

INTERVIEW: Dawn Prestwich and Nicole Yorkin

Dawn Prestwich and Nicole Yorkin Credits

Best known for:

<i>The Killing</i> (Executive Producers/Co-executive Producers/Writers)	2011–2012
WGA Nominated (New Series)	2012
<i>FlashForward</i> (Consulting Producers/Writers)	2009–2010
<i>The Riches</i> (Executive Producers/Writers)	2007–2008
<i>Carnivàle</i> (Co-executive Producers/Writers)	2003–2005
<i>The Education of Max Bickford</i> (Executive Producers/Writers)	2001
WGA Award Winner (Episodic Drama)	2003
<i>Judging Amy</i> (Co-executive Producers/Writers)	1999–2001
<i>Chicago Hope</i> (Co-executive Producers/Producers/Writers)	1996–1999
Emmy Nominated (Outstanding Drama Series)	1997
<i>Picket Fences</i> (Co-producers/Writers)	1995–1996

NL: Before we examine what makes a great cold opening/teaser as your way in to a pilot or episode, I'd like to discuss your partnership's approach to getting started. What's your process?

Who does what? Do you have complementary strengths and weaknesses?

NY: The actual physical process is always the same. We've come to this after years of trial and error because we've been writing together for 22 years. So, I always type because I like to see the words in front of me and Dawn is more of a blue sky person, so she's on the couch or walking or doing whatever.

DP: Nicole reads it back to me or we'll be talking out loud. For me, it's got to live in the room in the space. Hearing it will put it on its feet for me too.

NY: Typically, in the beginning, we fought over every word because we had to agree on every word before it's typed. Now, we've gotten better and faster at that process, but we still sometimes hit moments where we come to a standoff. And then we have to come up with a third solution which would please both of us.

DP: I think in the moment if you were in the room with us you might be stressed because we're not happy, but I don't think we take it as seriously at this point because it's our process. We don't take it home with us. And as wrong as we think each other is, we have to come up with something different and something different is always better because it's going to be less predictable.

NY: In terms of where we write, we've written everywhere. Different cities and many offices. Given a choice, we always work at our local Starbucks and sit across from each other for hours. There's plenty of coffee and food if we need it. We've written at your kitchen table, in the back of a limo in New York, in little offices and trailers. Wherever someone can put us where we can sit with a computer, we will write.

NL: When you're starting an original, like *The Education of Max Bickford*, and other originals you've developed, how do you decide this is my way into the story? You may know what the concept and franchise is and have a sense of the lead character, but what's your entry point?

DP: I think it's intuitive at this point for us. It's the thing that's going to establish the problem and characters in a way that makes the audience want to know more. It's something that gives them questions that they want answers to.

DP: When we're writing a pilot, we're thinking about the reader. We want a teaser that's going to be really compelling, something that is going to make you stay with the pilot for more than just the next few pages.

"We know from having read a lot of scripts and having hired a lot of writers that you only have a few pages to grab a reader. Busy showrunners are not going to slog through 50 pages of a script if it's not working for them."

NL: How important is starting off with that spark of empathy for the character? I guess it also depends if it's broadcast network or cable. Some cable shows like *Breaking Bad* often start with a climactic moment in the present and then go back six months prior. *The Killing* is also an example. You find out so much more of Sarah's (Mireille Enos) backstory much, much later.

NY: I think with cable likeability doesn't seem to be an issue. The thing about *Max Bickford* which was a long time ago and, in a way, was a precursor to *House* was that Richard Dreyfuss played a total asshole. He was an alcoholic and in a terrible relationship with his teenage daughter. He was not a good father and was jealous of his new boss. So how do you get people to relate to this man who was having a midlife crisis? At the time, CBS was looking to try something different, but maybe that doesn't work as well with broadcast now.

DP: Because it was all about a character. It wasn't about a plot. It wasn't about a big idea. I think that network television is invested in the big idea or big franchises. Like *FlashForward* was a big idea. I think you're going to find more character-driven shows on cable – which is why we write for cable because that's what's interesting to us.

NL: So *House* was a jerk to his patients, but a brilliant doctor. So establishing your characters' strengths and weaknesses is your way in?

NY: I think the same thing can be said of *The Killing*. I think some people did not relate to Sarah Linden at the beginning because she seems fairly cut off from her emotions, but you get the idea that she's a great police detective.

