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# Written By

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## House of Realness

JANET MOCK, STEVEN CANALS, AND OUR LADY J STRIKE A POSE

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PLUS: AGENCY CAMPAIGN TOOLS FOR WRITERS

**Celebrating the  
resilience of the LGBTQIA  
community, period drama  
*Pose* finds moments of joy  
amid the tragedies of the  
crack and HIV epidemics.**

# Our



**JANET MOCK, STEVEN CANALS, OUR LADY J**

WRITTEN BY **PETER HANSON**  
PORTRAITS BY **ILONA LIEBERMAN**

# House

*P*ose starts big, with a transgender woman receiving an HIV diagnosis, a gay teenager becoming homeless after his sexual identity is discovered, an ostensibly straight man falling into something like love at first sight with a transgender sex worker, and a posse of fierce queens robbing a museum for costumes they subsequently wear to a drag ball. These are just a few vivid moments in the FX drama's first episode. Yet very often, *Pose* (created by Ryan Murphy & Brad Falchuk & Steven Canals) makes its strongest impact during quiet scenes in which characters from under-represented populations reveal profound truths about their experiences.

Consider the opening of the first season's sixth episode, "Love Is the Message" (written by Murphy & Janet Mock), a contemplative vignette featuring the aforementioned sex worker, Angel, sitting across a coffee shop table from Patty, the wife of the man with whom Angel has been keeping company. Stunned to learn that Angel is transgender, Patty—a sheltered white girl from the Jersey suburbs—asks for proof. Equally stunned by the request, Angel confirms that Patty really just asked to see Angel's genitalia, then pushes back.

"Everything I can't have in this world is because of that thing down there," Angel says. "If you want to see who I am, that's the last place you should look."

Even with all the strides that have been made toward improving LGBTQIA portrayals (the acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, and asexual or allied), encountering this scene on a basic-cable drama in 2018 was quite something. *Pose* is an intersectional milestone, featuring an unprecedented number of trans women in an ensemble cast that is dominated by people of color.

"The core of the show is always to open up hearts and minds," says Canals. "We're very quick to 'other' those people who are not from the majority, but we're all much more alike than we are different. The storyteller in me, and also the educator in me, wants folks to recognize that Earth is a communal space."

Opening in 1987, *Pose* revolves around Blanca, an HIV-positive trans woman estranged from her biological family. Blanca belongs to a house (read: surrogate family) run by a "mother" who leads her "children" through competitions in balls, which are pageants held in night-



clubs and featuring categories for various types of beauty, fashion, and dance. In ballroom parlance, the winner of each category is the person who brings the most “realness,” meaning the best personification of the category. (Example: “That three-piece suit is giving me executive realness!”) When Blanca tires of selfish behavior by Elektra, mother of the House of Abundance, Blanca leaves to form the House of Evangelista. Motivated by newfound awareness of her mortality, Blanca creates a nurturing environment for people including Damon, the homeless teenager.

Against the backdrop of a New York City beset by the dual epidemics of crack and HIV, *Pose* explores the lives of everyone connected to the House of Evangelista, such as Angel and her on-again/off-again paramour Stan, who is introduced as a rising young executive at the Trump Organization.

It’s all rather fraught and fabulous—a vibrantly costumed, designed, and shot mixture of character-driven grit, dance-number escapism, and soapy melodrama. In other words, it’s on brand for Murphy & Falchuk (co-creators of *American Horror Story*, *Glee*, and *Scream Queens* [the latter two with Ian Brennan]). Along with Murphy, Falchuk, and Canals, the show’s writing staff consists of activist-author Mock (marking her first TV gig) and musician-screenwriter Our Lady J, previously a staffer on *Transparent* (created by Jill Soloway).

“I want young trans and queer people, who feel like they’re in the margins and they don’t belong, to see that we made this very emotional, fun, laughing, glamorous series,” says Lady J. “All it takes is for one person to have a vision, and to then link up to another person who’s a co-conspirator and collaborator, and then to bring a whole team of people together to make something special—hopefully something that allows people to see themselves more fully for the first time.”

#### ADVOCACY REALNESS

Given the show’s aspirations, balancing education and entertainment is an ongoing challenge. The nettlesome reality is that one component of the audience, those from the LGBTQIA community, enters the show with more institutional knowledge than viewers from outside the community. “If you already know what it’s like to live as an LGBTQ person or a person of color,” Mock says, “you don’t really need the catch-up, so at times having to listen through the education can be a lot. One thing that we’re clear on is when all of our main characters are in a room together, there are not many moments in which they’re lecturing one another about the realities of the world, because they just get it. It’s

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usually when they’re paired with someone who’s not from their world that enlightening has to come through.”

