Going in Deep

WHY WE JUST CAN'T GET ENOUGH OF LESLYE HEADLAND

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Since TV's creative sandbox was replaced with a puzzle box, producers are expected to captivate and hold their fickle audiences who are used to watching whatever they want, whenever they want. Be it on-demand, in-demand or bingeing to excess, the game is to keep your fans close with mysteries slowly revealed in flashback until that final puzzle piece is in place—whether that happens by appointment or all in one sitting. Leslye Headland has cracked that mysterious code with Netflix's insatiable hit, *Russian Doll*. The secret? Going deep.

Like the tiny figures hidden inside Russian nesting dolls, there is much more to writer, director, playwright, executive producer Leslye Headland and her work than meets the eye. By the same token, *Russian Doll* is more than another take on *Groundhog Day*, as some have compared it to. On the contrary, the never-ending loops of Nadia (played by co-creator, writer, director Natasha Lyonne) living and dying through her 36th birthday go ever deeper in each episode, as she tries to reprogram and heal her life up until that point.

That depth is due to the creative trifecta of Lyonne, Headland and former SNL member and executive producer Amy Poehler. *Russian Doll* arose from their collective desire to examine how people are "always overturning and going deeper into the ego and trying to figure out how the human brain works and how we make peace with certain things and why we repeat certain things."

Russian Doll is a high-concept, multifaceted, female-protagonist show that, Headland says proudly, "doesn't have to do with [the main character's] job or her family or her love life" and uses game coding as a device to rewrite Nadia's journey into her psyche. Headland partially credits the show's success to Netflix's binge model of dropping all eight episodes at once. She explains, "There wasn't this pressure of that first episode having to make everyone stay in."

Headland got her start, even *before* graduating from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts drama program, as a produced playwright with her Seven Deadly Plays series, the first of which became her feature film and directorial debut, *Bachelorette*. Even then, she chose to dive into her own past of a conservative and religious upbringing to see what she could unearth, each play focusing on a single sin.

Bachelorette's sin was gluttony, and Headland recalls writing the line, "You guys had an abortion without me?" "I had that moment of, 'I cannot say that. That's not funny.' And then I thought, 'Oh, I *have* to say it.' I think that was like a defining moment of whenever I had that moment of 'no,' it was like, 'Oh, we should go deeper into this.' Go into it and not run from it.

"The next thought that happened was, 'Are you ready to answer for this?' And I thought, 'Yes, I am.' Because it's a good joke, you know, number one. And number two, it really did sum up thematically what the play was about, which was that wom-

en were looking past their trauma and only seeing it through the lens of their own narcissism."

Such brave, truthful storytelling is what landed Headland her first writing job in television on a one-season-wonder show for FX about a pair of scrappy private detectives called *Terriers*. "It was literally a dream come true. But what was amazing was it was the first time that I'd ever had to write in someone else's voice, and it was the first nonfemale-centric project I'd ever been on," Headland says. And yet she remembers her major contribution to that show's sole season story line being to push for a main female character's depth.

"I thought, 'Katie has to do something wrong. Everything she does is just perfect.' To me, in that moment, I'm not thinking, 'I'm truth-telling.' It just seems to me that I can't relate with a character unless they do something wrong."

Finding and fleshing out flaws is also a major theme in *Russian Doll*. "One of the things that [Poehler] hit a lot on when we were pitching was the tiny doll inside. She said, 'Everybody has a tiny doll. What is Nadia's tiny doll? How do we externalize that? How do you make that into an understandable, consumable thing?' [Natasha's] literally telling a story that is—I don't think she'd mind me saying—pretty autobiographical. And so there's the triangle of her inner, smaller self dealing with her mother and then her being an adult trying to deal with the ghost of both of those things."



Headland on the set of *Russian Doll* directing young Nadia, played by Brooke Timber

"EVERYBODY HAS A TINY DOLL. WHAT IS NADIA'S TINY DOLL? HOW DO YOU MAKE THAT INTO AN UNDERSTANDABLE, CONSUMABLE THING?"

Headland recalls of her own writing before *Russian Doll*, "I had been basically saying things about myself and my own psyche like 'this is my badness' or 'this is my addiction' or 'this is where I'm broken.' And the [therapist] that I worked with really turned it around to 'this is little Leslye.'

