

FEATURE

A LITTLE HARD WORK

East Harbour Heroes (Attraction)

Hardworking Canadians are everywhere on our screens: unscripted series set in perilous environments, comedies about manual labourers, a dating show for farmers. What makes these shows so irresistible?



East Harbour Heroes

IN

our ever-more complicated, automated, outsourced, push-button world, Canadian audiences

can't get enough of shows featuring regular people who roll up their sleeves and get to work.

Blame an overly rich diet of prestige, high-concept TV. Blame the pandemic, which revealed to us the vulnerability of supply chains, and how little we know about how our system actually works. Blame anxiety around AI and our longing for a simpler time.

Whatever the cause, viewers are flocking to documentary series featuring risky, high-stakes work, like *Northern Air Rescue*, *East Harbour Heroes* and *Highway Thru Hell* (which has been renewed for a 15th season!). Scripted comedies about blue-collar workers—*The Trades* and *The Office Movers*—are gaining traction. And maybe you've heard of *Farming for Love*, a dating show for, yep, farmers.

Justin Stockman, VP of content development and programming at Bell Media certainly understands the appeal of these shows, once joking on a conference panel that if it has a truck, it'll find an audience. Bell Media is leaning into this with original series such as *The Trades*, *The Office Movers*, *Farming for Love* and *Highway Thru Hell*, among others. "The characters and real-life figures resonate with Canadian audiences, reflecting viewers' own experiences and making it easy to connect with the stories," he says. "Our focus remains on creating original content with humour and heart, content that allows Canadians to see themselves represented and fosters that important and valuable emotional connection."

Despite their differences in genre and tone, these workplace shows have at least two characteristics in common. One: they're undeniably authentic, firmly grounded in real life. Two: they have a great big heart.



"THE CHARACTERS AND REAL-LIFE FIGURES

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Farming for Love (Lark Productions, Fremantle)

"THESE ARE THE PEOPLE WHO BRING US OUR FOOD, OUR BEER, OUR BREAD"

Farming for Love is probably not the kind of show that springs to mind when you think of a romance reality series. There's no island. There are no crafty characters. According to producer Tex Antonucci, of BC's Lark Productions, the company's goal with the show was to solve a real problem: how can busy single farmers find love?

Farming for Love is based on the UK format *Farmer Wants a Wife*, which has laid the groundwork for over 200 marriages to date. Lark Productions was impressed by the success rate, which suggested the format cared about building lasting relationships, rather than simply entertainment. "We were excited to make a dating series rooted in authenticity and true, meaningful heart," says Antonucci.



Tex Antonucci

The timing of the show's release helped draw in audiences. The first season premiered on Crave near the end of COVID, when "we were all romanticizing the idea of leaving the city and living off the land," says Antonucci. *Farming for Love* certainly provides the visual fuel for such a fantasy. Antonucci calls the



show "a love letter to BC" and its diverse terrain, from desert habitats to lush rainforests.

But the show is just as interested in showing the diversity of Canada's agricultural industry. That diversity was illustrated in the farmers' race, sexual orientation, and the type of farming they do: dairy farming, agritourism, winemaking and more.

Says Antonucci, "I think and I hope we helped reframe perceptions of who our farmers are and what they do. At the end of the day, these are the people that bring us our food, our beer, our bread, all these things. It's cool to shine a light on that."

