

Universal Realities: How a TV Drama Set in a First Nations Community is Resonating Around the World

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Universal realities

How a TV drama set in a First Nations community is resonating around the world

By: Sierra Bilton



Showrunner Ron E. Scott and actress Carmen Moore (counsellor Leona Stoney) say they are passionate about *Blackstone's* authenticity.



ANYONE who says Canadian TV is missing out on the boom of premium network drama should watch *Blackstone*, a little known Canadian drama with world-class ambitions, that has arguably done better in international markets than at home.

This is the stuff that *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* are made of. The series' unflinchingly gritty and realistic depiction of life on Canada's indigenous reserves has been applauded by activist groups and honoured with a truckload of award nominations. *Blackstone* has also earned itself a worldwide audience that, thanks to Netflix, may be set to expand exponentially.

The series revolves around the fictional Blackstone reserve, which seems to be forever facing disintegration by its own hands, and every episode carries an M18 warning: mature content; suitable for viewers over 18.

Subject matter revolves around several colonial viruses that still course through the Canadian national bloodstream – and which have resonated with viewers around the world, not just Canadian indigenous people. Such social issues as small-time political corruption, substance abuse and addiction, rape, suicide and racism are the raw materials from which the *Blackstone* stories were fashioned.

As co-executive producer Ashley Barlow says, “*Blackstone* is not only an indigenous story; it’s a story of humanity.”

The series, produced in and around Edmonton by the local company, Prairie Dog Film + Television, ran five seasons on APTN and Showcase, wrapping its final episode in 2015. Most of the filming was done just north of the city, in Namao, Alta., and many scenes were shot in town, including in the downtown strip club Shade.

But, now, a contract with Netflix, and repeat-airings on CBC have given it new life.

“It’s so rewarding to be a part of a show that is saying something real and that has substance,” Barlow says. “I am not indigenous myself, but it doesn’t matter. The drama you see on screen is universal; the stories are universal.”

The stories are also universally dramatic, and populated with as many negative forces as positive ones.

As strip-club owner Daryl Fraser, Steven Cree Molison (*Brokeback Mountain*, *50 Shades of Grey*) is one of the main agents of corruption in *Blackstone*.

As he told the *Prince George Citizen* early in the show’s run: “Sometimes aboriginal people don’t want us to shine a light on that stuff, but what it leads to is an understanding that this isn’t a side of our culture, but a side of all culture.

“It’s about everybody.”



Julian Black Antelope plays Darrien Tailfeathers, the kidnapper viewers love to hate. His troubled past, brings him to desperate places.

Julian Black Antelope, who plays arch-villain and kidnapper Darrien Tailfeathers agrees. “If you take away the fact that it’s a reserve,” he says. “The fact that it’s chief and council, and you listen to it with your eyes closed – these things are found throughout society. They’re how we are as a species.

“If we’re pulling back the carpet and showing all the ugliness underneath, at least we’re the ones doing it. So it’s told from the right perspective.”

BLACK Antelope was adopted and raised by a non-aboriginal couple, so, even though he grew up outside Fort MacLeod near the Kainai (Blood) and Piikani Blackfoot Reserves, he knew little of his native culture. But, after leaving home at 15, he sought out his First Nation roots. Eventually some Blackfoot elders took him under their wings.

“I’m half-Irish and half some kind of Indian,” he says. “I was adopted into the Blackfoot tribe and those are the only ways I know. Growing up, I didn’t fit in anywhere. I was always too Indian to be going out with your daughter, or not Indian enough to be going out with your daughter.”

Black Antelope says the first time he saw *Blackstone* was a scene between the late Gordon Tootoosis, as band elder Cecil Delaronde and Michelle Thrush's struggling alcoholic, Gail Stoney.

"The way that he spoke to her was exactly the way I've heard elders speak to me. They don't come across as preachy; they don't come across as know-it-alls. They're people that used to be fuck-ups themselves."

Black Antelope says the authentic scripting struck a chord with him and made him want to join the cast when he got the chance.

"I mean it was real-life. It wasn't some BS, Hollywood-ized version. When I got the script, it was like: No acting required. I mean, I knew people like this."

One of the unique aspects of the series is its balance of authentic, warts and-all portrayal of band life, and respect for the culture. Many cultural consultants and elders were involved in refining the scripts.

Barlow says Ray Thunderchild and Gordon Tootoosis, who both play elders in Season 1, offered regular reflection and feedback from the beginning; unfortunately, Tootoosis passed away in 2011, after the first season. Edmonton Métis filmmaker Gil Cardinal (*Mocassin Flats, North of 60*) wrote the series pilot and was a writer and script consultant through the entire series run.

"We wanted to do it right and respectably," Barlow says.

The series has helped Prairie Dog Film + Television carve out a reputation for raw authenticity.

Series creator and showrunner Ron E. Scott, says his experience growing up Métis near Alberta communities similar to *Blackstone* helped him add texture to the show. He founded Prairie Dog in 1993 and has seen it become a frontrunner in Canadian independent television production.



Gordon Tootosis plays Blackstone elder Cecil Delaronde. A real-life elder, he was also a series advisor.

Scott has created four separate series' in his 20 years in the industry and continues work on a new shows filmed in Southern Alberta.

He told the *Edmonton Journal*: "We do have some great resources in Alberta, and especially Edmonton.

“People in Toronto are still asking, ‘How the hell did you do it?’ ”

Another source of *Blackstone*’s authenticity is the fact that many of its stories are ripped out of the daily news, Barlow says.

