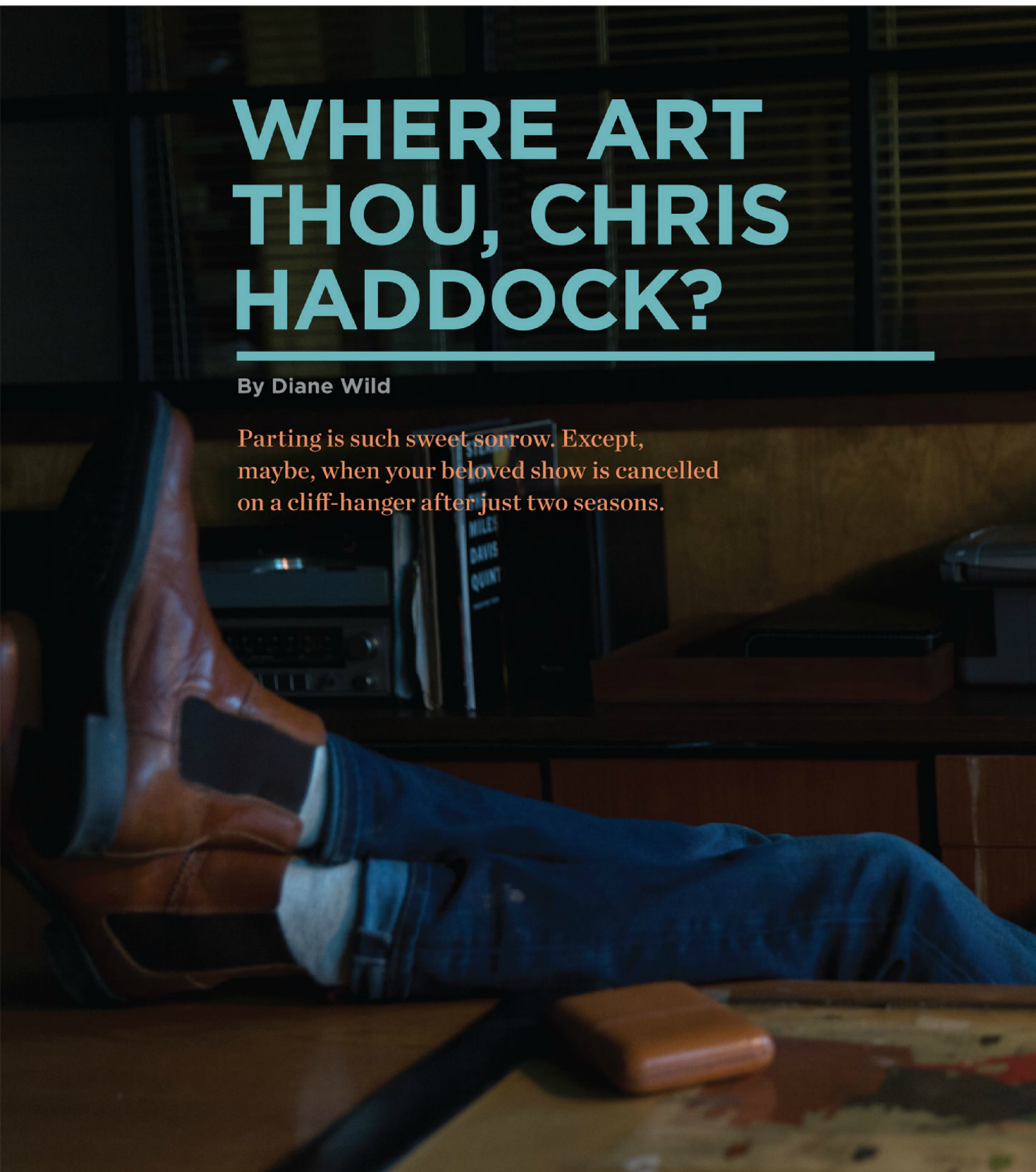


# WHERE ART THOU, CHRIS HADDOCK?

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By Diane Wild

Parting is such sweet sorrow. Except, maybe, when your beloved show is cancelled on a cliff-hanger after just two seasons.





