

Transcript

DEMAN Live: Inside A Netflix Writer's Room
Feat. Keely MacDonald '13
with StudioDuke

00:00 DAVE KARGER

Welcome to DEMAN Live. I'm DAVE KARGER, Duke alum and host on Turner Classic Movies. DEMAN is the Duke Entertainment, Media and Arts Network. And it's the University's hub for the creative industries. On this show, you'll hear a past episodes of DEMAN live, which includes panels and one on one chats with alumni. Thanks so much for listening and enjoy.

02:13 STUDENT

Hi, my name is Jasmine. And then the first question is what made you want to be a writer?

02:18 KEELY MACDONALD

Yeah, that's a good one. Um, so I had always loved TV. And I've always loved creative writing, but it hadn't ever actually occurred to me that that would be something of a career, I kind of always dabbled in, like, you know, my own kind of fiction just for fun or fan fiction, if any of you are like aware of that. And to me, that was always just sort of like a side hobby. And it wasn't until I was a senior that I started realizing, like, people actually write these television episodes. And like, how do you get into that, and I had no idea. So I sort of scoured the internet looking for blogs and stuff like that. And at the time blogs were a big thing. I graduated in 2012. So I sort of started reading some that like bigger writers like Jane Espenson, who's a big genre writer, you know, she's on Buffy, and a lot of things like that had written and I was like, you know, if there was ever time to try it, maybe after college would be a good opportunity. So I kind of reached out to any possible connections, and everyone was sort of like, you just have to be really driven. And I decided I would give it one year in LA to see if I could hang with it. And I ended up being really lucky that first I started in production as a PA. And then later, I got into a writers room as a research intern. And that was this FOX show, Sleepy Hollow. And I ended up like writing up that show until I was a writer. So the long story short is that I always loved writing and TV, and it just took a while to occur. To me. That's actually a possible career path.

03:52 STUDENT

Yeah, thank you. And then the next question is, how long does it usually take you to write an episode or a season?

03:58 KEELY

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Yeah, so the way it works in TV rooms, and this is always kind of confusing, because it sort of depends on the show and the showrunner as well. The showrunner is like the head writer, head executive producer, he or she makes every decision between like, what is the storyline going to be? What writers are we hiring? Who is being cast in the role? What locations are we doing? What wig is that actor wearing? Like every little tiny decision, and they usually hire a staff. It used to be when there were 22 Episode seasons, which you know, there's still a couple of broadcasts, there would be bigger staffs of like 13 writers. Now, for instance, I'm on a Netflix show, that is eight episodes. And there is six writers plus the showrunner. So the way it works is you have a certain allotted amount of time. So like we're hired for 20 weeks right now. And that was to basically break the first season, which is eight episodes. He'd already written the pilot the showrunner had, and I'm episode six. We just broke it in about two weeks and you break it together as a room. So a bunch of writers will sit together in a room and there's assistants who take notes. And breaking story basically means you like, know what every scene is and what's happening in each scene. And that's basically like, how you go about breaking it together. But then the writer will individually go off and write it. And first they write an outline. And then that gets approved by like the studio and the network. And then they'll write the episode, and then that will go through various revisions depending on the production schedule. So anyways, the question is that it depends on the show, but like, my current show is 20 weeks long, and it took two or two and a half weeks to break my episode. And I guess writing wise, it takes like a week or so to write it. But once it's already broken, it's a lot easier.

05:53 STUDENT

Hi, I'm Greta. So the third question is, what kind of research do you do? And how long do you spend researching before beginning to work on a script?

06:06 KEELY

That's a good one, it kind of depends on whatever you're trying to write. So just a little bit about me, I'm kind of, I'm a genre writer, which means I do like sci fi, fantasy, kind of supernatural things. But I also love like, dramedy and rom-com type stuff as well. All the shows I've been on, though, have been genre shows. Um, so a lot of times, I kind of think the idea of research is a little bit of a trap just in that people can get very stuck in the research phase, rather than moving forward. So to me, the biggest amount of research is figuring out what's your character arcs? And like, how can you most clearly state that? And on top of that, like, what message are you trying to convey? So like, that could be a theme, that could be like the reason you're writing this, it could be just like a feeling that every character is kind of feeling a different way about that sort of like, overall umbrella. But whatever you're doing, like the research phase, for me, typically is all about breaking all the character stuff, because a lot of times plot will come from that. So I don't spend that long, I say, as long as it takes you to get all your character things ready. And usually, for me, that's like, maybe a month kind of like percolating and like writing down all the arcs before I start, like breaking it out.

