Media Masters podcast

Listen to our podcast and get the media's inside view.
www.mediamasters.fm

Tim Kring

Screenwriter & producer

Media Masters – June 1st 2022

Listen to the podcast online, visit www.mediamasters.fm

Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one to one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today joined down the line by Tim Kring, the leading television writer, producer, and creator of the hit superhero sci-fi drama, Heroes, which ran for four seasons and became a global sensation, winning Tim a BAFTA and an Emmy nomination along the way. Tim previously earned an Emmy award for his writing on medical drama, Chicago Hope, and also devised the long running crime drama, Crossing Jordan. Named as one of the masters of science fiction television, Tim has continued to produce high-octane dramas, most recently including Jason Bourne spin-off, Treadstone. Tim, thank you for joining me.

Great to be here. Thank you.

It was a pleasure to meet you in The Bahamas as well. I've been a huge fan of your writing. Right back from Chicago Hope and dare I say, Knight Rider.

Oh my God Knight Rider. That was a very interesting beginning for me, an auspicious beginning for me.

So come on then, as someone who's an expert in superheroes. They all have an origin story. What's yours? Did you always want to be a writer? How on earth did you get into this lark?

All right. Well everybody's origin story is a little complicated, but I'll go back as far as knowing that I wanted to make movies and I wanted not necessarily to tell stories. My initial interest was really much more about the visuals. I was a photographer and then when I got into college, I took a film class and sort of fell in love with all the techy film cameras, loading cameras, and shooting film and just making tiny little student films with my friends. And I decided that I wanted to go to film school, not really with any desire to be a director or a writer. It was really just more, like I said, wanting to be in that soup of creativity. I fell in love with this idea of just making movies with my friends and that felt like something worthwhile to pursue. So I had a film teacher in my first year of college who said if you want to go to film school, I suggest that you go as a graduate student and not as an undergraduate student, because film school can

be a bit of a trade school. And he said I suggest you go and learn how to think and read and write and take interesting classes, get your liberal arts degree and then go to film school. And it turned out to be really fantastic advice for me. And so I was actually a religious studies major in college. I sort of fell in love, not because of any sort of religious upbringing or leanings. I just kind of fell in love with it as a study because it was a combination of history and sociology and philosophy and anthropology kind of all rolled into one. Now I was just very stimulated by it and I also had the luxury of not having it have to mean anything for my future. I knew I was going to film school. And so it wasn't a means to an end. It was just something to do to sort of educate myself in a broad way. And then I went to the USC film school, which at the time and still is kind of the preeminent film school in the world. And once I was there, I realised that this idea of just sort of making movies with your friends was not really how it worked. You had to kind of slot yourself into a track, you had to sort of choose one lane that you were gonna be in. So I chose this kind of visual camera and lighting and all of that. And with the idea that maybe I could be a camera operator and then ultimately a director of photography and a cinematographer. And that was what I was really passionate about. But when I got out of film school and started working small jobs and they were whatever I could get a gig doing, depending on the size of the production, if it was a small, little independent, little music video or something like that, then I might be the cinematographer, or I might be the camera operator. If it was something bigger, then maybe I was the second assistant camera and I was basically loading cameras and working the slate and that sort of thing. So I did that for a few years and it was sort of a gig career where I was just trying to find, you know, one job after another. And I noticed that the people that I went to film school with had gone through the writer track of the curriculum. Suddenly a few of them were really working in the business and selling a script or getting a development deal. And I was making minimum wage, pulling cables and hanging lights and maybe camera operating. And some of these people were just suddenly driving new cars and I thought, wow, I have some stories to tell. I have something I wanna say. I sat down and wrote a script, while I was doing these other jobs, obviously. And I ended up finding an agent, just a guy who worked literally by himself and out of his apartment, kind of a junior junior kind of guy in the whole grand scheme of things. But he really believed in me and he got me, I don't know, dozens of kinds of general, I guess, what you would call meet and greet meetings where you just kind of take a general meeting with some junior development executive. And as you mentioned, Knight Rider turned out to be my first paying job as a writer. If you've got a minute, I'll tell the story of that.

We've got many minutes for Knight Rider. It was my favourite show as a kid.

Well, it's kind of a ridiculous story. I think it was the last season of the show and the show was sort of run by a team of, they were these ex-cops because back in the seventies, when television had all of these cop shows, Beretta and Policewoman, and I don't know all these different shows and The Rockford Files, those kind of things. They hired a lot of ex-cops to be kind of consultants on these shows. And so somehow Knight Rider had about four of these guys at the top of this thing as the executive producers. And they were all these old kinds of Chicago or New York or Boston cops, who'd sort of seen everything. And I came in there all fresh faced. And here's how naive I was, Paul. I thought that a writer, if we were gonna legitimately pitch something, I was going in ostensibly to pitch an idea for the show because

maybe one thing your listeners don't know that on long running traditional network television shows, the Writers' Guild, the union for the writers mandates that out of every 22 episodes, two of them have to go out to the open market. You can't just have your staff writing them.

And is that situation to keep the industry open?

Exactly. And to just to get employment for the rank and file, writers in the Guild. So I was auditioning for one of those open slots. And I was so naive as a writer that I thought that first I had thought I had to wear a tie, which was just ridiculous. Nobody wore a tie. And I carried a briefcase because I thought it would make me look more legitimate if I had a briefcase. So I have this briefcase and in this briefcase are literally eight pages, single sheets of paper each with like a paragraph of a pitch and I would take them out of the briefcase, hold them in my sort of shaking hands and read the one paragraph pitch.

To these ex-police guys?