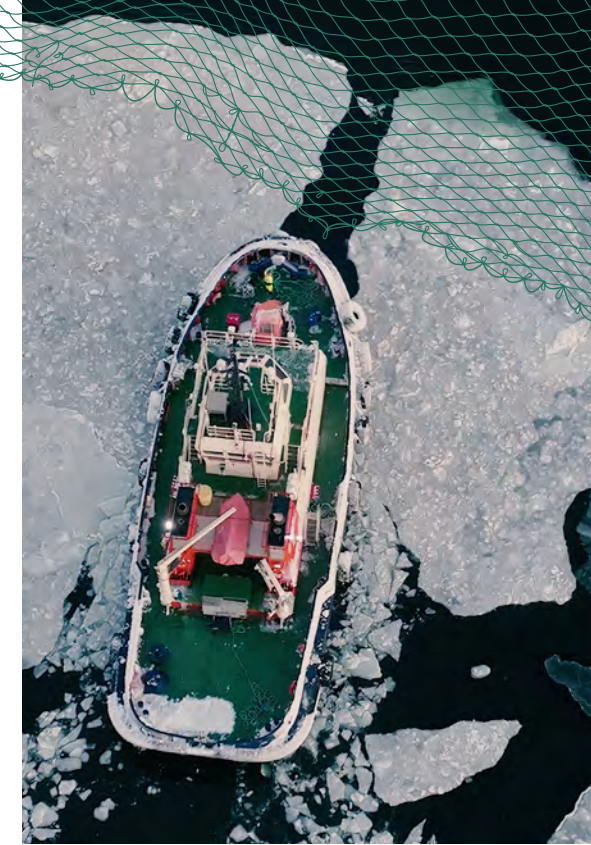
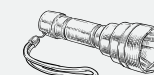


"THEY'RE THE BACKBONE OF OUR LIVES, AND WE DON'T ALWAYS SEE IT"

If *Farming for Love* gives viewers a glimpse of the essential work that farmers do, docuseries offer a front-row seat to types of work that are just as essential, but even more hazardous.

East Harbour Heroes (on Crave) follows the workers who "make a living on the edge of the world," on the coast of Newfoundland, particularly in St. John's Harbour. "The show is really a look at the everyday heroes that keep communities running," says Nicole Hamilton, the show's executive producer and EVP of unscripted content at Attraction.

She defines "everyday heroes" as people whose jobs are nearly invisible to us, but are entirely vital to how we live. The allure of the series—which features stevedores, commercial fishers, tugboat operators and more—lies in both the difficulty of the work and in the characters who do it.



East Harbour Heroes

"Mother Nature has her own will and makes things extra challenging," says Hamilton. Sea ice, hurricane season, winter storms: the show's cast (not to mention its crew) must contend with all of these things to keep goods moving in and out of the harbour. Even if viewers aren't ultimately inspired to take up commercial fishing off the coast of Newfoundland, they're happy to watch from a distance.



Nicole Hamilton

"Watching these people in conflict with Mother Nature—it's a powerful battle," says Hamilton.

As is so often the case with docuseries like this one, audiences come for the action and stay for the characters. "The people who do these jobs are so amazing," says Hamilton. "And Newfoundlanders are so funny. Salt-of-the-earth people. It's such a special place."



East Harbour Heroes



East Harbour Heroes is also a story of building local production capacity in Newfoundland. By season three, a full 90 per cent of the crew was local. One of the local camera operators, who started as an assistant, is now the director of photography (DP). Success stories like these have helped the local community embrace the show, which spotlights their often-overlooked livelihoods.

"We're dependent on a certain pool of people to keep our lives running," says Hamilton. "They're the backbone of our lives, and we don't always see it. To shine a light on them is incredibly satisfying."

BC-based prodco Great Pacific Media has made an art of shining a light on invisible, rugged, risky work. The company is the proud creator of shows like *Timber Titans* (logging), *High Arctic Haulers* (northern cargo shipping), *Rocky Mountain Wreckers* (heavy towing in the US Rockies), *Heavy Rescue: 401* (heavy towing in Ontario) and, of course, the original heavy-towing docuseries: *Highway Thru Hell*.

The long-running series covers heavy-vehicle rescue and recovery-towing operations on the treacherous Coquihalla Highway in the BC interior. As in *East Harbour Heroes*, the cast of *Highway Thru Hell* must grapple with Mother Nature's worst—in this case, ice storms, mudslides and avalanches—to rescue semis, buses, and other vehicles too large to be towed in the regular way. The show is wrapping up its 14th season of production. It's a "very, very, very, very well-loved series" in the 180 territories in which it's shown, says David Way, CEO of Great Pacific Media.

Clearly, it's not just truck drivers and tow-truck operators who are watching (though heavy machinery is certainly part of the appeal). "We have a pretty core audience, but we get notes from grandmothers and grandkids. It's multigenerational now," says Way.

The most common response Way hears? "I had no idea that people were doing this kind of work and how important it is." And here's that word "backbone" again: "Audiences around the world marvel at the people who do this job. They're the backbone of what it takes to make a country work, by keeping highways safe and open for everybody to do what they need to do."

