

THE GREAT IDEA



H
B
O
O
S



by Kate McCallum



PHOTOS: Doug Hyun/HBO

CARNIVALE

This issue's "Great Idea" moves from the big screen to the small screen. In the world of an ever-expanding television marketplace, selling a one-hour drama is one of the most competitive challenges in the business. Creator/executive producer/writer and now head writer, Daniel Knauf took time out of his busy schedule to share some of the mystery behind his wildly and wonderfully eccentric HBO prime time series *Carnivale*. Bolstered by ingenuity, creativity and passion, Knauf launched this remarkable series last year, completed 13 episodes and is now readying for season two.

Knauf is a native son of Los Angeles. He attended a number of Southern California colleges—studying fine art, and later, creative writing with an emphasis on poetry—graduating in 1982 with a bachelor's degree in English from California State University, Los Angeles. He then entered the business world as an employee benefits consultant. After establishing himself financially and assuring the support of his young family, Knauf returned to creative writing as an avocation, eventually directing his efforts toward screenwriting. In 1994, HBO produced his screenplay, *Canaan's Way*, starring Armand Assante as a blind gunfighter. Knauf subsequently developed a number of feature projects at various studios, most of which were eventually shelved as "too damn weird."

In 2001, Knauf turned his efforts to television, developing and writing several series pilots including *Carnivale*, which was based upon one of his earlier feature screenplays.

scr(i)pt: *Carnivale is one of the most unique one-hour series airing on television. From where did the idea come?*

DANIEL KNAUF: Conceptually, the show is so complex. You don't have an idea like this just full-blown. You don't wake up one morning and say, "My God, we're going to do this huge epic story that's using Milton's *Paradise Lost* as a template set in the 30s about a carnival." There's a word for people that have ideas like that—"lunatic." It came to me in little bits over many years ... maybe a decade. The first bit was that I knew I wanted to do a big story. I had done many smaller stories in 120-page screenplays. When I was growing up, I loved *The Lord of the Rings*. I loved epic fantasy—and into college Dickens and *Huckleberry Finn*, which is definitely a hero's journey. I knew I wanted to do something like that someday, but I didn't know if I had a story. I had to take something logical and figure out the topography and geography, then build the whole world. That was an interesting challenge to me as well as the world of the carnival.

The carnival is sort of an American experience, but it's suspicious because it is also European, foreign—a universal experience. What race, color or creed you are doesn't matter, everyone has been to a carnival at one point in their lives. The weird thing is you have different experiences at the carnival depending upon your age. When

you're five or six, it's one kind of experience. Then you go as a teen, and suddenly it's charged with sexuality; it's exciting and anything can happen. Then you go as an adult, and the carnival a different experience. It's a world that just hasn't been written about that much in the way of literature or film—kind of virgin territory. As a writer, when you find something with universality about it that hasn't been exploited yet, it's like finding a hundred-dollar bill on the sidewalk.

I knew I wanted to do a carnival story about good versus evil. In the series, the carnival is on the side of good. It's the way the world should be. But there's a balance because both good and evil people exist in the world. The other thing that intrigued me was that the carnival is a genuine subculture. The guy who loads you into the Rocko Plane or the Tilt-O-Whirl doesn't clock out at night to go home ... he crawls under a truck and goes to sleep. These people travel with the show, so their world is an invisible world. The idea of a group of people moving through towns and setting this carnival up and taking it down and moving on to the next town was so romantic, strange and dangerous. The final component of the concept was the 30s. When the idea first came to me, I was thinking of a post-apocalyptic carnival. The world's been devastated by plagues or nukes, and here's this little carnival. That may have been interesting, but then I decided I didn't want to do that because it's almost like a subgenre—the whole post-apocalyptic thing. Yet I knew I didn't want to do it contemporary.

scr(i)pt: *Why not contemporary?*

DK: I wanted to do something with the aspect of more long ago and far away. I think [the show] would have lost a certain amount of its mystique if it were [set in the present]. I wanted to give it that luster of romanticism that looking back gives. [The script] was either going to be a science-fiction piece or a period piece. I chose the 30s because I'm creating a new mythology, and that's virgin territory in a way.