Yes, exactly. And with my hands shaking, I'd read these things and with each one of them they'd go "we did that back in season two, we've already done the con man doing whatever it was that I was pitching." So I finally had my last idea, which was literally the last for a reason, because it was the worst idea I thought. And so I pull it out and I start to pitch this idea about KITT, the talking car getting possessed by a voodoo princess. And so as soon as I get that sentence out, these guys sort of look at one another and start nodding their heads and they're like, "voodoo, okay, well we haven't done that one." And it was literally was "we need it by next Thursday." So I went off and I wrote this thing in about a week and delivered it and went through a couple week or two of like changes and everything. And the next thing I know it was my first paying job and I'm telling you, it was what's called Guild minimum. Everybody sort of gets a set minimum, but for me it was so much money. I couldn't believe it compared to what I had been making working my gig career as a budding cinematographer. So I just couldn't believe it.

Did you feel like you'd arrived at that point and that you were a writer?

Yeah got me into the Guild, which is a huge thing, once you get into the Guild, you're sort of in the mix and you're legitimate. And to be honest, I never stopped working as a writer after that, I've never had to wait tables or do anything. So that was the beginning of my career. So that's the origin story. And then from there to be really honest, I didn't have a certain genre that I was trying to sort of get into. I was a freelance writer for many, many years, working whatever I could get. And so no opportunity was a bad opportunity. I just took it, whatever I could. And at the time there was this whole TV movie world. I don't know whether you remember that whole thing.

I remember them, absolutely, with fondness.

Yeah. The big networks, you had the big three ABC, CBS, NBC, and then you had Fox after that, but take CBS for instance, did 60 of these movies a year. And so I got into this and it was sort of a separate world when you entered into this TV movie world. I ended up as a freelance guy who did many of these TV movies and they were fantastic because they were full movies, you really wrote the beginning, middle and end of a movie. They got made very quickly. You generally got to stay involved in some capacity as a writer. It was an amazing thing. And they fell into a couple of different categories. You had the kind of disease of the week movie, where someone's dying of some strange disease, and it was a tear jerker, or you had these kind of romance thrillers where somebody's out to kill the date of the week kind of thing. And then you had light horror genres and stuff like that. And I did them all. And it was a very interesting way to have a career where you didn't really get pigeonholed into any one slot. And you mentioned Chicago Hope, which came about because the TV movie business sort of fell off a cliff and they stopped making them. I think HBO sort of helped put the death nail in that.

How did it work on the TV movie side? Did the network say "we've got Stephanie Powers, we've got her for eight days and we need her to be involved in a science fiction thing with a romance." Or did you come up with the idea and then turn it into a movie? Or was it both? How did it actually work? What were the logistics?

It was a little bit of both, to be honest, it was more of the former. They would want to fill a slot. We wanna do a thriller, they come up with some sort of like a cross between a couple of different thrillers and yes, it was usually star driven, female star driven. And it was very title driven. They loved catchy, silly titles. I did one called Falling For You, based on a kind of a serial gigolo kind of guy played by Pierce Brosnan, who is a serial killer and his mode of murder was to push women out of windows. So it was called Falling For You. That kind of ridiculous play on words, notoriously a classic title for a TV movie was Mother May I Sleep with Danger? That was one of the titles.

I'd watch that on a plane.

So the sort of sillier and more kind of catchy you could come up with a title, the better, but then there was this sort of serious, more disease of the weak ones that were tear jerkers, usually some epic heroic battle against a disease and a love story kind of thing, But yeah, it was an amazing business and a very self-contained business. And while I was doing this, I would call myself a list TV movie writer. I was simultaneously a C list feature writer. So that would be writer number seven out of 12 on some feature. You know what I mean? The feature business is notoriously long with multiple writers that get hired and fired and hired and fired. And the project then gets a star attached and then the star wants to bring in their own writer and it's that sort of thing. And so I would work in the feature business, as you know, like I said, one of these unfortunate guys that's gonna get fired in a month and a half. But I had a unique perspective because at the time the two worlds really were very separate. You either worked in television or you worked in features and TV was really considered sort of the redheaded stepchild or the feature business, the feature business was very prestigious and sexy and a little bit mysterious and relationship

driven. And the TV business would be sort of meat and potatoes. And it was fascinating to have a view of the inner workings of it from my point of view as a writer, because it felt to me that in TV, it was a very honest business. If you hyped it up and said “we have Tom Cruise attached to the movie” the movies go into production next Thursday. And so if Tom Cruise isn't there, then you must not be telling the truth. In the feature business, it was just the opposite. It was like, Tom Cruise was always attached, those kinds of things. And when he in fact wasn't, there was just a lot of smoke and mirrors and even the quality of the development executives were so like, let's take a CBS development executive in the TV movie business. Maybe every year, there were four or five of them in that division. And so each one of these development executives will have seen 15 movies from a pitch or development all the way through to a finished product where you're on the set and dealing with all the problems and all that. So when you're talking to those executives about notes and things like that, even if you didn't agree with the note, you kind of had to say, well if he's been there a few years, he's made 45 movies, the quality of their skill set as a development executive was very high. Whereas in the feature side, it was always some 26 year old development person who had never had a movie done that they were involved in. If it got anywhere close, some senior executive would take it away from them and they were always kind of mysterious characters who drove fancy cars and went to parties. Whereas the executives in TV drove a station wagon and had a golden retriever and kids in public school kind of thing.

What came next then? I mean, tell us how you came to Chicago Hope.

