

'Legacy' creator reveals price for TV's top job

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From Correspondent Michael Okwu

HOLLYWOOD (CNN)—There are plenty of people who would love to create their own television show, but few who really know what goes into the process. It's a job where personal problems, family and social life are checked at the door.

Just ask Chris Abbott. Ten months ago, she sat down to write herself a ticket on one of the most expensive rides Hollywood has to offer: the chance to create her own network drama. Armed with her pilot script, she was trying to land the title of creator and executive producer of a series she called "Legacy," the story of an Irish family in Kentucky after the Civil War.

Her script was one of roughly 300 to 400 commissioned by the networks this season. Out of that number, only 135 made it to the next stage—a pilot. "Legacy" was one of those, and is now showing on UPN.

The business of creating

Abbott's "Legacy" revolves around Ned Logan, a widower and prosperous horse breeder, with three sons and two daughters.

If it sounds like a tough sell to a fickle American audience, you should know that Abbott is no stranger to the business. "Little House on the Prairie" was her first staff writing job. She was hired by Michael Landon. She then went on to write over 150 scripts for all kinds of TV dramas. She's tried to create her own show four times before. "Legacy" is her fifth try.

She recalls what it was like to have her show finally picked by UPN. "I have never before been in an experience where you walk in the room, you pitch them the show, three months later, you see the show on the screen, and it's the show you've pitched in the room," she says.

But the responsibility that comes with writing and executive producing your own show doesn't always revolve around the creative aspects of the business. Abbott recently attended the annual UPN affiliates meeting, lobbying for her show—selling it, again. The support of the affiliates, those stations that carry UPN across the country, is critical for a new series. They determine how much promotion a show will get.

Actors get into the act, too, attending the annual press tour in Pasadena. Even before shooting started, publicity photos were taken—twice as many as normal—in the hope that the print press will snap them up and start the hype. About six weeks after the photo shoot, those images, blown up to 10 feet tall, began appearing on billboards across the country, plastered on walls, in

"TV Guide" ads. UPN calculates that by the time the series premieres, potential viewers will have been bombarded by over one billion messages, seducing them to watch "Legacy."

'My favorite part'

Abbott says after all the hype, she lives for the creative process. "Oh, it's great. That's my favorite part about writing," she says. "That's what I love more than anything. You sit in a chair, and in your mind, you think, grand estate on the river. And six weeks later, you're standing at a grand estate on the river—it's physical. It has come from the ether and it's now physical—incredible."

The production is a machine. Every seven working days a new script needs to start shooting. Chris constantly consults with the show's writers. Point by point, they go over plot and the characters that will go into the script.

"It's really the role of the daddy or mommy of the show," executive producer Barney Rosenzweig. "You are the one who everybody comes to with their problems, with their concerns. You are the one who has to answer all the questions." Rosenzweig says TV's most coveted creative position is stressful. "It is probably the best job in episodic television, but it is also a job that puts you at risk for things like family relationships, personal relationships, and your life," says Rosenzweig. "It is a very, very demanding mistress."

Abbott has left her husband and son behind in Los Angeles, some 2,600 miles away. It's a sacrifice she has thought about a lot. "They're coming out to visit me every two and a half weeks," she says. "That's as long as I can stand to be without them. My son is eight. I didn't want to, like, uproot him from school, take him out there. He has to meet all new friends, all new school. And he'll never see mommy anyway, because the first year of a series, I have to make that commitment to it. I have to and I want to make that commitment to my show."

'I love creating a universe'

Abbott works most weekends in her apartment in Richmond, writing scripts for the show. "I love creating a universe," she says. "I love being here in my universe." The kind of person it takes to perform this job -- obsessive and compulsive, Abbott says. "Which is what I am," she says. "In another society, I would be put away, but in this society, I get to make money."

But with the money comes added responsibility. Abbotts recalls a crisis at the beginning of the show -- she had creative differences with two of the show's writers. "We reached a point where I realized that this is my black Sunday, if you will," she says. "I had turned in a script for the very first episode, and UPN was very happy with it. And the other three scripts that we turned in from the other writers were, unfortunately, no where near the ballpark that we were hoping for." As executive producer, Abbott was responsible.

"I couldn't go in and say, 'Yes, well the boss doesn't like you, you have to go,'" she says. "I'm the boss, so it was a very painful, difficult time, and I had to go in, and sit down, and talk to them, and say, 'This isn't working.'"

But with the first set of writers gone, she was left without scripts, and that meant the entire production was at risk. "I ended up coming to Richmond and writing three scripts in two weeks," she says. "It's like undoable. But I was going to do it, because I don't know how to quit. I'm not going to quit. I've had to make some tough decisions. What it finally came down to is, I realized that I have to care more about the show, than I care about what people think about me. It's a very strange feeling to come to the place where all the things you used to think about other people, you know they're thinking about you."

With the experience, Abbott has some advice. She lists the personal characteristics needed for the job. "Flexibility, patience, courage, humor," she says.