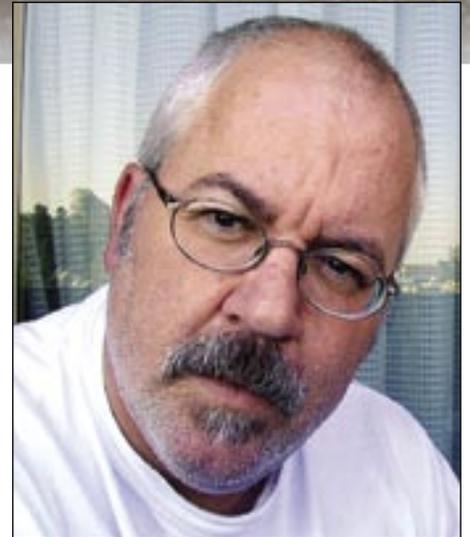
There was a lot of great contemporary work done in the 30s. You could argue that some of the greatest American authors were at their peak during that period, but there's not much

in the way of looking back and writing fiction set in the 30s. The West has been completely exploited as a mythology; and since this is a young country, we don't have a lot of history to exploit. Tolkien had Europe, so he had thousands of years he could go back in which to create story. The 30s were ripe to take true historical events as our signposts but then run between the raindrops. You think you know why this country ended up joining the Allies instead of the Axis powers, but you don't really know. You think you know why we had a depression, the Dust Bowl, why these terrible things happened; but you've been told a rationalization.

The show's conceit is Satan was here ... the devil was here. The 30s were the critical period for the survival of America as we know it. Nobody realizes just how dicey things really were then. You had a vast percentage of Americans out of work; and, politically, there was a lot riding on ideology—a pivotal point: good versus evil.

scr(i)pt: *You touch on several mythic elements in this series. What do you draw upon for your themes?*

DK: A lot of things, but obviously the Bible as a source of inspiration—certain aspects of *Paradise Lost*, which is sort of the template for what we're doing—the duality of God and Satan—the idea of good not being able to exist without evil and vice versa. All those things fall into [the show] thematically: the idea that flawed people can be remarkably heroic, the themes of being consumed—waking up one morning and finding out that you have this destiny, like Harry Potter realizing he truly is to become a very powerful wizard—or, like finding out you were adopted but then discovering that your birth parents were really the King and Queen of England. That fantasy of saying “I'm something other than what I am” is something we explore with both, Brother Justin and Ben. I've seen the reluctant messiah played out, but I thought, “What about the reluctant antichrist?” The guy that finds out he's the bringer of destruction; but if he's half human, he has freewill. He has a predilection toward evil, but what if he doesn't want to play ball? Those things are totally fascinating to me.



PAGE 32 (Left): **Adrienne Barbeau** and **Nick Stahl** star in HBO's *Carnivale* (Middle): **Clancy Brown** and **Amy Madigan** star in *Carnivale* (Right): **Cynthia Ettinger** and **John Fleck** ABOVE: *Carnivale* creator/executive producer/head writer **Daniel Knauft**

[I also explored] the idea of being different and of people who are regarded as freaks. I loved Todd Browning's movie *Freaks*. I grew up in a household where my father was post-polio and confined to a wheelchair, so it was a very different situation in my house. People would say “Your father is a saint,” but they didn't see my father. They would just see a wheelchair. They didn't know the man. You can meet the most incredible-looking different people; and if you spend 10 minutes with them, you won't notice the differences anymore. We did the story with the Lobster Girl and flew her out from Florida to do a cameo on one of our episodes. Five seconds in she's just this delightful person; and her differences are not even relevant, and that's always fascinated me. All these things just go into a big soup.

scr(i)pt: *Is there something in particular that you are trying to provoke from your audience?*

DK: I don't think that way. I just think about what I respond to personally, what's going to interest me. I don't think there's such a thing as “them” because “they” are us, and nobody knows what “they're” going to think. The only person you know is yourself. I don't watch most network TV because how beautiful all the people are throws me off. If you go into a room of 100 people, there might be one person out of that 100 that's

as attractive as one of the network stars. That's putting them in the "freak" category. Someone who looks as good as Jennifer Aniston is as rare as somebody who has two heads, and yet we're presented with that as if it were the norm.

In British TV, they don't do that. They cast actors that look like people you know. That's one of the things I'm really happy about with HBO: They let us cast the kinds of faces you'd never see on network TV. You look at somebody who's as unusual looking as Clea—she's so striking—and then you look at somebody like Tim DeKay, whom we cast as Jones. I told our casting director all I wanted was to see somebody who looked as if he played baseball. Who would think? We're presenting this guy as a sexy character, a very traditional leading man.