So I was sort of getting to the idea that the TV movie business fell off a cliff very, very quickly, in the early nineties. And my agent represented David Kelly as well, the creator of Chicago Hope. And so I remember him saying I think it's time for you to step over to this series side of television. And I was really reluctant. I liked my freelance lifestyle. I had sort of developed a very solitary kind of career as a writer and series TV was a much more social kind of career, you worked in a writer's room and all that. And I was a little reluctant to try to do that. And also I had been sort of an executive producer level guy in the TV movie business and the way it worked in series television, at least at the time, you paid your dues. You started at the bottom and you worked your way up. And with each season of a show that you were invited back to, your title would rise from staff writer, to story editor, to co-producer, to producer, to supervisor. There's a step ladder that you rise up. And so that was the other issue. I didn't wanna enter too low because I sort of had a lot of experience. I was able to sort of get onto the staff of Chicago Hope at a producer level, which is high enough up that you have some seniority. And it was completely, as I had sort of predicted, a totally different mindset to being a writer because you were working with, must have been about nine of us on the staff. And you're sort of seen as a team player and it's much more like being at a dinner party where you have to kind of figure your way out of all the relationships and where you fit in and all of that. So it was a very steep learning curve.

Absolutely, and I wanted to ask you about that actually, if you forgive me for interrupting, because lots of people sort of nod if they're asked what a TV producer does. I know what one is unless someone asks me and then I

wouldn't be able to explain it really, not to put a final point in it. What does a producer do?

Well, because television is such a writer driven medium, especially back then when you're doing 22, sometimes 24, even more episodes a year, it's a conveyor belt, assembly line thing. And so on shows that are well run and not all shows do this, but generally the idea is that by producer level, you should be able to produce your own episode of your show, meaning that on this conveyor belt assembly line, you have one episode in prep, which is a whole, as you might know, prep is everything. It's usually a few weeks of prep. So one episode's in prep, one episode's in production and one episode's in post production, and then there's also the writer's room that's going on continually. And so the reason you need so many writers and hopefully upper level writers is that when you write an episode of television, you become the representative of that written word through the whole process from prep to production, to post production. And so on any given day, as you might imagine, there are 10,000 questions that have to be answered and adjustments that have to be made based on the written word at the beginning, may not resemble the thing that ends up in the editing room. You write with the idea that it's producible, but sometimes it isn't, let's say that you set a scene in a, let's say a convention centre with 20,000 extras walking around. And the week before you get there, you realise the convention centre isn't available and the line producer, physical production producer says “we don't have a convention centre and 20,000 extras, but what we have is a Volkswagen with a big backseat, can you write the scene there?” And so you just have to sort of shift gears.

A slight reduction in scale, as it were.

Yeah and locations fall out, actors schedules don't line up, there's a gazillion reasons why things have to be changed. And then also the writer represents this piece all the way through, you hire a director who comes in out of maybe nowhere and you have to teach them what the show is, sort of both visually and that director is working with the cast who maybe have already done a hundred episodes of the show and they know exactly what their character would and should say. And so you are managing all those kinds of disputes on the set. And the actors all have suggestions for line changes and things they want cut and things I want to add. So the writer that produces the episode really is the eyes and ears of the show in this very messy process of prep, production, and post. And that theoretically is what a producer does on a television show. And what the beauty of that is that it creates a kind of farm system. When you get thrown into a production as a producer for the first time it's like getting thrown into the deep end of the pool. Either you learn how to swim, or you just fail miserably and somebody takes it away from you. It's a very, very steep skill set that you learn. And then the beauty of that as someone, which I think we should maybe talk about a little bit today is the whole idea of running a show and what a showrunner does and what putting together that whole dinner party looks like. The beauty of having these producers that get thrown into the deep end and succeed is that you create, as I said, a kind of farm team that can take over more and more problems that you have with a show, the more people at the top who really can have the vocabulary to manage all these problems, the more sleep that you are able to get. The more you're able to see your family and introduce yourself to your children

and all that kind of stuff. So I always love the idea of the shows that I've run, the idea that the writer really does represent this process and through the production and the post.

There's nothing more frustrating, even as a viewer with poor writing where two characters could sort this out just by revealing when one of them's monologuing at the other, and in real life, you just said, “no, that's not what happened.” And that would solve a comedy of errors or you think why did that person do that? Just doesn't make sense.

Yeah, one of the problems with working on a TV show is that you get too close sometimes. And it's hard to be the eyes and ears sometimes of the audience. It's why in a writer's staff, which is a whole other topic of how to put together a writing room, which is a very complicated and fascinating process of running a writer's room. But to your point, there's always somebody in the writer's room who either self designated or just sort of becomes the eyes and ears of the audience. And we sort of playfully refer to them as the dumbest person in the room, but the dumbest person in the room becomes this super necessary role to play. Somebody has to raise their hand and say, “I don't get this” because in a writer's room, you can all get sort of too smart for your own good. You speak the language of the show so fluently and the audience might not. One in one may equals six to you, but for the audience, it only equals two. But vice versa, you can find yourself over-explaining and the audience itself develops a very sophisticated vocabulary, the more they watch your show. And it's part of the fun of being a fan of a show is that you get very inside the show. And so you don't need as much handholding to get the jokes or to be on the inside of where the story's going. But the whole thing is very fascinating. The whole idea of how a writer's room functions.

Your whole career is fascinating. And I'm glad that this is a nine hour podcast to get through. You obviously worked under the amazing David Kelly, but Crossing Jordan was your first big creative by credit. And obviously went on for many, many years. How does it work in terms of moving from one project to another? And tell us about the genesis of creating that and then running it. The old cliche is heavy is the crown.

