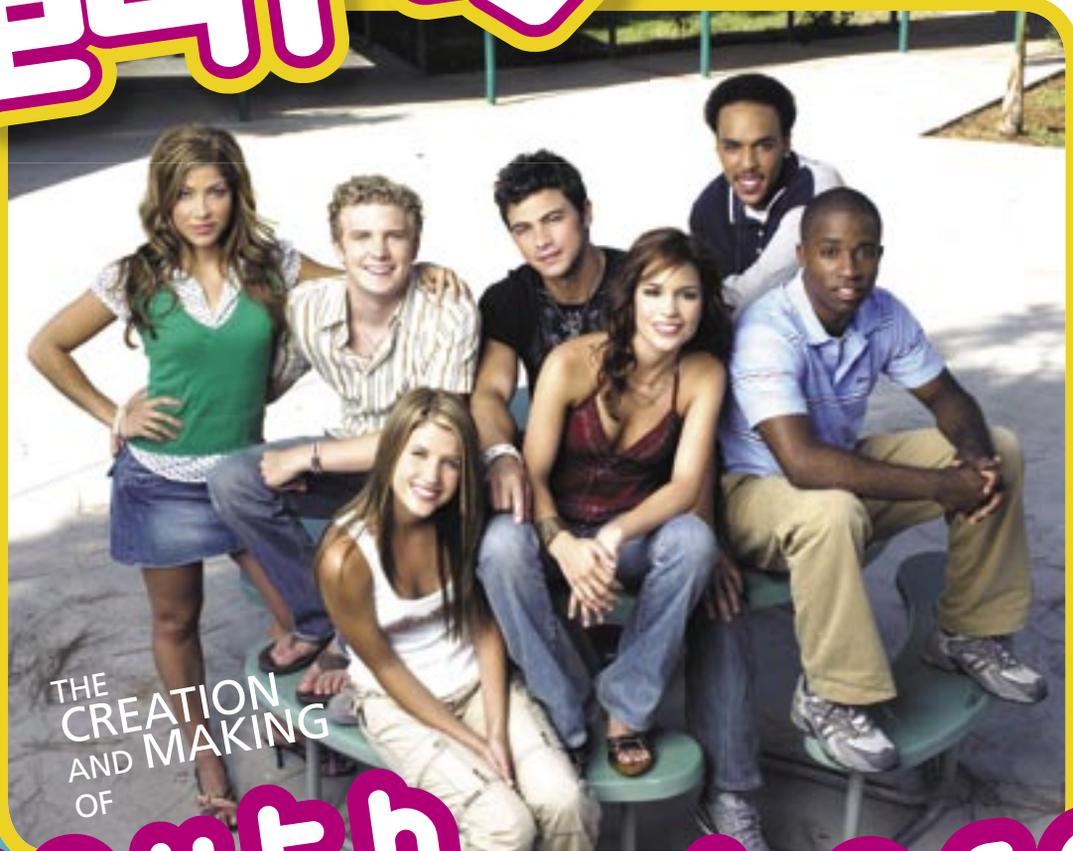


## teen tw



THE  
CREATION  
AND MAKING  
OF

## south OF nowhere

by Kate McCallum

Television has long provided a staple of content for the youth audience. There are cable networks dedicated to children's and teens' TV. Nickelodeon, The N, The Disney Channel, Discovery Kids, and more, all feature television that caters to the various niche youth audiences from pre-school to young adult. Work for writers in this field is plentiful and requires a passion for understanding specific age demographics.

The N, the nighttime network for teens, has ordered a second season of the original half-hour dramatic series, *South of Nowhere*, which debuted to widespread critical acclaim and viewer fascination last November.

*South of Nowhere*, which is both set and shot in Los Angeles, is created and executive produced by Tom Lynch (himself a Los Angeles native), a person who continues to revolutionize TV programming for teens with such contemporary fare as *Caitlin's Way*, *Romeo!* and *Scout's Safari*.