Chris Haddock and CBC parted ways noisily after the demise of *Intelligence*, the Vancouver-based showrunner's 2005-07 serialized drama that ended with the main character wounded in a drive-by shooting.

"I got over that in about 24 hours," says Haddock. "With the birth of every show, you know cancellation is coming sometime. If you're on an American network you can be off the air in two episodes, so the fact we got two good years was nice."

While "patiently waiting for the CBC regime to change," he moved to New York and worked on *Boardwalk Empire*. With Heather Conway's installation as executive vice president of English services in late 2013, the public broadcaster turned its sights to more serialized, premium-quality shows, and one day, Haddock got a call from Sally Catto, the general manager of programming.

"I've been a fan of Chris's since my earlier days at CBC," says Catto, who had worked with him on *Intelligence* and characterizes him as "an incredible talent with a unique and distinct voice."

With her desire to bring more cable-like shows to the table, she thought, "who better than Chris?" When she asked him what ideas he had percolating, *The Romeo Section* bubbled up.

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The series feels like a cousin to *Intelligence* in style and substance. Andrew Airlie plays ex-spy Wolfgang McGee, a professor with a freelance side job managing a roster of "Romeo and Juliet" spies – informants engaged in intimate relations with intelligence targets. Haddock has long held an interest in espionage, with sources from his *Intelligence* days helping him delve into the real-world issues involved. "As a writer, I need to have one foot in the truth and then I can let the rest of myself wander."

Haddock said exploring the espionage theme is "something I've wanted to do for a long time. I'd been trying to look for the right formula. It goes way back to the second year of *Da Vinci* when I wanted to create a spin-off out of *Da Vinci*, but then it took a long time to get *Intelligence* going. I first started talking to [*Romeo Section* executive producer/director] Steve Surjik about this particular concept a few years ago. And then the CBC tapped me and asked me if I was interested in coming back and doing something for them."

Given his long history at CBC, there were few surprises for either side in the rekindled relationship.

"You have to have a lot of trust," says Catto, who knew she had to be prepared to work the way Haddock works, noting his understated writing style depends heavily on the execution of a line or the glance of a character. "Chris often won't tell you where he's going in the series, which is unusual given we're the broadcaster. But you choose who you work with carefully and then honour that vision."

"He has a very strong belief that he wants us to be the audience," she says. "He wants us to react and give feedback not knowing what's coming. It's not completely hands off, but it's more feedback at the cut stage. And his cuts come in so strong it's more general discussion than getting into the details."

"One of the great benefits of working with CBC is they've worked with me before and they know I'm not going to be calling them with line changes," says Haddock. "We get our talking done with the network early. They send their notes on every script and we work with them, argue with them. It's always about making it better. They see things we don't see."

Haddock's year of working for *Boardwalk Empire* – the first time in a dozen or so years he wasn't the boss – helped him reflect on his own showrunning style. He found it a liberating luxury to be able to see the job from a distance.

"I got to work with such stellar actors in New York and we had a room full of fantastic writers. Everyone in that room had some kind of prize – an Emmy, a Pulitzer. It was a much slower-paced show with almost theatrical staging. I could study how to approach that, taking the risk to stage a dramatic scene and keeping the pace down."

That meshed with Haddock's own approach, though with his work in Canada, "a lot of it is budget constraints – you don't have a big budget, so it comes down to actors and dialogue, and that's our root. We've been doing that style for a long time."

Since *The Romeo Section's* main character is an academic, Haddock wanted a pace that mirrored



Romeo Section's Andrew Airlie and Juan Riedinger.

that world, allowing for thoughtfulness, moments of reading, writing, and lecturing.

On set, that meant going against trend and eliminating handheld cameras in favour of dollies, for example. "This is really about the characters and the looks between them and the things left unsaid, so we need to keep the camera less busy and more focused on the actors."

*Boardwalk* creator and showrunner Terence Winter's style was to spend most of his time in the writing room managing the writers rather than on set, something Haddock does not emulate.

"We don't have a writers' room, we have a writers' closet," he says of his *Romeo* team, which consists of Haddock, Jesse McKeown (*Da Vinci's Inquest*, 19-2) and actor/novelist Stephen E. Miller, who had been slated to write *Da Vinci's* novels for Penguin until his own material took off.