Oh yeah, no, it's amazing because at the time, this has changed drastically. And with the advent of 5,000 shows on TV, back in that time, there were only a set number of shows and that number didn't really change because there were only a set number of platforms that aired these shows. But back then, you had to earn your way up the ladder. Nobody gave anybody a show out of nowhere, you became an executive producer on a show for a few years. You sat in the number two spot and saw how the sausage was made and all of that. And then you got your shot. And that was very much me. I earned my way p up to that position, but the truth is, I'm sure it's like going from vice president to president that nothing can really prepare you for the severity of being a manager of up to 300 people on a show. And suddenly your job becomes very broad and not simply about what's on the page and what gets on the screen. You're dealing with union issues and workman's comp claims and problems on the set.

What I call boring but important.

And also you're managing the show as a promoter of the show. You're not only the sort of head cheerleader internally on the show. You have to be for your own network because the truth is most shows, there's obviously a few out the box hits that are just wildly successful and not in any danger of being cancelled, but the truth is 99% of shows live their entire life sort of on the bubble, waking up every day, prepared for that being the day you get the phone call to tell you that you're cancelled. And so one of the skills that you have to learn is how to sort of keep that show alive when it is on the bubble. You wanna be relevant within your network. You wanna be doing interesting things that get the promo department and the marketing department to be interested in it. You want to try to be casting in interesting ways that you can promote. And so you're sort of a cheerleader for your whole team, with the network that's putting you on the air. And that was a really eye opening thing. I wasn't aware of how much sort of internal politics you had to deal with and then the press and making sure that the press was happy with your show or that you were getting enough press.

And the acting talent, and also that being true to your creative vision to literally manifest the idea that you thought of on screen.

Well there's a whole other topic is that once you've handed that over to 300 people, it can end up becoming sort of like a game of telephone, it can start to resemble something very different than your original idea. I always say it's important to write down what that original idea is in a couple of sentences on a four by five card and stick it in the top door drawer of your desk so that every once in a while you can pull it out and look at it and make sure that you're still somewhat in the ballpark of that, because with the mission creep of anything, especially with shows like Crossing Jordan, those are an episodic procedural show, meaning that the stories were somewhat closed ended. They might be continuing relationships and continuing love interests or something like that. But generally what you were doing on a show like, as with most kinds of crime shows or medical shows, they're closed ended and you're wrapping up that story for the week, and then starting the next episode with a brand new case or a brand new dead body or something like that. But now with most things being somewhat serialised or fully serialised, that idea of veering away from an initial idea four seasons in it can really not resemble what it was that you started off with.

I loved Crossing Jordan. And I was gonna ask actually, in terms of the ingredients, I mean, you've got character there. How important was it to set it in Boston? Was that a network executive that said it's Boston and you wanted as kind of heritage town, or was that central to the creative vision, or did you think I've got a character and it doesn't matter which town they're in as long as though they're going to come up against the DA and the examiners?

It's funny you asked me because I kind of for a second forgot what the answer was and then I remembered. Here's a view into the thinking of this is that I knew that because it was a show about death ultimately. It took place in a morgue. And I was fascinated with the idea of doing a show about death. And I guess maybe this hearkens back to my religious studies days, but I decided that I wanted the character to be someone who had grown up with a kind of a faith and like an old world faith. So

I was like Catholic, how about Irish Catholic. And that just sort of led me to Boston, Boston is sort of generally known in the United States for the Irish Catholic, old world kind of vibe to it. And so I think that's where that came from. And then I sort of fell in love with that kind of accent. And I went to the morgue in Boston to do a research trip. And her father was an ex-cop and I loved the whole idea of this Boston Irish cop in an old city where the politics was really entrenched. That was the other thing I wanted it to feel kind of old.

It wouldn't have worked in Miami, would it?

Exactly. And having been to Boston as a tourist kind of thing, I remembered those fantastic cemeteries with the ancient tombstones leaning, falling over and I was like, oh, that's the kind of feel that this should have it shouldn't as you said, it shouldn't take place in the blue sky, Western state, shouldn't be Seattle or San Francisco or something.

Did you come up and think this is gonna be seasons one to three, I'm always fascinated as to how much you're sort of building the plane as you're flying it. And then how much it is an open ended commission and then you just see which theme every season has.

Well with that one, it was really I knew that we were doing a procedural show, which meant you were doing closed end. What we used to just sort of playfully call the body of the week show. So I knew that the general engine of the show was just singular.

But then you have emerging things, don't you? Like the murder of her mother, for example.

So that was what I was gonna get to, the body of the weak part was not the interesting part for me, it was fun to break those stories and all that, the fun part to me was her as a character. And the seminal event of her life is that her mother was murdered. She was a character who had had this major injustice in her life and there was never any justice, they never found the murderer of the mother. And so I looked at each body that she solves the crime for and gets some kind of closure and justice was sort of a cup of justice that she's pouring into this bottomless well that was never going to be filled up. And so to me her story became more and more interesting. And if you sort of look at the credits over the years, the ones that I always tried to write were the ones that dealt more with the mythology of her. Out of 22 episodes a year, we do maybe four episodes out of each season that were really heavily devoted to the mythology. And I always loved that stuff. And at the time, if you recall, there wasn't a lot of serialised television and the networks did not want serialised TV because they used to quote this thing to you all the time, these sort of research that the networks had done, which those of us who worked on shows were always like insulted by, but ultimately they were right. That even the people who checked the box that say I'm the most loyal fan of this show were only watching one out of every three episodes of a show, which those of us who worked on shows were like that can't be, our fans are so loyal. But the truth is they really didn't watch the show as much as you thought.

