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The Television Showrunner: A Case Study Analysis of Insecure and Fleabag

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In light of the rise in video-on-demand (VOD) services, television has exploded in popularity on an international scale, eclipsing its predecessor of movies. This phenomenon has been further heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic as audiences flocked to their television screens during Stay-At-Home orders. Specifically, Netflix received 15 million more subscribers since mid-March, 2.3 million more Americans subscribed to Netflix since March, and broadcast television viewing has jumped by 8.3 million viewers (Fitzgerald). With the demand for high-quality entertainment, the role of the television creator/showrunner has become increasingly important, as this individual or pair of individuals is tasked with maintaining the vision of a television series. In turn, this paper will explore the role of the showrunner through two case studies: Phoebe Waller-Bridge, creator/showrunner of *Fleabag*, and Prentice Penny, showrunner of *Insecure*. Particularly, it will examine this role during the development, pre-production, production, and post-production stages. It will also discuss the different challenges and tasks that these showrunners face, especially as Waller-Bridge and Penny are both the heads of 30-minute, comedic, socially conscious, and women-driven series.

First, it is necessary to define the role of the showrunner. According to the documentary film *Showrunners: The Art of Running a TV Show,* a showrunner is "the person or persons responsible for overseeing all areas of writing and production on a television series." They also "ensure that each episode is delivered on time and on budget for both the studio that produces the show and the network that airs it." Most showrunners begin as writers and work their way up from being a staff writer, story editor, co-executive producer, executive producer, and then a showrunner. However, showrunners do not have to be writers to fulfill the role. Furthermore, showrunners serve as the liaison between the writer's room and the executives financially

backing the television series. They are always the executive producers of the series they run and are oftentimes the creators of their series. If not, they are usually paired up with less experienced television creators (Rhimes).

The showrunner's role also changes through each part of the production process: development, pre-production, physical production, and post-production. In development, the development team assesses whether or not the showrunner would be the right fit for a greenlit show. They may also pitch their ideas to studios and networks to receive funding (Strauss). In pre-production, showrunners hire writers, actors, and above the line crewmembers, work with a line producer to budget for the series, meet with studio and/or network executives, and solve pre-production problems. During physical production, they serve as the "number one" go-to person on set and problem solve physical production issues. They may also act and/or direct in their series, such as in the case of Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag* and Prentice Penny's *Insecure*. Finally, in post-production, showrunners make the final decisions on music, sound design and mixing, and picture editing choices (Strauss).

I.   Development

Showrunners must undergo the development process before pre-production. Television development includes but is not limited to: pitching the series idea to financiers, writing and refining the pilot, and attaching production companies and a showrunner (if necessary) to the series. First, the showrunner will pitch their idea to studios and/or networks for monetary backing. There are several ways showrunners can do this. If the showrunner is the series creator, it indicates that this individual has managers and agents to connect them with networks and studios, or the showrunner has enough industry connections to get "in the room" with executives. It may also mean that the showrunner has a first-look deal or an overall deal with a network or

studio. An overall deal is where showrunners or creators "exclusively develop all of their material under the network/studio they have a contract with." In a first-look deal, the network/studio has "the right of first refusal" when a showrunner or creator comes up with an idea. This means that if the network/studio who signed the first-look deal turns down the series idea, then the showrunner and/or creator can bring their idea to other financial backers (Kennington and Groff). For showrunner Prentice Penny, he signed a two-year overall deal with HBO MAX in March. This deal entails that he will "develop, write, produce, and direct television projects" only for the streaming service (Petski). Moreover, in September 2019, showrunner Phoebe Waller-Bridge signed a three-year overall deal with Amazon. While she claims that she will not create a third season of *Fleabag*, her upcoming material will be exclusive to Amazon (Andreeva).

However, the process of receiving financial backing differs if a showrunner is paired with a less experienced series creator. According to Tyler Knell, Vice President of Development at Circle of Confusion, finding the right showrunner for an upcoming series is like "a dance." The showrunner must be someone willing to establish a working, amicable, and collaborative relationship with the financiers. If the potential showrunner has a reputation of being unorganized, unempathetic, and difficult to work with, the financiers will look at other options. Moreover, most financiers look for previous showrunning experience in candidates. However, if the candidate has not been a showrunner before, this person should have experience as a "number two," or the person who answers questions and troubleshoots problems when the showrunner is not present. In addition, Knell looks for showrunners who can handle budgeting. This is because showrunners and line producers, who are typically hired by the network and studio, are in charge of every monetary decision on the series. If a showrunner is consistently

behind schedule and makes poor financial choices, the individual is unlikely to be hired again, even if they are a talented creative. For example, showrunner Brian Fuller was fired after one season of *American Gods* due to his poor handling of budgets. Because of this reputation, Fuller is rarely hired anymore by studios (Holloway). In turn, when showrunners enter relationships with studios, they must be collaborative, experienced, and adept at handling money.