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07:31 STUDENT

I think I'm next. Um, yeah. Hi. So my question is, just from your experience in, you know, different writers rooms, what would you say is a trait or, you know, a couple of traits that you think the best and best could be, you know, like, any definition, writers, in your opinion have?

07:52 KEELY

Yeah, totally. So the big thing about TV writing is, it's a very collaborative process. If you're writing features, like movies, you're doing it a little more on your own. But no matter what, you're gonna have to take notes from executives, producers, directors, a bunch of things like that. I'm doing a rom com, and I had to do a bunch of passes for my producers. And then finally, we just attached a director. And now I have to do a bunch of passes on her notes for that. But in a TV writers room, like the reason that they select different writers is because every one of us has a very unique POV. And that's what we bring to it. And that's ultimately what makes it like a very well-rounded show that will be good for universal audiences. And so the biggest thing you can do is be like a positive pitcher in the room, try to yes-and people, or if you disagree, or it's not working you like it's bumping you for some reason, then that's the kind of thing where you look for a fix. Where you're like, I don't know if she would act this way, because it actually undercuts the urgency. But if we did this, instead, I think it answers the note we're trying to get at, and you're pitching positively forward. So for me, I've been really, really lucky that I got on a show Sleepy Hollow as an assistant and most of my shows up until now have been with writers who were on that show who later got their own shows. And they all took me along with them. And the reason was, because if you come into the room and you're like, genuinely excited, you want to make the best story possible. That's like infectious and that's we're all just excited to be making good TV for people and ultimately, like, no matter what ends up with the end product, generally comes from a good place, you know?

09:37 STUDENT

How can you tell whether a job is worth sticking with to kind of get where you want to be even though it's not where you you're not currently doing what you want to do?

09:50 KEELY

Yeah, so this was a big thing for me when I was an assistant. Um, one season when I was on Sleepy Hollow, I got offered a job on Empire which had just ended It was like a huge show at the time. And another season I got offered the job of writers assistant on the first season of This Is Us which I read the pilot, I was like, Oh, this can be like a really big hit, you know what I mean? And you're kind of trying to decide, like, what's the better fit for you. A lot of times, it can be kind of hard to decide, but you have to listen to your gut. And my biggest thing is, go whatever place you think you can grow the most. So I ended up sticking on Sleepy Hollow both of those times, because they both times offered

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me something that I didn't have before, like, a promotion from the showrunners assistant to writer's assistant, or to get a script that would let me write and produce the whole thing. Um, basically. So whenever you're doing a job, and it's maybe not quite where you want to be, think of it as like a stepping stone along the way, because there is no set path for anybody. Like, I've seen people get into this business in the weirdest ways, and you just never know. So as long as you feel like you're learning stuff, or you're meeting really great connections, that's the biggest thing. Because honestly, like we're always still growing. We're always still meeting new people. And I think everything is sort of additive, like it will come around in some way, shape or form.

11:45 STUDENT

I'm Nia. Apologies for the delay. Keely: Don't worry. All good. Nia: Okay, so my question is, what is your dream position?

11:55 KEELY

Oh, honestly, I do think I want to be a showrunner one day, which again, is the person who's in charge of all the shows, but I have to say, I've been incredibly lucky. And the last two shows I've been on have been like my absolute dream shows, I unfortunately, have signed NDA. So I can't tell you what they are. But one of them. They're both on Netflix. One of them just started filming yesterday and released a bunch of casting and things recently, and is a big spectacle event show that is based on a very popular animated show. So you can take guesses as to what that might be. Um, but yeah, basically, my goal is always to either adapt things I love or create my own kind of dream show, which my brand kind of speaks to. It's very, like female centric writing, that usually speaks to very, like flawed and complicated relationships between women, whether that's like sisterhood, friendship, like relationships, whatever. So my dream position is just writing that kind of stuff, and eventually, hopefully show running it. But yeah, I, I guess it's a little boring to say like, I've kind of feel like I am very fortunate to have written on some of my dream shows. And that just feels like the ultimate, you know what I mean?

13:12 STUDENT

Hey, I'm Brandon. My question is, what part of what is the most difficult part of writing or breaking story for you? And how do you overcome that process?