I find that fascinating.

I did too. And now obviously we're all used to the bingeable thing where you wouldn't dream of missing a show that you love, but there are eight episodes a season and you can actually, or 10 episodes a season, you can actually do that. But back then, they programmed these 22 episodes over a 39 week season. And it was just very hard to watch, you had something to do on one night or your kids' school thing or something like that, so it was very hard to watch every episode. And so my point was that the idea of doing serialised television, nobody wanted to do serial and it wasn't until towards the end of Crossing Jordan, when I started to think about serialised television.

I mean, Jill Hennessy was a fantastic actor, but did you ever sense a vulnerability just relying on one person to carry the show, because if she got sick? Or she got blamed for a crime she didn't commit in another country and ended up in prison? You have no show.

Those people who know the history of the show know that Jill got pregnant and we were off the air for about 10 months. And I think part of my desire to ensemble a show to the point where you didn't rely on a single came out of having a single lead. And while I loved working with Jill, there's no knock on her. It's just the idea exactly as you said, there's a vulnerability, especially with a show like that, that character's name was in the title.

And with action, I remember when Beverly Crusher was pregnant in Star Trek: The Next Generation and they just shot a head and shoulder shot from behind and used the standard tricks, but you can't do that for 23 episodes of the season.

Exactly. And so that's how we had that same problem and yes, there's not only a vulnerability, but there's just at some point you want the freedom to be able to go in some different directions. And with a procedural and where there's a bit more of a cookie cutter quality to it. It's okay to rely on the single lead, but boy, if you want to tell any branching stories and also the sophistication of production starts to increase. With HBO and suddenly cable, these bigger budgets and you could now watch, this all sounds so innocent from now, but if you think back, people were buying these large format TVs for the first time. And so where you were seeing a more cinematic experience, you were watching things like HBO and Showtime, where you could see a hundred million dollar movie on your TV and for the average person clicking from that to a 2 million episode of television, they're on the same screen. You're sitting on your same couch watching it, and all you know is the viewer. If you're unsophisticated, wow, one looks really cool and expensive, and the other one looks kind of cheap. And so we were suddenly competing with this idea that the audience was getting a much more sophisticated eye and vocabulary. And so suddenly the days of putting your characters up against a wall and shooting three pages of dialogue with maybe a little bit of coverage, a couple of medium shots kind of thing, that wasn't enough. You wanted to really enhance the coverage so that it felt more

like a movie. And so when that happened, your days got more full, it took longer to produce and you couldn't work your lead character as much. You needed to have your lead character have a few days off during production, which meant that you had to ensemble the show and start telling B and C stories about other characters. So that the world would expand a little bit, so the number one on the call sheet, you can't overwork them. So there are all kinds of reasons why moving on to something that had a big cast was really inviting to me.

Think it was about 2006 when I used to get public transport everywhere in the UK. I kept seeing these adverts for this new show and it said, Save the Cheerleader, Save the World. I'm thinking what on Earth's all that about? And of course, I think even then back in the day, Britain was like six months behind, or three months behind. Now we have to wait a day, which is an outrage. There was this show, Heroes. I mean, tell us the journey of that. What an incredible show.

Yeah. So some of the impetus for doing that was exactly what I said. Just sort of wanting to stretch the boundaries of doing these closed-ended mysteries every week that had to be wrapped up and on a show like Crossing Jordan, they had to be wrapped up in a clever way. You had to have that moment where the audience went, “oh, I didn't see that coming.” And it's very hard to do on a weekly basis. And several of us who were working on the show started and my other writer friends who were working on other shows right about this time, we all started thinking wouldn't it be great to just keep telling these stories? And the end of the episode is really only what happens next. Well, that's a lot easier to do than wrapping up a mystery, you know? And so if some of that impetus was just wanting to do that. Some of it was wanting to expand the casting, but I was also very driven by having young children at the time. My kids were young and the world was kind of vibrating, obviously after 9/11 and after we were in America, we were in the middle of the Iraq war. We were suddenly the bad guys. There was a lot of xenophobia and I started to think about what is a way to put a positive message out into the world. And what is a way to put a message about interconnectivity, the idea that we're all somehow connected to one another, and if we can find each other and come together, we could change the world or save the world. And I didn't really have any real passion for doing a superhero. I didn't grow up as a comic book reader, I was not really a comic book nerd or a geek about sci-fi. I wanted to tell real human stories about what it meant to become heroic. And I started to think what if it wasn't the cop? What if it wasn't the highly educated doctor who was the hero? What if it was the weird kid down the street, or the guy sitting next to you on the bus? If it was a cop, it was the cop that was relegated to directing traffic outside of the crime scene, not the one inside solving the crime. What if he was the hero? What if that was where the extraordinary came from? And I just became really obsessed with this idea of hyper ordinary people that you would pass on the street and never think twice about. And what if those were the ones who were meant to save the world. And so to me, it was also about global consciousness, about wanting to have people represented from all over the world, all different types and ethnicities and it came out of this real message, really wanting to put a message into the world. And so that was the impetus for where that came from.

Did you have a whole mythology prepared? How does it actually work? Or do you create it as you go? I'm fascinated as someone who watched the first season and was utterly blown away, as indeed many people were, a huge success. But I had visions of the writer before I knew him because you are him, I assume that you were sort of a brain in a jar with everything plotted out and everything completely planned in advance. How much of it is like that?