"I applaud The N for having the integrity to air this show," said Lynch. "The N really embodies authentic TV for teens—their issues and their angst, their language, their humor. That's certainly

what *South of Nowhere* is about, and I think that's why The N's viewers embraced this show with such fervor."

Tom Ascheim, general manager at The N, said, "Our teen audience immediately recognized *South of Nowhere* as an authentic, contemporary series that speaks to the real issues they face in their lives today. Season two will continue to deliver on that promise."

*South of Nowhere*, which was nominated for a GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding Drama Series, is a fictional story about a contemporary American family and their multi-faceted journey of self-discovery. The series chronicles the five members of the Carlin family as they try to define themselves and make sense of their lives while they undergo a huge transition—moving from a small town in Ohio to the big city of Los Angeles.

In the first season, the Carlins find they are unprepared for the fast-paced, metropolitan environment and the overcrowded, "anything goes" Los Angeles public school the family's three teenagers attend. The family is at the heart of the series; and while their characters are unique, they reflect many American families today—bound by their evolving identity and their close relationships.

Season two will continue to delve into the family and teen issues explored in the first season: self-discovery, sexual identity, racial identity, family, faith, parental expectations, and peer pressure, among others. The new episodes will continue to tell complex stories about real issues in real people's lives. Viewers will follow the Carlin family as they pick up the pieces of their lives while trying to keep their family together. Teens will see how identity can change within a family and how the family dynamic must change to accommodate it.

Lynch, founder and president of the Tom Lynch Company, began his career as a rock 'n' roll producer on Don Kirshner's *Rock Concert* and as creator/writer/producer of *Night Tracks*. With an extensive roster of television hits to his credit—*Caitlin's Way*, *Just Deal*, *Sk8*, *Galidor: Defenders of The*



PAGE 28: *South of Nowhere* cast (clockwise from top left): **Mandy Musgrave** as Ashley Davies, **Chris Hunter** as Glen Carlin, **Matt Cohen** as Aiden Dennison, **Austen Parros** as Sean Miller, **Danso Nyameche Gordon** as Clay Carlin, **Valery Ortiz** as Madison Duarte, and **Gabrielle Christian** as Spencer Carlin. ABOVE: Spencer and Clay play brother and sister on *South of Nowhere*. The show was nominated for a GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding Drama Series and airs at 9:00 p.m., Wednesdays on The N. PHOTOS: Chris Cuffaro/The N.

*Outer Dimension*, and the Emmy®-nominated *Scout's Safari*—Lynch recently returned to his musical roots with the hip-hop sitcom *Romeo!*, starring rap artist Master P and his real-life son Romeo, and an untitled André 3000 project, a Cartoon Network series which debuts this fall.

Lynch and the company that bears his name continue to create groundbreaking, uniquely fresh, innovative shows that resonate with audiences around the world by "illuminating the magic of the human experience"—celebrating all the drama, the humor, the kookiness, and reality of human beings' lives.

In the early 1980s, kids' programming was the bottom of the television barrel. But Lynch was one of the few visionary pioneers who saw the potential of this overlooked genre. He knew it was possible to create compelling programming for kids that could engage their minds, imaginations and energy.

In his first project, Lynch combined the best of his musical experience with his

unique ability to tap into kids' interests. *KIDS Incorporated*, the first variety show for youngsters, was born—and so were the successful new careers of Jennifer Love Hewitt, Stacy Ferguson (Fergie of The Black Eyed Peas) ... and Tom Lynch.

Soon Lynch was revolutionizing kids' programming, bringing it not just into the mainstream but making it the dynamic, highly competitive field it is today. Lynch has consistently broken new ground, beginning with his landmark show *The Secret World of Alex Mack*. The first show to reach the elusive (and now sought-after) "tween" market, *Alex Mack* was also the first to feature a strong female role model as its lead character. It was one of Nickelodeon's first breakout hits.

Lynch's vision has also assumed a global scale, as seen in his recent Discovery Kids on NBC series, *Scout's Safari*, which was set and filmed on location in South Africa. In addition, he recently returned from China where he served as an executive producer on



Creator/writer/director/producer **Tom Lynch** on the set. Lynch's recent projects include *The Secret World of Alex Mack*, *Caitlin's Way*, *Romeo!* and the Emmy-nominated *Scout's Safari*.