Showrunners must also be able to work well with series creators, especially as the two will be entering a long term creative and professional relationship. In the case of *Insecure*, showrunner Prentice Penny wrote a letter of interest to creator Issa Rae, the mind behind the web series and bestselling autobiography *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*. Penny, who was just leaving his role as co-executive producer on *Brooklyn 99*, said that he clicked with her project immediately and wanted to "protect" Rae's vision when HBO ordered her idea to be made into a pilot. Subsequently, the two got coffee and bonded over their similar upbringings in Inglewood, a Los Angeles neighborhood. He said that after 15 minutes, he was reminded of why he wanted to produce television in the first place: to create great projects with people he cared about. In turn, Penny and Rae established a strong, collaborative relationship right away as showrunner and creator (The Gather Project).

In the case of *Fleabag*, Waller-Bridge's journey to becoming a showrunner was unconventional. The hit television series began as a 10-minute comedic monologue Waller-Bridge wrote for her longtime friend and writing partner Vicky Jones. At the time, she and Jones had also started their own theatre company called DryWrite to produce boundary-pushing, female-driven material. Through DryWrite, Waller-Bridge turned her monologue into a one-woman play and presented it at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2013. The play was a huge success and was noticed by producer Jack Williams. Through his company Two Brother's

Pictures, he and Waller-Bridge pitched the one-woman show to BBC. BBC-3 then ordered a pilot for *Fleabag*, and Amazon Studios financed and ordered the rest of the six-part series. Throughout this process, Waller-Bridge served as the showrunner and star of the series despite her lack of prior television experience. However, her extensive theatre background, experience in running a theatre company, and sheer talent guided her creative and financial choices through the entire production process and helped the showrunner succeed in her role (Warren).

It is important to note that both Penny and Waller-Bridge became showrunners of series based on existing intellectual property (IP). IP generates a proof of concept to executives deciding on whether or not to develop and greenlight a series. If a series does not have existing IP, a showrunner and/or creator may generate a pitch deck, which is a usually picture-heavy document that describes the story, characters, look, and tone of the television series they are pitching. They may also create a sizzle reel, which is a 2-5 minute long series of edited clips that capture the look and tone of the proposed project. These clips may be shot by a director or taken from existing shows and movies. Finally, experienced showrunners may secure "attachments" to entice buyers. Attachments are actors, directors, producers, or production companies that have already committed to working on the project being pitched. In turn, this gives development executives and networks/studios a sense of additional security when deciding if the project is worth the financial risk (Murphy). This greenlighting process may take from a week to years depending on the buyers, the market, and the project itself. Thus, while it is can be an arduous, discouraging process, development is a necessary and at times rewarding process for showrunners.

II.   Pre-production

After a project is greenlit, it goes into pre-production. This process is spearheaded by the showrunner and is arguably the most important component of the job. Some of the pre-production tasks include but are not limited to: hiring a writer's room, running the writer's room, hiring the director/key crew members, hiring actors, overseeing the budget, and being the liaison between the studio/network and the writers.

First, the showrunner has to hire the writer's room. To complete this task, the showrunner and executive producers will look at original writing samples from candidates. These samples traditionally come from agents. However, because the Writer's Guild of America strike is still ongoing with Creative Artist's Agency and William Morris Endeavor, many writers currently do not have agents. Consequently, writers are finding different avenues to submit material. Showrunners will find both novice and experienced writers through managers, writer's grids, mixers, Twitter exposure, screenwriting competitions, and word of mouth (Adellman). Showrunners will also interview the candidates to ensure that they will be a good fit for the room (Vulture). From there, showrunners will have to decide on who will best contribute to their vision. For Prentice Penny on *Insecure*, he looks for individuals with different voices than Issa's and his own. In an interview with Insider, Penny states that his writer's room includes writers in relationships, writers not in relationships, writers with kids, writers in the LGBTQ+ community, drama writers, and comedy writers. The writers also come from all over the United States, even though the show takes place in South Los Angeles. Furthermore, as the story centers a Black woman in her late 20s, the majority of the writers are African American and/or female. Finally, each writer brings different technical strengths. Many are strong with characterization and dialogue, while others may be stronger at structuring story or pitching jokes. Also, some writers tend to talk more in the room, while other writers may be quieter yet write excellent drafts

(Renfro). Thus, the showrunner has to balance each writer's unique experiences and skills to bring the story to life.