13:25 KEELY

Yeah, that's good. I think a lot of times, especially when you get reps, which are like agents and managers, people try to like, follow the market, like, you know, this summer, if anybody was pitching anything, everyone was like, we want the next Ted Lasso, because that was the popular thing, you know. And then now I feel like everyone wants the next Squid Game. And so it's one of those things where everybody kind of wants you to follow whatever is most popular thing. But that's not how it works. Like you create the market by writing whatever you want that's most personal and important to

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you. So I think the hardest thing is kind of sticking to your guns and figuring out like, what do you truly want to write because I wrote so many samples when I was an assistant that were okay, like, the writing was fine, but they weren't really that personal. And the first time I wrote a pilot that I felt like was like, sort of deeper, more vulnerable and like, based on things that I felt people responded to it and it made me realize that as a writer, something that we need to do is like pull from ourselves. And I'm not just talking about like deep therapy sessions, but any kind of like, okay, this is based on a friendship I have with someone or I ended up selling a pilot to FOX that was based on me and my sister and how we're kind of two sides of the same coin. And we argue a lot, but we love each other a lot. So whenever it comes from real life, that makes it feel real. And so the hardest thing is just kind of like writing what you want and what your vision is, especially for your own samples. Being able to bring that with you into a room. So you can like, you know, bring your POV. Student: Awesome. Thank you.

15:10 STUDENT

Hi. How has networking played a role in your career and kind of how would you recommend people go about that?

15:18 KEELY

Yeah, I mean, so for me, networking has been hugely helpful. I think you guys can probably tell I'm, like, very chatty. I'm like one of the chattier people in all my rooms. But again, like, ever since I started out here, I met a ton of other assistants who are now like executives, and producers, and that has helped launch a lot of things in my career. But on top of that, even when I was an assistant, and now like, as I move up the ranks for writing, basically, all the people I've met have been so incredibly helpful in helping me on my next step in the journey. So like, I know, it sounds kind of awful, like the idea of networking, but really, what it's about is making lasting relationships with people that are actually authentic, because that will help you moving forward. And that doesn't mean you need to, like, go out and get drinks and coffee with people constantly, you're exhausted. It just means like making a connection. When I was a showrunners assistant, I remember emailing these agency assistants, and we're trying to set up meetings and we're like, Oh, my God, like, you're my co pilot right now. And I could not be doing this without you. And now they're big producers, and they help get projects going. So yeah, it's it's very important. And I think you'd also be surprised, like, it kind of turns into a little like LA family out here as well, like a bunch of the writers that I've met I'm very close with now. And again, every job I've had, which has been one FOX show, and for Netflix shows, and a couple of like pilots and movies and stuff like that, basically have all come from the show I was on for a long time as an assistant until this one. And the only reason I got on this show, which again, I can't tell you what it is. But it's based on a very, very, very big IP basically happened because like 14 of my mentors, like emailed the showrunner, and we're like, you have to hire her. So he was like, I guess I have to. So anyway, it's important, and it can actually be fun. And it'll be like very additive to you out here. And I'll add like, I mean, I've told this to Amy, but like, I'm happy to, like help in any way I can. Like if you have

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questions and stuff after this. And I feel like it's awesome that Duke is doing this. And it's great to have mentors, and I like to help try to place people in rooms if I can. So any kind of network you do, like with alumni like friends, family, anything like that always helpful, and you just never know like, what's going to open the door.

17:48 STUDENT

I am Devinne, thank you so much. You're talking with us? And my question is, while the saying goes that no regrets and don't look back, but I do want to know, like, looking back on your do career, is there something that you would have changed?

18:03 KEELY

Yeah, you know, I used to be like, Oh, I wish I'd taken more like screenwriting classes or more cinema classes and things like that. But honestly, like we were saying at the beginning of this, I do think that everything you've done will help you in some way shape or form, whether you write a pilot about it later on, whether that's one of your interest, and you go into a show that is like talking about that kind of subject. Like, I like to think that, you know, even if I had taken all those classes, I'd still be where I am. So it's just one of those things where it's kind of what you make of it looking back on my career, I guess the only thing I could have done was like, you know, watch more films or something like study that a little more. But I honestly I think that you can start anytime you want, you can take the knowledge you have and make it useful. So there's like no use looking back on all that. But the one thing I would tell myself when I was younger is like, it's okay, it takes some time you'll get there if you persist, because there were so many times when I was like unemployed for a while. And you know, the way it works out here is you work on a season and then it ends and you have to get on another season unless the show gets renewed which becomes like more few and far between like as we get into the age of streaming and stuff and like limited series and things like that. So just kind of being kind to yourself. I know that's like very corny, but definitely something I would have liked to have heard from my older self.

19:28 STUDENT

Alright, speaking of streamers, I was wondering what you would say your biggest takeaway from working in the writers room of a streamer is as opposed to I guess like traditional television.