“Typically, members of historically marginalized communities wind up finding themselves in the role of teacher,” Canals notes. “We talk a lot about that. When I worked in education, that was a conversation we were engaged in ad nauseam. It was just, ‘Stop putting women, stop putting people of color, stop putting LGBTQ people in the position of teacher.’ Is it exhausting? Yes. Is there emotional labor baked into the show? Absolutely. But I think the difference between the experience that I have navigating the world as a queer person of color versus the experience that I’m having with the show is that here it’s a choice. I’m walking into this saying, ‘I want to not only entertain but also educate.’ I don’t feel like there’s room for me to say, ‘I want to be an ally to the trans community,’ then complain about the work that I’m doing to advocate. I’m in it for the long haul.”

Canals describes a sequence in the second episode, “Access” (written by Murphy & Falchuk & Canals), during which Blanca gives Damon a motherly talk about safe sex. “I remember the first draft of that scene was very clinical,” Canals says. “I kept going at draft after draft of that scene, and it just felt like you were opening up a pamphlet. Finally Ryan gave me a note: ‘What would you have wanted your mom to say?’ That unlocked the scene. I recognize that that moment is very specific to a young queer boy hearing about sex, but the moment’s bigger than that, right? It’s about a mother connecting to her son.”

“We’re very purposeful,” Mock notes. “Part of it is shining a light on characters and communities that are navigating systems of oppression, but we can’t show systems. It’s too complicated. When we create some of our supporting characters, it’s almost like they’re the physical manifestations of systems, whether it’s real estate, gentrification, racism, sexism, homophobia. We want to strike that balance between the rhetorical and the entertaining.”

Related considerations informed the choice to treat Donald Trump as an offscreen character. “The assumption has been that we allude to Trump because he became

BLANCA (CONT'D)

Thank you.

LINDA

For what?

BLANCA

Gotta be hard telling people they're going to die day after day.

25 INT. PRAY TELL'S APARTMENT -- DAY

25

Blanca. Sitting silently in a low-rent Hell's Kitchen apartment with faded furniture, rescued sewing machines, fragrance samples and maribo boas thrown about. PRAY TELL -- our commentator -- heads for the kitchen. Opens the fridge. Pulls out a half-filled bottle of white zin and pours them two glasses. Blanca suddenly starts to cry. Pray hands her her wine. A KLEENEX. Takes her hand.

PRAY TELL

Cry more pee less, that's what my mother used to say. She was a saint -- a saint Bernard. The woman must have weighed four hundred pounds.

Blanca laughs through her tears. Appreciates Pray's efforts.

PRAY TELL (CONT'D)

I cannot understand why you would have gone and had that test. You already knew the answer. Denial isn't just a river in Egypt -- it's a way of life. Do you have any symptoms?

BLANCA

No.

PRAY TELL

Then you know what you have to do. Keep on living! Put on your tallest heels and get back out into the world. You're not dead yet. There is nothing more tragic than a sad queen.

BLANCA

I'm not sad. These are tears of joy. I'm happy. Relieved.

Pray Tell doesn't understand.

(CONTINUED)



president,” Canals says, “when the truth is he was always part of the narrative, because he was omnipresent in New York in the ’80s. If you go back and really look into the history of Donald Trump in terms of his relationship to black and brown people, and the housing crisis, he was always someone that we wanted to lean into. It just so happened that he would end up running for president and winning. As a result of that, Ryan felt really strongly that we don’t need to give him any more press.”

While the show’s first season finds the principal characters living on the fringes of society, the second season flips the script by jumping ahead to March 1990, the month that Madonna’s single/video “Vogue” introduced ball culture to an unsuspecting America. That year also saw the highest number of AIDS-related fatalities yet. “By 1990, the city was on fire, so we’re leaning into that,” says Lady J. “What does it look like when you’re in the middle of a plague? How do you keep your family together? How do you continue to find joy and light and love in that? Where it felt like you could maybe escape the reality in ’87, by ’90 you can’t. The plague was relentless at that point.”

#### WE’LL ALWAYS HAVE PARIS

The story of *Pose* began with *Paris Is Burning*, director Jennie Livingston’s 1990 documentary about ball culture. Canals, who is of African-American and Puerto Rican descent, first saw the movie in the early 2000s, when he was an undergraduate cinema student at Binghamton University in New York. “As someone who grew up in New York in the ’80s and was impacted directly by both the crack and HIV/AIDS epidemics,” he recalls, “what I was so taken by with the doc was this community of queer and trans and non-binary black and brown people existing during that period and finding joy. There was a deep resilience that impacted me. Fear permeated lots of different areas of my life, and I took strength from their strength. I remember thinking at the time, ‘That would make a really great television show,’ and having the idea of this young man moving to New York and getting enmeshed in this world, and then getting caught in a war between two house mothers.”