"This is actually not a problem. This is little Leslye, who is not being given the sunlight, the creativity, the spirit. So when you do that type of work, it's awful and wonderful all at the same time. The idea that you could get that vulnerable, talk about it, put it up on the screen and people would say, 'Me too,' is mind-blowing to me."

Her chances to share that vulnerability on a larger scale increased soon after *Terriers*. "It's worth mentioning that one of the show's creators, Shawn Ryan, said, 'Writers, you need to learn how to become producers. You need to be on set for your episodes so that you can learn how to produce your own work,'" notes Headland.

And indeed, her producing career was not far behind with *Bachelorette* and her second turn, the feature *Sleeping With Other People*. Directing and producing on the TV reboot of *Heathers* hit just before *Russian Doll* came about.

"An actual producer, in my opinion, is someone that is a liaison between the project, the work and everybody else. It should flow that way. Not the other way around. I think sometimes what happens with producers—and I've been this person when I'm just producing—it's kind of like, 'Oh I guess I'm here just in case something happens ... I guess I'm here in case there's a problem and I'll take care of it.'"

The potential problems with *Russian Doll*'s production were immense given that the show was block-shot, cross-boarded and shot in chunks. For example, every scene where Nadia comes back to life in the bathroom at her birthday party was shot all at once. How did Headland solve the puzzle of tracking 22 different life/



death loops that filmed back-to-back?

"There are three things that I think contributed to how well that came off. The first one is that Natasha was in the writer's room the entire time. So you had a number one on the call sheet that really understood the nature of what the show was. She already knew what the overall journey was going to be.

"Another thing that contributed to it is that the other characters are always starting over. So [they] are always in the same feeling. They basically have to be in the moment and react right away to whatever it is that [Nadia's] doing.

"The third contribution was that we had the best script supervisor in the business, Melissa Yap-Stewart, who was incredible. I think it also just helps that I'm a video game player and I was also, again, writing in the writer's room but also directing half of the season. And we didn't have a very large writer's room and we didn't have eight different directors that directed the whole thing. It was good to have a smaller brain trust of people that were all the gatekeepers of the information."

Tackling *Russian Doll*'s insane continuity issue of consistently disappearing people and set pieces was solved with a big whiteboard and one big meeting of all the department heads simultaneously. "There were a couple of different diagrams. This particular diagram was just about what disappeared when and they were lettered. So for 'A through F, everything's the same. G through M, all these things disappear. And N through Q, people will start disappearing.' So on and so forth. So in a way, the block shooting of it helped because if you are shooting something on a corner and then the next time that happened was actually a couple episodes later, you would still have your background matching."

Headland, a self-proclaimed *Star Wars* nerd, says the layers of loops in Nadia's search for meaning and truth are no accident. She credits watching YouTube video essays in her youth for teaching her about Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey that plays out famously in the George Lucas films. Nadia too "has her refusals of the call; she has her mentor with Ruth," just like Luke Skywalker did.

Headland's other nerdy obsession is as "an artistic adrenaline junkie." She lives for the twist of "subverting expectations" where everyone dislikes a character and then suddenly it's like, "'Oh my God! I care so much about this character now.' I just love if they're surprised when they yell like that. Then it feels like I've got them; they're listening. While they're listening, let's shove the truth in their mouth. I'm addicted to that for sure.

"I'm addicted to engaging the audience to the point where they forget where they are for a second … and then they'll come back, and they'll remember their laundry. It's why the binge model is such a brilliant, brilliant, brilliant thing. If I could get them just kind of hypnotized by the show … if I could just get them to keep pressing play, next episode, next episode. That immersion. I'm addicted to that immersion myself. Like when I watch the movies that I love or when I watch a new movie I've never seen before."

We can look forward to immersing ourselves in future Headland projects that include season 2 of *Russian Doll*, *Not Just Me*—a series she directed the pilot for—and an optioned dramatic feature she wrote and directed called *Tell Me Everything*. For now, she has these words of wisdom for fellow creators: "I think to be producing is getting as involved and as vulnerable as everybody else is. I think that's something that gets a little lost in the shuffle in the rise of the 'exec,' which is a person that sits and stays in an office all day. That's not hands-on. And I'm not saying that in a pejorative way. So what I've noticed in my very small amount of time on this earth is that there are producers that are on the ground, and [those who are] really invested and care just as much as you do and are solving problems." Lucky for us, Headland is one of those problem-solvers, going in deep with every project.