Nickelodeon's *Kids Choice Awards*. Lynch is also partnering with National Geographic Television & Film on an original, live-action comedy-adventure series.

Yet, no matter what the medium, the Tom Lynch Company is one of the few independent production companies still inspired and driven by the signature voice of its creator—who continues to lead the industry in new directions and take audiences places they've never been before.

**scr(i)pt:** *Where did the idea for South of Nowhere come from, Tom?*

**TOM LYNCH:** It came from a conversation I had with one of my best friends, who told me his son was gay. He asked his son, "How do you know you're gay?" The son responded, "How do you know you're straight?" When my friend told me this story, I knew there was a series in there about identity.

**scr(i)pt:** *How did you develop it?*

**TL:** I sat with the idea for a few days and spent a few weeks developing characters and writing out the pilot story. During this time, I did a lot of research—reading various publications about teens coming out, talking to counselors at high schools. I wanted to funnel this show through the grittiness of L.A. so I could interweave the culture of multiple races and socio-economic backgrounds within the story of sexual identity.

**scr(i)pt:** *Then what? To whom did you pitch it?*

**TL:** I had developed a few series with The N and, during a breakfast with creative executives Amy Friedman and Essie Chambers,

we talked about the show, which at that time I was calling *Out*.

**scr(i)pt:** *What happened next?*

**TL:** They were intrigued and gave me a script commitment to write the pilot.

**scr(i)pt:** *Where does your inspiration and insight come from to write these teens? Do you have children of your own?*

**TL:** I've got five kids, ages 18 to 23. I think my own dinner table serves as a writing room of its own. My kids and I are all very open ... or I should say as open as they want to be. I know their friends. I know their girlfriends. I know their girlfriends' families. So, as far as inspiration for the worlds I create, it directly descends from the world of my family. Most of the characters in my series have traits of real people who have crossed my life.

**scr(i)pt:** *How many writers are on your staff and what criteria do you use when hiring writers?*

**TL:** I keep pretty small staffs. Typically, I have a showrunner and two staff writers. I look for people who are not only passionate about writing, but also passionate about the content of the show I'm considering them for. They have to understand the voice of the series and be able to bring it to the page. I prefer reading original samples to specs of existing shows. I like to spend an hour or so with potential writers, vibing with them about their own lives, their own passions, their own fears. We have to be simpatico; there has to be an openness, a sense of self and a sense of humor about that. I also like to work with freelancers so that fresh voices are always coming into the show.

**scr(i)pt:** *What advice might you give writers wanting to break into this area of the business?*

**TL:** Go to law school. Kidding. If you want to write, write. Too often, young writers talk about writing instead of actually writing. Go to seminars. Read books—not just "how to write for TV" books, but literature. That's the best way to learn about story and voice. As for the craft of writing, watch TV and analyze it. Read produced teleplays and figure out the structural formula of the show. Get out there. Meet everybody. Sleep less, work more.

**scr(i)pt:** *What does a typical week look like for a writer on your show?*

**TL:** Generally, we'll start each week breaking a story on the board. Writers pitch out their own story areas, and we all work to flesh them out and shape them so that there's an element of heart, muscle and surprise. I like writers to pitch out the first thing that comes to their mind—their "gut"—and then think about how to twist that up. Find the unexpected. Once we've broken a story, we all sleep on it, go back to the board the next day, and finesse it. Then it's off to the network. While we wait for their notes, the writers work on the next story. Then we get the network's notes and discuss the ones we're going to take or not going to take. We do this with the network so that our writing staff and our execs work collaboratively. Then it's off to script. Rinse and repeat.