Haddock had larger rooms when working in Los Angeles, and was one of eight on *Boardwalk Empire*, but he jokes that "management of writers is a full-time job because they're all a bit squirrely ... with the exception of me."

"Where I've been successful in the past with a larger writing room is to look forward down the line at turning points in the storyline," says Haddock, "but the actual nitty gritty, it's a focused operation."

He considers the math in Canada of small budgets and short season orders, but also simply finds working with a small staff more productive. While mapping out *The Romeo Section*, the three writers weren't even in the same city, instead meeting by phone five days a week. "You eliminate all the time spent wanting a coffee, wanting another coffee, wanting a smoke break, then wanting another coffee," he says. "Our time together was reduced to maybe a couple hours a day and it allowed the rest of our day to arrange to our own daily writing habits."

He compares that to full days in a typical writers' room where "after all that yacking you have to produce the work. A lot of days you aren't left with a lot of writing time and you've burned your molecules on the writer jams."

His showrunning style has evolved partly from his desire to carve out time to be on set as the



voice in charge. “I’m there helping people feel calm, I liaise with various departments, I do the things that are unavailable to a director coming in.”

He’s also there grabbing the on-set energy and running with it, allowing inspiration to happen but relying more on a solidly-crafted script going into it. He will often reject line changes that “sound fresh because it’s the first time we’ve heard it,

whereas the original sounds stale because we’ve rehearsed it five times. But that’s like changing your bet at the wicket.”

He has little patience for eating set time for continuity, as in making sure details look the same from one shot to another. “Nobody cares. That’s not the kind of show we’re doing. Leave the hair alone. It was the same thing down in LA. I told the

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Teamsters to stop washing the cars. In every show, the car looks like it’s off the showroom no matter how old it is.”

Above all, just as CBC allows him autonomy, he trusts those around him to do their jobs well. Because *Romeo* was shot in digital he knew they could shoot reams of footage “and the poor assistant editors have to log all that. We shot as if it was film in very few takes.”

The directors blocked out scenes tightly, the actors didn’t need to provide “infinite variations of a performance,” and Haddock stayed out of the editing room as much as possible, preferring to see what the director and editor found in the story and tweaking if he had notes.

His results have generated acclaim, and ratings for *The Romeo Section*’s first season were about on par with what *Intelligence* garnered, with 10 years of additional audience fragmentation to factor in. “In a fiercely competitive environment for people’s eyeballs, they’ve done a terrific job,” Haddock says of CBC. “I think they’ve backed the show to the greatest extent they could rationally allow themselves.”

While Catto acknowledges she wishes more people were watching, “I definitely knew with Chris’s work it’s more niche, and by the nature of serialized storytelling, I know you’re appealing to a certain audience that would be smaller than some of our series that are more episodic.”

She stops short of blaming the Toronto Blue Jays for their incredible run that seeped into the

fall premiere season and cannibalized some of the audience, and ponders what effect advertising breaks have on the audience of a complexly plotted show of the kind more commonly seen on cable or Netflix.

Regardless, she says “I think it’s an outstanding series. We’re so proud of it and we’re proud to be working with Chris. He’s an original and a brilliant writer. We’re lucky to be working with him. It’s also great to see Vancouver reflected on the public broadcaster and he does that in such an organic way.”

Haddock’s experience away from Vancouver taught him something else: “I realized the best conditions I could possibly get I had had at the CBC for most of the time I worked there.”

He cites his familiarity with Vancouver and his belief that specificity of setting allows for more grounded storytelling with international appeal, as well as his comfortable relationships with the network, international distributor, directors, producers and key personnel on the show. “I have the best of all worlds here.”

Despite our era of supposedly “peak TV,” Haddock sees the number of outlets for the kind of show he delivers as limited. “The niche markets have boomed, and everyone seems to attract a smallish audience. Because they’re subscription services that’s doable. CBC has given me the backing of a broadcast network while looking for the aesthetics of a cable show.

“I’ve got no ambition beyond churning out the best stuff I can for the Canadian audience.” ■