

JOHN J. SAKMAR AND KERRY LENHART Television's Best Kept Secret

By Constance M. Burge

"Boston Public." "Ally McBeal." "Judging Amy." "Chicago Hope." "Early Edition." "Medicine Ball." "Seaquest: DSV." "MacGyver." Most of us can say "yes, of course we've seen these shows" but only two of us can actually say, "Yes, of course we've written/produced for these shows." Meet John J. Sakmar and Kerry Lenhart, writers and current Co-Executive Producers of David E. Kelley's sophomore hit, "Boston Public."

Together, John and Kerry have created 2 television series, written 15 pilots (7 produced), and written and produced for 14 television shows. One look at their impressive resume -- it's filled with every writing credit even possible in Hollywood: "Creators," "Executive Producers," "Co-Executive Producers," "Consulting Producers," "Supervising Producers," "Story Editors," etc. -- and you realize that these guys have not only earned their way to the top, they've been able to stay there because they can seemingly write anything. Medical shows, legal shows, Sci-Fi, mysteries, action-adventure, nighttime soaps, romantic comedies -- there literally is no genre this writing team hasn't written and produced. This may also explain, if you don't work in TV, why you may not have heard of John and Kerry: they haven't had *time* to give interviews, they've been working non-stop for sixteen years. (This, trust me, is an unbelievable track record for television writers.) So who are these guys?

John J. Sakmar grew up mostly in the Midwest. He was born in Detroit, Michigan, but being a "hotel brat" (his father was an Innkeeper for Holiday Inn), John moved around quite a bit -- Michigan, Ohio, Missouri, Texas and New York. He graduated from the University of Missouri with a journalism degree.

Kerry Lenhart, the son of a wheat farmer from Ritzville, Washington (pop. 1876), transferred from Washington State University to the University of Southern California where he graduated from the School of Cinema/Television with a B.A. in Film Production.

Today, they both live in Los Angeles.

THE PAST

You two met when you both worked as Pages at NBC. When did you decide to work together?

John: The NBC Page program had a finite term limit. You could only be a Page for eighteen months. In that time, you were expected to find another position within the network, or you were out. Everyone in the program was aspiring. Aspiring actors, aspiring directors, aspiring writers, aspiring executives. Kerry was (is) an aspiring director. I was an aspiring network programmer (don't ask). Both of us were told that writing was the way to get where we wanted to go. I had never seen a script, let alone written one. I asked Kerry, who was working on a spec script for "Cheers" at the time, for help. He gave me guidance on script formatting and wished me well. I returned for more help. This time, I had a more serious problem. Writer's block. Which was odd, given that I hadn't begun. I think that was the problem. I wasn't sure *where* to begin. I asked Kerry how *his* script was coming. Slow, he said. And he admitted this wasn't his first "unfinished" script. So I suggested we write one together. I figured if he had someone to be accountable to, he might be motivated to finish. And I got the benefit of someone to bounce ideas off of. So that's what we did. Nights and weekends, whenever we could, after our day jobs, we wrote.

Kerry: We wrote a spec script for an NBC show called "Father Murphy." Nothing happened with it and that was the end of the partnership. John then decided that he was going to write a spec script for "Remington Steele." However, there was a problem. He didn't have an idea. I supplied him with one. He then refused to use the idea unless we wrote the script together. We did. It was that spec script that became our first script sale. Though we had not planned it, we were now officially partners.

Your first staff job was on "Remington Steele." How'd that happen?