When we were casting the Cooch girls, I said, "I don't want to see any silicon, and I don't want to see any hard bodies." We need to see people who look period correct, so we brought them in and cast them. We have somebody like Amanda who plays Dora Mae—she's a big girl, yet you get her on that stage, and she's doing her thing. You'll never see that on network TV, and you won't even see that in movies. It's ridiculous to me.

scr(i)pt: *How important was Arthur Waite's Tarot in inspiring your stories/concepts since it plays such a prominent part in the opening credits and in Sophie's role as a card reader?*

DK: Not much, but as far as a structural device, a framing device and a very filmic visual thing that we could say, "Ah ... this is moving into this story." Here's the "tower." Here are the "lovers." It was a very, very good device. Next season we're introducing a new card that doesn't exist in any tarot. It's called the "Usher." We'll find out what that is.

scr(i)pt: *What content and materials did you prepare in order to sell the concept?*

DK: What happened was very weird. I was your typical screenwriter, but I also had my own consulting business. I had a family, and I liked to pay the mortgage; so even when I had a script sale, I kept the business—thank God! A writer has dry spells; and I had gone through an extended period where I was writing, but nobody was buying. I was doing spec scripts, which are very difficult to sell these days. Television was something I hadn't even thought about. I went to a WGA retreat and talked to some TV writers. They were telling me about writing for TV, and it

sounded very appealing because the writer is the king in TV, versus the director. At the time I was about 40. I thought, "What the hell, maybe I'll do a spec script."

Originally, I tried to do *Carnivale* as a screenplay, but it was too big. I got to page 180, and I wasn't even done with Act Two yet. It wasn't even really that good because I was trying to compress everything. So I decided to take the first act and write it as a TV pilot and make it a series. When I finished, I didn't know what to do with it because I didn't have any TV credits, I didn't know anyone in the TV business and I didn't have any awards as a screenwriter. I thought, "How dumb am I? I shouldn't have even bothered with this," so I put it away. I put it in a drawer because there was nothing I could do with it. I showed it to a TV writer, and he thought it was beautifully structured but told me that nobody was going to do it.

After a few more years, I fired my agent because I wasn't going anywhere; and I was getting past 40. I decided I'd make one big, last run at it, then call it quits and start writing prose—novels. I created a web site, and this was back before anyone was doing that. Now everyone's doing it. I had programming experience and was an art major in college, so I put up a web site, which was basically an online resumé; and then it became a sort of a blog. I put all the first acts of my screenplays on it. The site was up for a few years when I got a call from my manager who had gotten a call from a development executive with Scott Winant. He had seen my pilot online and wanted to read it. They had no idea who I was because they had found me on the Net, so they were a little scared. We got them the script. They gave me notes, and I delivered them two days later. I delivered it quickly because I wanted to look good. They were really excited, and they asked me if I had a "bible." Of course I had a Bible [laughs], and would a Koran help, too?

The truth is—I didn't even know what a [show] bible was. They explained it to me, and I started to write this document; but I found it impossible to read and felt that it didn't really express what I was trying to do with the show. Once again, since I had an art background, I decided to approach this as if I were a professor and I was doing research on something that really happened—that these people had really existed. The professor was a very dry, persnickety and skeptical man; and any time magic came in, he would say, "Somebody says this is what happened, but

obviously it couldn't happen that way ..." I created faux newspaper articles—interviews. I had an interview with Samson that was done in 1975 where he's this crotchety, 85-year-old man with a 46-year-old girlfriend who's sort of trailer trash who says, "You can't smoke! No, you can't have one of my cigarettes!" On Brother Justin's side, I had mock-up religious tracts and pictures of his Temple of Canaan. I included the more traditional character bios, too; but I wrote them as the college professor, "Allegedly he was this ..." "Very little was known about him before this period ..." It became an entertaining and visually interesting document to read—enough to keep me interested while I was writing it.

scr(i)pt: *You mentioned tone.*

DK: You didn't have to say, "Here's the tone of the show," since you could get it by reading and seeing the bible. Having the bizarre religious tracts, newspaper articles, photographs, police reports and all these things, helped you fall into the times and see what I was playing with, as far as dancing around historical facts. I would quote famous people like Eleanor Roosevelt talking about how appalling the architecture of Brother Justin's temple was: "It looked like a headless jackal." That's what we turned in to HBO.

scr(i)pt: *Who is "we"?*

DK: Scott and Howard Klein, who by then were very much involved. Howard is the executive producer on the show and one of the partners of 3 Arts. Scott introduced me to Howard, and the three of us developed [the series] with HBO in mind. We weren't going to do this show with anybody else. It just wasn't going to happen. There was only one place we were going to go with it, and they responded. Take into mind how challenging the material is to begin with, how different it is, that it's an incredibly expensive show to mount, that it's a period piece with special effects—I mean, all we need are dogs and children [laughs]. We knew there was really only one outlet for this.

scr(i)pt: *To whom did you pitch at HBO?*

DK: First, we submitted the bible without the pilot script, and that spoke for itself. Then we met with HBO executives Chris Albrecht and Carolyn Strauss. They responded very positively to it although they didn't quite know what we were trying to do; but they were interested enough to pony up for a pilot. I basically gave them an outline.