19:38 KEELY

Yeah, it's definitely kind of interesting because they're very, very different. So when I was on Sleepy Hollow, which was a FOX show, it was like you have way less time to break all the episodes and write everything, but they're a lot more formulaic, so they're almost kind of easier to do. Um, being on these Netflix shows, you generally have more time for the writing and the production starts a little bit later. So you're not in as much of a time crunch. But they're a lot more serialized, so the structure of the

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episodes kind of change. So, you know, tonally, like streamers can also be kind of anywhere where you have like, more specific parameters for broadcast things. It just kind of depends on like, what you like what you're looking for. I used to, like, watch so much network TV, like obviously, I watch things like Grey's Anatomy, or like Vampire Diaries, you know, things like this that had like 22 episodes, and like, you know, they have to break so many things per season. But if you think about it, a lot of them have the same structure. And now, the last couple shows I've been on have been like eight episodes, because they're kind of like the very high budget ones, so there's less episodes, and we break those like we're breaking one long movie. So instead of each episode being its own little contained episodic thing, it's more like the season as a whole, it's just a more serialized story.

21:07 STUDENT

Hi, I'm Brie, you've done such a great job of answering some of my question. So I was wondering if I can ask a new one. Based on casting. How does your writing style or does it change? Once the show is cast? Do you rewrite? Or what does that look like?

21:32 KEELY

Yeah, so it totally depends. So again, on network things, once you cast someone, generally, like the pilot has already filmed. And so you know you're writing towards a certain person playing that character. And that definitely helps. You'll have like pictures up in the writers room of all those people. For these streaming shows, for the most part, they're actually casting afterwards. So the last three shows I've been on basically, like, will finish the writing of it, and then they'll do the casting afterwards. So in that case, the person just really has to embody what's already written there. And hopefully, it's a distinct enough character that it jives, you know what I mean? I was on one Netflix show, which was this one October Faction where we cast in the middle of the season, and depending on the strengths or weaknesses of the actors and actresses, we basically ended up going back and like changing some things at the beginning of the season and backfilling it. So it just sort of depends on when in the process casting is, I think, for a lot of the streamers, they're kind of happening more after the room has wrapped, and you're more into the production phase.

22:43 STUDENT

Thank you. Hi, um, I wanted to ask about, you talked about how you were an ICS major and didn't necessarily have any internships prior. And so I was kind of wondering, I know you mentioned some assistantships. How did you initially break into the field?

22:59 KEELY

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Yeah. Okay. So I basically asked anyone if they knew anybody out here, and I was trying to take coffees and stuff with anyone, and my mom had a friend whose husband worked on a FOX show. And so I came out here I met him, I went to the FOX lot and everything. And I ended up getting offered a job as a PA and a couple months on a different show, which was ABC Family sitcom, Melissa and Joey. And that just came from like, meeting random people and kind of like expressing my interest. Like, I want to be in a writers room, I'll do whatever it takes to get a foot in the door. So that was just incredibly lucky. So I was in production for the first six months of being out here. And then this was the weirdest thing. My mom went to, she was in Atlanta at like a conference and she met a woman by a pool. This was like, at the beginning of 2013 when I was out here, and the woman lived in LA. And I my mom got her email. Basically, I emailed her being like, if you ever need a babysitter, like I'm looking for extra cash out here, by the way, I want to be a writer, if you happen to know anybody. She emailed her husband, who was one of the creators and executive producers of Sleepy Hollow, which we didn't know because they had different last names. So he immediately forwarded my email to the production company who reached out to me the next week and was like, Do you want to be a research intern on this show? And I was like, how they even hear about this so that was the kind of thing where like, you just never know like, who will know someone, so I always put out there like this is what I'm looking for. You don't do it in like a desperate kind of way, you just do it in like I'm looking I would be interested if you knew anybody no pressure, it's all good. And like that's how I got on Sleepy Hollow and I was on it for four seasons and it kind of like launched my writing career. So I know that sounds so random and it's not like the kind of thing you can duplicate, but I really believe it just comes from like letting people know what you're looking for, you know. But again, you guys can email me, and I'll like, try to be on the lookout for things, as well.

25:10 STUDENT

As same vein as Kelly's question about, I was very curious. And you were an AI, CS major, and that you also studied French and other other things at Duke. Have you felt that any of those academic studies have fed into your work in the entertainment industry? And if so, how, like for those of us that have majors that aren't really necessarily lined up with what we're interested in pursuing?

25:38 KEELY

Yeah, for sure. I mean, first of all, in a lot of my personal pilots, which are things I've written myself, all my interests from Duke are still very much my interests. And so I just choose to write about them. So there's subjects that you guys feel like you know a lot about and you're experts in, use that in your writing, like that can be very important. I think also, these things come up in a room a lot. So like, classes I took for ICS have come back around and actually been helpful whenever we're breaking story. And it might just be that a certain character has certain hobbies or certain interest and you're like, oh, wait, like, I actually know a ton about that, because I took this class. So again, I do think everything

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you've learned, you can take forward, and it will be important for you later. And it also just goes to show like, if you are interested in something, write about that, you know what I mean?

