



Kate McDermott, Craig Parker, Maxine Fleming, Jason Daniel and Max Currie

## Writing for the ‘massive story-hungry beast’

Script to Screen kicked off the 2007 Writer’s Room series last Tuesday with an in-depth look at the ‘massive story-hungry beast’ that is Shortland Street, our very own medical serial that has scrubbed up well on our screens for the last 15 years. MC Craig Parker (aka Guy Warner) hosted a panel that represented the wide range of writing roles needed to feed ‘the beast’: storyliner and dialogue writer Kate McDermott, head writer Maxine Fleming, recent storyliner and ‘boot camp’ recruit, Max Currie, and current producer Jason Daniel. The panel gave a fascinating insight into the many challenges, pleasures and rewards of writing for our longest running serial drama.

Generating scripts for Shortland Street requires several writers working together as a coordinated team. Planning meetings to plot the future of life on the street are held every 4-5 months and storylining is completed 3 months ahead of screening times. Despite the careful planning, the panel agreed that generating the amount of story required to keep the show on screen five nights a week is a relentless task. ‘A major problem at this point in Shortland Street’s history is coming up with things that haven’t happened on the show before’, said Daniel, ‘after 15 years it’s becoming harder to come up with characters who are fresh and new’.

Characters also need to display a mixture of different personalities. Daniel recalled rejoining the Shortland Street team at a time when most of the writers were liberal leaning types from Grey Lynn who sometimes tended to create characters reflecting their own views. However, having characters that were mostly liberal and PC threatened to remove any sort of conflict or debate from the Street. So Daniel introduced Baxter, a fundamentalist Christian, ‘because being so conservative allowed him to challenge the views of the other characters and create conflict; in

that context he was a radical character.’ Writers have to be careful not to become too protective of their characters said Fleming. Daniel suggested the journalist’s adage, ‘a good story is one that someone, somewhere doesn’t want told,’ should also apply to drama; ‘If you start thinking ‘we couldn’t do that to a character could we?’ then you pretty much know you almost certainly should.’

Charter obligations charge Shortland Street with the responsibility of reflecting the cultural diversity of the nation. ‘It’s a struggle because there are only 20-22 characters and a limited supply of ethnic actors available’ said Daniel. Often criticised for his cultural representations, Daniel said he can’t win. ‘First I was criticised for ‘browning Shortland Street’ in 2000, then for ‘ethnic cleansing’ in 2006.’

Writing for the Street presents many challenges and satisfactions. If an actor gets sick or walks out, writers must come up with a credible story in a very short space of time. The mix of genres offers opportunities to write comedy, romance and even suspense. Max Currie stressed that the human dynamic of coming up with stories as a group requires trust in your work mates. ‘You have to be able to bring anything and everything to the table, even if it means being humiliated!’ Daniel also noted that writing for a sustainable drama requires characters who need many facets to their personality in order to allow them to participate in different storylines, ‘which is to say they need to be more complex, more multi-dimensional than any character you might employ for a film or play.’

The skills required to write for Shortland Street should not be underestimated. ‘It’s not as easy as it seems,’ said Daniel, ‘and those skills are transferable to so many other mediums.’ This diversity of experience has made Shortland Street a training ground and launch pad for many writers working in the film and television industry. As Currie states, ‘The sheer volume of writing gives you so much practice. I’ve learned more in these last four months at Shortland Street than I have in my four year writing career!’

‘Shortland Street has played a vital role in the career of many New Zealand screenwriters’, said Rebecca Kunin, Executive Director of Script to Screen. ‘We were thrilled to launch the 2007 series of The Writer’s Room by celebrating these writers, and by acknowledging the role they have played in keeping Shortland Street on screen for 15 years.’

This next Writer’s Room on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March offers Aucklanders a rare chance to hear from one of New Zealand’s most experienced screenwriters Graeme Tetley (*Vigil, Mr. Wrong, Ruby and Rata, Bread and Roses, Out of the Blue*). Tetley will speak about the unique challenges of writing a screenplay based on real life events for *Out of the Blue*, and provide insight into his 20 years of experience as a screenwriter in the New Zealand film industry.

To learn more about writing for Shortland Street and to request a test writer's kit email [nvlahovic@shortlandstreet.co.nz](mailto:nvlahovic@shortlandstreet.co.nz)

**About *Script to Screen***

*Script to Screen* is an independent, industry wide initiative, established to develop the culture of screenwriting in Aotearoa / New Zealand. *Script to Screen* places writers at the centre of the New Zealand screen industry as we recognise the crucial role the writer plays in the filmmaking process. *Script to Screen* provides regular opportunities for screenwriters to meet share their experiences and develop their craft.

For further information or to arrange an interview with *Script to Screen*, please contact:

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