Once in the writer's room, which ranges from 6-18 people, the showrunner and staff spend "break the story." This means that the room comes up with what is going to happen in every scene. While the writers may pitch different ideas, the showrunner ultimately guides the process and makes the final decision on what goes into the outline. Most days in the writer's room last 8-10 hours. However, some showrunners will keep their writers for longer if more brainstorming is necessary (Davis). The process varies slightly if the creator and showrunner are different people. In the case of showrunner and creator duo Penny and Rae, they agree on "90%" of what goes into the script. However, in the other 10%, they often have to make creative compromises with each other, especially when financial and physical production issues arise (Renfro). In turn, this diversity of thought between the duo and in the writer's room strengthens the overall story.

With the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic, the writer's room has moved online. Showrunners now use either Zoom or Writer's Room Pro, a system developed by screenwriters that allows everyone access to the same beat sheets and whiteboard. If the room uses Zoom, the writer's assistant displays a word document with the story beats pulled up on Screen Share mode. The WGA has also provided tips on how to combat Zoom fatigue, such as taking numerous, 10-minute breaks, having every writer's microphone be off of mute, and encouraging quieter writers to speak up more, as the Zoom platform may discourage less talkative writers (WGA).

In addition to staffing and running the writer's room, the showrunner guides the staffing process for the above-the-line crew. First, the showrunner must select the director to set the visual and emotional tone for the series. Typically, a showrunner will hire an experienced

director to shoot the first 1-2 episodes. Then, directors following that will have a tonal template to follow. If the showrunner is inexperienced, the studio or network may choose the director (Hellerman). In the case of *Fleabag*, Waller-Bridge and the producing team at BBC brought on director Tim Kirkby to direct the pilot. When the pilot was a massive success and Amazon joined the producing team, seasoned director Harry Bradbeer (Enola Holmes, Ramy) took over the series. In an interview with BAFTA, Bradbeer discusses how he executed Waller-Bridge's darkly comedic vision in season two, episode one. During the restaurant scene where Fleabag is surrounded by her fighting family, Bradbeer shot medium close-ups of every person's reaction to one another and contrasted that with a wide, "theatrical" shot. In turn, these contradicting directorial choices both let the actors shine and set up the chaotic, emotional, yet hilarious tone of the series. Moreover, after Claire, Fleabag's sister, has her miscarriage in the bathroom, Bradbeer chose to shoot the rest of the episode handheld. This choice highlighted the uncertainty in Fleabag's circumstances and for her character development. In turn, the director sets up the tone of the series and is an extremely important choice a showrunner has to make.

After the showrunner and producing team select a director, the showrunner spearheads the hiring process for the rest of the above-the-line crew. According to showrunner Rebecca Adellman (Guilty Party), she looks for the most talented people available who are going to contribute their expertise and passion to the project. This includes cinematographers, production designers, 1st assistant directors, the production sound team, and more. In the case of *Fleabag*, in an interview with art director John Paul Green and director of photography Tony Miller, they both worked with Waller-Bridge and Bradbeer on setting the visual tone for the series. Particularly, they decided on using a lot of dark colors, such as blacks and greys, to emphasize the dramatic tones of the piece and parallel Fleabag's dark humor. The two made these decisions

by creating a mood board, which depicts the visual tone of the series, and getting it approved by Waller-Bridge (The Fleabag Situation). As for *Insecure*, Penny and Rae wanted to capture the authenticity of Issa's character through production design choices. For production designer Kay Lee, this meant creating an apartment that looked like it belonged to a real person and highlighted Issa's taste and style (Burg). As for the signature saturated, cinematic look, cinematographer Ava Berkofsky took special care in lighting the predominantly Black and Brown cast. Up until recently, cinematographers lit Black actors the same way that they lit white actors. Because different skin tones require different lighting needs, this process failed to showcase the beauty and nuance of Black actors. Conversely, Berkofsky loved "embracing color with all skin tones" to make the look of *Insecure* both "interesting and beautiful" (Anderson). In turn, this care in lighting Black actors and choosing to give the series a cinematic feel is one of the reasons why Penny hired Berkofsky among others.

