

# New in the Room

When first hired on a TV staff, try not to freak out. You're not alone.

**F**or a few pulse-quicken- ing moments, it seemed like Davita Scarlett's first day as a professional TV writer was headed for disaster. It was 2014, and she'd scored a gig on *Constantine*, a Warner Bros. adaptation of the DC Comics character, with less than a week's advance notice before the writers' room opened. Scarlett quit her day job, read as many *Constantine* comics as she could, and prepared a slew of episode pitches.

"That morning was funny for me," Scarlett recalls. "I woke up very early, and I had a good breakfast because I wanted to make sure I had my brain food. I tend to be late a lot, which is a terrible habit, and so I realized it seemed like I was going to be late. We were working in a building that Warner owns where they house a lot of the comic book shows, so the parking situation is complicated. I'm terrible with directions, and so I got in the vicinity

of the building probably, like, 20 minutes before we were supposed to meet. But I could not figure out how to actually turn into the building. I call the writers' assistant, and he doesn't pick up, so I'm freaking out. I end up just parking somewhere where I'm probably not supposed to park, but in my head I'm like, 'I cannot be late on my first day of my dream job.'"

Scarlett reached the front door of her building simultaneously with *Con-*



stantine executive producer David S. Goyer, whom she'd never met in person. No pressure—he only co-wrote the *Dark Knight* trilogy. “I’m like, well, this looks really bad, because he probably thinks I should be in there already,” continues Scarlett. “He’s busy. He’s on his phone. I’m just standing there, the newbie writer. Then he’s like, ‘Your [sample] script was good.’ That was all I needed for the rest of the day.”

Crisis averted, Scarlett met the rest

of the staff and listened as the EPs laid out their vision for *Constantine*. Thus began Scarlett’s journey across the proving ground every new TV writer must traverse: Joining a room for the first time.

#### HIGH ANXIETY

Talking about their early days of staffing, writers recall agonizing about everything. *Where do I sit? When do I*

everything works. It’s really hard to do. Sometimes I thought I was failing. Then, occasionally, we’d be told by upper-level people, ‘Oh, you guys are doing fine.’ It didn’t feel like it, because I was always freaking out internally.”

*Freaking out* is the common denominator. Beyond concerns of the impact that failure could have on career momentum, being new in the room echoes first-day-of-school jit-

**“It’s such a unique job,” Lippoldt explains. “You’re sitting in a room with five to 10 other people every day, and you’re showing your soft underbelly—pitching ideas, you’re putting yourself out there. They’re going to see who you are, so you want to be in a situation where you’re willing to show them who you are.**

*speak? What do I say?*

“The first few weeks of work—even having heard all about what to expect—were the most stressful couple of weeks of our lives,” says Bo Yeon Kim, who joined the CW’s *Reign* in 2015 alongside her writing partner, Erika Lippoldt. “This is the thing you’ve been dreaming of such a long time, but you’re trying to make friends, trying to stay positive, trying to have ideas—”

“And,” interjects Lippoldt, “just trying to figure out the lay of the land.”

“You have all of those insecurities of, ‘Am I a good fit for this show, am I pitching enough, am I talking enough, am I talking too much?’ It’s a lot of anxiety,” Kim says. “We lucked out because it was a season three show, so people knew where the ropes were to show us. But for a lot of staffies on pilot shows, that’s not necessarily the case. They’re thrown into the situation, and they have to figure out how

ters from childhood. *Will they like me?*

“It’s such a unique job,” Lippoldt explains. “You’re sitting in a room with five to 10 other people every day, and you’re showing your soft underbelly—pitching ideas, you’re putting yourself out there. They’re going to see who you are, so you want to be in a situation where you’re willing to show them who you are. We were just like, ‘We want this to be a good working environment.’ Even when it’s a bad day for everybody else, you can still be happy to be there, and that goes a long way for everybody.”

“Excitement is always a good thing,” notes Scarlett, who followed her gig on *Constantine* with tenures on ABC’s *The Family* to TNT’s *Animal Kingdom* before becoming story editor on OWN’s *Queen Sugar*. “Maybe around five o’clock, everyone’s getting tired. A lot of times the new writers can be cheerleaders.”

Is there a more alien concept than



ART BY BILLY VALLEY



Erika Lippoldt & Bo Yeon Kim

the writer-as-cheerleader? Aren't writers hermitic creatures who burrow into their warrens for hours on end, building worlds with nothing but their imaginations and fingers clacking across keyboards? Hence the shock to the system that many first-timers experience upon being forced to—horror of horrors—interact with strangers.