For the next several years, Canals set aside Hollywood dreams while working in higher education, but his fascination with *Paris Is Burning* resurfaced in 2014 when he was a graduate student in screenwriting at UCLA. He wrote the original pilot of *Pose* for a class, but early industry feedback was indifferent. Nonetheless, Canals secured representation and staffed for a year on the teen horror series *Dead of Summer* (created by Edward Kitsis & Adam Horowitz & Ian Goldberg), all the while hustling original projects including *Pose*. Eventually the script reached producer Sherry Marsh, who worked up a pitch with Canals.

Meanwhile, Murphy was developing a separate project in-

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spired by *Paris Is Burning*, having secured rights to adapt the doc. In a serendipitous moment, Murphy learned about *Pose* shortly after his own project hit a wall because of issues pertaining to the depiction of real people from *Paris Is Burning*. A



meeting was arranged. “It was maybe 45 minutes to an hour,” Canals remembers. “Once I went through my pitch, he then went through, ‘OK, so this is what I imagined the show would look like—here are some of the characters that I’ve come up with, here is some of the narrative.’ In the course of that meeting, he started taking parts of mine and lifting parts of his and combining them. That meeting felt like two kids on the playground sharing their toys.”

Whereas Canals’ original script was dark, including a murder and a sexual assault, Murphy—who later brought in Falchuk as co-creator/co-writer—envisioned a more inviting tone, partially for marketplace reasons. As Canals notes, *Pose* carried a special burden because if it failed, it could set a precedent for nixing other inclusive projects.

The final *Pose* pilot script reflects three sensibilities joined in common cause. “Ryan is big picture—he’s very macro,” Canals explains. “I’m more micro. The thing that’s wonderful about Brad is that he’s very, very character-driven as a

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storyteller. Early on, we discussed that the three of us collectively will break and write the first two episodes, so that anyone coming in has a sense of what the tone is. We knew, obviously, as three cisgender men who are creating a show that’s grounded in the narratives of the trans experience, it was really important for us to bring in women who are having the trans experience.”

#### SEEKING REPRESENTATION

In blog posts, magazine articles, and two published memoirs, Mock has described a life that once included doing sex work to earn money for gender-confirmation surgery. That’s why writing *Pose*—specifically Angel’s scenes—is deeply personal. “I have literally walked in her same platform heels on those same kinds of streets,” Mock says. “I drew on all of those experiences of being a young woman yearning for more than what society threw at me or said was possible for a girl like myself. A lot of her ambitions and dreams and her lovesickness, her self-assuredness, but also her vulnerability—all of that anchored me very strongly into the world of *Pose*.”

Significantly, the episode “Love Is the Message” made Mock the first trans woman of color to write and direct an episode of television.

Lady J’s health status informs a powerful connection with the show’s HIV-positive characters, including Blanca and ball emcee Pray Tell (played by Emmy-nominated Billy Porter). “I have the most fun writing for Elektra,” Lady J says. “I love writing a bitchy one-liner. But Blanca and Pray Tell I feel most drawn to. One of the reasons I transitioned was because I found out I was HIV-positive 15 years ago. In that moment of having this choice of life or death—back then, there was still so much confusion around mortality—I chose to live as fully and as authentically as I could. When I read the pilot for *Pose*, I read this story of survival. It was otherworldly how it paralleled my own story.”

Recognizing synchronicity is one thing. Talking about it is another. “When I first joined the room, I was very uncomfortable with sharing so much of myself in that way,” Mock says. “I [was] used to putting myself on the page in my books or in my personal essays, but never sitting with

four strangers and having to cut myself open. It took me a few months to really find my groove.”

“I’m very much an introvert,” notes Lady J. “I was a classical pianist many years ago, and it was because I loved being in a room by myself, away from the horrors of the world. I got to find beauty within art.”

The fact that both Mock and Lady J frame their life experiences through the prism of struggle underscores why *Pose* exists. Season Two’s fourth episode, “Never Knew Love Like This Before” (written by Murphy & Mock), addresses grim realities by featuring the murder of a beloved supporting character. Hence the need for balance, beauty as a counterpoint to tragedy. “Currently, trans women of color’s life expectancy is 35,” Canals says. “Positive representation—where trans women aren’t just sources of trauma, but where they’re also shown as being happy and successful and deserving of love—is important.”

