

Showrunners

special report

Show and Tell

Behind the scenes with the writer-producers calling the shots on America's top scripted series



Vince Gilligan
"Breaking Bad"
(AMC)

Why are Gilligan's five Emmy nominations — including outstanding drama — stressing him out? "There is pressure of the self-induced variety," draws the Virginia native. "This is the first time I'm 'The Guy,'" he says, noting he learned the ropes while working closely with Chris Carter on "The X-Files." "Chris expected even the lowliest staff writer to take ownership of his episode — that's something a lot of showrunners don't offer," Gilligan says. He's found a way to relieve some of his anxiety: a shiny BB gun he keeps in his office. "When we're stuck we have a little target practice. Hopefully the BBs don't ricochet and hit anybody in the eye."



Peter Tolan
"Rescue Me" (FX)

Showrunners write and produce but few also direct or star. When Tolan helms and Leary is in his zone, their "Rescue Me" can power through more than 10-15 pages a day while keeping a relatively sane schedule. "There's no chain of command to go through," says Tolan, a "Home Improvement" and "Larry Sanders Show" veteran, of his process. "My decisions are immediate." That hands-on attention helped "Rescue" bounce back from a disappointing fourth season, and Tolan is looking beyond the show's final season in 2011, starting a production company with his former agent, Michael Wimer. "There are fewer fires to put out five seasons in," Tolan says of "Rescue." With him, all puns are intended.



Denis Leary
"Rescue Me" (FX)



Al Jean
"The Simpsons"
(Fox)

since developed his own strategies: "Never settle. You have to be continually asking how you can make a script

Here's how long "The Simpsons" has been around: When Jean first joined the show they still used typists to cut-and-paste script changes. After showrunning Seasons 3 and 4, he left to work on "The Critic" but returned in Season 13 and hasn't left. He credits "ALF" showrunner Bob Bendetson for teaching him the game but he's long

better." At one point Jean was overseeing the series' year-round production process and 2007's "The Simpsons Movie," so "after that, just doing the show alone was like being able to swim without a 100-pound weight on your back," he says.



Shonda Rhimes
"Grey's Anatomy,"
"Private Practice"
(ABC)

really needed one. "If you do things right then you can spend the morning at your child's play at school." Rhimes is using that time to write a feature film — and to try not to micromanage: "To cut a writing staff's knees out from under them by being too controlling is the worst."

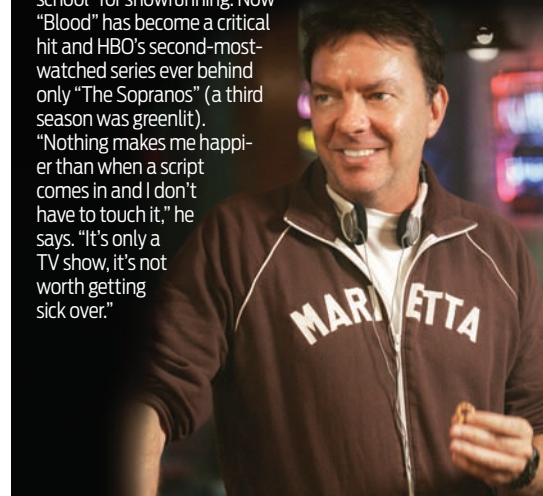
Matthew Weiner
"Mad Men" (AMC)

Weiner's much-lauded brainchild scooped up a drama series-best 16 Emmy nominations in July, and Season 3 launched last month with a record 4.5 million viewers (and a fourth season pickup from AMC). But Weiner still gets worked up when his audience doesn't catch nuances in the story, which he has meticulously plotted out for five or six seasons. "There are things I think are super-obvious that people don't get," says "The Sopranos" veteran. But he has one indispensable arbiter: His wife. "I can't think of many other shows where people will openly admit that, but I have complete confidence in her opinion," he says.

There have been a lot of firsts for Heller this year: His "Mentalist" finished its first season; its star Simon Baker earned his first Emmy nomination; and the

>> Alan Ball "True Blood" (HBO)

Hard to believe that Ball, a serious explorer of suburban angst, would end up running a show that drew one of the largest crowds at July's San Diego Comic-Con International. But such are the vagaries of the TV business. Ball started in sitcoms (co-running "Cybill" for "about two weeks," he jokes) but "Six Feet Under" was "like film school" for showrunning. Now "Blood" has become a critical hit and HBO's second-most-watched series ever behind only "The Sopranos" (a third season was greenlit). "Nothing makes me happier than when a script comes in and I don't have to touch it," he says. "It's only a TV show, it's not worth getting sick over."



Bruno Heller
"The Mentalist"
(CBS)

show is the first new series to finish a week atop Nielsen's prime-time ratings since "Desperate Housewives" back in 2005. Heller credits his team, especially Baker: "From the beginning, Simon and I just clicked," says the London-born producer, who wrote "Rome" for HBO and is hoping a

feature version will someday come to pass. Such success does come with pressure, he admits, but "It's far better than the alternative."

METHODOLOGY

Editors based the 40 selections in these pages on the following criteria:

1. Direct responsibility for the day-to-day operation and creative output of a scripted show currently on the air or debuting in the fall.
2. How prolific the showrunner is: writer-producers with more than one show on the air were more likely to be included.
3. Nielsen ratings of the current show(s).
4. Critical praise and/or Emmy attention.
5. Track record and proven ability to deliver high quality and high ratings.

Note: This list primarily focuses on writing showrunners/creators. Uber-producers and franchise originators were not considered, including Dick Wolf ("Law & Order"), J.J. Abrams ("Lost," "Fringe"), Anthony Zuiker ("CSI") and John Wells ("Southland").

