



A woman of action

Michelle MacLaren at work on the set of *The Walking Dead*

COURTESY OF MICHELLE MACLAREN

The X-Files, Breaking Bad, The Walking Dead, and Game of Thrones.
Queen's film grad Michelle MacLaren has been a key player
in creating all of these phenomenally popular television shows.

BY ANDREA GUNN, MPA'07

Michelle MacLaren, Artsci'86, can't tell me anything about her latest television work. The plot, the actors, even the locations she used are all top-secret. That's because one of the veteran director's latest gigs was on the highly anticipated fourth season of the hit HBO series *Game of Thrones* (which begins airing in April), and she isn't giving out any spoilers on the two episodes she directed, or any other details of the new season.

She also just directed the upcoming finale of fourth season of *The Walking Dead*. No spoilers there, either. However, Michelle is happy to share an insider's perspective on the work that goes into a television series and to recount her journey from avid film buff to one of the most acclaimed action directors in the television industry.

She's been at the helm – as producer and/or director – of some of the most original and popular TV series of the last two decades, starting with *The X-Files* in 2000. From 2008 to 2013, she was an executive producer on the hit series *Breaking Bad*, which wrapped up last year after six seasons. In addition to the Emmy Award she received for *Breaking Bad*, Michelle has received critical acclaim for her work as a director on both the AMC series *The Walking Dead* and HBO's *Game of Thrones*.

Michelle knew long before she arrived at Queen's in the fall of 1982 that she wanted to be a filmmaker. That had been her goal since she was 13 years old. But it was here at Queen's that the Vancouver native got a solid grounding in film history and in some of the mechanics of filmmaking, along with a few other lessons that have served her well thus far in her career.

Michelle recalls that Queen's was a popular destination for students at the Vancouver high school she attended. She followed her sister Nicole to Kingston to study, living in Victoria Hall in first year. While Michelle enrolled in film studies, the big draw of Queen's for her was the University's reputation for providing a well-rounded arts education. "It really appealed to me on a grander scale," she says. "I studied English and German, but one of the most helpful courses I took was a contract law course in which I learned how to read and write contracts. As a producer, it has helped me immensely to have taken that course."

Michelle also spent many late nights in the Film House, editing the short films she created. She also got a solid grounding on the history of film from her professors, especially the late Peter Morris. "He made film history very exciting. It was one of my favourite classes," says Michelle.

From Morris, she learned to examine a film's social and political contexts, a perspective that has come in handy, especially when she has worked on such edgy shows as *The X-Files* and *The Walking Dead*. "That really made me understand how storytelling is related to what's going on in the world," says Michelle.

As a student, she was drawn to the dark, tension-filled movies of the film *noir* of the 1940s and '50s – especially director Alfred Hitchcock's "voyeuristic approach to filmmaking." Says Michelle, "I

had a lot to learn about subjective and objective filmmaking. Studying great filmmakers in a university environment really helps foster a basic understanding of [the art]. Although I learned a lot by actually being on film sets, having some of that basic education to draw from has proved to be really helpful."

After graduating from Queen's in 1986, Michelle took a year off to expand her horizons and travel before returning home to Vancouver. Once there, she worked as a waitress while seeking an opening in the film industry. Eventually, a friend gave her the name of a potential contact at a commercial film company, and so she pursued the lead. "The only work experience on my résumé was waitressing, but I went to drop it off with anybody who would see me," Michelle recounts. Talk about serendipity.

"When the elevator doors opened, there stood a guy with a walky-talky. He saw the brown envelope in my hand and asked, 'Are you looking for a job in the film business?' When I nodded, he told me, 'We're shooting a commercial down the street, and we're understaffed. Come and work as a volunteer.'"

Michelle jumped at the opportunity. "I worked for free that one day, and then I worked for that company for two years," she says.

That on-the-job experience gave her some invaluable insights into how to break into and succeed in the film industry, although she now recognizes that those same insights might also apply in other career fields.