In addition to hiring crew, the showrunner assists the casting director in hiring actors. Typically, a casting director will post a casting call on services such as Actor's Access, Cast It, Backstage, or InEntertainment. They will then receive casting self-tapes via agents, managers, or the actors themselves. Also, if an actor has a personal relationship with the showrunner or an executive producer, they may get an audition. After reviewing 1-2 rounds of casting submission tapes, the showrunner, along with the executive producers and co-executive producers, will bring the actors in for an in-person audition. The actors may also audition with other already cast characters to determine their on-screen chemistry. Finally, in the last round of casting, actors will sometimes have a screen test, which allows the showrunner, producers, and director to see what the actors look like on film. The showrunner not only makes this decision based on talent and look, but they also examine the actor's professionalism, timeliness, and humility. Showrunners

will be entering a long term relationship with actors and crewmembers, so these traits are pivotal in creating a series (Heim-Jinivisian).

With the case of *Fleabag*, Waller-Bridge previously worked with actors Sian Clifford at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts and Olivia Colman on the set of *The Iron Lady*. Waller-Bridge "fought" for Sian to have an in-person audition (Roth). Colman expressed to Waller-Bridge that she would love to star in anything the showrunner wrote because of a love for her material (Harrison). In season two, Waller-Bridge could only envision Andrew Scott, who she had known for the past 10 years, as the hot Priest. In fact, in an interview with IndieWire, Waller-Bridge says that season two of *Fleabag* may not have happened if Scott were not cast in the role (Nguyen). Not only were these actors cast because they knew Waller-Bridge on a personal level, but these personal relationships also enriched each character's on-screen chemistry. Thus, industry connections play a critical role when showrunners decide on hiring cast and crew. As for *Insecure*, Penny looks for actors who respect the script and act authentically. He also looks for actors who "grow" into their parts, meaning that as the series progresses, they "tailor" their given character to their strengths. By tailoring each role to themselves, actors inform the showrunner and the writing team on where their character should progress (Mink).

Finally, showrunners must oversee the budget and be the liaison between the writers and the financiers. As stated before, after a series is greenlit for pre-production, the network or studio gives the showrunner a large amount of money to create the show. The network or studio also hires a line producer to work with the showrunner on budgeting. Showrunner John Strauss (David Meets Man) states that showrunners then must "play a game" in balancing their interests with the studio or network's interests. This may mean making financial compromises in deciding

where to shoot and who to hire. According to Strauss, the majority of the budget is spent on hiring actors and directors, especially if they are a big name. The money also goes towards specific locations, production, design, and building sets. If a show runs over schedule or budget, the showrunner, writing team and studio executives must creatively problem solve each situation. The first choice a showrunner makes is cutting script pages and characters. The showrunner may also change shooting locations to lesser expensive places if the script allows for it. In rare instances where the showrunner and executive producers go over budget, but the choice is essential to the vision of the show, the studio may give the showrunner extra money known as "breakage" (Knell). Thus, as showrunners must hire the actors, crew, and writer's room, manage the writer's room and budget, and serve as a liaison between the writers and the network or studio, the showrunners play a crucial, extensive role in the pre-production process.

III.   Production

The role the showrunner plays on set depends on each showrunner and each series. It also depends on how many series the showrunner is overseeing. For instance, when showrunner Joss Whedon was overseeing the final season of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, and *Firefly*, he was rarely on-site at each production (Doyle). When a writing showrunner cannot be on set, the work falls on the executive producers, on set producers, and episode directors to execute the showrunner's vision. An executive producer (EP), also known as a nonwriting showrunner, has a similar workload to the showrunner in managing the budget and problem solving production issues, but they do not make the creative choices or work with the writers. Oftentimes, they come directly from the network and studio to oversee the production process (MasterClass). On set producers problem solve on set issues, or "put out the fires" as nonwriting showrunner Maggie Murphy states. Some of these issues include, but are not limited to, unexpected illness or injury,

weather changes, scheduling conflicts, or issues with operating machinery. When problems like these arise, the on set producer and showrunner have to creatively problem solve each unique situation, usually by changing the story or the shooting schedule. Finally, the episode director plays an important role on the production sets as they are the ones who work with the actors, cinematographer, set decorators, and sound team. Some showrunners like to work closely with the directors on set. In a NewFilmmakersLA interview with television director Gwyneth Horder-Payton, she states that showrunner and director Ryan Murphy will often change the director's and actor's choices when on set. Conversely, other showrunners will put more trust in their physical production team. For instance, showrunner John Strauss states that he tries to spend most of his time in the writer's room rather than on set. This is also because a series may still be writing its final episodes when it goes into production for its first episodes.