There's a blueprint and there's a fair amount that's planned out. And the truth is I did not have a whole lot planned out beyond the first season. The first season felt like the epic season of television that I wanted to tell. And if it went away after that, it was okay. I thought we were gonna keep sort of renewing the cast each year. That was something I thought, that there would just be an endless number of rotating people that would come through. But the truth is that it kind of smacks up against the realities of a hit show where the stars become stars and they're on the covers of magazines and they promote the shows that are on your network and they become not only stars of your show, they become stars for the network. So the idea of getting rid of them, I sort of learned pretty quickly that was not gonna happen. But there is a collective brain that happens when you get a lot of smart people in the room together. I wrote the pilot and made the pilot before we hired anybody. And so I had a bit of a Bible of where it was going that first season. And it was a contained idea because we had to stop a bomb from going off in New York and so we knew where we were writing to the end of that storyline. But then you bring in, I think we had about 10 writers on the staff. It was a big staff and the way this show was written was really unique. And it came out of necessity. Because these stories didn't intertwine with one another, I'm getting into the weeds a little bit production wise, but because these stories did not cross, it meant that you were shooting in very different locations, in very different settings, very different casts that needed to be involved. And so that really kind of broke the back of a traditional television show. You couldn't really do it on a schedule and budget. So it meant that we had to, what's known as cross board. So if you were gonna shoot somebody's storyline and it took place in, let's say Claire in the high school and the high school is 40 miles away, and we have to go and set up all the trucks. If there's only three scenes in this episode, in that high school, but there's three scenes in the next episode and three more scenes in the one after that, well then let's just go and drop anchor one time and shoot all of those episodes and cut them into these three separate episodes. So we had to be cross boarded that way. So that meant we needed to have finished scripts by the time you were ready to shoot that second episode, we had to have like five finished scripts. And we had about six or eight weeks to write those episodes. And we were facing sort of a mathematical impossibility if we sort of divided up and all tried to write our separate episodes. So we just said, okay, well you write this storyline and just keep going. We know where it goes. We know it goes those nine more scenes that are set in that storyline, just keep writing those. And then you keep writing the Peter Petrelli stuff and you write the hero, Nakamura stuff and we broke these stories on the board and then we divided up and we went off and wrote these separate scenes. And we came back and put them all together. And we had five finished scripts and each person took maybe four, five days to write those scenes. And we came back together, all of us fairly sceptical that it was gonna work. And we sat down and read all day long. And I remember that day when we walked back into the writer's room, all of us after having all gone to our offices to read these scripts and the look on everybody's face was holy shit. We really pulled this off. These storylines, all the hard work was done

when we broke them on the whiteboard these last three weeks, and they were a little clunky, but they really work. And so that's how we wrote the first season of the show. We divided it up and one writer took one part. So it was a unique form of writing that's not usually done on shows.

And then does it kind of take a life of its own, in a sense that it's your baby, you've created it, but you start to obviously go a different direction and step away. How does it work? Did the network executives get hold of it? It was such a strong first season that even as a viewer thought, where are they gonna take this? But I was obviously intrigued. You have to take it somewhere.

Well, there's some mythology attached to this as I talk about it, but some is rooted and real in reality, the show was so unique that the executives really didn't know how to give notes to it. They were used to doing these procedural shows. This was a giant ensemble show with 10 characters and these open-ended things. And it just felt like the network was very frustrated by it. They did know how to give notes. They did not know how to wrangle this thing. And it was moving so quickly that they couldn't really wrap their brain around it. We were over budget and overscheduled, every week we were just in tremendous trouble. The bean counters were furious. The executives were frustrated. I used to say, we were like the Taliban camped out in a cave somewhere. We were just under siege the whole time. And somehow this attitude of kind of like almost an insurgent quality, we knew it was somewhat revolutionary. I think that added to that whole feel of it. And the truth is with all of these storylines, we used to call it Haku storytelling. We would go into the room and we'd break a story. Let's say there would be eight scenes to that story. And we knew that that was too many scenes because we've got seven other storylines that we have to do. So we'd play this game that was sort of like name that tune idea where we'd all stare at the board for a while. And then one of the writers would say I can do it in six, here's how I'd do it. And they'd pitch the thing and you'd go, okay we can do it in six beats and someone else would go five, here's how you'd do it in five. And invariably, that would be the one that wins. And so we used to sort of refer to it as putting 50 pounds of story into a 10 pound bag. It was very cramped and tight. And what that gives is a kind of breathless quality to watching it. It felt like there was almost no subtext in the show, everybody said only what was necessary, nobody had any flowery speeches or you never spoke in metaphors. Everything was just pure text, no subtext. It made for this kind of breathless quality and because you had multiple storylines, you could always find one to find a giant cliff hanger on that gave you that holy shit moment at the end. Oh my God, I gotta come back. And back then obviously you couldn't binge. So the audience was often very frustrated, there were a lot of them in the chat rooms saying I'm never watching this show again. They're not telling me the answer to this. And then the next week in the teaser you would give the answer and then the audience would go oh, okay. Alright. Alright. Okay. Now I'm back on.

And some shows like Lost raised that to an almost frustrating art form where they'd answer two questions and beg another five. And you got used to never actually knowing the bloody answers. I mean, I watched the finale of Lost and I said to my wife, I can't decide whether that show's genius or total tripe. And I said that having watched every episode.