“We then look at it and say, ‘How can we tell this in an entertaining way?’ We pull right from the headlines, do tons of research and put it in the stories. Like the protesting the fracking that was in Season 4, the missing and murdered aboriginal women in Season 5, the suicide in Season 1, anything that is happening, we pull it from real life.”



ONE OF the main goals of the series was to tell stories that haven’t necessarily been told, and make them dramatic and entertaining, she adds. “It’s another way to access the psyche of people. When you’re watching on a screen, you can have a stronger emotional impact ... It’s more easy to digest.”

Many of *Blackstone*’s actors know these issues all too well, and often draw from personal experience for their performances – but that doesn’t imply that *Blackstone* fell back on old-fashioned Hollywood-style typecasting, Black Antelope says.

“We should be able to play ethnically ambiguous roles. North America needs to catch up to Europe. I’ve worked in Europe, and the difference is night and day. I mean, over there, they’ll have an African guy who has the right accent, so they use him because he’s the right *person* for the job rather than the right *ethnicity* for the job.”

Or, to put it another way, as Thrush told the *Calgary Herald*, casting directors need to see aboriginal people as people first and aboriginal second.

“I’ve been in this business for close to 25 years working professionally as an actor,” she was quoted as saying. “And I think we’re beyond the time to start casting aboriginal actors as just human beings. I want to come in and read for people who are just doing whatever and it has nothing to do with the culture I’m a part of. I’m an actress who just happens to be aboriginal.”

Blackstone is Prairie Dog’s most successful show, and has been nominated for some 120 awards since it went on the air in 2010. Its honours for screenwriting and acting include 13 Alberta Media Production Industries Association awards, 13 Leo awards, two Gemini awards, and several Canadian Screen award nominations.

Unlike a lot of so-called Canadian productions, it was not co-produced with foreign money.

“We’re proud to be 100 per cent Albertan,” Barlow says. “There is a lot of American co-pros around.”



Scott has helped create four series with his production company. Now, he is working on a sci-fi series in southern Alberta.

Prairie Dog partnered with the Aboriginal People’s Television Network early in the creation of *Blackstone*.

APTN was the first aboriginal television network in the world, and is completely privately funded. The network partners with Canadian production companies to produce programming that is made by indigenous people and about indigenous people for domestic and international viewers.

Along with support from APTN, *Blackstone* received money from corporate and government agencies, such as the Canada Media Fund, Rogers Cable Network Fund and Alberta Multimedia Development Fund.

Despite being entirely Canadian produced, the show had a niche international audience almost from the beginning. *Blackstone*’s first few seasons were picked up by New Zealand’s Māori TV, and the public SBS TV network and National Indigenous Television in Australia.

Globe and Mail TV critic John Doyle says he isn't surprised by the series' popularity in Commonwealth countries with large indigenous populations.

"These countries share public policy and social issues with Canada, with the place of indigenous peoples in the culture and the role of the state in its treatment of indigenous populations. There has been a massive shift in the way that the establishment – conventional society – looks upon these indigenous populations. The threads of the story are shared by those countries with Canada."

With the new Netflix deal, *Blackstone* is moving into a new phase of international interest, Barlow says

"As we got picked up by Netflix we found that we still have a strong Australian audience but the U.S., Canada, the UK and Brazil are our highest audiences."

Speaking of international resonance, Black Antelope says shooting in Ireland recently hit some strangely familiar notes.

"The way the politics are back and forth with each other – People in Dublin think their shit don't stink and they think people from Galloway are a bunch of hicks. And everybody thinks the people from Belfast aren't even Irish anymore.

"The same sort of internal conflicts and politics just reminded me of a reserve."

He also discovered that the Irish see the same similarities, and love *Blackstone* for them.

"That's what I mean by a powerful show that's so universal."

Doyle adds that he, too, admired the realism of the show.

"It approached the grit and grime of the lives of its characters with a very open attitude. It was upfront about the characters and the lives they lead.

"It did not gloss over them."



ASKED ABOUT similar shows to *Blackstone*, Doyle replies that there are a few British series that deal with the lives of people in a similarly frank manner.

"*Blackstone* certainly seemed to be connected to a British or European style of harsh realism, rather than North American convention."

That harsh realism is the trend in TV drama today. The most popular shows on both sides of the Atlantic are aiming for more artistic content that targets a more mature audience – concepts that were once seen as too dark for prime time.

What producers want to make directly correlates with what draws viewers, Doyle says. “If you look at the last 15 years of television – *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad* – each show became a cultural touch point and became the most discussed and most talked-about television.”

But hard-hitting drama has to be entertaining, too, Doyle says. Viewers are not going to tune in week after week for dull, well-intended message-TV that plays like a public service announcement.

“It needs to be sharp,” Doyle says. “There is so much television, so much *good* television, the challenge really is to have that audience discover that production.”

Doyle attributes the upsurge in quality television for drawing audiences away from standard network television and to such premium networks as HBO and AMC, and streaming services like Netflix.

“It’s a self-perpetuating phenomenon,” he says. “The rise of quality, serious-minded television was slow and then became substantial. The heart of it is that technology makes it easier for people to have more choices in what they watch on television.

“That means that, if you’re the type of person who would rather stick with conventional network dramas and comedies, there’s plenty of that material there for you.

“But if you are someone who is more interested in sophisticated, serious-minded drama, there is also more of that for you.”

This TV environment also provides a global platform for Canadian niche content like *Blackstone*, which has proved good stories are universal.



Eric Schweig, left, plays arch-villain Andy Fraser, and Garry Chalk is deputy police chief Ken Hillis.

Photos by Dan Power, for Prairie Dog Film + Television.