Kerry: While I was a production assistant on "Remington Steele," John and I were able to write two freelance episodes that were filmed. That made the transition to staff writer, for the most part, a comfortable one because we had already had the opportunity to meet and work with Michael Gleason, the Executive Producer, and the writing staff. Still, we suddenly felt the pressure of being full-time writers who could be cut loose in ten weeks if we failed to prove ourselves useful. One day Michael Gleason -- sensing we were stressed -- asked if we were having fun. We told him we were nervous about our latest script assignment. We were struggling with the story, the structure, the page count ... basically everything. He told us to relax and assured us that whatever the problems, they could be fixed. He also -- and this was most important to us -- told us that we didn't need to worry about our ten-week trial period. He believed in our talent and guaranteed that we would be around for the entire season. It was an incredibly kind thing to do and enabled us to eventually complete and turn in a truly horrid script (never used) while maintaining an optimistic outlook regarding our new writing careers.

Did you have a mentor there?

Kerry: When we sold our first freelance script, we had no idea how to get an agent. Brian Alan Lane, a writer on the show, was a huge help. He sent our material to one of his former agents to read. We eventually signed with this agent and have been with him ever since. Brian also gave us our first script assignment outside of "Remington Steele." Michael Gleason was also unfailingly patient in the way he instructed and worked with us. He was never too busy to help or encourage us when we needed it.

THE WRITING PROCESS

How do you two write a script? Together? Separately? What's your process?

John: We write separately, but together. We always break story together. Then we split off to write.

Kerry: With a series like "Boston Public" that contains multiple, equally-weighted stories, we simply divide the stories between us to write and then weave them together when we're done. If the script has a strong "A" story with lesser "B" and/or "C" stories, we're more apt to divide the work by acts. Over the years we've learned that John is more adept at research than I am. If a story requires lots of research, he usually writes it. On the other hand, if the story has lots of action, I'll take it.

John: After we write, we exchange pages and re-write each other. So, essentially, our first draft is more like a second or third draft, since it's been re-written once or twice before we deliver it to anyone.

Kerry: We try not to have any hard and fast rules. However, because we have a tendency to write long, we try to limit our scripts (1 hour) to six major beats per act. That's twenty-four beats for the entire script. One beat, however, might be divided into several scenes. For a dialogue-

heavy series like "Boston Public" we try to have fewer scenes than pages (the scripts are approx. 48 pages). For an action series we prefer our scene count to be around one hundred, or approximately two scenes per page.

What's a typical writing day for you two?

Kerry: When I'm writing, whether at the studio or home, that's pretty much all I'm doing. Deadlines are tight on "Boston Public," so I'll get started around 8 a.m. and work until at least 6 p.m. and often as late as 11 p.m. or midnight. If things are going well, I like to take a break for at least an hour to take a walk or go to the gym. If things are going *really* well, I'll see a movie in the evening and then come home and read over the work I've done that day. Rewards are important. When I finish a scene I allow myself 15-20 minutes to play video games, read or do just about anything that will take my mind off of my work. Every once in awhile for a change of pace I'll leave my computer and go somewhere to write longhand with a pen and pad of paper. I feel less isolated when I do this, but I'm not as productive.

John: There's no such thing as a typical writing day. It all depends on what other issues are going on with the show. When we're just writing -- and can focus strictly on writing -- I like to get an early start. I tend to be a "morning" writer, though I often find myself writing from morning to morning. They're long days. I remember saying to Kerry -- back when we were writing in our spare time while working our "day jobs," which made for very long days -- "just think ... if we wrote for a 'living,' it would be like a regular job, write from 9 to 5 and then go home." I had no idea. Another writer once said, "Writing is like having homework for the rest of your life." And I've found that to be true. The work is never done.

I have that quote tacked up in my office -- it's by Lawrence Kasdan. Do you guys outline or not? If so, how detailed do you get?

John: We always outline. As a team -- writing separately -- we almost have to. So as we split off to write, each is well aware of what the other is writing, and how the pieces will fit together. The degree of detail depends on how much time we have.

Kerry: Prior to "Boston Public," we wrote very detailed outlines. Running about 12 pages, these outlines were broken down into acts and scenes. They included virtually every important piece of information that had to go into the script, including dialogue we had come up with while working on the story. This was especially helpful for John and me because we were always writing on separate parts of the script. However, on "Boston Public" we often don't know what we're writing until a week before it's due. This doesn't allow much time to do a detailed outline. In its place we create a simple beat sheet. It contains nothing more than the scene locations and the major plot point of the scenes.