They came back with notes on the outline, and then I did a revision on the pilot script that reflected their sensibilities. Carolyn was incredibly passionate about the material. Everybody thinks that if they do *JAG* with boobs or *Law & Order* with prostitutes, then it's HBO; it just has to be edgy to be an HBO show. That's not true. HBO is all about doing stories that nobody else would do in a million years. If you've got a show that is so different on a conceptual level that no one else would touch it, then HBO's a great place to take it. Once we did the pilot script, they decided to greenlight it. We did this wonderful pilot that Rodrigo Garcia directed. After that, and a lot of trepidation, they greenlit us for a series.

scr(i)pt: *Did they put you on as showrunner?*

DK: No, and it was funny. They were kind of dancing around telling me they weren't going to let me showrun, so I almost had to say, "You're not going to let me showrun because I don't know how to do that." They proceeded to look for showrunners, and they had some pretty amazing candidates based upon this material. They did want to keep me involved because the concept was so unique.

scr(i)pt: *Who was your showrunner?*

DK: Ron Moore. We worked together. He did a splendid job on an amazingly difficult first year. Any show is hard the first year but especially something like this. Outdoor days will kill you. Costuming, cars, not a lot of standing sets ...

scr(i)pt: *You just got picked up for season two?*

DK: Thirteen more, and it's not an easy pick up. Their courage is amazing over there because it's a very weird show. I'm not David Milch, Alan Ball or someone who comes from the feature world with an Oscar® tucked under my arm. I was really untested talent. I had a brief period where I did a TV series for CBS but only while I was waiting for the greenlight on the pilot for this. My agent said, "Maybe you should be on staff to see what it was like." I agreed because I had virtually no television experience.

scr(i)pt: *And this season you'll be taking Ron's place?*

DK: Yes. Last season Ron had *Battlestar Galactica* developing in the background; so once he left, HBO decided I was ready to move into the head writer's slot. I'm working with Howard Klein as far as running the

show, and I've got a very capable production staff there. If I make a mistake, they'll catch me. You learn a lot very quickly.

scr(i)pt: *How do you staff your writers?*

DK: HBO is very specific about with whom they want to work. There are certain writers who have their respect and confidence. Given my experience coming in, they really wanted to bring in some high-level staff. Normally on staff you'll have one or two old hands, a couple medium-level and story-editor types. On our show, every single person was showrunner level. I was new to TV; and I didn't know a lot of TV writers, so I would weigh in with comments. HBO had a lot to do with staffing of the show, but they never forced anybody on me. I relied heavily on them for staffing.

scr(i)pt: *One of my favorite conceptual ideas from the show is from a line in Samson's opening monologue in the pilot where he says, "... we've given up wonder for reason." What does that mean to you?*

DK: It means that the more we explain, the less mystery there is. As a species we want to open everything up and figure out how it works. We have natural curiosity. It's who we are. Once we figure it all out, we have a sense of sadness and loss. A four-year-old is going to ask, "Why is the sky blue, Dad?" If you say, "Well, there is this gas in the stratosphere that filters out the red and yellow so it's basically not blue. It's an illusion," versus, "Because that's the color of an angel's eye," that's [giving up] wonder for reason.

scr(i)pt: *And that's what you work to reveal in the series?*

DK: What I tell people is that this is the story of the end of the last great age of magic. After that era we lost our innocence once we harnessed the power of the sun—the detonation of the atomic bomb—because that was God-like power. That event marked the end of man as a child. That's when man entered his adulthood. Once we did that, God and Satan just gave us the car keys and said, "You're on your own now." (i)

KATE McCALLUM is a Los Angeles-based independent writer/producer/consultant currently working with writer/producer Michael Chernuchin in development at Universal. She has recently completed her M.A. in Consciousness Studies and is especially interested in media, the arts and story and their effect on culture and society. Contact her at Lifeonthedrawingboard.com