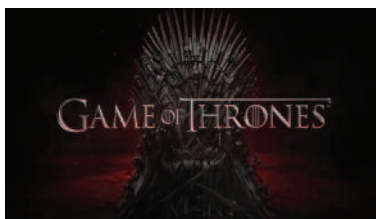
Advises Michelle, "The best advice I can give young people is this: Make yourself invaluable. Make it so that people need you. Be willing to do anything ... get experience,

get exposure, and when you see something that needs doing – whatever it is – do it. Be proactive."

She might also have added that it doesn't hurt to persevere. Michelle's first film jobs were by no means glamorous. "I had my Queen's degree, but I started out pouring coffee, sweeping up cigarette butts, and holding a traffic sign in the rain for 14 hours straight. I just wanted to be on a film set, and I was willing to do anything."



Michelle's role in the success of *Breaking Bad* solidified her reputation as one of the television industry's foremost action directors.



From her experience shooting and editing films at Queen's, Michelle knew how long and arduous piecing together even a short film can be. However, her experience as a production assistant on a film set opened up a whole new world, giving her a realistic look at the time, resources, and the many people it takes to create a film.

"It's not for everybody. It's a lifestyle and a lot of hard work. You also have those moments when you really appreciate what everybody does. And that it takes a village to make a movie or a TV show. To have an understanding of what everybody does on a film set and an appreciation of what they do is really important."

Michelle loved being on a film set, and she found plenty of work in Vancouver, on both TV series and movies. She worked her way up from her start as a production assistant – first scouting locations, then working as assistant director, production manager, then finally as a line producer (responsible solely for the business side of a production.) But she wanted to spread her wings still further as a creative producer. In this role, she would be able to work more closely with writers and directors to bring a great story to life. There were few opportunities in Vancouver for this work, so, in 1991, Michelle made the move south to Los Angeles.

Once there, she began producing TV movies and also co-wrote her first screenplay, *A Song from the Heart*, which she sold to CBS. She then served as executive producer of the TV movie from that screenplay in 1999. "Being accepted in the creative side of things helped me transition into becoming a creative producer. And then the TV movie industry dried up. Having a solid background in TV series work, Michelle returned to episodic television. "But now, I was accepted on a more creative level," she says.

That led to Michelle working as co-executive producer on the sci-fi series, *Harsh Realm*, created by Chris Carter. While *Harsh Realm* only ran for eight episodes, in 2000, Michelle began work on another Carter production, *The X-Files*. Michelle was again co-executive producer, working on 46 episodes of the hit show.

But, there was something still missing.

"During this whole time, I really wanted to direct," Michelle says. So she immersed herself in rounding out her film education. "I took classes. I studied acting for three years because I wanted to understand what actors go through. I took classes through the Directors Guild of America and private teachers in LA."

And when she asked if she could direct an episode of *The X-Files*, the answer was "Yes." To prepare herself, Michelle went to a week-long intensive training course for directors to supplement the on-the-job training she'd



GENE RAGE/AMC

Zombie extras on the set of *The Walking Dead*



COURTESY OF MICHELLE MACLAREN
HELEN SLOAN/HBO

Michelle (centre), on the set of *Game of Thrones*



FRANK OCKENFELS/AMC

The cast of HBO's phenomenally successful series *Breaking Bad*

received as a producer. When Michelle took the helm for the episode “John Doe,” it was an episode written by Chris Carter and Vince Gilligan, Michelle’s co-executive producer on *The X-Files*.

“It was terrifying,” she laughs. “I’d been on many film sets, but I showed up the first day and saw all the trucks and people and everything, and I knew they were all going to turn to me and say, ‘Okay, where do you want the camera?’ I was terrified! But I was very, very, very prepared. And when I did it, I loved it.

“The thing that took me by surprise – and it was a wonderful surprise – was the unique relationship a director has with the actors. Together, you’re creating the story and these characters. I realized that was my passion.”