I've found that even with the most detailed of outlines the story will change as I begin to write the script. How do you guys handle this if you're writing separately?

John: Even with the most detailed of outlines, there's always room for change or inspiration during the writing process. We discuss these as they occur and "debate" the merit of the change as well as what "domino effect," if any, the change will have on what the other is writing.

Kerry: On "Boston Public" this isn't a problem. Though we are writing separately, we are each writing complete, self-contained stories. If something needs to change, we have the freedom to change it without consulting each other. Prior to "Boston Public" we spent so much time outlining that things very seldom changed once we began to write the script. If they did, we just talked about it. If John, writing act four, had a great idea for a new ending that needed to be set up in act two, which I was writing, he would just tell me. Conversely, if I added a new bit of business in act

one, I'd let him know about it so he could make sure it paid off later in the script. Simply put, though we write separately, we are constantly communicating and sharing our progress.

I'll assume you guys disagree -- a lot -- that can only make for good drama on the page. How do you two deal with these disagreements?

John: I just let Kerry win. It's much easier that way. Seriously, I don't think we've ever had a fight. We've had disagreements, sure, but I think we're both objective enough to recognize a good argument when we hear one. Kerry is far more logical and methodical than I am. When he presents his case, he's thought it through from every possible angle. And it's virtually bulletproof. I do find myself conceding more often than not, but it's always for the good.

Kerry: We don't disagree as much as you might think. When we do, we try to find a fresh solution that will make both of us happy. We might also ask an objective third party their opinion. If both of these approaches fail, whoever is most passionate (or stubborn) will get their way. If we're both feeling especially "passionate," the person actually writing the scene/story in question will usually get their way.

What do you do when you hit roadblocks in the story?

Kerry: We think. And if that doesn't work, we think even harder. And if that doesn't work, we look for something to steal. Seriously. Whatever your profession, you build on the work of those who came before you. There is no story that is totally original. No story that hasn't, in some form, been told before. If we're stuck, we mentally review books we've read, movies we've seen, TV programs we've watched ... and try to find a story similar to the one we're telling and discover how *its* writer dealt with the problem. It's also great to be on a show with a talented writing staff. If John and I have hit a wall on a story, there is usually someone much smarter on staff that will have the solution we're looking for.

Have you ever considered writing "solo?"

Kerry: Yes. But never at the expense of the partnership. And since we have been blessed with so much work as a team, that leaves very little time to contemplate solo projects. Also ... I'm lazy. The reason John and I teamed up in the first place was because I could never finish anything that I started on my own.

What about Writer's Block or Burnout? Do you have any "special tricks" to avoid this?

Kerry: An outline is your best friend. With an outline you always know exactly where you're going. If the outline is inadequate and I get lost in the story, I ask myself what would happen next if this weren't a story I was creating. What would happen if it were real life. Often, the answer is boring, but it's a place to start.

A partner is also a huge help. If I'm blocked or burned out there is always the hope that John isn't.

Any writing "secrets" you'd be willing to share?

Kerry: For most of my career I would never commit anything to paper until I believed it was perfect. Consequently, very little ever got written. I could easily spend an entire day writing one page. What I've learned recently is that the very act of putting words on paper seems to prime some sort of creative pump. Ideas will start to flow and I won't have any idea where they're coming from. Bottom line -- when you're writing, great things can happen when you give yourself permission to be bad.

I'm looking at your resume -- you've written comedies, dramas, medical shows, PI shows, adventure shows, family shows, legal shows, continuing dramas -- is there anything you can't write? Don't want to?

