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Hollywood's Top Creatives Explain It All at Variety Tune-In TV Summit

Catherine · Wednesday, June 29th, 2016

As the publication of record in Hollywood, *Variety* is consistently able to populate the panels and presentations for their Summit series with top talent from all corners of the entertainment industry. The recent Tune-In TV Summit was no exception. Scanning the full spectrum of television as we know it, the audience listened to creatives and executives as they explored the challenges and opportunities they face in bringing their visions to the screen. But the most interesting moments could be found in the comments of top creatives who were moving past the boundaries of their craft skills.

Aaron Sorkin

Aaron Sorkin has been the brain behind some of the most exciting scripted television dramas as well as feature films that probe the inner psyche of intense creative minds. So it's exciting to consider the idea of combining his skill with the recent successes of NBC's efforts to bring LIVE theatrical extravaganzas back to television. Couple these elements with the genius of executive producers Neil Meron and Craig Zadan and throw in a story that has captured the cultural zeitgeist like *A Few Good Men* and you have a recipe for "Must See TV." But, as they say on TV…wait, there's more! Sorkin considers *A Few Good Men* to be his "starter play" and says "it still feels like my high school yearbook picture." He plans to work with Tony winning director Scott Ellis to adapt the play to create a "deeper and fresher" feel for the current state of military service in America. At the same time, the revised version will benefit from the way that his innately brilliant writing skills have improved with age and experience.

Zadan and Meron have triumphed over the year-long life cycle of staging a live theatrical musical beginning with *The Sound of Music*, *Peter Pan*, *The Wiz* and *Hairspray*. This project will be their first venture into live drama on television. But, with an anticipated air date of February 2017, Sorkin is excited by the fact that *A Few Good Men* will be "the canary in the coal mine for live dramas on television." He admits that they have to learn to do it all over again, because "Sidney Lumet was the last person who knew how to do it from his *Playhouse 90* days."

Some may not recall that *A Few Good Men* was the first play that Sorkin wrote. It opened on Broadway in 1989 and following a successful run he was brought to Hollywood to write it as a movie. After building a strong working relationship with the network during his years on *The West Wing*, Sorkin considers NBC to be a home base. Robert Greenblatt, Chairman of NBC Entertainment, acknowledges that, "we're in the business of getting people to watch programs on the time and place that we put them." He's still all in on the bet that LIVE entertainment is the best way to get an audience to comply. Up to this point, Greenblatt acknowledged, "we usually work with dead authors." Instantly, Sorkin wanted to know how they died. "They wrote themselves to

death," Greenblatt explained, slyly.

Mindy Kaling

At the other end of the creative spectrum, Mindy Kaling announced that she has just signed a new deal at Universal as an actor, writer and director. She sees this as a sign that the industry is progressing. "For someone who looks like me," she admits, "my career only exists at this time. It used to be that minorities could only be on shows about minorities." She paid tribute to Shonda Rhimes for creating hit series with diverse casts, but acknowledged that her true role model is Emma Thompson.

Thompson's nominations for both writing and acting in *Sense & Sensibility* were a turning point for Kaling. "It was the first time I realized you could do that – act and write." Kaling readily admits that she doesn't mind the non-stop schedule that is required to be a triple hyphenate. "I've wanted this job since I was 5 years old, so for me, I don't want to sleep. I want to be awake and live this show." Being a showrunner has taught her many things that she will take with her as she progresses to producing other shows. "I'm a naturally cheerful person, so the trajectory of my show has been very conducive to that." When her show moved to Hulu, she appreciated the benefit of not having to chase ratings on a daily basis anymore. "I don't want to have to be part of a network executive downloading his fears onto me," she admits. "I don't have to worry about whether one of my friend's shows dies so that I can get their spot [on the schedule]. I'm an artist and I don't want to be caring about these things." She also appreciates the fact that Hulu offers a stimulating environment for creatives. "It's really nice to work in a place where the energy is 50% creative production company and 50% startup. That kind of excitement feels really new."

John Legend

Toward the end of the day, one of the more exciting creative reveals happened during a keynote presentation with singer-songwriter – and executive producer – John Legend. Through his production company, Get Lifted, Legend has produced a number of documentaries and has ventured into feature films. His proudest moment on screen, however, seems to be the series *Underground*. As its title suggests, the series focuses on the Underground Railroad. Legend explains that "this story could have been told at any time, but it's an interesting political moment in America with the Black Lives Matter movement and what happened in Charleston with the legacy of the Confederate flag."

Legend read the narratives of some of the slaves who escaped, as well as some who didn't before he tackled the challenge of how to bring their story to live in a television series. "The fact that it's about the Underground Railroad gives us a chance to show the occupation and the revolution along with all of the excitement that comes with the running." The success of this series – which has been picked up for a second season – is most likely due to the fact that it explores the characters from every perspective, from the slave owners to the overseers to the slave catchers and the abolitionists to the north.

"We're at a moment now where we have a major candidate for office who is being racist and divisive in a major way. I feel the need to call that out because it is impossible for our nation to go back to a dark place," says Legend. "We who believe in equality, who believe that every life matters, should be vigilant to make sure we don't go back." To that end, he uses his social media platforms to advocate his beliefs. "I can't just sit by without saying what I believe to hold our leadership to account." As one might suspect, all of this is punctuated with an amazing musical soundtrack. "Part of our mission was to take this story out of the museum and the library and make it come alive." One of his proudest moments was screening the first episode of *Underground* at The White House, "a house that was built by slaves and is now occupied by the first black

president.”

The Variety Summit Series runs throughout the year. For more information, www.events.variety.com

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