"When you're working in isolation on your own scripts, at any point, you can step away from it," notes Steven Canals, who recently got his first TV gig on Freeform's *Dead of Summer*. "When you're staffed, you don't have the luxury to do that. It's a bullet train that has a very clear final destination, so there's no jumping off."

"The most surprising thing I learned on my first show," Scarlett explains, "is that once you get your first professional TV writing job, for quite a while, there's very little writing. As a staff writer, you're not guaranteed to get [the assignment to write] an episode. You might spend a whole season and not write anything at all. Once you get in a room, you're using a different skill. It's conversational."

Daunting as this may sound, Edward Ricourt—a feature writer (*Now You See Me*) who broke into TV by staffing on the debut season of Netflix's *Jessica Jones*—says confidence emanates

from remembering how you got the job. "Know you're in that room because they thought your work was good," he says. "You're always going to be faced with things that could make you nervous, like, 'Okay you're writing your outline this week.' But I think at some point you just have the belief that, 'I'm in this room because they felt I belonged here—not just [the EPs], but the studio and the network. They've all signed off on you, most likely. So just own that.'"

#### SAFETY IN NUMBERS

Part of becoming comfortable in a writers' room involves discerning how you fit into the bigger picture, both creatively and interpersonally. "Especially when you're brand new, it takes a while to figure out exactly what your role is," says Scarlett. "Sometimes it's more obvious why your showrunner hired you. For instance, if you're going onto a big legal show, and you used to be a lawyer, or it's a show with a lot of guns and you used to be in the military, it's more obvious what expertise they're looking for

from you. Oftentimes, you watch and you wait and you learn."

"I don't think anything really prepares you for what the room is like," Kim remarks, "because no two rooms have the same set of variables."

Amplifying that point, veteran showrunner Jeff Melvoin, who has overseen many cycles of the WGA's Showrunner Training Program, recommends a cautious approach. "The worst thing a new writer can do is talk too much and too loudly in the early going, work too hard to create an impression," he says. "It's often a symptom of insecurity, but far better to err on the side of reticence than braggadocio. Resist the temptation to save the day on an hourly basis. There are older and presumably wiser, but certainly more caustic, heads around the table, who will gladly point out your shortcomings if given enough provocation."

Canals stresses that interpersonal skills are as valuable as storytelling acumen. "Being an active listener is a big part of it," he says. "Bringing your authentic self to the table is also really important. Each of us has our own unique lived experience, and it's really important for that to be front and center. Just as an example, I think a lot of the ideas I presented in the room that have landed came from personal anecdotes."

Furthermore, being open nurtures



camaraderie—Canals bonded with fellow staffer Kay Reindl over a shared love of figure skating. "If I had gone into the room like, 'I'm here just to write and to

create stories,” he says, “those types of connections wouldn’t have happened.”

Speaking of stories, lying in wait beyond the getting-to-know-you period is the actual work of creating a season’s worth of narrative. While common sense might suggest this is the aspect of being in a writers’ room that comes most easily to new staffers, Ricourt says learning to identify which types of stories fit the specific needs of each particular show is challenging. “You start to see what ideas are getting traction,” he says, explaining that *Jessica Jones* showrunner Melissa Rosenberg established rules for portraying the title character, an ex-superhero with emotional baggage. “She is a PTSD survivor,” Ricourt says. “What does that mean? How does she function through the day? Sometimes it’s alcohol, sometimes it’s doing harm to herself, or not caring that harm can come to her. Keeping the rules in mind can help you formulate a pitch.”

“You’ll be surprised at how fast those ideas are ping-ponging back and

forth,” Scarlett says. “Sometimes it takes all your energy just to listen, because [the other writers] will talk in shorthand, or they’ll change something in Act Four and then they’ll know something in Act Two is changing, but you’re still on Act Four. It’s a muscle these seasoned writers have been working for a long time.”

“I barely spoke the first two weeks,” Lippoldt recalls. “There were so many people in the room and it was moving so fast. This is where the anxiety comes in. You’re like, ‘What do they need *me* for?’” Eventually, Lippoldt found a



Edward Ricourt

niche by employing her research skills, since *Reign* is a fictionalized take on the life of 16th-century monarch Mary, Queen of Scots. “For this particular show,” she says, “I could look up the history and be able to reference it as a jumping-off point for pitches.”