"THEY'RE THE BACKBONE OF WHAT IT TAKES TO MAKE A COUNTRY WORK"



Highway Thru Hell (Great Pacific Media)

According to Way, safety is number one on set. "We're not in there, chasing the action with a camera running. No, we ask: Is this safe? Can we do this? And if we can't, we don't," he says.

And he insists that, while the team at Great Pacific certainly wants audiences to be entertained, "we don't make stuff up on this show." Why bother? The drama is already built in.



"THEY HAVE A STORY TO TELL, AND THEY'RE PROUD TO SHARE IT"

Another show that doesn't make stuff up is *Northern Air Rescue*, APTN's docuseries about Missinippi Airways, an Indigenous-owned airline operating out of Mathias Colomb First Nation in northern Manitoba. The airline performs rescue, passenger and cargo services to fly-in communities in the province.

"*Northern Air Rescue* highlights the remarkable stories of ordinary people who go the extra mile to serve the North," says Adam Garnet Jones, director of TV content and special events at APTN. "We believe people connect with these stories because they see reflections of themselves and their loved ones in the commitment of the Missinippi Airways team."

The show's origin story illustrates how popular series like these are becoming with producers. RealWorld Films' Denis Paquette read an article in *The Globe and Mail* about two pilots from Manitoba who made up the first-ever female Indigenous medevac flight team. He contacted Ricky Brenton, the general manager of the airline—only to learn his was the fourth production company to call.

Ultimately, RealWorld won the day and committed to making the show in the way the airline wanted: as "a true factual series that really doesn't play with the narrative," says Paquette. "It's straight up about these people and the good work they do." APTN quickly signed on, and the series is currently in production on season two, which will release in early 2026.

The show captures the life-or-death necessity of an airline like Missinippi, for medical emergencies, the transport of goods, and evacuations during wildfire season. "There's only one way in and one way out," says Paquette. The pilots also perform tasks southerners wouldn't even think



Northern Air Rescue (RealWorld Films Inc.)

of, such as flying in dog food for the dogs remaining after an evacuation. Because without the dogs, bears will come.

Beyond the ever-present threat of bears, with real-life shows comes real-life weather. This has been one of the greatest challenges for the crew. "In northern Manitoba, inclement weather is just a reality," says Paquette. The crew deals with temperatures from -32° to plus 32°, and the notorious swarms of bugs in the summer. "It's hard to get a steady shot when you see horseflies taking a piece of your skin out," he says.

But the weather, as well as the time it's taken to build relationships and create trust with the community, is well worth it. The show gives people who never have—and probably never will—set foot in a fly-in Manitoba community a deeper sense of what life and work in the North is like. And it gives the airline employees and community members a chance to share their life and work with others.

"They have a story to tell, and they're proud to share it," says Paquette. "It's been an honour and a privilege to work with them. If we can capture a bit of the beauty and allow people to see a bit of the essence of life in the North, that would be fantastic."



Denis Paquette and Carmen Henriquez of RealWorld

"IF WE CAN CAPTURE A BIT OF THE BEAUTY AND ALLOW PEOPLE TO SEE A BIT OF THE ESSENCE OF LIFE IN THE NORTH..."





Warren P. Sonoda, Ryan J. Lindsay, Tom Green and Gary Howsam on set of *The Trades*

"IT'S AN UNDERSERVED DEMOGRAPHIC, SO THERE WAS DEFINITELY A NEED"

A scripted single-cam comedy about oil refinery workers sounds as distant as can be from a docuseries about pilots doing essential work in remote Manitoba. But *The Trades* (airing on Crave) is also rooted in reality. And while, according to its creator, it's "ridiculous" and "crass"—it's co-produced with the Trailer Park Boys—it's got heart to spare.

Creator Ryan Lindsay (Kontent House Productions) based the series on his own experiences growing up



Ryan J. Lindsay

in Sarnia, Ontario, a city "propped up by oil refineries," he says. His younger brother, Tyson, is a pipefitter. His youngest brother, Kellan, is a carpenter. When Lindsay moved to Toronto to work in the film industry, he'd come home with what he thought were great stories, "working with the Guillermo del Toros, the David Cronenbergs. But my stories always got trumped by my brothers' misadventures and workplace antics."