26:32 STUDENT

Hi, Keely, my name is Taylor, thanks so much for taking the time to chat with us tonight. So I did Duke in LA about, I guess, like a year and a half ago. And I did basically a development internship with a TV production company doing coverage. And I came into this, you know, wanting to be a writer or to work in documentary. So drama documentary is kind of where I stand. And I felt like a little frustrated at the time, because it seemed like development was just very far away from the work that writers were doing. And there was not a lot of interfacing happening there. It was very much the business side of it the bottom line. But you know, that company like me, they would want to have me back next year. Is that like, a viable place to start if I ultimately want to be a writer's assistant? Or would you recommend kind of moving somewhere else? I'm not sure how much I guess like, movement there is between development and writing?

27:28 KEELY

There is a ton of movement, because here's the thing, if you go to a company, and they're developing with writers say they're working with a writer, and that writer show goes, and then that that show runner needs an assistant and you're like, Well, I've been working at this company, they know this writer really well, they can talk to the writer for me. And then suddenly, you're an assistant on the TV show. So I know a ton a ton of writers who've started production companies in production, like I did at agencies and management companies. Because no matter what it's kind of about connections, it's about building your story instincts. So if this was a production company that's doing scripted TV, I think that's a good thing to do. Um, also, you can email me and we can I like, let me know what the company is. And I can let you know, like what I've heard and stuff like that. But I think the answer to that is like there's a ton of crossover.

28:49 STUDENT

Hi, um, so one question that I have is, do you think there was anything you did to stand out in terms of your writing? And how do you recommend to best put yourself out there?

29:02 KEELY

Yeah, I mean, the best thing you can do in your own writing is have a really distinct POV and a really distinct voice. And so it's like, how do you do that you kind of just have to lean into, like, whatever makes you you. So like, my writing has a lot of really, kind of funny, snappy action lines. But it's, it's how I talk a lot of times, like, it just sounds like if you're reading it, it sounds like me talking like it's very voici it's kind of hard to describe that. But also, again, the scripts that for me got the most attention were scripts that like came from a place deep within me like, again, that's not like your biggest trauma

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or anything, but it's about things that are important to you. So like my first script that like, kind of got me manager and into this writing program I did and staff for the first time was called Fan Girls, and it was about it was basically like Miss Congeniality. but it was like a jaded cop has to go undercover in a fandom to save this B List, YA star basically. And it was all about how one shared common interest can create a community. And that's what I had found via like fanfiction and fandom and things online. And now I think that's like more talked about, but when I wrote it a couple years ago, I think it was sort of more new to people. And they were like, how do you know about this, and I was like, this is a hobby. And this is an interest I really like. And this is how I got into writing. And now it's kind of a calling card for me. So it just is the kind of thing where like you pull from what makes you you, and that will shine through. Also, like when you're meeting people. And this is not just about your writing, again, just being like, interested in them genuinely and making connections that are actually authentic, and people will want to work with you. That's the biggest thing. We have to spend like so many hours a day, like, kind of getting into the nitty gritty about characters and stuff like that. So like, people want to work with good people, and people who are like interesting and different. So it just kind of capitalizing on like, the things you love, which is the best part of TV writing.

31:14 STUDENT

I just have always wondered what writers room looks like, how is it like set up? Because when I imagine people talking to each other, I feel like the way that they are in relation to one another, like orientation is important. So you can elaborate on that. That'd be great.

31:36 KEELY

Yeah, totally. So kind of funny, because it's gotten a little weird in the age of Zoom Rooms. Um, my last show was a Zoom Room, I'm actually in a physical room right now we just we wear masks all day, although, at the moment, I'm in my actual apartment. Um, but the way it works is you're in a huge conference room, there is a table and all the writers sit at it. And there's just tons of whiteboards around usually. And those are for breaking story for writing down all the character arcs, kind of the season long plan and all those things. And there are a couple of assistants who are usually in the room as well. The writer's assistant is the one who takes notes on everything. And that's just like, as if you were taking notes in a class. And the reason we do that is that we talked about so many things in a day, that it's nice to be able to go back at night and like re familiarize yourself on things that you've discussed and like what you actually landed on. Also, if someone was absent for the day, they can easily catch up. And also the writer's assistant kind of becomes like the archive person. So it's like if last week we had a pitch, but we moved away from it. And this week, we realized maybe that was the right path, the writers assistant can easily pull up the notes from last week and be like what you guys said was this, and then you can go down that path. So that assistant is always in the room. That's definitely a position that will teach you a lot about writing. I did it for two seasons. And honestly, it taught me so much about breaking story and how to pitch in a room and kind of the etiquette of being in a room.

