executives.

Without a crystal ball or magic mirror, it's a high-stakes gamble, given the time you'll invest. That's why we've picked the brains of writers and showrunners past and present to get their perspectives along with key information that may help increase your odds.

Whether aspiring to break in, or looking to get staffed again in the spring, savvy writers know that now's the time to start watching a few well-chosen shows with a professional eye. Come January, when it's time to sit down and write that new spec for staffing season, you'll have the edge if you know your show backward and forward.

"It's a really tough time out there for writing specs," says Angel Dean Lopez (*Sleeper Cell*, *Judging Amy*) who teaches an introductory television spec writing class in the UCLA Extension Writer's Program. "*The Sopranos* is over, *The Shield* is wrapping up its last season, and



Anna Friel and Lee Pace in *Pushing Daisies*

a lot of the solid dramas are a bit long in the tooth. I've always told my students to look for comedies or dramas with critical acclaim, popularity, longevity and insider penetration, which means (shows that are) watched by agents, showrunners and executives. But finding shows that fit that matrix is a bit harder now."

In a highly fragmented television-viewing universe, it's hard to know how many people in the business watch that hot new cable show or whether such a narrowcast choice can be a viable spec compared with a mainstream network drama. But it is a sure bet that there are stacks of *30 Rock* and *Entourage* specs sitting on desks at CAA. And specs of *Desperate Housewives*, various versions of *CSI* and other dramas that remain popular with audiences have glutted the reading market.

"I'll shoot myself if I read another *Grey's Anatomy* spec," says Dee Johnson, an executive producer on Lifetime's *Army Wives*, who previously served as co-executive pro-

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ducer on *ER* and executive producer on *Commander in Chief*. "And if a *CSI*, *Law & Order* or *Without a Trace* comes across my desk, those scripts will not be the first thing I read because a procedural doesn't tell you much, other than someone can handle structure and get the voices down.

In Johnson's opinion, "Specs of shows that are a mix of comedy and drama and handle a range of emotions allow for greater depth in storytelling."

"*Rescue Me* is a good show to spec because it proves someone can write comedy, pathos and drama," says Tim Kring, creator and executive producer of *Heroes* and *Crossing Jordan*. "*Big Love* (HBO) and *Dexter* (Showtime) are cult hits that are popular with other writers, and *Mad Men* on AMC is another interesting show, but I'm not sure if it has a huge following internally in Hollywood," he adds.

Kring still finds *CSI* and *Law & Order* and their sister shows worthy, and he says any show with strong central voices makes for a good spec. "There's always been a wave where everyone will write the same show. It used to be *NYPD Blue*, *The Sopranos* or *The Shield*, and that was smart because people were really watching those shows," Kring says, "but that's always changing. There will be new shows that come along this year."



Hugh Laurie in *House*

Among the newcomers, early money is on *Pushing Daisies*, created by Bryan Fuller (*Dead Like Me*, *Wonderfalls*), a former writer on *Heroes*. "He wrote it as a spec pilot and it's terrific. It has tremendous heart and humor, and it's quirky," Kring says.

The cardinal rule, according to the showrunners we surveyed, is to never spec

a show until it has at least one season under its belt. Even then, it can be risky. Just ask people who wrote specs of *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip* or *John From Cincinnati*. Both lasted one season and definitely didn't live up to their hype. Some of the new shows seem promising, but it's too soon to know if they'll have staying power. The NBC sci-fi dramedy *Chuck* is another high-concept show like *Pushing Daisies* that has lots of buzz. *Dirty Sexy Money* and *Cane* are essentially soap operas in the vein of *Dallas* or *Dynasty* but with contemporary spins. The crime drama *Life* has received critical acclaim and is being described as a much edgier version of *Monk*.

"All new shows suffer from 'new-show-itus.' It often takes six or eight episodes to get them on their feet, so you never know where the show is going," says Tom Blomquist, an executive producer on *Walker, Texas Ranger*, who got his start working on *The A-Team* and *Riptide*. He also teaches spec workshops at AFI and a spec pilot class at UCLA Extension.