**scr(i)pt:** *You've got quite a lineup of new projects coming up as well. How do you juggle all the work, and can you talk a bit about your role in these projects?*

**TL:** I don't sleep much. I try to work very methodically. I spend the first hour of every day and the last hour of every day solely on the "business" side—i.e., running the company. Then I try to segment each day so I can devote a few hours to my current shows and about two hours working on new development. On weekends I work a lot on my own scripts. Not only do I create most of the series we produce, but I write on them episodically as well. I'm also working on a feature about a teenage boy who's on trial for murder when his stepfather goes missing. I love being an executive, and I love being a writer. Thankfully, I've somehow found a way to balance both.

**scr(i)pt:** *Do you direct as well?*

**TL:** I directed a lot in the past and put it aside for about 10 years. But I'm actually starting to direct again. I'll be directing an episode of *South* this season.

**scr(i)pt:** *Do you have any thoughts about the struggles teens face today and how watching television can help them with their own lives?*

**TL:** Teens struggle with things we all struggle with—self-love, self-loathing, grief, hope, loss and wonder. What's different today is that their world is moving faster than mine did, just as mine moved faster than my parents' did. Like anything, some TV is good and some is bad. Teens will watch things that reflect their lives. Hopefully, as writers

of shows we place value in that content. Things may not always be easy or hopeful or simple ... but, then again, that's the joy of life's journey.

**scr(i)pt:** *What kind of notes do you get from the network on your stories? How strict are the standards & practices for The N?*

**TL:** We don't generally get big story notes because we go back and forth with the network on the season arc until we're all happy with it. The notes we get typically deal with digging deeper into a scene or tracking minor continuity issues. But it always depends on the story or script. Sometimes we'll get a few sentences of notes, sometimes a few pages. As far as S&P—The N looks to portray real teens in real-life situations that are authentic to their audience. While they always act as a responsible broadcaster, they also recognize that they are not serving the audience by sugarcoating issues with unrealistic characters and expectations. Instead, they look to avoid glorifying harmful or dangerous behavior by representing complex situations in a complex manner—always respecting the intelligence of the audience.

**scr(i)pt:** *You've produced such diverse content for children/teen TV, both dramas and comedies. Could you categorize how you view the demographic breakdown of creating television for youth?*

**TL:** We typically create content for networks who aim for six to 12 or nine to 14. In the case of The N, the age is a little higher: The sweet spot is somewhere around 15 or 16. The older the demo, the more candid the content becomes. But coming-of-age stories are coming-of-age stories. Comedy or drama, for an eight-year-old or a 14-year-old, identity is the theme that always seems to permeate all my shows.

**scr(i)pt:** *What kind of budget do you work with in this format?*

**TL:** Our budgets range from show to show and from network to network.

**scr(i)pt:** *How much rewriting do you typically do per episode after you've issued your shooting scripts?*

**TL:** Our shooting scripts are typically second drafts. At this point, we've received network notes and have had a tone meeting with the director to make initial changes. Then we table-read it and do another polish. Then

*“What’s different today is that their world is moving faster than mine did, just as mine moved faster than my parents’ did. Like anything, some TV is good and some is bad.”*

we polish one more time the night before production just to make any final dialogue or transition tweaks. But, we'll continue to revise scripts as we shoot them. You can always find one line that can be better.

The N, the nighttime network for teens, has become very popular with viewers too old for Nickelodeon and too young for MTV. Although The N—the alternate identity of the Noggin pre-school channel—is only shown to 48 million homes, its ratings jumped 35 percent among teenagers from 2004 to 2005 and, in addition

to the popularity of *South of Nowhere*, its other highly popular series, *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, is regularly the top show among teens in its time period. The N is a programming arm of MTV Networks and is currently available via cable, digital cable and satellite television. The N's mission is to be the authentic voice for teens and help them figure out their lives with relevant, topical programming on-air and online at the network's web site: The-n.com. The N airs every day from 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. (EST). **(i)**

**KATE McCALLUM** is an independent producer/writer/consultant based in Los Angeles. She specializes in transmedia property development through Bridge Arts Media (Bridgeartsmedia.com), and she is currently consulting for The Harmony Channel, a new television channel scheduled to launch on Comcast in May. Additionally, she co-founded c3, The Center for Conscious Creativity (Consciouscreativity.org), whose mission is to explore the power of art and media's effect on society and culture.

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