

## **ANTHONY ZUIKER**

### **Doing His Homework On "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation"**

*By Lisa D. Carroll*

A glamorous life as a scriptwriter? Parties all the time? Not so much for Anthony Zuiker, the creator of one of the hottest shows on television, "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation," having been up since 1 a.m. writing for yet another deadline. Still, for Zuiker, who used to drive a tram for the Mirage Hotel in Las Vegas, everything seems like the proverbial dream come true. Especially the show's recent nomination for an Emmy®. Zuiker, who lives in Las Vegas and Los Angeles with his wife and son, spared what little downtime he has to talk to SCREENTALK.

#### **How did you get the idea to write "CSI"?**

My wife was a big fan of a cable show with detectives on Discovery. She was just watching it, and then I sat down and started watching it, [and] thought "interesting, a new world," and thought maybe I should see if there is a series there. So I called up the captain of field services in Las Vegas and asked if I could ride along with some of the CSIs, and he said "yeah," so I rode on the graveyard shift for five weeks in Las Vegas.

#### **How did your idea get noticed?**

I had just finished writing a film called *Wanna-be* for Warner Bros., when I was approached by President Jonathon Littman of Jerry Bruckheimer Productions, who asked what I wanted to do and I said "something forensic." I was a definitely an up-and-coming writer and he was trying to recruit writers when he "darkened" my door, and when he read my second film, *The Harlem Globetrotters Story* he thought I had a unique voice.

#### **What is it like writing for television as opposed to film, as you really got started by writing films?**

I didn't really know what writing for television was like, and I always thought I would be known for films. Writing for television is definitely harder; a TV script has to be done in four days! The production schedule you are on is at such a speed that those who can write TV scripts week after week are amazing. I am dumbfounded how those around me, such as Carol Mendelsohn and Ann Donahue, can write so well. Television is ten times harder to write than a film.

#### **When did you begin writing for television?**

I just got started writing for television about a year ago -- I pitched the idea in October 1999. Then it was greenlit in May of 2000, and aired October 6 of 2000.

#### **Did you think "CSI" would be so successful?**

I'm surprised by its success, [because] just to get your foot in the door is a long shot, but it might as well be tested and do well. I'm not surprised that the idea caught on, but I am surprised at the success of the show this quick. I don't think anyone could've predicted that.

#### **How did you come up with the ideas for your characters?**

The character Gil Grissom and Catherine are loosely based on two CSIs who work in Las Vegas, Daniel Holstein and Yolanda McCleary. Yolanda was a mother of one or two kids, worked a graveyard shift in a male-dominated world, and she was tough and sexy. Marg (Helgenberger) does a fantastic job of portraying her, and Daniel has entomological containers of different bugs

at his home, and also at his office. And he has pigs in mayonnaise jars, almost like a mad scientist. He never shows you his personal feelings, he's very enigmatic. I think Gil is one of the more interesting characters of the decade of television.

### Are the episodes based on real situations?

A very few cases are based on real life happenings, the premiere is one -- the Binion trial. We took the forensics of the case and turned it into a story of ours about a real family. People in Vegas would know what we are talking about in that show. But we sit in the room as writers and have a couple of researchers and a tech adviser and start to relay and create stories. There's so much research out there on forensic cases to formulate a plot.... If you can write our show, you can write any show!

### What would you advise budding writers?

Stick with it! I knew no one in Hollywood, bought scriptwriting books by Syd Field and sat down and wrote a feature in six weeks for fun called the *The Runner* and I was fortunate -- I knew nobody but had the courage to sit down and write something. There's always room for great writing. There are very few out-of-work writers who can write. For the most part, if you can sit down and write a great piece of literary work, you will get noticed and get your shot. When I wrote *The Runner*, no one knew who I was, but I got it into the right people's hands, a casting director who got it to a manager and they walked it around to literary agents. The advice I would give is to stay the course, be loyal and work your tail off.

Writing is a small part of it, the biggest thing is the intense pressure of the schedules and deadlines, but writing is the most enjoyable part of it, the rest is hard mental warfare. Things change, climates change. You may have to talk to the actor, or the director can't shoot a certain scene. Now, that may scare people (laughs) but people should buy books on screenwriting, finish a script and give it to ten people and if 8 people like it, they should think about going to Los Angeles. Everyone's looking for new talent there.