Multi-camera, 30-minute series handle physical production differently than single camera. According to Bill Prady, showrunner of *The Big Bang Theory*, there are six typical shooting days. Five of them are production days, and the sixth day is a hiatus. The cast and crew will produce a season of 24 episodes in blocks of three episodes. An episode takes about a week to shoot, so each block is three weeks. After the three weeks are up, the cast and crew take a week off. During that time, the showrunner and writers work on the upcoming scripts. In *The Big Bang Theory*, the writers begin writing in June, production begins in August, the show begins airing in September, and physical production wraps in April (Doyle). During a week of sitcom production, live audiences are invited to the set. If a joke or line does not resonate with the audience, the showrunner and writers rewrite the line or change the scene on the spot. After the episode's physical production has wrapped, the showrunner, director, and executive producers typically stay later to work on next week's episode (McCusker). Another aspect of 30-minute

situation comedies is many of them are shot in a studio or on a soundstage. One of the advantages of shooting on a stage is that it allows the showrunner more control over the lighting, sound, and editing. If it is a multi-camera comedy, the showrunner and director can watch the edits as they happen in realtime (Epic Studios).

On the other hand, most single-camera shows, whether they are 30-minute comedies or hour-long dramas, shoot on location. Shooting on location is less expensive and can add more variety to the look and feel of the show. To do this, showrunners and location managers decide together which location makes the most creative and financial sense. Both *Fleabag* and *Insecure* are examples of these shows. Specifically, *Fleabag* shot in 11 locations throughout London and its surrounding suburbs. According to cinematographer Tony Miller, each season took approximately seven weeks to shoot. As for *Insecure,* each episode shot 4-5 days on location and one day on a soundstage per week. Production took place at 26 different locations throughout South Los Angeles, where Issa Rae and Prentice Penny grew up. Their thorough knowledge of the area played a large role in choosing these locations, including Los Angeles hallmarks Randy's Donuts and The Forum (Chandler). In turn, this made heightened the show's authentic, West Coast feel.

Both showrunners did an excellent job running their respective productions. *Fleabag* cinematographer Tony Miller says that Waller-Bridge was a collaborative, generous, and empathetic showrunner. She gave each creator as much time as possible to perform their role, even if she sacrificed her own takes. She would also "rewrite" her upcoming parts each night even while acting during the days. (Marchant). Similar to Waller-Bridge, Penny wanted to create a good set environment. This meant that the majority of the people behind the camera on *Insecure* were people of color. In addition, Penny directed 1-2 episodes per season, thus

contributing his visual direction to the series. In season four, he directed "Hella LA," which Vulture calls "the boldest" episode of the season, because Lawrence's one night stand is something that happened to his friend (Bastién). Unfortunately, this doubles the amount of work the showrunner has to complete. Penny had to generate shotlists, block scenes, and work with the actors and crew on set, all while performing his showrunner duties during and after physical production. However, Penny feels that it is important to contribute his directing style to the series in addition to hiring predominantly Black or underrepresented directors (Blackfilm).

When not directing, Penny oversaw the production and continued working alongside the studio executives and on set producers. In one instance in season two, he and Rae wanted to shoot at the Forum in Los Angeles. While at first HBO was hesitant, they eventually worked with Penny to make the shoot happen (The Gather Project). Moreover, Penny oversaw several large, high production value scenes in season four. For example, there was a block party episode that involved 500 extras and shooting in Inglewood for 10 days. It also involved food trucks, vendors, clothing stores, and live performers, including Vince Staples. In the next episode, Rae and her co-star Jay Ellis participated in an "art walk" in downtown Los Angeles. To lower the financial strain for these episodes and support local Black artists, Penny and production designer Kay Lee hired vendors that he and Rae grew up supporting. They also brought in over 30 different artists to bring in their work and pick it up the next day. Not only did Penny's role on and off of the set creatively navigate these production challenges, but they also added authentic nuance to the series that brought the show to life even further. Therefore, while the showrunner may balance other positions such as directing and acting, they play an important role during the physical production process.