“I have the general knowledge that

A movie poster for 'The Meddler' featuring a scene from the film. A woman in a red and black striped shirt is talking to a woman in a black leather jacket who is sitting on a motorcycle. A man in a tan jacket and cap stands next to her. In the background, there are other people and a large camera crane. The setting appears to be outdoors near a body of water.

**“LORENE SCAFARIA ACCOMPLISHES SOMETHING RARE: THESE CHARACTERS SEEM LIKE PEOPLE WE MIGHT KNOW, WITH QUIRKS AND FEELINGS AND FLAWS AND HEARTS. SUSAN SARANDON SHINES.”**  
—Moirra Macdonald, THE SEATTLE TIMES

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# The Meddler

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everyone has,” Kim adds wryly, “but Erika put in the effort to actually read things that are not on Wikipedia.”

New writers should expect to encounter unfamiliar concepts, methods, and terminology. “One of the challenges was just knowing the lingo,” Ricourt says. “I remember one of the writers saying, ‘Well, that’s a bottle episode.’ And I thought, ‘Okay, bottle episode—let me just sit quiet for a second, and maybe it’ll catch up with me what a bottle episode is.’ Finally I just had to say, ‘Time out—I don’t know what a bottle episode is.’” He was told the phrase refers to inexpensive installments that focus on primary cast members and standing sets. (The concept of “ship-in-a-bottle episodes” dates back to the original *Star Trek* series of the 1960s.)

“Once they explained it, I said, ‘Oh, okay.’ Two weeks later, I’m like, ‘Oh, yeah, that’s a bottle episode.’ Sometimes I feel like I’ll catch up with the conversation, but if it’s really something where if we go any further I’ll be totally lost, I have no problem saying, ‘I don’t understand.’”

“There are times when I’ve been in a room,” Scarlett says, “and I thought the thing on the board was the thing that was going to be in the episode, not realizing that oftentimes what



Kay Reindl

seasoned writers do is come up with a placeholder, and they know it’s not right. We’re talking about it as if it’s going to last in the episode forever.

**“You can pitch something, and you hope people will say, ‘Okay,’ and that’ll start a conversation—but crashing and burning, to me, is silence. If you pitch something and you hear nothing, and another conversation that has nothing to do with yours starts, then you know what you said didn’t resonate with anybody.”—Edward Ricourt**

They might not ever say in the room, ‘This is a placeholder.’ You have to feel it out. But there were times when I thought, ‘Oh, I don’t quite understand the character doing this,’ not realizing it’s just there to help us move on.”

#### RELIEF PITCHERS

Another commonality, no surprise, is the fear of pitching story ideas, that perpetual bane of professionals more accustomed to communicating on paper than in person. “The most intimidating thing was probably sounding like an idiot in front of people,” recalls Han-Yee Ling. “That was fun to navigate.” (She notched her first TV-writing job on *Tangled* and now works on *Big Hero 6*, another animated Disney show extrapolated from a hit feature.)

In Canals’ experience, observation was the means for vaulting this particular hurdle. “I paid a lot of attention to the other writers in the room, who are all upper levels and have a lot of experience and have worked on multiple shows,” he says. “They each have a very different style. I’ve seen pitches tweaked based on who they’re being pitched to. Every writer has to find their own style.”

“You never really crash and burn,” Ricourt says. “You can pitch something, and you hope people will say, ‘Okay,’ and that’ll start a conversation—but crashing and burning, to me, is silence. If you pitch something and you hear nothing, and another conversation that has nothing to do with yours starts, then you know what you said didn’t resonate with anybody. Every writer has that moment, it feels like, at least once a day.”

Ling agrees wholeheartedly: “That moment where you pitch a joke and everyone stares at you blankly for 30 seconds, or they don’t understand the very nerdy, stupid reference you just made—it’s a weird feeling when you’re going through it, but after that, you can conquer anything. Your peers in the room will get used to your style of weirdness. Everyone in the room tends to be pretty smart, so they’re good at figuring you out after a few days. It gets comfortable after that. Don’t dread the awkward pause. Once it’s over, you can never experience that for the first time again.”

Plus, Canals, adds, “If you were to ask those other writers in the room, 20 minutes later they probably wouldn’t even remember you pitched an idea that didn’t land—because everyone’s pitching ideas that don’t land.”