### Did you think about incorporating any of the events of September 11 in the scripts?

I was a big advocate to not change anything in "CSI" or touch upon subjects of September 11, anthrax or smallpox, as it feels inappropriate or opportunistic. We should just concentrate on more teamwork and camaraderie. What happened was terrible and devastating in September and we don't need to capitalize on that. We need to give people television that takes them away from all that.

### What inspires you, and, who are your idols?

I think the actor in "Second Sight" (a television show in UK) is amazing and so talented! We were so impressed with the making of that show, that was the inspiration to improve our music and sound. A lot of transitions in it, such as the actor putting his face under a shower nozzle and that scene going into raindrops onto a windshield on the show.

I also aspire to learn from such people as Waldo Salt, William Goldman and I'm a big fan of writing. I go to an awards show and walk up to writers such as David Kelley and say, "I really look up to you! I aspire to be like you!" They probably think who is this crazy kid?! I long to be as successful as them, I am just a fan of other writers.

I consider myself an expert dealing with people and I am extremely honest and people aren't used to dealing with honest people like that, but I treat everyone with respect. I have no enemies

in the business. That's from having talent and thinking smart and positive and having made the most out of a very turbulent experience.

If I can walk into the Hell's Angels clubhouse (as research for a film) and stay for six hours, then it takes a special person to do that, and I'm pretty happy that I was chosen to do so.

I've had terrible days in the business in terms of something political happening or a cut on an episode, but for the most part, my whole career has been blessed. I have exceptional representation that protects me too. You have to be a big boy in this business, you don't get paid this money because they like you, you have to take the good with bad. If you can't take things in stride, then, oh well.

For instance, we don't move production schedules as the next script needs to be written, it has to be done, and there's no choice because they have to find the location. If there is a quality television show, know those writers are working their asses off.

### **What do you do about writer's block?**

I never have writer's block. Writer's block is about not doing your homework. It's about not knowing your character's motivation, that's what writer's block is about. You should be able to write the scene ten different ways, if you know the attitude and motivation. I have to care about what I'm writing though.

### **What are your goals for the future?**

My long-term goal is to stay for five years with the show. The other goal is to see the Hell's Angels movie (*Hell's Angel: The Life and Times of Sonny Barger And The Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club*) get made, that would be fantastic. I think these two things can happen. I think the Hell's Angel film is an incredibly important movie, and I think "CSI" is the "ER" of its generation.

### **How do you research the show?**

The research of the show is a combination of CSI stories, forensic books, different technologies and procedures, ... any stories of CSI experiences.

### **Why did you make the Gil Grissom character so uptight?**

The reason for making Grissom (Editor's note: The Grissom character is played by William L. Petersen) anally retentive was that I wrote a character that needed to know everything about forensics and a person who could make reference to things like the Father in *The Exorcist*. I think he is enigmatic and keeps to himself but he is always thinking. And it's hard to write about a character and show him thinking, but "The Sopranos" TV show did a fantastic episode before about a character who is bored. Which is tough to write!

### **What do you think about the "CSI" website?**

I think the "CSI" website is fantastic and amazing, I think CBS has done a great job with that, they went above and beyond and I was very flattered.

### **What do you think makes the show so successful?**

We have new technologies in the episodes that we like to use, but we're not running a spy show, and we don't want to make it too "techie" ... people watch our show for the mystery and try to guess who did it. The killer is usually floating around in the first two or three acts, but sometimes there are multiple killers, such as in one show we've had. People watch the show because they're *engaged*. The success of the show has a lot to do with the writing, and the actors bring a lot to our scripts.

Our shows are stand-alone shows, they aren't continuation shows, and we may bring in an occasional love interest, but you won't see Grissom and Catherine involved, that's never going to happen! That's a different show. If you want a good mystery with a compelling story, that's *our* show.

**Tell me more about the film *Wanna-be*.**

We're still looking for a director, and I believe it will get made.

**Any last words for new writers?**

The motto is "slow and steady" for scriptwriters, that's really important. There is a shortage of talent in Hollywood -- those who have a gift to write may have a decent shot, as a whole, in film or television.

Lisa D. Carroll has written for several publications, including *Premiere*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Woman's World*, *New York Times* and *Movieline*. Other profiles include Helen Hunt, Ray Liotta, Jon Voight, Anthony Quinn, Gary Ross (*Big, Pleasantville*), Sting and Donna Summer. Her interview with Lynda La Plante was published in the Sept./Oct. 2001 issue of *SCREENTALK*. Lisa currently lives in London.

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