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There's also the showrunners assistant, who is really largely in charge of making sure like the showrunner has everything that she or he needs, in terms of having all the meetings on the books, like, you know, scheduling everything, taking notes on calls that the showrunner is having with the producers in the studio and the network, and kind of just making sure that the office is running at its best, you know. There's a script coordinator. And this person is in charge of sending out all the documents to everybody. And it's a huge list because it's everyone in production. It's you know, the network execs, the studio execs, the producers, it's just a ton of people, and they go through and they kind of edit it and make sure all the grammar and everything is right. And they're also in charge of continuity for the season. So that's a good position. And then writers pa who's the one who's in charge of making sure the office is maintained, like are there enough whiteboard markers, like do we have cleaning supplies? like can they get some snacks because everybody's really stressed out and hungry? You know, like, do we have water around like just kind of everything and that person usually steps in also to help like run the board, or the writer's assistant like when they need someone else to help them. They can take notes and stuff as well. So the room basically just looks like a big conference room with all the writers sitting there. And I don't think there's any certain position where anybody sits like my current show. We all just came in the first day and like sat down in the chairs that we literally still sit in. So it kind of is like in college when you go into class and you're like I guess I'm sitting at this desk from now on. So, yeah.

34:43 STUDENT

Hi, I'm Ava. I have a question about like moving to LA and how that move was from you or for you like from the East Coast to the West Coast. Like how you managed it and if like if you use like the Duke network out To make friends and...

35:03 KEELY

Yeah, okay, so I'm from North Carolina, I'm from like an hour away from Duke, Greensboro. It's pretty close to Durham. But yeah, I never really lived anywhere but North Carolina. So I drove out there and I was really, really nervous. And I was really worried about being homesick. And I literally found someone on Craigslist and moved in with her. And that actually ended up being really lucky because she was in the NBC Page Program, which if you've seen 30 Rock, like Kenneth's position, basically, but through her I met a ton of other pages from NBC. And a lot of them are now executives, and they're still some of my very best friends. I went to dinner with one last night, I had one friend from Duke who came out there, Jenna Gates. I don't know if you guys have met her, but she works at UTA now and she's an agent. So I hung out with her and her agency mailroom class a lot. So it's funny, because everybody out here is like you were an NBC Page, right? Like you worked at UTA. Right? And I was like, actually didn't I just hung out with those people. So I was really worried about it. But the thing is, like, you'll actually find that there's a ton of people looking to make friends and meet other people. You know, I think I emailed people from Duke at the time. But I didn't really make as much use of the

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alumni network as I probably should have. And looking back on it like, that would have been a really helpful thing. And like, hopefully, I can be helpful to you guys. And I think there's a lot more of us now, like, when I did the FOX Writers Lab, which was like a little thing each year that all like all the studios and networks do like writing programs like the ABC Fellowship, and like the Warner Brothers Workshop, I did the fox one and actually another girl in my program is like, two or three years above me graduation, like she is a writer now and like Rutherford Falls, I think, Lauren Tyler, so there's like more of us out here than I knew, which is exciting. Yeah. Hi, yeah, the move is hard. But you'll be good. Sorry, go ahead.

37:12 STUDENT

Another another question. Um, what would you say your biggest piece of advice is for someone looking to get into a writers room as an assistant or future employee?

37:19 KEELY

Yeah, I mean, I think the biggest thing is just like, kind of meet as many people as you can tell people, that's what you're looking to do. And on top of that be writing because like, it's not like anyone expects you to have like, totally finished polished samples. But like, if they're like, do write, because there's a lot of people who come out here, and they're like, I want to be a writer. And it's like, Have you written anything, and they're like, I have a lot of ideas. And it's like, you know, we all have to start somewhere. There's like, literally 15 pilots I would never show anyone because they were all the first ones I wrote. But that being said, like, if you want to write, just practice it. And then when the opportunity arises, like you'll be totally ready. Like, everything out here is a little bit of luck. And like a little bit of like, you know, preparedness. And it's just kind of a fun mix of both funnier anxiety inducing, whatever you want to say about it. But I think just let people know what you're looking for. And like people do want to help. Like, I think that every one of us who's out here knows that. So much of it is like people helping each other out. It is really collaborative. And people help each other kind of climb all the ladders, and it'll come back around and help you out.

38:39 STUDENT

Hi, I'm , thank you so much again, for for talking to us today on I was wondering if you had any advice for us on what's the best thing we can be doing right now? Especially, you know, in the middle of a pandemic, if we want it to be successful in a creative industry in the future?