IV.   Post-Production

Finally, the showrunner must oversee the post-production process, particularly picture editing, sound editing, and the music and composition. First, the showrunner will oversee the picture editing process. This usually begins while the showrunner is still in physical production, as editors begin picture editing as soon as they receive dailies. According to Nena Erb, Emmy-nominated editor of *Insecure*, the rough cut is due three days after she receives the final round of dailies. Then, editors will work with the director before clearing a cut with the showrunner. After the showrunner approves the cut, the studio provides notes and works with the showrunner, director, and editor on any final revisions. Erb says that the most important aspect of her role is to fulfill the showrunner's vision. In *Insecure's* case, this means giving the series a stylized, unconventional, and cinematic essence with a strong emphasis on music and establishing shots (Altman).

Emmy award-winning editor Gary Dollmer faced similar circumstances when editing Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag.* First, *Fleabag* had a smaller budget and strict time constraints. Whereas Dollmer had multiple weeks to work on each episode for *Veep*, each episode of Fleabag typically had a week to picture edit. The actors would also provide many strong yet different performances of the same line, which made it difficult to decide which take to use. To mitigate this challenge, Dollmer would play each cut for Waller-Bridge and Bradbeer in the editing assembly and make the editing decision alongside them (The Fleabag Situation). Moreover, post-production in the United Kingdom follows a slightly different process than post-production in the United States. With television series in the U.S., the showrunner typically looks at the director's cut with fresh eyes. However, on *Fleabag*, Bradbeer and Waller-Bridge were in the editing room as soon as they were finished filming. Fortunately, Dollmer said that Waller-Bridge would give excellent notes. In one instance, she watched a cut and immediately knew something

was off. Dollmer then showed her his original cut of the performance, and they both knew that his original choice was the correct take for the series (Hullfish).

It is important to note that showrunners can spend too much time in the editing suites. In his essay, "The Eleven Laws of Showrunning," *Lost* showrunner Javier Grillo-Marxuach claims that many showrunners spend more time "looking" for their show in post-production rather than creating their series in the writer's room. In fact, many showrunners begin picking apart the editing in the first few minutes of the episode. In his process, he watches the rough cut of each episode as a whole, then gives the editor his overall notes. When the second cut comes through, Grillo-Marxuach has the episode writer watch the cut and see if it serves the story. When the writer feels that it does, then the showrunner should resume overseeing post-production. Thus, while picture editing plays a critical role in bringing the showrunner's vision to life, it is only one component of the showrunner's duties.

After an episode is picture locked, the cut goes to the sound, coloring, visual effects, and music composition team. According to Emmy-award winning sound designer Rachel Simmons (The Vampire Diaries, Houdini), an episode will first receive dialogue editing. In this process, the dialogue editors will cut out unpleasant lip smacks and make sure that the dialogue is audible. After dialogue editing, the cut will receive added sound design, which takes approximately 2-3 days to complete. Because most television series are on a time crunch, there are typically no additional "foley," or specialty sound effects that are recorded in post-production. After that, the episode will go to a sound mix stage, where the sound mixer will have one day to combine all elements of the production sound, sound design, and music. The showrunner will then watch the fully mixed episode and determine if the sound serves the vision of the series. Many times, the showrunner will make choices that sound designers may not agree

with. For instance, when working on *The Chilling Adventures of* Sabrina, showrunner Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa told sound mixer Vicki Lemar to mix the cat meow levels at an abnormally high level. In cases like these, the showrunner's decision will override the sound team's original choice (Lambert).

In addition to the sound, the music plays a significant role in shaping the series. Showrunners will work directly with composers, who create original scores for film and television, and/or a music supervisor, who "selects and licenses" music for a show (Masterclass). They are typically hired during the pre-production stage, but the composer and/or music supervisor will not work directly with the showrunner until the first few episodes have rough cuts. From the rough cuts, the composer will draft several pieces of music to send to the executive producers and showrunner. If it is a music supervisor, this individual will send the showrunner music pieces they believe would be a good fit for the series. The showrunner will then decide what musical direction the composer and/or music supervisor should take based on what they sent. Composers will have 2-3 weeks to compose for the pilot episode, anywhere between 15 and 35 minutes of music for an hour-long drama. During this process, the showrunner will continuously give constructive feedback on the composer and/or music supervisor's work (Tongue).