Still, some of the new offerings that rocket to rating highs may be spec-worthy and bear keeping an eye on. *Back to You*, from the creative team behind *Frasier*, could well become the new comedy spec. There's not a lot of newcomer competition — only six half-hour comedies were included among the 28 new shows premiering on network TV this fall.

For comedy writers trying to break into drama, Johnson says the hybrids (comedy and drama) are a safer bet. They may even be the strongest choices on the air because they allow a writer to showcase character and storytelling while emphasizing the genre he or she would ideally like to write one day.

"*House* remains a very effective spec because it's a character-driven show with a bit of mystery and procedural," says Greer Shephard, a partner in Shephard/Robin Co., which produces TNT's *The Closer* and FX's *Nip/Tuck*.

Both a ratings and critical hit, *House* features a lead character who's an anti-hero with bite. The skills you might display in executing its procedural elements would cross over to a crime drama, while its med-



Michael C. Hall in *Dexter*

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ical milieu works for *Grey's Anatomy* execs. Both *The Closer* and *Saving Grace*, which is coming back for at least 15 episodes next season, provide an opportunity to write for strong female characters, played by Kyra Sedgwick and Holly Hunter, respectively. Each of these dramas mixes the personal with the procedural. *Medium* also offers a strong female lead, but in a different genre.

If it's a teen series that would show the world what you can do, perhaps a *Supernatural* would work to demonstrate both character and procedural skills. And for those with an aptitude for racy material, *Nip/Tuck* has been a very popular spec.

"*Dexter* is my favorite show on the air right now because it has an unconventional hero and (takes) a totally different slant on the stories they tell," Blomquist says. "(And) while *Weeds* and *Big Love* may not have worked a year ago, now everyone is talking about them." Meanwhile, he adds, "Once-hot shows like *Desperate Housewives* may have reached their tipping point."

To make the game even more challenging, the truth is that gatekeepers have very little time to watch television. An agent may catch an episode or two of one of his clients' shows, while showrunners typically have time to watch only a few shows for their own enjoyment.

Says Bill Grundfest, who wrote for five seasons on *Mad About You*, "You have to be very inner-driven in this game, from when you're breaking in to when they throw you out. If you listen too much to other people, you lose yourself, and that's the only thing you have to sell."

If he were looking to make an impression right now, he says he might write a *Dexter* or something that allowed him to "color outside the lines" and alternate that with a more mainstream choice. "I'm a character-driven guy, so I want to write about humans and their pain, whether it's for a drama or a comedy," he says.

Success stories

When Sheldon Bull, a producer on *Sabrina*, *the Teenage Witch* and *Coach* and author of *Elephant Bucks: An Insider's Guide to Writing TV Sitcoms*, was breaking into the business, he tried to write a *Laverne & Shirley*, one of the hottest shows on the air at the time. "I just didn't hear it in my



Denis Leary in *Rescue Me*

head, so I decided to write a *M*A*S*H* spec instead, and I ended up writing two episodes of that show," he says.

As David Chase's assistant on *I'll Fly Away*, Johnson was so into that show that she decided to write a spec of it, violating a



Dee Johnson, *Army Wives* executive producer

"no-no" in the business, which holds that you never write a spec of the show you want to write for. But Chase read Johnson's spec and assigned her an episode to write.

"I do see a calculated effort by writers to pick the show they think is hot, but I think that's a mistake," Johnson says. "It's much more important to write a show you're invested in, since that will come through."

After landing a job on *Fastlane* from their spec screenplay, former advertising copywriters John Coveny and Hunt Baldwin had to start over when the show was cancelled after its first season. They chose to write a *Without a Trace* because they liked the actors on the show and the character-based moments. They also wrote a *Six Feet Under*.

"Before we started writing, we went back to school," Coveny says. "We spent months watching those shows and reading the scripts. Our goal was to replicate the show, to demonstrate we knew its rules and the voices of the characters. But it was also to stand out and be noticed, to put our own personal stamp on the shows."

In both cases, they opened with a major twist and introduced new characters into their specs. The results led to them landing an agent and to jobs on *The Closer*, on

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which they've just finished their third season as co-executive producers. A pilot they co-wrote, *The Truth in Advertising*, began shooting in October.