“Survival is not about accumulating days or years,” adds Lady J. “Survival is about being able to walk out into a very broken world and keep your spirit intact. It’s about looking at your circumstances and making the best of it—infusing joy into what some others might see as tragedy. I feel like the [*Pose*] pilot just so strongly states what the show is. I love when Blanca meets Damon, then takes him to the ball. She already has it in her mind that she’s now living to help others. Her adopting Damon, I think that’s a really special moment. It’s about creating family to keep that survival spirit intact.”

#### THE HOUSE OF MURPHY

The workflow of the *Pose* writers’ room is customized to suit Murphy’s crowded schedule, so the team holds condensed afternoon sessions for several months before each season. “Ryan’s time is very valuable, so we want to make sure we get as much done as we can,” explains Lady J. “It requires us to be quick on our feet, but it doesn’t feel stressful—it feels like a group conversation. It’s a long room, so we have time to reflect. We just did a complete overhaul of [Season Two’s] first four episodes. But we have time to get silly, too. Music is a huge part of *Pose*, so we’ll often be looking for a song for a scene, we’ll pull something up on YouTube, and we’ll all be dancing to it and remembering when we first heard the song.”

Frequently a well-chosen tune guides the construction of a sequence, as with the use of Tina Turner’s “Private Dancer” in a Season One episode that finds Elektra returning to sex work after a financial downturn. “We knew that was going to be a montage of Elektra facing the reality of where she’s at,” recalls Lady J. “When I went to write that montage, I had my beats that I had to hit, but I listened to the song over and over again, and it unlocked an empathy for Elektra, because Elektra’s been so hard and so cold and so bitchy up until that point, and then we really see that she’s just another human being.”





Like music, video clips spark the room's collective imagination. "One area where we get stuck often, because we have them every single episode, is the ballroom scenes," Mock says. "There's a YouTube channel that's amazing. It's called Ballroom Throwbacks. Oftentimes we look there to see the ways in which people have done certain tricks on the runway, or the ways in which there are certain costume reveals, or the ways in which they've reinvented certain categories—there's Realness, there's Runway, there's Modelesque, there's Face, and then there's Vogue. Sometimes our ball categories will spark an entire episode theme."

"The script gets written, and then typically we do a lot of page-turning as a group," Canals says. "My experience hews closer to a Damon or a Ricky or a Lil Papi. I'm not a trans woman of color or a straight white man, and I know who I can go to for support in particular scenes if something doesn't feel like it's working. That doesn't mean having the person write the scene for you. You're rewriting your own work, but we flip through scripts page by page and have conversations about what does or doesn't work. We're not precious."



#### ONLY THE BEGINNING

The existence of *Pose*—which has received accolades including an AFI Award, a Gay and Lesbian Entertainment Critics Association (GALECA) Award, two Golden Globe nominations, a Writers Guild Award nomination, and six 2019 Emmy nominations (including one for Outstanding Drama Series)—raises the question of how far mainstream culture has traveled along the path to inclusion.

"I think it was in 2014 when *Time* magazine had Laverne Cox on the cover," Canals says. "They dubbed it 'The Trans Tipping Point.' Recently I was at a session with Nick Adams from GLAAD, and he was talking about that cover, and he said, 'They dubbed this moment the trans tipping point,' and we were all like, 'Is it?' But we all just thought, 'OK, let's run with it.' If I'm looking at the five years since that declaration was made, I would say, sure, there's more visibility for the trans and non-binary community. I would still question

In blog posts, magazine articles, and two published memoirs, Janet Mock has described a life that once included doing sex work to earn money for gender-confirmation surgery. That's why writing *Pose*—specifically Angel's scenes—is deeply personal. "I have literally walked in her same platform heels on those same kinds of streets. I drew on all of those experiences of being a young woman yearning for more than what society threw at me or said was possible for a girl like myself. A lot of her ambitions and dreams and her lovesickness, her self-assuredness, but also her vulnerability—all of that anchored me very strongly into the world of *Pose*." —Janet Mock

whether or not that representation is positive. So I would say *Pose* is really just at the beginning. I've been asked by quite a few people, am I excited to see all this progress within the business? And I'm always hard-pressed to say yes, because I don't necessarily see that progress. For me, progress will be seeing ten other shows like *Pose* exist. Progress will be seeing the women who are on our show having opportunities beyond the show—and not just opportunities to play other trans women, but opportunities as actresses, period. That hasn't happened yet. So I think we're at the beginning, but I'm hopeful that we're moving in the right direction."

Whereas Canals is cautious about overstating the impact of *Pose*, Lady J is happy to celebrate its historical nature. "By putting courage and strength on mainstream television, I know I'm inspiring someone else to find their courage and strength," she remarks. "They're going to walk out into the world inspiring other people. It's the butterfly effect. If I died tomorrow, I would be satisfied knowing that will continue in some form." 📺

