

## True-crime TV rampant in Washington

By Roger Catlin, Published: August 15 Updated: Friday, August 16, 8:05 AM

Charlie Archambault FOR THE WASHINGTON POST Jillian Kalin looks at head shots while casting a show at the offices of Sirens Media in Silver Spring.

“Okay, now evil. Hold those eyes. Keep that evil face. Evil, evil, evil, evil and ... smile!”

The eyes narrow, brows converge, the mouth hardens, before a jarring, toothy grin breaks out. *Creepy*.

The director, Cara Walters, is eking all possible menace out of her actor in this Germantown house. Mark D. Dailey, a retired businessman, has come down from New Jersey to play polygamist pedophile Arvin Shreeve for an episode of “Who the (Bleep),” one of the true-crime shows multiplying like goose bumps on the Silver Spring-based Investigation Discovery channel. Dailey got the part because he looks like Shreeve, a self-proclaimed prophet convicted in 1991 in Utah.

Dailey has already been directed through seemingly benign wedding-day scenes, the gathering of bridesmaids in matching dresses on the porch, an indoor social scene, an unnerving touch on the arm to the young victim.

Now he’s channeling all his evil into this one close-up, a shot so in-your-face it might be of a villain from silent pictures, though Walters says she borrowed it from “[Dexter](#).”

“Okay, super evil, then creepy,” coaches Walters, coaxing the look that says, “I’m gonna kill you, and I’m gonna rape you.”

None of that particular violence will be seen when the episode airs Aug. 31. In most Investigation Discovery shows, the crime story is told largely by police, witnesses, family members and victims. The reenactors fill in the rest.

Dailey, who tried acting after he retired from the Social Security Administration, has found more work in Washington than in New York and New Jersey lately. And it comes not in soundstages, but in houses and offices volunteered for about as much (or as little) as the actors are paid: about \$150 a day. Production crews invade, rearrange furniture and install lighting. Smoke machines create that hazy, re-created-memory look.

A sheet provides the backdrop of this menacing close-up here in Gina Grinkemeyer’s family room. It’s the fourth time in seven months that the homemaker has let producers use her house. She herself has appeared in several true-crime shows. “I love the chaos,” says Grinkemeyer, who makes caramel corn for the crew. “I’m used to it. I have three boys.”

**View Photo Gallery:** Think it’s easy to play a dead body? Local actors can tell you, sometimes it’s murder.

**Crime may be down, but** true-crime reenactments are way up in the area. Investigation Discovery is churning out shows with titles such as “Cuff Me if You Can” and “Swamp Murders.” Sirens Media is the largest of a handful of area production companies that help illustrate the endless march of murder, molestation and mayhem that rivets a largely female daytime audience you may have thought was watching soaps.

The vast majority of faces in these homegrown shows are plucked from local stages or at auditions, or sought out because they look like the people whose stories they’re telling.

Just as every New York actor has a credit from one of the “Law & Order” shows — as a dead body or Prosecutor No. 2 — many local actors have credits for Sirens’ “Deadly Affairs,” “Nightmare Next Door,” “Who the (Bleep) Did I Marry” and offshoot “Who the (Bleep),” “Evil Twins” and spinoff “Evil Kin,” and the new “Southern Fried Homicide.”

Why, you are surely asking, has Washington — home to the august National Geographic and PBS channels — become a hub for blood?

Because of those networks, says Sirens co-founder Valerie Haselton. “When we came here, this was the place to be,” says Haselton, who moved from Los Angeles eight years ago. “This was where nonfiction programming was.”

Don’t forget that “America’s Most Wanted” was shot for years at the National Museum of Crime & Punishment in Chinatown.

“Every time I meet someone at a party, they’re like, ‘Oh, is there TV in D.C.? I didn’t know that,’ ” Haselton says. “They think we’re all politicians and lawyers. But there’s actually quite a bustling creative community.”

Investigation Discovery began life in 1996 as Discovery Civilization, an offshoot of the main Discovery channel. Struggling, Civilization was turned into a current-events collaboration with the New York Times called Discovery Times, which fizzled as well.

When Court TV became truTV in 2008, Discovery filled cable’s crime-story void with the renamed Investigation Discovery. In place of current affairs, suddenly, was “Deadly Affairs.”

Since then, the network has experienced double-digit increases in its age 25-to-54 female audience every night of the week every year, according to Nielsen. Available in 83 million homes, Investigation Discovery was watched by 52 million people in the first quarter this year.

Twice as many women as men watch. “They’re very interested in figuring out the crimes and trying to solve them,” Haselton says.

Sirens Media employs 200 full-time writers, producers, directors and editors. The company is behind a dozen shows on various channels, including “Strange Sex” on TLC, “Panic 9-1-1” on A&E and its marquee production for Bravo, “The Real Housewives of New Jersey.” But more than half of what Sirens produces are crime reenactments.

There’s hardly a day when a team isn’t out at one of a hundred locations they’ve scouted in the region re-creating crimes with nonunion actors. Cast members usually do their own makeup, bring their own wardrobe and even compile their own research on the real-life people they portray.

actors,” Haselton says. “And if they’re good actors, we use them over again. We have one guy who played a villain in one

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son Bradford, a.k.a. “Balloon Boy.”