It was also fulfilling a wish she’d articulated many years earlier. “When my grandmother passed away, my mom found a letter I’d written to her when I was a girl. It said, ‘I just saw this movie, and I hope someday I can direct a movie as well as that.’ My mom found that letter right before I asked to direct *The X-Files*. And when I read it, I said ‘My gosh, I’ve been wanting to direct since I was 13 years old. I better get off my ass and do it.’ I feel very fortunate that I get to do a job that I really love. I still love producing. And I do both jobs, but directing is truly my passion.”

Harkening back to her student days at Queen’s, Michelle found herself practising the techniques she’d learned about in film theory. “I learned on *The X-Files* always to make sure the camera is telling the story, and always know whose head you’re in at any particular moment, and whose point of view do you want to be in.”

In the years since she made her directing debut, Michelle has earned a well-deserved reputation as a director who knows how to weave together the threads of an effective story: adept in building suspense with her use of drawn-out pacing and thoughtful camera angles.

In 2008, Michelle again teamed up with her *X-Files* collaborator Vince Gilligan on his new hit show, *Breaking Bad*. Michelle directed an episode of the second season before signing on as co-executive producer for season three. She was an executive producer for the show’s third through sixth seasons, and also directed 10 more episodes, some of which are among the show’s most acclaimed.

Michelle has earned five Emmy award nominations for her work on *Breaking Bad*, both individually as a director, and as part of the show’s executive team. In 2013, *Breaking Bad* won the Emmy for outstanding drama series, and Michelle, Vince, and their colleagues each took home an Emmy Award. This January, *Breaking Bad* also won the Golden Globe award for Best Drama Series.

Michelle’s role in the success of *Breaking Bad* solidified her reputation as one of the television industry’s foremost action directors. “I try to make sure that the violence serves the story,” she says. “I never want to take you out of the story and go ‘oh, cool shot.’ If the cool shot can help tell the story, then great. We got to do a lot of those on *Breaking Bad*.” It’s a philosophy that helped keep millions of viewers captivated to the show during its six-year run.

Back home in Los Angeles now after finishing up her work on *Game of Thrones* and *The Walking Dead*, Michelle isn’t sure what’s next in store for her. “I’m taking a lot of meetings,” she says, “and reading a lot of material, and just figuring out what my next move is going to be. I’m considering a lot of wonderful things.”

Right before we wrap up the interview, I ask Michelle a question from a young Queen’s grad, who wanted to me to ask the director, “Looking back, when you decided to pursue a film career, how certain were you that you were making the right choice? Did you ever question yourself?”

Michelle knows she’s fortunate to have known since childhood that she wanted to work in film. But, she confides that even if her life had turned out differently, “from a very young age, I loved to have a camera in my hand, loved to take pictures. And if I was a lawyer today, I’d bet you anything I’d have a hobby taking photos. It’s in me. But I’ve had friends who struggled with not knowing what they wanted to do. And a lot of them have done very, very well. They just had to go through that period of finding it out.”

Her advice for young grads? “Don’t worry that what you do when you first graduate from university is going to be a life decision. Get yourself into a situation where you can be ex-

posed to the things you think you’re interested in. Find out, ‘Am I truly interested in this?’ And, if yes, then ask yourself, ‘What aspect of this do I want to pursue?’ Pursue it, and the specifics will come.”

Great advice from a woman who has put her dreams into action. ■



Michelle and Vince Gilligan at the 2013 Emmy Awards, where *Breaking Bad* was honoured as television’s Outstanding Drama Series.

GETTY IMAGES

NOTES FROM THE DIRECTOR’S CHAIR

In a longer version of this article that’s posted in the online *Review*, Michelle MacLaren shares an insider’s view from the sets of *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones*, from making do when a stunt goes wrong to auditioning a very large bear. Check it out at alumnireview.queensu.ca.

Later this year, Film and Media Studies will move out of Film House on Stuart Street, which has been its home almost since Day One. The Department will take up residence in the new Isabel Bader Centre for the Performing Arts, a priority of the Initiative Campaign. Watch the *Review* for more details.

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