Yeah. So Damon Lindelof, who created Lost, worked on Crossing Jordan with me. And we talked a lot about his process, my process, and he helped me tremendously with Heroes. And I'd like to think I helped him with Lost. Vut we were very aware because they predated us by several months. And so we watched the audience's frustration with the whole idea of the mysteries. And we sort of took a different tack. We were like, well, let's just give people answers. We have so many storylines. We can always create more questions. The questions weren't really the hard part. Let's just give them the answers as we go along and try and try and keep feeding people. So we sort of took a different tack, but as you said, the first season had that quality and one of the problems for me and as a production was it took 14 months to make one year of television. So we went back to the network and I said I think we're facing a mathematical impossibility here. I don't think we can make this show the way that we've done. We just can't and we're gonna burn everything out. And they were like, well, figure it out, because it's a hit and we want it.

I mean, it went for four seasons.

Yeah. So we faced that mathematical impossibility the whole time, it was just too much story and each one was like a little mini movie and breaking all these sorts of new things in terms of like the visual effects and the broad storylines and the multiple languages and all that stuff. And it would've worked I think much better on a model where you could do these shorter seasons of eight or 10 episodes, the show should've been in that world, I think.

Were you frustrated at the end of the fourth season then with the way that it ended?

Well, we didn't know it was going to end. I mean, we didn't write that as the ending, we thought we were coming back for our fifth season. So ultimately yes, of course. Again, it was quite a rollercoaster because of the sheer volume of production and creativity that had to be with very little time to reflect on things. You know, the creative process is really, you can only stretch that so far in the 23, 24 episodes, our second season was meant to be 26 episodes. When I went back and said, I think we really should do 13 and make it special and rare and interesting in that way. And they were like, nope, we're doing more. And we're gonna order even more episodes. So we ran into, I think what was with network television, it's a single source of revenue business. They only make money by selling advertising. And so there wasn't a lot you could do, it was a volume business. And it also came along at a very interesting time. And if we have a little more time, I'd love to sort of get into this, that the show really excelled at this whole idea of the multi-platform approach to the way we told the story, we were really on the forefront of that. And by a kind of necessity that the network was losing viewers, as you recall, in the mid two thousands the viewership of all network television started to really collapse and people were going to the internet and games and all these new platforms, HBO, that kind of thing. And so the ratings were collapsing and the network at NBC at the time hired, in the first summer that we were making the show, they hired 60 people to create this new .com division and their mandate was to get out there and figure out where the audience is going and try and get them back. And so it was a real mandate from the audience. And that mandate really met with a show in Heroes that was perfectly designed to tell a story

across multiple platforms because of the deep cannon, the deep mythology, the multiple storylines, all of that. And so we had a huge team of people working on this content. We called the 360 initiative of the show and it became fascinating to me and changed the way I even think about content. I was absolutely energised by the idea of telling a story in a new way to an audience. Telling a story on a show like Crossing Jordan, you had a one way street, basically you told the story to the audience, it went out into the world and you never had any relationship with the audience whatsoever. Maybe there was a chat board that was out there. And we heard from that, but the truth is it was like standing on a stage with bright lights in your face, and didn't really see the audience well, suddenly that changed drastically with Heroes where it became this very dynamic relationship, where we were putting out all this content, webisodes and games and mockumentaries and online comics and contests and all this kind of stuff. It was this immediate feedback loop that was suddenly developed with the audience where they could very quickly tell you what's working and very quickly consumed that content. And that became really fascinating and kind of frightening to me, but fascinating.

Well it was an innovation, frankly. Was that one of the things that sparked and drove the creativity regarding Daybreak, and with AT&T that was incredible.

Absolutely. So this is exactly where I'm going with it is that this two way street where the dynamic relationship with an audience just became very interesting to me and where it really got interesting is that to be honest, although we had probably 50 people dedicated on the show to doing all this content and I'm not gonna say we had a blank check, but we had promo and marketing money and no pressure to monetize any of that content. We were just making it and trying to capture our eyeballs and bring it back to the show. And what we discovered was that we couldn't make this content fast enough. I used to liken it to throwing red meat off the back of a slow moving pickup truck to zombies, that you're eventually just gonna be overtaken by this audience. It was an insatiable audience. And so one of the ideas that we sort of had just by necessity was let's open up the narrative to the audience and say here's our world, welcome to it. Start making your own content around it. So we started encouraging all of this fan fiction and mashups and music videos based on footage that we'd supply and all these ways for the audience to engage with the creating content. And that became super fascinating to me. And I just sort of fell in love with this whole idea of a multi-platform approach to a story that could live above you and beneath you and below you. And another light bulb moment for me was standing on the stage at ComicCon with the cast and looking out into the, the giant hall H, which was in the big hall at ComicCon and seeing dozens and dozens and dozens of people dressed as characters from the show and realising that these people had come from far away and spent their hard earned money to get here and to make these costumes and stood in line for hours to get into this event, all because of their desire to express themselves around something that they loved. And the light bulb moment for me was what if you were able to let people become a character inside of a narrative and let them go out into the world and become a character. And that led to this project that I did called conspiracy for good. We did for Nokia, who at the time was the largest handset manufacturer in the world. And we ended up doing this giant project that rolled out across the internet.

Social benefits storytelling?

Yes, social benefit. And the idea was that your involvement inside of that narrative would have real world positive results. And so we developed the whole project that ostensibly became a giant scavenger hunt on the streets of London for four days, using very early image recognition technology that where you point the camera in your phone at a, let's say we tagged a statue or some graffiti or something. And if it recognized that, when you pointed your camera at it, it would recognize that, and it would open up a video or a link or something like that in a way for you to do a scavenger hunt. And so we had people running around, we had 45 actors on the streets of London who would chase you down an alley, or they were a shopkeeper or barista or something, and you'd have to interact with them in order to get clues to this narrative. And then as a result of this whole narrative, we ended up bringing down an evil corporation villain that unlocked these funds that ended up letting us build and stock five libraries in Africa and donate 10,000 books and give 50 scholarships to school girls. And so we were proving this model that people's participation inside of a narrative could actually have kind of a real world positive result. So I fell in love with that whole idea of where fiction and reality cross and all of these new technologies that allow people to, especially with a mobile device that is this lightsaber in your pocket that allows you to, it's not only a content consumption device, but a content creation device. And so you can push content back and I can push content to you and I can tell a story and engage you. And broadened my whole idea of what narrative was.