**The effervescent Grinkemeyer began her** Sirens career last year at age 43 in “Who the (Bleep),” playing Mayumi Heene, mother of Colorado’s [“Balloon Boy.”](#) The country was captivated in terror one afternoon in 2009 because his parents said he was trapped in an escaped Mylar balloon. Turns out the 50-mile drama was a [hoax](#).

Grinkemeyer then played a 54-year-old crack addict named Vivian Irizarry in the first episode of “Evil Twins.” She was a bank teller on the first “Deadly Affairs” and was in two installments of “Nightmare Next Door,” one as a lead, another as a bar patron. She was a jogger in “Southern Fried Homicide” and posed with her family for the opening credits of “Evil Kin.”

Grinkemeyer caught the acting bug when she was asked to be an extra in 1993’s [“The Pelican Brief”](#) when it was being shot at Georgetown University Law Center, where she worked. Since then, Grinkemeyer has landed prized roles for local extras on the HBO movie [“Game Change,”](#) the HBO series [“Veep”](#) and Netflix’s [“House of Cards,”](#) and she’s like family with the Sirens crew.

“A lot of actors work multiple times for them because they can’t have enough actors. There are just so many roles to fill,” Grinkemeyer says. Proving it, she is hired that day to play a social worker on the “Who the (Bleep)” episode being shot at her house.

She’ll get \$75 for the day; leads get twice that. Days often go 12 hours, and there’s no overtime. It’s not always an easy job, even when you’re just lying on the floor playing a dead body.

“You try not to move. You gotta hold your breath,” Grinkemeyer says. “You wait until they start the camera. And it’s hard. It’s not so much the [not] breathing as the eyes. You think you can keep your eyes still, but if you have to and you’re thinking about it, it’s so hard.”

Katie Zitz, a 24-year-old Gaithersburg actress, had a bit of trouble when she played dead in “Southern Fried Homicide.”

“It was a really cold day,” she says. “I was lying there with my pant legs rolled up, and you could see goose bumps on me. Lying there was fine — I can lay there and be still. But apparently corpses don’t have goose bumps, so I had to sit there with a blanket and put a heat lamp on me, or they were rubbing my legs so they could get the shot.”

It’s a little creepy to appear dead, Grinkemeyer says, “but it kind of bothers me that it’s not as creepy as it should be. Because as you’re doing it, you kind of forget that these were real people that died in horrible ways.”

Sirens keeps that in mind, as well.

“We are so aware that it’s someone’s daughter, son or husband who has been murdered,” Haselton says. “We do not take this lightly.”

Crews are trained to be respectful and have testimonials to show for it. “They say: ‘You’re the nicest crew I worked with,’ or ‘This is the best representation of my daughter’s murder I’ve ever seen. I got real closure watching.’” Haselton says.

“We’re just really careful to walk that line so when the daughter dies and the mother watches the show, she’ll say, ‘Yes, that’s just how my daughter looked’ or ‘I love how they mention that she loved horses and butterflies, and they got that in there, because it’s important to me.’”

Once the show goes to the network, though, the promotions amp up the “guilty pleasure” aspect, starting with the giggle-inducing show titles. “Evil Kin”? “Southern Fried Homicide”?

“We do have title brainstormers,” says Pamela Deutsch, an Investigation Discovery executive producer. “They are sort of fun to sit through.”

But there was no way “Prison Wives” would be titled “Penal Attraction,” though some executives lobbied for it. “You know when you’ve crossed the line,” Deutsch says.

Charlie Archambault

FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Actors Ali Dash (seated) and Diana Abrecht shoot a scene in Discovery’s “Who the (Bleep) Did I Marry.”

**Peter Muggleworth, a former filmmaker,** musician and salesman in Ellicott City, started acting for Sirens last year, playing a murderer and kidnapper in “Nightmare Next Door.” There was a hitch.

“When we were shooting the scene where I march the neighbor out by the highway and execute him, we had to shoot along a real highway, as the guardrail was essential to the accuracy of the scene,” says Muggleworth, 35.

It was filmed at rush hour on Sykesville Road, so many drivers witnessed a man with a gun taking a hostage, though there was obviously a camera crew following them. And though police had been informed of their activity, the actors started hearing sirens.

“A fleet of police cars come flying down the road and peeled into the field where we were shooting,” Muggleworth says. “Apparently, they had received many phone calls from motorists who thought they had just witnessed a murder. Meanwhile, I’m standing in the field over the ‘dead’ body holding a prop .357 Magnum. I immediately threw the gun away and put my hands up.”

After hearing explanations, the police were even coaxed to be part of the scene.

“We got some good shots of them from their knees down walking around the corpse,” Muggleworth says.

Since then he has helped re-create a lot of nefarious behavior. “Last month, I had to murder a bunch of cats on ‘Evil Kin,’ and I had to bomb a ... clinic on ‘Evil Twins,’” he says.