In the case of *Fleabag*, the series composer was Phoebe Waller-Bridge's sister Isobel Waller-Bridge. For season one, the composer created a metallic, electric guitar-based theme song to sum up the unconventional, edgy comedy. However, for season two, the Waller-Bridge sisters used religious, choral style composition to mirror Fleabag's burgeoning relationship with the priest. In an interview with IndieWire, Isobel Waller-Bridge states that in the beginning of the series, she used a boy's choir to complement the series romantic beginnings. By the end of the

show, she used an adult choir to draw attention to Fleabag's maturing relationship development. One of the most fascinating music choices the Waller-Bridge sisters decided on was scoring the scene where Fleabag and the priest kiss. In the song "Kyrie," which is based on an orthodox Christian hymnal, she snuck "words that could be interpreted as filthy words" in the piece. This creative, comedic choice from both Phoebe and Isobel adds a hilarious, dark nuance to *Fleabag* (Nepilova).

In the case of *Insecure*, Penny works with composer Raphael Saadiq and music supervisor Kier Lehman. In an interview with Vulture, Saadiq says that he, Penny, Rae, and Lehman met at least twice a week during the post-production process. In these meetings, they would discuss where to place the music in the picture locked cut. Saadiq would also score different pieces for each protagonist to match their personalities while still upholding a "West Coast" feel (Harris). Similarly, music supervisor Lehman worked with Rae and Penny to select the show's vibrant soundtrack. Lehman says that Rae was especially involved in the music selection process and would consistently bring him new music to consider. Penny, Lehman, and the creative team focused heavily on bringing in LA-based, up and coming artists that were women and people of color. Not only does this mirror Issa's experience as a Black woman navigating her late 20s and early 30s, but this choice also gives talented artists a platform. Lehman and Penny also wanted to blend Black and Latinx culture into the score. For instance, in season four, Lehman added in a Spanish "Mexican Thanksgiving song" in episode eight. Penny's strong relationship with RCA records also allows him and his team access to more renowned Black and Latinx musicians, such as SZA and Miguel. This cultural blend enriches the series' production value, bolsters character development, and highlights the broader, vibrant South Los Angeles communities.

After selecting the music, the showrunner and the music supervisor must obtain the rights from the artists and/or record labels. On *Insecure*, this was a more difficult process in season one because the series had not taken off yet. It is also difficult to receive clearances for R&B beat samples and songs from singer/songwriters that do not have representation. Therefore, Penny and Lehman often had to balance the creative component of choosing music for the series while managing the deadlines and paperwork (Herman). However, once the music, sound, and picture are set, the episode will be overviewed by the showrunner, executive producers, and studio/network once more. From there, the episode is finished. The showrunner will then continue overseeing the rest of physical production, post-production, and the writer's room until the set is wrapped and the show is ready to air.

Therefore, through the development, pre-production, production, and post-production processes, the showrunner shapes the creative vision for their respective television series while managing the behind-the-scenes financial and logistical choices. Due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, consolidation of streaming services, and cultural change in consumer tastes, the role of the showrunner remains uncertain. Julie Winograd, Manager of Production at Circle Television Studios, says that there may be a shift towards hybrid and in-person Zoom meetings in the development and pre-production stages. She also says that there may be a better work-life balance for showrunners and television executives due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as many individuals will be able to perform tasks at home. As for the future of what types of shows will air, many experts say that the pandemic has hastened the end of broadcast cable shows. This is because many audiences no longer have steady work-life schedules that incorporate their weekly broadcast viewing (Berman). This lack of schedule has also led to an increase in streaming service subscribers. For this reason, several experts predict that television will see a rise in high-

budget, limited series from studios such as Disney+, Netflix, Hulu, Peacock, and HBO MAX (Katz). Therefore, showrunners may find themselves working for video-on-demand companies and creating high-concept, high production value shows, especially as the COVID-19 vaccine is distributed across the world and productions resume. While future showrunners may face different challenges in overseeing television projects, their position will still have an enormous impact on shaping both television series and the broader sociocultural landscape. As people such as Prentice Penny and Phoebe Waller-Bridge continue to make groundbreaking, provocative series that defy cultural norms, showrunners can use their power to bring awareness to various social justice issues, generate empathy between audiences from different backgrounds, and use humor to make the world a more just, equitable place.

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