John: Never say never. I was nervous about writing for "MacGyver" at first because I wasn't sure how I was ever going to come up with the clever "MacGyverisms" he used to get himself out of scrapes. But you just do it. And you get help from technical advisors along the way. Same with the law. Neither Kerry nor I are lawyers and Kerry used to say he never wanted to write for a law show. Then we wrote on "Judging Amy" and "Ally McBeal" and had very positive experiences. I feel very lucky to have had the opportunity to write for so many different genres. This business tends to pigeonhole writers, which is unfortunate because a good writer is a good writer, regardless. We always try to push different concepts when we're pitching pilots, just to show we can "paint with different colors." And mixing it up keeps things more fresh and ultimately, more fun.

Kerry: I love the fact that until "Boston Public" we never spent more than one season staffing any one series (Note: This may lead you to believe we have been fired with great frequency. We have not. Only once. I swear). Not only did this allow us to meet and learn from many wonderfully talented writers, but it also gave us the chance to develop a wide range of writing "muscles" early in our careers. That said, I think, given the opportunity, we could write just about anything. Certainly some (the hour drama) would be better than others (three-camera comedies). I can't imagine that we would ever turn anything down based on genre alone.

CREATING A TELEVISION SERIES

You've also created two series -- "Mr. and Mrs. Smith" for CBS and "Medicine Ball" for Fox. Where did you find the inspiration for "Medicine Ball" and "Mr. and Mrs. Smith?"

John: "Medicine Ball" was inspired by one of our all-time favorite series, "St. Elsewhere." The Fox network approached us and asked if we would be interested in developing a medical show (this was before "ER" and "Chicago Hope"). They said it had been a few years since "St. Elsewhere," and they felt it was time for a new medical series. Being huge fans of "St. Elsewhere," we jumped at the chance. The focus of the show was on the medical residents, fresh out of medical school. In fact, the pilot episode was Day One, their first day on the job as doctors.

"Mr. and Mrs. Smith" was an idea Kerry and I pitched to CBS. We liked the idea of two spies who spy on each other. Working closely together, attracted to one another, yet forbidden, by profession, to know anything about the other. It was inspired by a lifelong love of spy shows and movies, and an equal fondness for male/female banter. We hadn't had a chance to write something fun like that since "Remington Steele."

How were those experiences for you?

John: Good, and yet frustrating. To me, getting our own show was "the brass ring." But when we got it, I found the brass to be a little tarnished. You get hit with the reality of production real fast. You're told you can't do what you want to because you can't afford it. So you make compromises to make the budget. Then you get notes on your scripts -- from network, studio, actors -- and you make more compromises. After a while, you've compromised so much, you hardly recognize your show as the one you sold. Certainly not as the one you were once so passionate about. It can be very frustrating.

"Medicine Ball" was frustrating for another reason. It was cancelled before anybody got a chance to see it. Of all the shows we've worked on, that have come and gone, "Medicine Ball" is the one I miss the most. It was a good show that nobody saw. Though it was in development prior to two

other medical shows ("ER" and "Chicago Hope"), the network decided not to air it until mid-season (March instead of September). By the time "Medicine Ball" got on the air, the other two shows were juggernauts. There was no room -- nor much interest -- in a third medical show.

We keep in touch with the cast-Jensen Daggett, Donal Logue, Harold Pruett, Jeffrey D. Sams, Vincent Ventresca, Sam McMurray, Timothy Omundson, Terri Ivens, Kai Soremekun and Darryl Fong -- but I will always regret not getting a chance to "live" with those *characters* a while longer. Kerry and I had ideas of where they were all going, personally and professionally, but that's only in our minds. Those characters are now forever in limbo. That series will always be very special to us.

Do you have a preference: writing for a show you've created or writing for a show you haven't created?

Kerry: Though it is an imperfect analogy, writing for a show you haven't created is like babysitting. Writing for a show you *have* created is like raising your own children. With the former, you are constantly trying to get inside the mind of the parent (the creator) and raise (write) the characters and tell the stories the way he/she would. With the latter, there is less second-guessing. The characters are your own progeny. They walk and talk like you. To a certain extent, they think like you. I find it much easier, and ultimately more rewarding, to write for my own kids.

