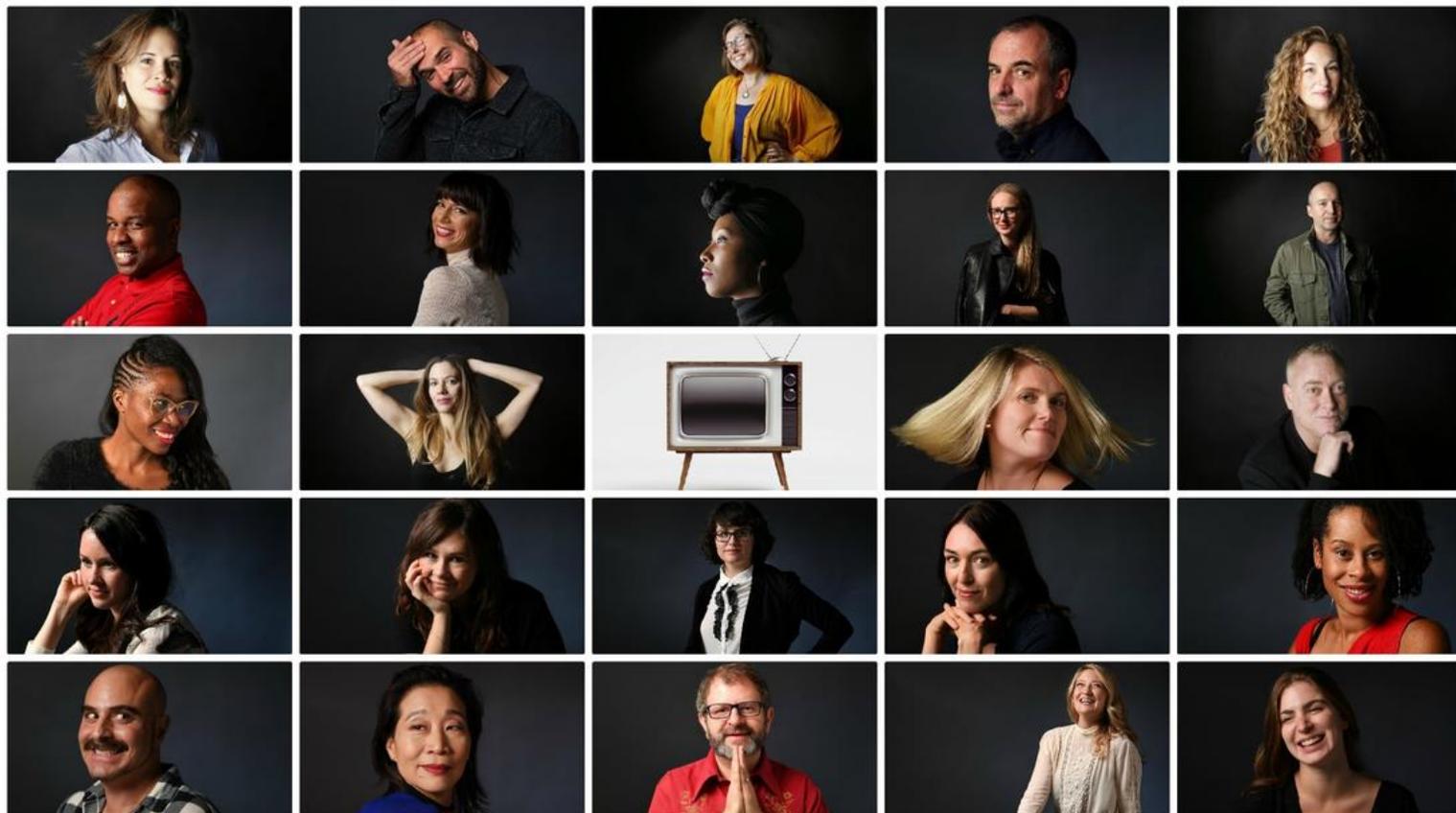


# The peak TV era has sparked a new love affair between playwrights and the small screen



Portraits of 24 playwrights finding success in television, and retro TV with clipping path (center). (Christina House / Los Angeles Times / Getty Images / iStockphoto)



By **Jessica Gelt**

NOVEMBER 17, 2017, 8:05 AM

**“S**hameless” writer Molly Smith Metzler calls theater her “secret lover.”  
“I always want to be with her the most,” she says, “and when I’m doing anything else, I’m thinking about her.”

In this era of so-called peak TV, the demand for strong storytellers on the small screen has sparked a new

love affair: Television adores playwrights, and the feeling is mutual. In unprecedented numbers, playwrights are essentially answering an industry personal ad that might as well read: Seeking skilled writers with a keen grasp of character development, nuanced dialogue, narrative structure and emotional realism. You love Ibsen, Camus, Alan Ball and Mary Tyler Moore. Ribald humor and existential angst a plus.