DP: What's exciting about *The Killing* is that you establish this character who is cut off from her emotions then you pair her up with this guy who has a lot of emotions and wears everything on his sleeve. He is messed up and might be kind of scummy. You just don't know who he is. That intersection pulls you in. What's that team going to be like? We just read a script for a pilot that FX did called *The Americans*. One of the main characters is introduced with another guy early on while they're waiting for someone. And one of the guys is really nervous. These are two cool KGB officers, but he's talking about what he's heard about this guy. The other guy is calming him down and telling him how to deal with those fears. You're immediately hooked in because you know there's a friendship there and that one of the guys is really afraid.

NY: It creates anticipation too.

NL: I believe that a good opening asks questions. It's instilling in the audience the need to know more; it sets up the "curiosity itch" that needs to be scratched. The other show I was thinking about was *Damages* where you start in the present with a critical moment and then go back to

figure out how they got there. With *The Killing* in season two, it seems to be a lot more about Sarah's backstory about her mother. I had no idea how tortured she is. There's so much empathy with her at that point and you totally understand why she's so invested in the Rosie Larsen (Katie Findlay) case.

NY: You'll notice that we never got to see Rosie as a real, live character until the last episode. We could have started that way too. Seeing her alive and interacting with her family.

NL: By not seeing Rosie though, it generated the mystery. We didn't know if she was a good girl or a bad girl. What had she done?

DP: You were just like Sarah Linden. You're trying to create this story in your own head. Then the story started mutating as different suspects came along. I think that's part of the game.

NL: That speaks very directly to point of view as a way in to a story. Perhaps as a unifying point of view that can be very consistent or like *The Killing* when there are times you're with Sarah and other times you're with family. You can go all over the place. When you're starting both a new project or going into an episode with a teaser, you have the menu of characters to choose from. When you're on staff, you're breaking the story as a group and probably deciding what your way in is going to be. When you're writing a pilot, you have so many choices. How do you narrow that down? Are you going to use voiceover or flashbacks? What's the point of view of the show?

DP: We generally try to avoid voiceovers and flashbacks.

NY: One thing we've learned from being on cable is how important the visual is. So we often try to find a visual metaphor for something striking that will hook an audience. Another episode last

season which was right after the teacher was left to die. We had to come up with a visual image of this man lying there. The first image was the broken and twisted eyeglasses. Then you see his bag and his glass case.

DP: So then we track and find his battered and broken body, seemingly dead, and we cut to Mitch (Michelle Forbes) who's calling for Stan (Brent Sexton). He hasn't returned her calls. She knows he went off in a rage. She's anxious about that. Because she's the one who fueled his fire and made him feel so enraged at this teacher. He comes back.

NY: He walks into the room covered in blood.

DP: And she sees him covered in blood and she knows something terrible has happened. Now you know that Stan has done this terrible thing and you wonder, "Now, what are they going to do? What's she going to do?" She pushed him to do it. Is she going to support him? Is he going to turn himself in? Are they going to run and hide?

NY: That may be more about serialized drama because I was thinking back to our *Chicago Hope* days. I seem to remember that teasers were completely separate from the rest of the show. I don't remember that they tied into the plot. You would have the shocking moment. David E. Kelley is the king of coming up with the greatest shocking moments. And then cut to black and the commercial and then come back in and tell your story. Or maybe it was that you don't find out about the link until the end.

NL: Are you still doing outlines before you go to script?

DP: Absolutely. It's essential. Episodic television takes work. You need smart brains in a room to help you run the story and come up with anything outside of the box. Then when we do our breakdown on the board, it's the whole room being as critical as possible.

NY: On *The Killing*, we know the basic story and then the writer goes off to write the beat sheet, essentially the A, B, and C stories.

NL: And they're not woven together? They're beat out separately?

DP: Initially, no.

NY: You'd actually write them out on the white board and call them A stories or B stories and make sure that they worked on their own. Then, you'd go off and come up with a blend and then write one-liners on the board which will blend them.

DP: And once you finally blend them, you discover that you have repetitive beats that people don't need. Or you find out that things happen too soon or in another story things are spread out more.

NY: In *The Killing*, that is what we go over and over in the room. You would have to pitch it to the room, and they would give notes. And Veena [showrunner Veena Sud] would, obviously, be the bottom line. You'd work it and work it and work it until the story worked perfectly. Then that outline would go to the studio and the network. Once the network signed off on it, then you could start writing. Every network and cable show we've ever been on works pretty much this way.

NL: How long are the outlines?

DP: Outlines are shorter on cable. It seems like in network that the outlines are so long that they're practically a whole script. At a certain point, our concern is that you're outlining the life out of it.

NY: Yes, that there's no creativity.

DP: It becomes flatter and flatter the more you do that. It's sometimes better if you're finding the scene as you're writing the script as opposed to connecting dots.