Do you prefer premise pilots or a pilot episode that reads as if it could be an individual episode -- say, episode 6, for example?

John: We prefer premise pilots because it's the best way to set up the world. Introduce the characters. Explain who they are. Why they are the way they are. A perfect example is "Northern Exposure" (which we didn't write, unfortunately). If you didn't show *why* Joel Fleischman was in Alaska, it wouldn't have been half as much fun. It would have taken so much more exposition to explain everything. And in writing, as we were taught, it's always better to show than to tell.

What about development notes? How do you handle it when they ... well, suck?

John: One of our first development executives told us early on, "there's a reason it's called show *business*." It *is* a business. And, like it or not, we as writers are sellers and the network is the buyer. They pay us, and therefore, have a right to be satisfied with what they paid for. That this "product" is not a widget, but a script that we pour our blood, sweat and tears into, makes for some frustrating times. Even when you tell yourself not to get emotionally invested in it, it's impossible not to. That's where the temptation to write a novel comes in. To write something purely for yourself. But in television and film, unfortunately, you're almost always writing to please someone else.

THE PRESENT: WRITING "BOSTON PUBLIC"

The two of you are currently Writers/Co-Executive Producers of "Boston Public" and work closely with David E. Kelley. And the show, currently in its sophomore season, continues to grow in popularity -- both with critics and the audience. What is it about "high school" that seems to remain such a wonderful arena for telling stories?

John: The "world" of high school is a universal one. Either you're in school now, you were in school at one time, or you have children in school. Almost everyone has experiences or memories -- good or bad -- from school. They're the "wonder years," those tough, trying teen-age years. The years of discovery. And doubt. Of growth. And disappointment. First crushes. First heartbreaks. And tests. Not just the curricular ones. But the tests that challenge the way we think,

the way we feel and the way we act. So much of who we are and who we become is shaped and influenced by the people, the events and the circumstances in high school.

And yet, it must be difficult to create new and fresh stories every week because high-school themed shows *have been* so universally popular. So where do you guys hunt for stories?

John: One thing David did to distinguish "Boston Public" from other high-school-themed shows was to tell stories from the faculty's point of view. Most high school shows have looked at stories as they affect the students. But "Boston Public" goes "behind-the-scenes," as it were, to show how high school affects the teachers. The hurdles they face, the battles they fight -- either with students or administrators or other teachers -- day after day, and ultimately, the passion they have for teaching. For helping and reaching kids. Unfortunately, teachers are underappreciated and underpaid. Most of us can remember at least one teacher who made a difference in our lives. And yet how many of us have ever taken the time to say, "Thank you" to that teacher? "Boston Public" tries to celebrate these unsung heroes.

As far as stories, we find inspiration in many places. Real life. The imaginations of our writing staff. We brainstorm all the time. We read newspapers and education trade magazines, listen to radio and television news, and talk to our two full-time "faculty advisors," who are both working teachers.

What is a typical week like? What have been some of your biggest challenges on "Boston Public?" What about surprises?

John: There's the time we're physically writing and then there's the time leading up to that. We begin by brainstorming as a group, discussing dozens of new ideas. At first these are only "kernels." We narrow down the field and flesh out the most promising, making sure there's a clear beginning, middle and end. Kerry and I then present those half-dozen story ideas to David. We discuss them with him and he determines which storylines will comprise the next script for the show. Often, he has his own ideas for what he'd like to see or he puts a clever twist on one of our ideas. Then someone writes the script. Either David writes it or he writes a particular storyline or two and assigns the others to us. Or he tells us we can write it or co-write it with other members of the writing staff.

The challenge is keeping up with David. He's fast and facile. In an effort to keep the show fresh and topical, he never arcs too far ahead. We usually don't know what stories will be in the next script until days before it's due. And then it's a scramble to get the script written before the director and producers need to prep it.