In years past, this relationship was an illicit tryst, a badge of shame. Today, it is an artistic triumph. Many writers head to theater school with dramatic polygamy in mind, and those already established in theater actively pursue meetings with TV executives.

“

**I love writing for TV, but when I go to bed and dream, I dream about the play I'm working on.**

— Marcus Gardley

Showrunners in turn are eager to recruit playwrights, and it's now common practice for them to read plays in addition to the spec scripts that aspiring television writers crank out upon graduation.

“I've pretty much only gotten TV work off of plays and not off TV samples,” says Bekah Brunstetter, who writes for “This Is Us” on NBC and “American Gods” on Starz, and whose premiere of “[The Cake](#)” at Echo Theater Company in L.A. was a hit with critics and audiences this summer. “People find it refreshing to read plays.”

When The Times cast a net for playwrights working in television, a list of a dozen names quickly grew to more than 50.

**[See the most-read stories in Entertainment this hour »](#)**

Playwright Halley Feiffer got one of her first TV writing jobs on an as-of-yet unreleased show co-created by filmmaker Alejandro G. Iñárritu called “The One Percent” after one of the show's other creators found a 10-minute play she had written on the bar at a theater festival.

“I interviewed and got the job, and I was like, ‘This is the best job ever, because I get to be creative and I'm not alone in my pajamas,’” Feiffer says of her introduction to a TV writers room. Since then, every room she has been a part of has had a playwright or four in it.

“We understand each other's sensibility in a special way, because it takes a certain kind of wounded soul to

gravitate to a business that will pay you \$5,000 for six months of work,” says Feiffer, who is writing for the upcoming Showtimes series “Kidding” starring [Jim Carrey](#), and who recently wrapped a Geffen Playhouse run of her “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Gynecologic Oncology Unit at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center of New York City.”

After a scary year of paying for his baby’s vaccinations out of pocket, playwright and “Mad Men” writer Jason Grote got past the trope that writing for television was more like carpentry than art.

“As a writer with a family, it’s nice to be in a position to turn down work that isn’t artistically fulfilling,” he says. “Now, everybody aspires to have a play at Playwrights Horizons while a show they created airs on cable TV.”

Television has provided unprecedented financial security to a whole class of scribes accustomed to subsisting on, as Feiffer describes it, “one bowl of gluten-free corn flakes a day.” Or as playwright and “Shameless” writer Sheila Callaghan reacted to a TV-sized paycheck: “What? I can get dessert *and* a glass of wine?”

The result of this happy marriage of mediums, say those on the inside, is not a tragic brain drain in theater, but the opposite. With padded pockets and adequate health insurance, playwrights are now able to write the plays they want to write rather than the ones they *need* to write.

“I think the ironic thing is that TV is freeing writers up to actually take more risk and push the form a bit,” says playwright and “Mindhunter” writer Marcus Gardley. “I originally wanted to write for TV in order to pay rent and buy some nice things — and by nice things, I mean a car— and what I’ve learned is that I’m writing less plays, but the plays I am writing go to a deeper place. TV turned out to be a gift.”

Playwrights can’t quit their initial calling, Metzler says. Rather, they feel compelled to succeed in both theater and television in ways that enrich each in equal measure. Love is an oft-used metaphor when discussing the parallel callings.

“Nothing replaces theater in my life,” says “Shameless” writer Dominique Morisseau, fresh off a plane from Berkeley, where her musical “Ain’t Too Proud — The Life and Times of the Temptations” was playing. “But with TV, it just turns into two different kinds of lovers that have different skill sets, and as long as they all get along, we’re cool.”

Or, as Gardley, who is also an ensemble playwright at Victory Gardens Theater in Chicago, says: “I love writing for TV, but when I go to bed and dream, I dream about the play I’m working on.”

Literary manager Dan Halsted has seen the trend explode. His company Management became a go-to firm for playwrights interested in television after he started signing them 13 years ago. His clients include Callaghan as well as Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Lynn Nottage, who was a producer and part of the writing staff for Spike Lee's new Netflix series, "She's Gotta Have It"; and Tarell Alvin McCraney, who co-wrote the Oscar-winning film "Moonlight" and recently sold a coming-of-age drama to the Oprah Winfrey Network.

"The TV boom has made such a huge difference in these people's lives," Halsted says, recalling how one client transitioned from a cramped studio in New York to a sprawling Silver Lake home. "There's something about a playwright who has struggled and suffered and has a mortgage and a kid — it's a great motivator."