38:56 KEELY

Yeah, I mean, I think the biggest thing to do is, again, be writing a lot, because no matter what, like, as soon as the opportunity comes up, if you're like I can back up what I want to do with like, I wrote this book, I wrote this movie, I wrote this pilot, like, that is the biggest thing. So like, during the pandemic, I was really fortunate to be on a show, but I also feel like it was the most I'd ever written because I

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couldn't really like network as much as usual. And so I had more time and I was like, I'm just gonna write, I know, it's kind of hard because also we're really stressed out during the pandemic. So that obviously makes writing harder, but do things that fill the creative. Well then like watch TV shows you love and read books you love and anything that's going to give you inspiration. So I know this all sounds like really intangible. But if you feel like you want to go into a creative career, then like anything you do to kind of hone your skills will be really important later, and then you just never know when you're going to meet the person who is going to be able to Like, get you in the door? You just don't know. But if you're ready for it, like, what's the thing like opportunity is when luck meets preparation? I might have totally butchered that. But feel like that someone's right. So let's, let's just run with it, you know? Hopefully that was helpful. I don't know, I feel like half the things I'm saying are coming off is like, very corny. And I'm like, I don't know how to express this other than, like, so much of it is just kind of like, persisting, working on your writing and stuff, and then letting people know what you're looking for. Because you just never know when someone's going to be helpful.

40:35 STUDENT

Hi, I'm back. I was wondering, you mentioned that you didn't take screenwriting classes at all, you only took the one. How did you learn how to write to form and especially like, with like, especially when you were writing for TV shows where there is such a specific thing? And if there were books or anything like that? Like, what books would you suggest?

40:55 KEELY

Yeah. So when I did my screenwriting class, I did it with Neal Bell. It was super fun. I wrote using Celtics, which is like a free program. And I was pretty funny, because I was like, Yeah, I know exactly what I'm doing. But I did buy a ton of books. And you know, the books, they were all helpful. I definitely learned some things from them. But the biggest thing I think you can do is actually read a bunch of other scripts. So if there's a show that you love, generally, if you just Google like, whatever the show is, and then PDF like screenplay, you can probably find it and looking through, like, how did they decide to structure this? Okay, at the end of Act One, this is sort of like the inciting incident. At the end of Act Two, there's a big turn here, like, how did they decide to structure it? What is the tone? How did they convey like these emotions, reading scripts will honestly help you so much. I feel like for me when I got to Sleepy Hollow as an assistant, being in the writers room was a huge crash course in screenwriting, because first of all, I thought I was a comedy writer first. And I'm not saying I'm not, but I'm like, definitely more of kind of like a dramedy writer. And I realized that if you write drama, and you put some jokes in there, that's actually pretty valuable, because everybody wants to be like, the funny writer in the drama room. Um, and also, on my current show, there's seven writers, four of us are 30 minute writers, and three of us are one hour writers. So I'm one of the one hour ones, but now it's kind of becoming a little more like cross pollinated in terms of like, what you can write on, which shows because everybody wants, like, some funny moments, but some serious character drama moments. So

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it just sort of depends. But anyway, there are a ton of books out there, I can't remember the name of any of them. But really, just like reading screenplays will help you more than anything, if you kind of break them down and see how they did it.

42:54 STUDENT

I actually had a follow up to my previous question. I know you said that one of the big things we'd be doing right now is you know, just writing a lot, creating a lot however we can, and I know a lot of us, as part of studio do are writing scripts, writing books. And I was curious once we have, you know, a finished for us finished products that we're happy with this, we want to put it out into the world. What would you say the best next step from barriers? Is it getting an agent? What is it?

43:23 KEELY

So the best thing after you have samples like you feel really strongly about is getting a rep. So usually people start with managers and the important things about reps, managers and agents. And then later when you have like big deals for development, stuff like lawyers, these people will hear about jobs before you will probably unless it's like, you know, the writers like running the show, or they're, you know, the producer who's looking for someone to fill this open writing assignment. And so they're the people who send you out on general meetings, who will help you make connections who will put you up for staffing, things like that. So some managers take query letters, I have met my I met my manager and my previous managers, who I ended up parting ways with after one of my jobs before another series of jobs for creative reasons. I met them through other writers who I trusted. So I think the best thing to do once you feel really strongly is if you know any writers and again, like you know I am going to offer up my eyes and services if it helps, um, get a writer to read it and see if they think you're ready. And if they have notes, do the notes, if they think it's good, but you could keep going on something more personal or whatever it is, like, just keep writing until like you're totally ready. And then once you feel really strongly like this is it this is my sample. You get a manager, they can help you find an agent Probably they'll send you out for things and you know, a lot of people think like I've made it once I get my Rep, but it's kind of like, the hard part about being out here is you're constantly having to like remake it, like, you get your rep, then you got to get on a show that show and you got to get on another show. And that sounds really scary. But it kind of pushes you to keep writing and keep getting better and better. And I remember like, you know, again, I wrote so many pilots, and I thought they were all like, amazing. And writers would be like, it's good. Like, what's your next idea? And I'd be like, Oh, why don't they understand me. And it kind of took until I wrote that when I told you about fangirls. I was like, oh, like, this is kind of like a different level of what I was writing before. So again, like, going to say it again, just keep writing, but you can send me things. I'll read it, make other connections, you can try queries if you want. But a lot of times your connections will know people.