He brought on his brothers as consultants for the show, and also got to work interviewing hundreds of tradespeople. He wanted to learn the local jargon, the juiciest workplace stories, the funniest nicknames.

"A lot of the show is based off of real things that have actually been said and done," says Lindsay.

It's those tradespeople that he makes the show for, though of course it has the ability to resonate with anyone who's had a quirky colleague.

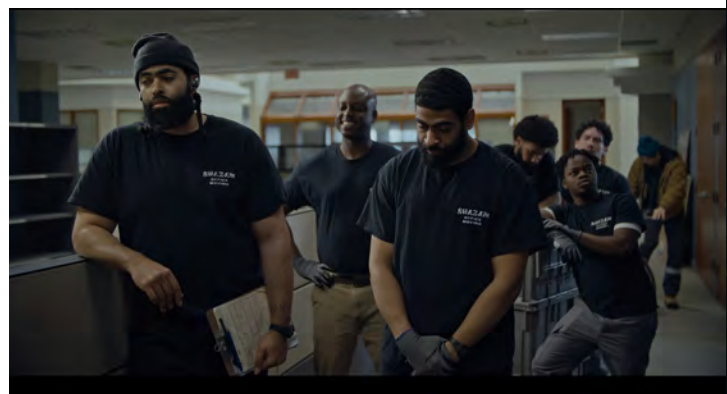
"Blue-collar individuals account for a third of our population globally, and they consume a large quantity of content," says Lindsay. "It's an underserved demographic, so there was definitely a need. But regardless of demographic, it's those relationships within a work family that provide the humour and drama and heart."

While the show is a comedy, it also addresses important workplace issues, such as women's representation in the trades. One female character, Audrey, pursues a career as a carpenter, and the show follows her trajectory from orientation to apprenticeship and beyond.

Again, while undoubtedly a comedy first, Lindsay asserts that the characters it portrays "are the unsung heroes, the individuals that keep our lights on and our water running." He wants to make content that showcases pipefitters and welders and boilermakers—but what he really wants to do is make them laugh. "There are unlimited options for content, but why shouldn't they watch a show that gives them a bit of ownership?" he says.



The Trades (Trailer Park Boys Incorporated, Kontent House Productions)



The Office Movers (Counterfeit Pictures)

"THE UNSUNG HEROES, THE INDIVIDUALS THAT KEEP OUR LIGHTS ON AND OUR WATER RUNNING"



The Office Movers

"WHAT ARE THE STORIES WE CAN TELL WITHIN THE PARAMETERS WE HAVE?"

The Office Movers, also on Crave, is another blue-collar comedy, this time about a mishap-plagued office moving company run by two brothers (played by creators Jae and Trey Richards). It's based on their real-life experiences working for their father, and their unglamorous, just-get-through-the-day anecdotes provide plenty of laughs, as well as all-too-real situations that many can relate to.



Dan Bennett

"Everett [played by Jae Richards] is trying to run a company with everything stacked against him," says Dan Bennett, of Counterfeit Pictures. "He's trying to do right by his people and by his clients,

but it's like trying to catch sand. It all slips through his fingers. I think people can relate to that: you just try to do your best and you live to fight another day."

According to Bennett, a show like *The Office Movers*, which films in warehouses and on loading docks, plays to the Canadian industry's creative strengths—and production limitations. "Our budgets are getting smaller in Canada," he says. "I can't get a budget to make *Succession*. So what are the stories we can tell within the parameters we have?" "Grounded, real, everyday shows: these are things that Canadian producers excel at," he continues. "We need to continue to look for opportunities in those worlds, because they're our strong suit."

They're also audience favourites. Whether they're lonely farmers, brave captains or hapless office movers, viewers want to see shows featuring people who



The Office Movers

aren't afraid to get their hands dirty. Authenticity is the name of the game.

"I feel like we've passed the stage of the big, shiny, aspirational shows," says Bennett. "People want to feel something a little more real."

Judging by the wide variety of authentic workplace shows, the people are getting what they want.