"The big gamble you're always taking is that you'll choose a show that someone has never seen or write the best script of a show they don't know well," Coveny says.

Coveny remembers when he and Baldwin were the low men on the totem pole in the writer's room. "James (Duff) and Greer made it clear that we were to speak up. 'There's no fear here,' they said. And that's what I repeat to myself and would say to other writers because once you start qualifying things you can talk yourself into a box. Just find what you like, write that and try to find a new way in."

From the hiring desks

Kring, the *Heroes* showrunner, says he often focuses more on execution in the specs he reads. "We have a big writer's room and we figure our stories out together," he says, so he looks at whether writers can construct a scene properly. "Can they start and stop it at the right place? Do they

"You run across a lot of young writers who seem to want to take a shortcut, but there's hardly any substitute for learning the craft," she says. "That's the beauty of the spec. It helps you learn the form, but you also have some wiggle room to turn it on its ear and stretch, and that's a good thing."

Lopez spends half of his class time dissecting dramas — charting the subplots and scenes to help students understand a show's template. (See sidebar on page 51 for more on this.)

Serialized dramas like *Heroes*, *24*, *Lost* and *Prison Break* can seem like intimidating specs to write, so Lopez encourages his students to ignore ongoing plots and focus more on character issues. In tackling shows like these, it's best to write a stand-alone episode, he advises, "or take a Shakespeare play or Greek tragedy and recast it in your show."

"No matter what the show is, it's important to tell something personally resonant rather than filling in the numbers and writing a generic beat sheet," he says. "One of the biggest pitfalls I see is no connection between writers and their material. They forget that they're writers, first."

The old adage that writers write is true. Bull says he's somewhat mystified by writers who complete two specs, sit back and wait, and then give up if nothing happens. "Writers [should] always [be] moving on and writing new material," he says.

Adds Grundfest: "The more writing

samples you have, the more shots you have. But no matter what show you spec, make sure you're willing to dig deep. Those who write cookie-cutter specs will find that their scripts sit in a pile somewhere. I always say, 'Either go big or go home.'" **CS**

Coming in the January/February issue of Creative Screenwriting: Part 2: Know Your Show ... And Write It Like A Pro.

We'll bring you specific guides to format and characters for two shows that we'd bet on as strong specs for the Spring 2008 staffing season.



Mary-Louise Parker in *Weeds*

have a button that drives the story forward and draws a reader's eye down the page?"

He prefers to read original material to get a sense of the writer's voice. "But I also want to see what kind of forgery a person can do. Can they come onto an existing show and copy what the show is and blend in and be a good copy artist," he says.

After going through the hiring process to fill the writer's room on *Army Wives*, Johnson said she'd rate most of the specs read as "competent but not memorable."

...AND WATCH IT LIKE A PRO

They all say, "Write what you know." While we can't help you to know yourself, here are some tips on how to know your show and watch it like a pro.

■ **Tape, TiVo or take good notes while you watch several episodes of your chosen show. Get scripts and read them. Break an episode down into acts and scenes. Beside each scene, write down the beat, a brief description of what happens. Generally, an hour-long drama will have 13 to 15 beats.**

■ **Break the show down into the A, B and C story lines. Then take note of the plot and subplots. Eventually a pattern will emerge. This will become your template for the show.**

■ **Think about which characters stand out for you. Consider the tone of the show. Does it have a strong central voice, and if so, what is it and how is it expressed?**

■ **Are the story lines resolved in each episode or is it serialized? If it's serialized, decide how you plan to handle that.**

■ **Take note of the set pieces the show might include in its format week after week, as well as any other repeating elements. Does the show usually open with a teaser? How long is it? Don't forget to include those elements.**

■ **Now that you've been watching for a while, look at the big picture. Decide for yourself what the show is about. What's the premise? What problem is the show set up to solve or explore? How can you interpret this on a level that resonates for you personally and excites you as a writer? Now you're ready to come up with your springboard, the premise that will set your spec episode apart.**

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