45:55 STUDENT

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So I have another question. I'm so I'm kind of thinking how to phrase this, but it's like, often, from my experiences in writing, especially I think with stuff like genre writing where there's like, often like a lot of complex information and world building, you know, especially in terms of like more sci fi stuff, and that kind of stuff like, and also later down in the episodes, there's stuff like plot twists, and then reveals and then just a lot of information. One thing that I've often thought about when writing is like and is, at what point do you judge that something has gotten too complex, or you've withheld too much information? Especially because he sometimes like I write down something and I'm like, oh, yeah, this connect like something that he said in episode one connects so well in Episode Five, but maybe, you know, someone was having some really crunchy cereal, and they didn't hear like that line in episode one, right? And then so like, what do you do? So and so is the solution to that sometimes, you know, giving them giving they making sure the audience has a lot of signals, like a lot of opportunities to grab that information. But then that could get a little too repetitive and not as pacey. So how do you like deal with that?

47:09 KEELY

Yeah, so if you're on network TV, they'll make you say things like five times to make sure the audience heard it. Because they're like, What if people were like folding their laundry the first four times, like, we got to have it in there at least five times. And you're like, I think our audience probably heard it, but we're gonna do it because the network said you, I think the biggest thing is, if your story is very complicated, that's okay, as long as your character arcs are very solid, and simple and make sense. And the biggest thing is, like, character arcs aren't ever really that complicated, like person starts at point A, and they need to grow to point B, and there are ups and downs to get there. But it all makes sense. Like, if you boil it down to just the characters, there are their emotions, how they're growing. So even if the world around them is crazy, and there's like a bunch of plot twists, people will be on board because they're following the characters. So a lot of times, like if you're writing something, like I just wrote this crazy space fantasy, because I was like, I want to staff on one of the Star Wars shows. Um, so I need like a, I need like a sample that will be that kind of thing that's like fun like that. But it's a huge world building sort of like space opera thing. So it's like, how do I do this. And so ultimately, it came down to a girl, who basically had been told that her dream was dumb, and then finally realizes in the pilot, that that's not true, like no one in the world can tell you what your dreams are, like, only you can do that. And that was sort of the impetus for her like leaving going off planet like starting the whole series. And so even though all this crazy shit was going on around her, that was very clean, very simple. And to some degree, most of the surrounding characters felt some kind of way about that idea. And that arc, the idea that like your dream is your dream. And like, only you can decide like, whether you're doing that or not. And again, like that felt personal to me, because screenwriting is that way for me. So for you, like you'll be writing things where you mostly just have to do episode one like the pilot. So you don't really have to think about what's happening in Episode Five, you can be like, Oh, this is a cool setup for something later on. But just make sure like within each of your episodes, or your movies, or

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your novels, whatever you're writing, like, the character arc feels complete. And it's very simple. And it's easy for people to kind of like, catch on to because that's the kind of stuff that people actually respond to, and you can get as crazy as you want. Outside of that, again, the show I was just on which I can't say the name of but it's based on a very popular American cartoon that is now becoming live action for Netflix. It is like a very big world building kind of thing. But ultimately, the character arcs and like their feelings are very simple and clean.

50:18 AMY

Kaylee, you're amazing. And, you know, I just really appreciate you and your time. So thanks again.

50:37 KEELY

Thanks for having me and good luck to everybody. And yay Go Blue Devils.

57:28 DAVE KARGER

That's it for this episode of DEMAN Live. I'm DAVE KARGER, DEMAN is a signature program of Duke Arts and Duke Alumni Engagement and Development. Follow DEMAN on social and stay updated at DukeDEMAN.com, that's d e m a n.com where you can find our full archive of episodes. Thanks so much for joining us. See you next time.

This episode was produced by me, Lilly Clark, in collaboration with Hear at Duke, Duke's student run podcast hub. Our theme song is "Carolina" by Cameron Tompkins.

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