When he was offered a lead role in one Sirens show, the contact made sure to ask: “There is one thing I need to clear with you and make sure you’re okay with it,” Muggleworth recounts. “[A producer] says, ‘In some of the scenes, you’re going to have to handle a live tarantula — but it’s trained.’”

“I can’t stand spiders,” says Muggleworth, now a full-time actor. “I don’t even like to look at them. And I am skeptical that one can reliably train an insect. But I wanted the gig, so I said yes. This tarantula had better be trained from Juilliard.”

Turned out the crew didn’t have a trained tarantula, he says. “So they purchased one at PetSmart the day before and gave one of the production assistants gardening gloves, and he got to be the ‘tarantula wrangler’ to get it into position. But I still had to catch it with a jar a few times and had to get pretty close to it for some of the shots.”

“Definitely one of my favorite acting gigs, though,” Muggleworth says. “It was like working on a horror movie.”

TRAVIS HEYING

AP

Convicted BTK killer Dennis Rader.

Chad Fleschner

CHAD FLESCHNER

Ken Giglio was hired to play the serial killer.

**The queen of local reenactments** may be Ali Dash, a 24-year-old mother from Pasadena, Md., who in the past year has been a lead in “Deadly Affairs” and “Who the (Bleep) Did I Marry” and was also in “Nightmare Next Door,” “Southern Fried Homicide” and “Evil Twins.”

Reenactment producers praise her ability to cry on demand, which she has to do today in a scene for “Who the (Bleep)” in which her character finally tells her mother — in a Frederick church room subbing for a school nurse’s office — that her stepdad has been molesting her for a decade.

Earlier in the day, at a home in Frederick, Dash had a creepier scene, in which her character enters her stepfather’s bedroom, which was so full of theatrical fog a fire alarm went off.

“When I do get killed,” Dash says, “it happens really quick. For most of it, though, it’s an already-dead-type thing.”

For Dash, the plentiful Sirens roles help fulfill a longtime dream to become a full-time actress, delayed when she married and started a family.

Others may not have thought about acting at all until they got a call.

Ken Giglio, a 50-year-old public relations worker from Silver Spring, has his picture on casting Web sites because he does voice-over work, but “Who the (Bleep)” called him for a lead role.

They didn’t tell him as what.

“I said, ‘You know I’m not an actor; I’m a voice-over guy.’ They said, ‘No, no, no, we know. Can you grow a goatee and come in and talk to us?’ and I said, ‘Yeah, sure.’ ”

He found out he had been hired to portray Dennis Lynn Rader, the serial killer who murdered 10 people in Wichita between 1974 and 2004 with his trademark procedure of “bind, torture, kill.”

“I thought, ‘Oh, my gosh, it’s the BTK killer! Oh, man, and I didn’t know what he looked like! I had no idea. I thought, ‘What have I gotten myself into?’ ”

But Giglio didn’t have to act out Rader’s twisted crimes.

As in many of the re-creations, the violence is more suggested than shown. “The creepy part is when they had me playing with tied-up Barbie dolls and looking at pictures of girls in bikinis and that sort of thing,” Giglio says. “That sort of freaked me out.”

When it was over in two days, he couldn’t shave that creepy goatee off quickly enough. Then about a month later the producers called and said, “We need to do one more day,” he says. “ ‘You have a week to grow it back,’ and so I did.”

The BTK episode was the premiere of “Who the (Bleep)” in February. Giglio had a viewing party for friends and family.

“People said, ‘You know, you are really scary.’ The odd thing for me is that I kept thinking: Come on, this isn’t a serial killer, this isn’t even an actor being a serial killer. This is just me pretending to be an actor pretending to be a serial killer.”

Illustration by Frank Stockton

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Human nature being what it is, it doesn’t look as if there will be a shortage of crime stories or shows to re-create them.

Investigation Discovery’s fall schedule will feature new shows “Beauty Queen Murders” and “Elder Skelter” (“Too old to enjoy their riches, too old to keep dry britches, but not too old to snuff out some b\*tches!” begins a press blurb). Add those to such returning favorites as “Wives With Knives,” “Deadly Sins” and “Dates From Hell.”

Sirens didn’t think it would have more than three true-crime stories tops for a series called “Evil Twins,” but it had 15. And spinoff “Evil Kin” offers even more twisted possibilities.

“It’s shocking,” Haselton says. “In the first episode we have a brother and sister who kill their mother because she won’t help them kill their grandparents. Then they kill their grandparents, and then they have a shag. You have patricide, matricide and incest all in one hour.”

Of Sirens’ nine shows in production for Discovery channels, all but one, the upcoming “When Ghosts Attack,” is for Investigation Discovery. The latter is for Discovery’s Destination America channel.

Can there possibly be enough reported ghost-attack stories to fill a season? “We’re doing three an episode,” Haselton says. “More ghosts push people down stairs than you have any idea. Apparently, it’s the most common way of being attacked by ghosts.”

All of it is done to fill the demand of insatiable audiences.

“We have such a unique viewing audience; they demand new all the time,” says Deutsch.

“It all seems kind of macabre,” she says. “But these are all just at heart, great stories about the human condition. That’s potentially why women love this genre so much. The psychology, the background stories, the relationships. I think that’s really the big hook.”

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