A Call to Arms

photo credit: Jane Weitzel

Vancouver showrunner Susin Nielsen leads a host of emerging writers behind the scenes at the new CTV series *Robson Arms*.

By Ian Caddell

Factor in the cultural differences, and the distance between Halifax and Vancouver might seem like even more than 6,000 kilometres of highway. Now imagine being handed the task of creating a TV series–a BC-Nova Scotia co-production–set in a fictional Vancouver apartment building and written almost entirely by emerging writers.

You might want to consider running those 6,000 kilometres just to avoid the assignment.

Susin Nielsen never flinched–even though there were no plans for a series kicking around in her head on the Friday that Michael Chechik of Vancouver-based Omni Productions phoned. Chechik told Nielsen that Louise Clark, director of independent production for CTV's Vancouver office, was looking for 13 half-hours to replace *The Storytellers*–a shelved collection of auteur-driven shows. Then he invited Nielsen to come in on Monday and meet with Clark and his Omni colleague Brian Hamilton.

"Sure, I thought, no biggie, we'll chat," Nielsen recalls. "Then on Sunday the phone rang and it was Louise herself–I don't think I'd ever had a call from her before, ever–and she mentioned in passing that they were looking forward to hearing my ideas on how to bring this whole emerging writer and director initiative under the banner of a series.

"And I went–holy crap! They expect me to have ideas! So I begged off all family activities for the day and thought and thought, and came up with the idea–no plural–that it could be set in an apartment building. And that, despite living in such close quarters, the tenants know very little about each other. We the audience know more about them than they do. Fortunately, Louise had actually had apartments on the brain as well, and they liked the idea. We started riffing on what would be the connective tissue week after week, where it would be set, and so on."

On-screen talent for the show, which is due to air in early 2005, includes Margot Kidder, Mark McKinney and John Cassini.

As the idea for *Robson Arms* gelled, with a different door in the building opening each week, Clark brought together Omni and Halifax-based Creative Atlantic, forming a trans-Canada partnership.

Nielsen, meanwhile, holed up in her home office to write what she called a mini-bible. ("I work in my garage. It's not as awful as it sounds. There are windows. There is no car. I look out onto my garden.") Why mini? So she could leave as much as possible open for input from her team of writers.

To make sure that everyone was on the same page, the key players from both coasts were brought to meetings in the Vancouver neighbourhood that had inspired the series.

"We met at the Sylvia Hotel in the West End so that everyone could get a sense of the area," says Creative Atlantic's Janice Evans. "We were there for four or five days of meetings and we really banged out the details of the show's concept. We came up with some ideas to make the show as universal as possible. We all felt that it was about living in an urban community and how you can

become disconnected despite living in such close proximity to other people. And also, how you could do something that seems insignificant but can affect someone else in a way that you might never know. Most people have spent at least some time in an apartment building and so it is an easy concept to relate to, no matter where you might live in the country."

Emerging, not inexperienced
With the bible and a pilot episode written, Nielsen set out to find emerging writers, though she admits to being reluctant at first.

"I'm going to tell you a story that I probably shouldn't because it makes me look bad," Nielsen says. "I remember having a meeting with Brian and Louise, and they were talking about their expectations for the show, and CTV's expectations, which were big. And I snapped that by saddling me with new writers it was like I was a racehorse and they'd broken two of my legs and were still expecting me to win the race."

But Nielsen came to the realization that emerging did not have to mean inexperienced. "After the first few meetings we were all committed to creating a show that was not a training ground for people but one that could stand on its own as a series," she says.

"We have really talented people in this country who are waiting for their break. And I'm not talking just about young writers. There was a wide range of ages here… I think the whole approach is innovative and fresh. We definitely had some instances of incredibly fresh voices in this show, voices that really tapped into the tone we were going for."

By the time she and the show's producers had found the people they wanted they had read over 100 scripts. Eventually, they ended up with eight writers–four on each coast–for the 12 episodes that followed the pilot.

They came from diverse writing backgrounds. The Vancouver group included Deb Peraya, who had written for the animated series *What About Mimi*; Sioux Browning who had worked on *Weird Homes* and *Weird Wheels*; *Da Vinci's Inquest* writer Jesse McKeown; and novelist, anthologist and screenwriter Karen X, Tulchinsky. Nova Scotia's Andrew Bush had written for *Canadian Idol* and had hosted the teen and tween show *Street Cents*–a show whose writing staff had included fellow Haligonian Warren Jefferies. New Brunswick's Tony Sekulich had written a 30-minute short about death and angels and Prince Edward Island's David Moses, who Nielsen calls "a tremendous talent" was a playwright.

Enter the story editor
"Writing and/or rewriting these scripts was one of the hardest things I've ever taken on, because, for the first seven scripts at least, we were writing for new people every single week," says Nielsen. "We were truly blessed to find David Moses, whose sensibilities just meshed with mine–and he could story edit… Having David on my team took a hell of a lot of pressure off."

At first Moses was reluctant to leave home to write for a series that seemed so far removed from his own life. He says that Nielsen convinced him he could find something that would allow him to connect to the show. "Susin, as a story runner, comes from a writing background and holds to the point of view of the writer. That made a difference when I started out because I had some problems with the show. I read the support material and it seemed kind of West Coasty, so I didn't hold out much hope. The characters didn't speak to me. So I pitched another story that was of more interest to me. She was very encouraging and then everyone else seemed to like it and they let me develop it."

Eventually, Moses wrote two episodes on his own and co-wrote a third with Nielsen. It was never easy, he admits, and there were times when he began to question his decision to write for television. He says that by the time he had finished his scripts, he had not only learned a lot about television writing, but he understood more about his own motives for being a writer.

"As long as you love writing, you should be all right in any area that you choose," he says. "But it

has to be the writing that you love and not the medium. In series television, you get so many notes and so much feedback, which is really the opposite of writing a play, where you are usually writing in a void. The good thing about it is that people are responding to your writing, so the idea is not to hold on to anything too tightly.

"Some people think that as a writer for hire you don't have to put yourself on the line, but that is when you work best and that is what television producers want. Your value is in your point of view. They don't want you to be them because they could just do it themselves. At the same time, you are walking a tightrope. You are afraid to offer them your best because you know it is going to be changed. If I learned anything it was that you just have to go that route because you can tell when a writer isn't giving their best. It just doesn't work for the show."

See the Winter 2005 issue of Canadian Screenwriter for the complete interview.