I mean, tell us about Touch. I watched both seasons, Kiefer Sutherland was incredible. I thought it was a high concept, very touching, very moving.

Well, I became fascinated by, as I mentioned with the sort of the themes that I was playing with with Heroes, this idea of interconnectivity, I decided that as a storyteller, that was the issue I wanted to promote. And that was sort of a one issue candidate. And so in Heroes, it was very much the theme, that was the theme of heroes. And then I had this thought like what if instead of it just being the theme, what if it literally became the premise? So it switched from theme to premise. And so the premise of Touch was this idea of these interlocking stories that are connected to one another. I mean, that based on this sort of Chinese myth or idea of the red thread of fate, the idea that if we're connected to each other by a sort of an invisible thread. And I sort of love this message that if you can buy this idea that your life is connected to others, then you'll maybe think of your actions in a different way. When you walk out your door every day, if you realise your life is connected to those around you, then it adds this weight of responsibility that hopefully makes the world a better place. And I've become really interested in using my whatever archetypal narrative format. I'm lucky enough to create and promote some kind of positive change in the world. And so this was an attempt for me to kind of put my money where my mouth was and try and make a show that actually talked about the themes that I was interested in. It was a very high concept and a difficult one too. I might have overreached with the concept, but yeah, I loved the initial idea of it tremendously.

I love bold original storytelling. It's the kind of thing that the network execs say they want, and viewers do. We don't just wanna rehash, although it was

incredible. Does it frustrate you? Do you see these shows like your children where it only lasted two seasons, Treadstone only lasted one. I was hoping for a second season, like you were, and it doesn't get one, the brutal realities of commerce into today.

Exactly. Yeah, you have to fall in love with the process and not the result. The result is maddening and uncontrollable and ultimately, all things fail. And so you try not to tie yourself too much to the result and to put the love of doing it in the process. And nowadays shows have to be successful in their metrics, all of that, but the truth is, when you're just trying to sell subscriptions to the platform and with as many things to watch, you don't have to be all things to all people. You can have a smaller audience, that's a dedicated audience. And it's very, obviously in this day and age, it's almost impossible. There are outliers, of course, Squid Games or something that comes along and becomes watched by most people. But it's very hard to have a broad audience, but in some ways it's easier to have a deep audience and a deep audience, rather than vertical goes horizontal with social media with the way people can find each other and connect to each other as a fan base. These very passionate, deep fan bases can really keep a show alive. The shows that you mentioned are all in the model that sell advertising, and that's a much cruller sort of bar to hit.

So what are you up to now? And what's next?

Well I've got a few projects in the works. I can't talk about some of them but I'm kind of going back to television again. So I've got a couple of projects in the works.

I'm available if you need a lead. I'm in my mid forties, but I could probably play in my early forties if I lost a bit of weight. I can do two accents. I dunno whether I'm versatile enough, I'm not particularly attractive, maybe a radio play, if you could write one of those.

There's visual effects, there's makeup.

Make me look 25 again maybe.

In the magic of film, we can do it and we can do whatever we want. That sounds great. So I'm working on that. I continue with the some philanthropic projects that I'm working with, that I'm very excited by. And I have a feature that I'm hoping is gonna be in production this year. And so I've kept myself busy. For me the pandemic was interesting because while I didn't work in a writer's room, I guess it was all those years of being a freelance writer. I'm not uncomfortable at all with working out of my house and not having to see people outside of my family very much so I functioned just fine in that, under those conditions.

Well, to someone listening to this inspired by success that wants to start out in Hollywood, writing an episode of a show with a talking car that drives itself isn't as high concept now as it was then. My Tesla does that.

Listen now, the broad array of topics that a television show can exist in now is staggering. The kind of things that you could have never even dreamed of. You can now find a show that does it. So it has opened it up to the entire world. I mean, there aren't enough showrunners, obviously, just do the maths in your head. If there are these thousands of shows, somebody's running them and they obviously didn't run shows beforehand. They came out of someplace else. So you can actually break in unlike before where you had to kind of work your way up, almost apprentice to somebody else. Now you can enter from some other career. And it is kind of wide open, not that it's any easier to sell an idea, there's still gatekeepers. But there are certainly a lot more places to go to and a lot more platforms to get things on. I still think it's a business of relationships though. And it's very hard to not have an agent, you have to kind of have somebody representing your ideas that can get them in the door, and that takes relationships. And for every one of those relationships, there's some unique way that that happened. Whether it's meeting somebody, sitting at a bar or whether it's your cousin's husband, who's a lawyer for some entertainment firm. There's a million stories of how those relationships are formed. My guess is that there is still somewhat of a feeling of LA being the centre for a lot of it. And so for some people it's about moving here and just getting into the river. And when you do, you invariably start meeting people who work in that industry. And that's where those relationships come from. So I can have maybe more specific advice if somebody had a specific question, but in general it is a business of relationships. So you have to try and break into that glass box somehow.

Tim, it's obviously a business of talent as well, and you have it in spades. I've been a huge fan of almost everything you've ever written. And it was an absolute pleasure to meet you and thank you so much for your time.

Appreciate it.