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Scribes in Tinseltown. The pain. It's like dental surgery

By Gayle MacDonald
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Canadian writers who've struck Hollywood gold come home to dish on TV comedy writing

They've won countless Emmys and run some of the most respected writing rooms in American television. But you've probably never heard of the Canadians calling the shots on some of the hottest shows on cable and in prime time.

Tim Long, who hails from Exeter, Ont., is the guy in charge of *The Simpsons*, a show he's worked on for almost a dozen years. Guelph-raised Chuck Tatham is co-executive producer of CBS's hit comedy, *How I Met Your Mother*. And Martin Gero, an Ottawa/Toronto native who co-wrote and directed the film *Young People Fucking*, is now the writing/supervising producer on HBO's *Bored to Death*, a quirky comedy starring Jason Schwartzman and Zach Galifianakis.

A few months ago, literary agent Glenn Cockburn asked if these comedy writers might consider taking part in the first annual Toronto Screenwriting Conference, which is being held this weekend at Ryerson University's Ted Rogers School of Management. Each jumped. And in a three-way phone call, they explain that's because aspiring Canadian writers need to know they're as good - if not better - at writing TV comedy than anyone. And our knack for self-mockery seems flawless. Which explains why you can turn on your TV and see that the character Robin, a gorgeous brunette in *How I Met Your Mother*, happens to hail from Vancouver, loves the Canucks and hangs out at the Hoser Bar. And why Homer Simpson whiles away the time watching the CFL draft. Iconic American shows sometimes possess a distinctly Canadian flair - thanks to the birthplace of their head writers.



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Tatham A few years ago, particularly around the time of the writers' strike, encouraging people to get into comedy writing felt to me like advising them to go into VCR repair. Comedy writing seemed to have hit the absolute bottom. But in the last two years, it feels like it's on the upswing again.

Long I agree, it feels like there's a mini-renaissance.

Gero The birth of cable networks like Showtime and HBO have helped our industry immensely because they focus on smart comedy, as well as drama. Now pay television is focusing on it too. Larry Sanders and Larry David (*Curb Your Enthusiasm*) raised the bar and opened the door for the rest of us.

Tatham When I wanted to go to L.A. many moons ago, I got absolutely no encouragement. But it was where you had to go because there was so little work here. That feels like it's changed. There always seems to be some new gem showing up on Canadian television, whether it's *Slings & Arrows*, *Corner Gas*, or before that, *The Newsroom*.

Long One woman I went to U of T with now writes scripts for *Little Mosque on the Prairie*. And a kid I met from Ryerson is now writing a comedy for TMN called *Call Me Fitz*. If there had been those kind of opportunities for me, I would have saved the bus fare.

Gero Ken Finkelman's *The Newsroom* was the ground-breaker for me. It made me think, for the first time, that Canadian TV was better than American TV.

Tatham My rule for running the writers' room on *How I Met Your Mother* is simple. It's all about character. And the thematic discussions that come from the essence of that character. Is it time for Barney to have a real relationship? Is Ted due for a career change? After three or four days of spinning ideas, a writer goes away with a fairly detailed outline. Each episode takes roughly three weeks.

Long There is this misperception it's just quick, dirty work, with joke after joke. That's rarely true. When you're breaking a story, you talk about the characters' motivations, even on a silly show like *The Simpsons*. So we go from discussing Marge's problems with the marriage, to Homer being a bounty hunter in space.

Tatham I liken figuring out a story to dental surgery. Episode 19 of *How I Met Your Mother* is cursed every season. I blithely charged into it again last year, and it had to be thrown out again. Then it occurred to me that every 19th episode has been thrown out because the story, itself, was a little bit flawed.

Long It's like having a fault line in the foundation of your house. You can spackle a script with jokes, but the spackling won't hold if the foundation's cracked.

Gero Television is all about character. Films are typically more about story. For a TV show to work, you have to have a reason to come back every week.

Long The trick to coming up with stories is to steal from your life and other people's lives. One episode of *The Simpsons* was about a school closing due to a blizzard. The kids were so excited, but woke up the next morning to no snow. Off they went to school, only to get trapped there when the blizzard finally hit. That happened to me in Exeter. Only we didn't put the principal in a volleyball sack.

Tatham My advice to those getting into TV comedy is, first, order two lunches. Because when 4 o'clock arrives, and you're famished, you're a staggering, 230-pound mess. Second, always make sure your characters need each other. If you do that, you can have the craziest, most disparate characters together, and it works.

Long I believe Canadians are flourishing in TV comedy because we've always been good at taking ourselves down a peg or two. As a young man watching *SCTV*, I loved how the cast took all these American icons and very gently made fun of them.

Tatham Canada, as a whole, is hilarious. We know how to evaluate and observe American culture. And we are less

prone to fall down at the Hollywood altar and worship it. That means rather than marvelling at Tom Cruise and Elvis Presley, we're more inclined to find things that are funny about them.

Gero Canadians live in a literal state of irony. We are next to the biggest country in the world who doesn't even know we exist. How funny is that?

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