NY: But sometimes the network doesn't like it if you surprise them.

DP: Right. You discover a scene or moment in your script that is unbelievably fabulous, but it wasn't in the outline, so when they read the script, sometimes they'll love it and sometimes they'll hate it.

NL: Sometimes a new writer will turn in a teleplay and they'll ask the showrunner, "How's the script?" And the showrunner will say, "It's the outline," and they're disappointed because it didn't lift or transcend the outline.

DP: It's sort of a Catch 22 for a new writer because you don't want to bring so much to it that they're like, "What the hell? We gave you an outline and now you're writing all this stuff that's not in the outline."

NY: It's hard to know where you can take off and go off in a different way or stick to what's on the page.

NL: The best advice I can think of to tell students is to communicate with the showrunner. You don't want to go so far off that you can get fired.

NY: Our first show was *The Trials of Rosie O'Neill* which was a Barney Rozensweig show with Sharon Gless. We were writing our first script and we had a character on the show played by Ron Rifkin who was the Orthodox head of this public defender's office. And we thought as we were writing, "Wouldn't it be cool if we had a scene with this Orthodox Jewish man's son who announces to his dad that he's a born again Christian?"

DP: On our own, we decided that.

NY: We thought that would be really cool and we turned it in. And then we had the experience of sitting around the table and having Barney Rozensweig throw the script on the table and say, "I'd rather have my secretary's script then produce this script." And we thought, "Oh my god, what did we do?" And he said, "No creating. Don't go outside the outline." The one thing that ticked him off was the scene with the son. So we took it out, and the rest of the script was fine. So, yes, communicate. Ask your showrunner, "What do you think about the son being a born again Christian?"

NL: I want to ask you about theme, and it probably depends on the show, both as entry point to a new series, to the arcs of the season, and to individual episodes. Some people don't believe in having a theme for every episode, but if you're Matthew Weiner on *Mad Men*, the title of the episode and the A, B, and C stories will all be on the same thematic. Other shows, there might be a theme for the season, but not individual episodes. How do you ascribe to theme?

DP: We've been on shows that are more theme-oriented and on shows that weren't. I think where we are now after 22 years of doing this is the best themes are the themes that live in your subconscious.

NY: They're organic.

DP: Right. You write your episode and then all of a sudden you see the themes that were there. They begin to rise to the surface.

NY: You can even enhance them and adjust them.

DP: But we don't ever go out of our way to impose theme – ever. For one thing, the audience doesn't care about theme. Writers care about theme because we all want to feel that we are so literary and brilliant. But for the audience, the themes that are working for them are the themes that are working on a subconscious level.

NY: When we were on *The Riches* with Dmitry Lipkin, we ended the first season with somebody being killed and buried. Then the whole second season which only ended up being seven episodes was about a question, “How are they going to get out of this?” And I think that question informed every episode, but it wasn't a theme.

NL: I've noticed, for instance, on *Scandal* that the A story/franchise case that Olivia Pope and her team needs to solve almost always dovetails with a personal B story; and both A and B stories end up being sort of married by the end of the episode. Is this kind of A and B story marriage something you consciously strive to do?

DP: In the process of breaking a story, you are trying to find a way for each of the stories to resonate with each other. For some reason, network executives look for themes and it makes them all feel better about an episode.

NY: I was thinking back to *Carnivale* and the sex episode where every character was dealing with some issue regarding sex.

DP: So many people have written about thematics in Shakespeare, but I don't really believe that Shakespeare sat down with themes in mind. I think that as he was writing, and because he knew his characters so well and their classic relationships, that all of his subconscious themes are now what readers are seeing. If you know your characters and you're writing real situations, the theme is there.

NL: Any favorite teasers that worked especially well for you?

NY: One of my favorite teasers was when we did a musical episode of *Chicago Hope* before everyone else was doing musical episodes. So the teaser was all about Adam Arkin's character having a brain aneurysm.

DP: We had to set up what was going to be in his brain before the aneurysm hits by the end of the teaser with him going down, basically.

NY: Right. So the beginning of the teaser, he gets into a big fight with Hector Elizondo, his boss. He quits and storms out. Is really, really mad. Goes to pump gas and keeps hearing this music that's driving him crazy that someone is playing on one of those player pianos. And eventually, loses his mind, blows a gasket over this music and just drops.

DP: But we used all of those images and details throughout.

NY: The music became what Mandy Patinkin was playing later and the main musical element of the show. That was one of the most fun things we ever did.

DP: I would say that is one of the most creative things we ever did and that was on network television.