

Coroner Puts a Priority on Highlighting Diverse Voices On and Off Screen

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Toronto is one of the most diverse and multicultural cities in the world, and yet, many of the television series set there over the years have not accurately reflected that fact on screen. The creative forces behind CBC's newest drama series *Coroner*, airing Mondays at 9 p.m., were going to be sure that the Toronto they know and love, the one that is culturally diverse, was accurately reflected on and off screen. "Canada is incredibly diverse and we show that," *Coroner* star Serinda Swan recently told *The TV Junkies*. Perhaps most importantly though, *Coroner* isn't the one calling attention to its diverse cast. "It's something that we're celebrating, but when they say 'action!' it's all normal. The normality of diversity is what we need to be showing, not the specialness or how exceptional it is that we have this

diverse cast," said Swan.

The mandate *Coroner* seemed to put on diversity when it comes to casting extends behind the camera as well, specifically when examining the show's writers and directors. In addition to executive producer and lead director Adrienne Mitchell, the series' first season featured directors Winnifred Jong, Sherren Lee, and Paul Fox. Showrunner Morwyn Brebner also assembled a writers' room that included Sean Reycraft, Noelle Carbone, Waneta Storms, Wendy MOTION Brathwaite, Nathalie Younglai, Seneca Aaron, researcher Leah Cameron and intern Akriti Jain.

The TV Junkies recently caught up with Brebner and Mitchell to discuss how they stressed the need for finding diverse talent on and off screen right from the get go, and the many benefits of having so many different perspectives contributing to *Coroner's* story. They also share how and why they assembled a diverse writing room and made sure casting agents knew how important it was to see as many different types of actors as possible for every single role.

The TV Junkies: In looking at the *Coroner* cast, as well as what I know of the writers' room and directors that were chosen, it seems like you guys really put a mandate on finding diverse talent on and off screen. Is that something you knew right from the start you were going to focus on?

Morwyn Brebner. It was. Part of deciding to set the show in Toronto was about trying to make the show feel like the Toronto we live in. It was definitely a conscious decision to make the show rich, full and real.

Adrienne Mitchell: Episode 5 is directed by Winnifred Jong and Episode 6 is then directed by Sherren Lee and they both did a beautiful job. It was important to us, not only in the writing, but also in the directing, to find diverse voices who want that next step directing a one-hour drama series. Sherren had done *Murdoch* but this is a different genre for her, and Winnie

had done web series and worked on a lot of our shows in other positions and we love her work and voice. That was very important to us.

MB: They had also both done features and shorts and brought really beautiful things to the show.

TTVJ: It is so important to give people, who maybe don't have the perfect resume, a shot like that. That's clearly something you extended to the writers' room as well, hiring people like Episode 104's co-writer, Motion, who hasn't written for TV before. Can you discuss a little about how you put the room together?

MB: Motion had never done television before, but she's a great writer. We had an incredibly strong writing room with some great writers in the room. We had such an amazing diversity of point of view, cultural background and sexuality. It started with the writing and reading people's work and saying 'this person is a great writer.' I read two scripts from Motion — a feature and a pilot — and now I've seen her as a playwright. She's an amazing writer. The other writers are amazing writers.

For me, the reason you have a writing room is that you can't think of everything yourself and you can only come from your own experience. You can widen it greatly through experience and curiosity, but you can never widen it beyond certain parameters. So to have people who have different experiences and perspectives in the room, that allows us to bring authenticity and different perspectives into the show. Being able to write from a place of authenticity is really exciting because I think the show does have a real richness that everyone brought in. I feel that our room was so strong that you can feel it in the show. You 100 per cent feel the tensile strength of those cumulative points of view in the show. For me, I felt so excited to work with such great writers.

AM: You hear things that you just wouldn't hear. When you're in a writers' room you're all very vulnerable with each other.

MB: What's interesting is, we sit around a table and the show hovers in the middle of the table and everyone is feeding the show. You're trying to figure out what the show wants to be. The show develops its own identity and becomes its own entity. Everything you feed the show makes the show what it is and makes it strong. It hones itself in the process of the writing room. It hones itself during prep and hones itself when the actors are bringing their brilliance to it. You're always honing the show and sharpening it. If everyone has the same perspective, then you can't hone it because there's no edge and nothing is coming up against it. Having more points of view and the fact that everyone is very committed to making the show feel strong, authentic, funny and moving — when they were all doing that, it made the show so much richer. The show is what it is because of the process that we had and the writers that we had.

TTVJ: As we take the discussion on screen, the cast is almost entirely non-white actors. You have Serinda as the lead, but how did you go about casting the ensemble?

AM: We have this amazing casting director, Lisa Parasyn who has worked with us on all our projects. It was something that was very important to Morwyn and I that we show Toronto as Toronto. In many cases, the caucasian person is the minority and we live in such a multicultural world. We wanted to reflect that, even though that's not often reflected. We asked Lisa to bring that to the project.

The diverse actors that came to read for the roles blew us away. They brought textures and excitement to their take of the character that was just so right for the show and so compelling. It was a seamless process and there were so many choices for each role.

MB: There were great actors for each role. We have a really, really strong, diverse acting pool in Toronto. We saw multiple terrific actors for each role and had a bounty to choose from. Lisa brought us great actors so we really ended up with the most incredible cast.

AM: It's unbelievable. They are all on another level. This cast is so authentic and specific and bringing incredible nuances in such short screen time.

MB: It's really funny because the only dilemma is that you want to write more for everybody. The only dilemma is that you have only 44 minutes. There are hilarious subplots we wrote for everybody that we ended up throwing away. The cast is just beyond.



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TTVJ: How much direction did you give on roles to the casting director?

MB: I've learned that you have to write characters specifically into the script. If you do that, then people are looking for an actor to portray the character you have in your mind. For most roles, it was specific on the page, but for some it wasn't. We wanted to see the actor a bit. For most though, we were in the room trying to think who the character could be and make them specific. There were cases though, where the character was a man and we'd say 'maybe it is a woman.' It was really case by case. For all the casting we welcomed as many choices as possible.

AM: We'd also say 'send us people who are not what you'd expect and

people who challenge the stereotype.' That really helped too to give us a richness. Morwyn and I both respond similarly to characters that have a life force that come at you in an unpredictable way that really stay with you.

MB: It's weird to talk about it because it feels self-congratulatory, and we don't mean it in that way, but I just want to acknowledge the truth that we have this incredible acting pool. An incredible, diverse acting pool that people could take more advantage of. There's these incredible actors with skills that made it our luck to have them be on the show. One of the great strengths of Toronto is that it's a diverse and multicultural city, and we're lucky to have a talent pool that reflects that too.

TTVJ: It's so great to hear these things because so often you'll hear something along the lines "well we couldn't find a diverse actor that was good enough or had enough experience," but clearly that's not true.

AM: What we hope is to just continually showcase the incredible talent that is out there. It's just amazing how talented the actors are and the choices that we had. It was not difficult at all to do. The difficult part was making choices because of the depth of talent out there.

MB: We're lucky to live in this amazing city with this amazing talent.

What are your thoughts on *Coroner*? Share them below!

Coroner airs Mondays at 9 p.m. ET on CBC and is available on [CBC Gem](#).