Where a playwright's salary can be negligible, TV writers with the Writers Guild of America can make \$6,800 to \$7,200 per week.

Callaghan remembers fearing her good luck wouldn't last after "United States of Tara" showrunner Jill Soloway emailed her out of the blue, thanks to the strength of a play titled "That Pretty Pretty; or, the Rape Play" that Soloway stumbled across.

"In the beginning, I was taking anything that anybody offered me because I was so afraid it was all gonna go away. It seemed impossible that I was going to be allowed to do this, because it was fun and challenging and artistically satisfying," Callaghan recalls. "In those days, I would sleep at the office, since I still had a small window where my [infant] son would not remember me being away."

“

**People have a hunger for adult complexity — for really rich, deep, complex stories — and at the moment, television seems to be where they are being told.**

— Moira Buffini

Last year, Callaghan had two plays open in L.A. — "Women Laughing Alone With Salad" at the Kirk Douglas Theatre and "Bed" at the Echo — while she was writing for "Shameless." But she hasn't forgotten her difficult path forward.

Struggle, the kind that almost every playwright can relate to, is at the core of plenty of successful TV shows.

That's why, many say, playwrights tend to make great fits for modern writers rooms where antiheroes are celebrated and richly detailed, character-driven, dialogue-heavy scripts reign.

"Theater, by historically being an art form for the dispossessed, was traditionally a place of experimentation," says playwright and seasoned TV writer Craig Wright, who got his start on the HBO drama "Six Feet Under." "Now, the widening of the TV marketplace is such that experimentation is required to stay vivid and present in the mind of consumers."

The result, he adds, is that the experimental aesthetics of theater have started to seep to the forefront of television. That's why niche shows like Amazon's "Transparent" or USA's "Mr. Robot" can enjoy multiple seasons and critical praise, says John Wells, an executive producer and showrunner whose series have included "ER," "The West Wing," "Southland" and "Shameless."

Wells, like "Transparent" creator Soloway and "Orange Is the New Black" creator Jenji Kohan, is part of a growing consortium of showrunners who love hiring playwrights.

In the early aughts, there were an estimated 182 scripted original series on the air. Now, there are more than 450 — in other words, something for everyone. Producers no longer need 40 million people to watch a show at once to signal success, so they can explore the kinds of unique themes and ideas that playwrights excel at bringing to life.

"The quality of writing on TV in general over the last 15 to 20 years has increased," Wells says. "When we were doing 'ER' in the early years, I couldn't convince playwrights to come onboard ... TV was thought of as a bit of a wasteland."

Today, the opposite is true, says playwright and "Harlots" co-creator Moira Buffini.

"People have a hunger for adult complexity — for really rich, deep, complex stories — and at the moment, television seems to be where they are being told," she says by phone from the set of her Hulu show just north of London.

The key difference between writing a play and writing a TV show, Buffini says, is scope. A play needs to be distilled into two hours, give or take, while a TV show can stretch for dozens of hours.

"The two forms that have the most in common are television and the novel," she adds. "Television gives playwrights an opportunity to write their novel without ever having to go near prose."

Sometimes it also gives them an opportunity to place theater front and center, say "Glow" co-creators and

playwrights Liz Flahive and Carly Mensch of their Netflix series about female wrestlers in the 1980s.

“We don’t have to leave theater behind, because the ring is such a theatrical place,” says Flahive, whose first play, “From Up Here,” was nominated for Drama Desk and Outer Critics Circle awards before she got her TV break writing for Showtime’s “Nurse Jackie,” which Mensch also wrote for. “There’s a stage in the middle of our set, and how we use that changes as what we decide to do narratively changes.”

Becoming a showrunner is the Holy Grail, because it affords a control similar to what playwrights experience in theater. When showrunners write, they find that they are once again driving the show’s vision.

They can also make all their own hiring decisions.

“You can’t underestimate the inside baseball of friends hiring friends,” literary manager Halsted says. “The starving playwright is making seven figures and remembering their starving playwright friends.”

Or, as Mensch says of stocking the “Glow” writers room with playwrights: “It’s almost like a bad habit. We’re like theater junkies: ‘Another one?’”

[jessica.gelt@latimes.com](mailto:jessica.gelt@latimes.com)

[@jessicagelt](#)

**Our latest arts stories are always at [latimes.com](http://latimes.com).**

**MORE THEATER:**

**[A royal winner in 'King Charles III'](#)**

**[Fluffy, fizzy, frolicsome and 'Something Rotten!'](#)**

**[Getting 'Caught' in a Rubik's Cube of reality](#)**

Copyright © 2017, Los Angeles Times

**This article is related to:** [Jim Carrey, Writers Guild of America](#)