If there’s a secret to winning the new-in-the-room game, it might be as simple as tuning into the showrunner’s frequency, which encompasses everything from the vibe of the show to the vibe of the room itself. “Really, the sole job of everyone on staff is to make your showrunner’s life easier,” Ling says, “so I think you just need to ask him or her, ‘How can I help?’”

“Ultimately, I’m in there to please the showrunner,” Ricourt explains. “Everything I’m doing is to help get that idea for an episode up on its feet so it can be something good and strong. As a new writer, you want to come out of the gate swinging, but then you feel out the conversation in the room. You’re like, ‘All right, if there’s a real good debate between these two writers, let that ride.’ If you can offer something that’s significant, do it. It’s like sports to me. Some days

you're shooting and you can't hit the net, but some days you're in the zone."

"It's about the team," Scarlett adds. "You're never more important than the show you're working on."

As Melvoin adds from the showrunner's perspective: "Try to learn as much as you can—about the show, the culture of the room, the nature of the personalities around you. Don't allow yourself to be drawn into any cliques, cabals, or power games. Be a good citizen of the show."

### GRADUATION CEREMONIES

While not every staffer can identify a single moment that stanching new-in-the-room queasiness, all describe milestones along the path to becoming fully integrated members of the TV-writing community. For instance, Ling recalls a touching gesture of inclusion. "It was on my first or second day, after I'd sat through the first room session—deer-in-headlights, peeking out every once in a while, and just trying to get a grasp on it," she recalls. "Even after all of that,



Steven Canals

and that awkward-silence moment, when we were breaking for lunch, my co-workers were like, 'We're going to lunch, and you're coming with us.' I was like, 'Oh, they still want to hang out with me outside of this—I must

not have fucked it up too badly."

"You always think there's a larger spotlight on you than there is," Scarlett notes. "At the end of the day, people just want to create a good show—and they want you to feel like you're part of the staff. I think it's important to take a deep breath, which I wish I had done more on my first show."

"I wasn't chill about anything," Ling says, "so this is hard for me to think about—but you should be open to talking with your showrunner or your No. 2 about certain anxieties you have. Your showrunner took you on, so they want it to work out. If you just talk to them about clarifying what to expect, et cetera, most of them will probably humor you."

Alas, some won't, either because they're too busy, or because they're not inclined toward mentoring, or because they simply don't click with you. Like any group dynamics, the interactions within writers' rooms are delicate, so new staffers should accept that not ev-



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—A.O. SCOTT, THE NEW YORK TIMES

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# MAGGIE'S PLAN

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ery situation is ideal. “There are very specific factors for you to have a good fit,” Lippoldt says, “and they’re not always going to be there.”

Still, rewards await those who survive the new-in-the-room experience, not least of which are future career opportunities. A special milestone for many is the first time they see completed episodes.

Ricourt, who recently worked on Fox’s *Wayward Pines*, recalls a mo-

ment from his *Jessica Jones* experience. “When I was writing, there was no [series star] Krysten Ritter, [co-star] Mike Colter wasn’t there—there was nothing. So the moment I felt like it was all real was literally sitting in the theater and seeing, ‘Oh, that’s the conversation we had about her lifting the car, that was the conversation that we talked about what [first-season villain] Kilgrave would do.’”

His excitement was palpable. “We

wrote in this vacuum where they weren’t going to shoot these episodes for another six or eight months, or whatever it was,” Ricourt remembers. “I never saw the final print until Netflix invited us to binge-watch at the headquarters. I think that’s when I felt like, *Wow, we made something!*”

“I grew up as a huge TV fan,” Scarlett says, “so actually being able to work in TV is amazing. I get way too attached to the shows I watch and the characters I see. Maybe I’m being schmaltzy, but I find it really rewarding to be a part of a team that’s helping come up with stories people can get attached to and lose themselves in.” **WB**

*Peter Hanson directed the screenwriting documentary Tales from the Script, and his books include the companion volume Tales from the Script: 50 Screenwriters Share Their Stories, as well as The Cinema of Generation X and Dalton Trumbo, Hollywood Rebel. Website: www.GrandRiverFilms.com*



“ADAPTED FROM PHILIPPE DJIAN’S NOVEL ‘OH...’ INTO A SCREENPLAY OF SINUOUS CUNNING BY DAVID BIRKE, ‘ELLE’ IS A GRIPPING WHODUNIT, A TOUR DE FORCE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SUSPENSE AND A WICKEDLY DROLL COMEDY OF MANNERS.”

-Justin Chang, LOS ANGELES TIMES

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ELLE

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