Have there been some stories you've wanted to tell but were unable to because they were considered too controversial?

John: I can't really say that there have. We've tackled many issues that some would deem controversial, yet we hear from teachers that we haven't gone far enough in depicting how it really is.

What about any controversial stories you *didn't* want to write -- but maybe had to? How do you deal with "uncomfortable" subject matters?

John: When David suggested we consider writing a story that involved Harvard Law School professor Randall Kennedy's new book, "Nigger," I was slightly uncomfortable. David had read an article about the book before it was published. The article mentioned a true story that appears in the book. It was about a college basketball coach who was fired for using the N-word among his

team even though he had sought -- and received -- their permission to use it. He had heard the team members calling each other that and felt he could use it to bond with them. The coach is white. Most of his team was black. David thought there might be something there for "Boston Public." But he suggested we discuss the topic with Chi McBride, who plays Principal Steven Harper, first. To get his take on the word and find out if he'd be comfortable tackling the subject before we began writing the script. In discussing it with Chi, I found that I couldn't say the word. I referred to it as "the N-word." Chi told me to say it. I couldn't. He said, "you're going to write about it, but you can't say it?" He was a great help to us in shaping the story around his character's opinion of the reviled word. And, though it was uncomfortable, that episode turned out to be one that has garnered some of the most positive feedback the show has received.

In fact that episode of Boston Public resulted in a book-sale increase of more than 400% on Amazon. Com. So now what about directing? Any desire, interest?

John: Kerry has always wanted to direct. And I wish he would. He will be a great director. When he writes, he sees it all playing out. I think most writers have that faculty. But Kerry really visualizes the whole thing, down to the smallest detail. There's nothing so frustrating as seeing something you've written turn out so much differently than the way you envisioned it. Kerry says he'll direct when it's a show we've created and it's one of the last episodes of the season, episode twenty-one or twenty-two. That way, he says, he'll be comfortable with the cast and crew, know the show inside out, and have all the scripts for the season written. I understand that. I feel the same way.

THE FUTURE

Any plans to develop another series?

John: We certainly hope so. We have some ideas, but so much of it depends on what the networks are buying. What they're looking for.

Kerry: Unfortunately, it's difficult to develop a pilot and work on a series at the same time.

What about features? Any interest?

John: Definitely. We have a screenplay that we promised to write for an actress friend of ours, and we have been so busy with our television assignments, that we haven't had time to finish the screenplay.

Kerry: Earlier in our careers we were hired to write or re-write several features. Since then our television work has been so time consuming that we haven't been able to develop any of the ideas we have for the big screen. I'll be very disappointed if we don't, at some point, write another film script. It just won't happen until we find a block of time where we aren't totally exhausted from a season of television.

What is the best advice you've ever read -- or been given -- in regards to writing?

Kerry: Read, read, read. Words are the most important tool a writer has. If you want to write you should immerse yourself in words. Learn new ones, see how other writers use them, absorb the impact they can have when used in unexpected ways. Learn their textures, their taste, their subtleties. No one has ever learned to talk without first listening. Why should anyone expect to learn writing without first reading? Read books, read newspapers, read magazines, read scripts. Read every day. *Read.*

John: Our very first boss -- Michael Gleason who created "Remington Steele" -- was a mentor to us. We're *still* quoting him, saying Michael said this or that. He is a wonderful storyteller. And taught us so much about structure and writing. His personalized license plate on his car reads, "REWRITE." I asked him why. And he said, "Because writing is re-writing." I've never forgotten that. And it's true. If you love writing, you better love re-writing as well. It comes with the territory.

Constance created and Executive Produced the television series "Charmed," and was the Creator/Co-Executive Producer of the nighttime soap, "Savannah," also for the WB network. She is currently serving as a Consulting Producer for "Boston Public" as well as writing television pilots for 20th Century Fox Television. Connie lives in Los Angeles.

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