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Doug Ellin
"Entourage" (HBO)

"I don't have a lot of writers on the show," says Ellin, which doesn't make his job any easier. Even with a lean staff, the HBO stalwart now averages 3 million viewers, received a seventh season pickup and another comedy series Emmy nomination. Plus, Ari Gold will be proud to see the show hit the all-important syndication in 2010.

Between bites of his trusted chocolate-covered pretzels, Ellin says he's pitching a new show to HBO and otherwise trying to stay sane. "You have to not panic when there's 4,000 things coming," he says. "But when you're a neurotic Jew from New York you have a tendency to."



Carol Mendelsohn
"CSI: Crime Scene Investigation" (CBS)



Ann Donahue
"CSI: Miami" (CBS)



Pam Veasey
"CSI: NY" (CBS)

The mavens shepherding CBS' three-headed franchise need to work together to avoid repeating crimes. But they're also fiercely competitive, sometimes firing off e-mails to headquarters at Jerry Bruckheimer Television to claim dibs on the best ideas. "New York tends to win a lot of those races," Mendelsohn admits. "Pam is an avid researcher." The trio earned showrunner stripes in diverse places: "The District" (Veasey), "Melrose Place" (Mendelsohn) and the short-lived Steven Spielberg cop show "High Incident" (Donahue) but they agree the responsibility of their current jobs is worth the sacrifices. Well, most of the time. "There are some days where I wake up and say, 'I don't want to be the grownup today,'" Veasey says. "And then there are days when I go, 'Gosh, I really get to do this?'"

Joss Whedon
"Dollhouse" (Fox)

One of only a handful of name-brand showrunners, Whedon marvels at his cult following. "The celebrity writer exists in a way it never has before," he says. "Frankly, nice timing." That fandom helped save "Dollhouse" from first-season extinction, and this year he's giving back by hiring guest actors from "Battlestar Galactica" and his old shows "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and "Firefly." "Having those actors speeds up my process without compromising anything," he says. Whedon splits his time filming the tightly budgeted second season of "Dollhouse" and the MGM feature



>> David Shore and Katie Jacobs
"House" (Fox)

Jacobs was so dedicated to Shore's promise as a writer-producer that in 2004 she used discretionary funds from a deal with Universal to have him hired on at "Century City" as a consulting producer — so he could write the "House" pilot. The two have paired well since; Jacobs is a nonwriting showrunner but directs episodes (including the two-hour Sept. 21 season premiere) while Shore writes and develops. He's also revamping "The Rockford Files" for NBC but promises double duty won't distract him. "The most important thing is to treat Day 1,000 the same as Day 1." Meanwhile, Jacobs continues to mark up her favorite "House-isms" on each script. "I'm the biggest fan," she says.

David Shore and star Hugh Laurie

"Cabin in the Woods." But his real passion is elsewhere. "The only real pressure I'm under is I want to play blocks with my kids."



Tim Kring
"Heroes" (NBC)

Showrunners ignore their audiences at their peril, so Kring has to be extra-attentive. "The idea is to look at the show the way fans do," he says. Working seven months ahead of airdates, he and his writers try to anticipate audience reactions to plot developments. For

the fourth season he plans to focus on fewer characters, which is similar to what Damon Lindelof is doing on "Lost" — no surprise there because Kring and Lindelof are friends from their "Crossing Jordan" days and often discuss stories. "There's definitely some DNA shared between us," Kring says. He admires showrunners who maintain perspective on their story lines. "You have to fly 5,000 feet above to see the bigger picture."

When things get hectic for two-show man Daniels, he calls on family. Brother-in-law Paul Lieberstein has stepped up to help run "The Office" (as well as co-star as Toby). Mike Schur (no relation) co-runs "Parks," allowing Daniels to jump between them.

With 34 combined episodes last year, parceling out duties is essential, he says: "You have to be able to teach people your vision of the show; if you have to do everything your-



Gregg Daniels
"The Office,"
"Parks and Recreation" (NBC)

self constantly, you burn out. And it's fun to get them to play the game." Plus, that means he can indulge in his snack food vice — including the 40 bottles of marshmallow fluff someone sent him. "I'm only scratching the surface of that."



Hart Hanson
"Bones" (Fox)

Hanson is always amazed at fan response to his Comic-Con panels. "It's hard to remember we have 10 million viewers," he jokes. After showrunning Canada's "Traitors" (where "House" creator David Shore toiled briefly), Hanson segued to America with "Judging Amy," where he devised a way to avoid notes from above: "I played the studio and the network against each other, and tried to make the show while they're not looking." Now in his fifth season of "Bones," he can be found on Friday nights watching production closely: "It's important to have a feel for what's going on so you can work toward the quirks of the set and the actors."

Bays and Thomas haven't just pioneered the multicamera/hybrid sitcom, this year they scored a comedy series Emmy nomination and their breakout star, Neil Patrick Harris, will host the show. "We survived," says Thomas, who trades off episodic duties with Bays. "For a sitcom, half the battle is remaining on the air." The former college buddies owe their showrunning expertise to a stint on CBS' "Late Show With David



Carter Bays
"How I Met Your Mother" (CBS)

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Craig Thomas
"How I Met Your Mother" (CBS)

Letterman": "On that show, if you had an idea you had to execute it yourself," Thomas says. "That kind of specificity and pressure was great." Today, Thomas says he and Bays' brains have "melded" — they recently left virtually the same note in the same location on two different copies of the same script.



Shawn Ryan
"Lie to Me" (Fox)

Ryan might not have seemed the most natural choice to jump into a show already under way, but the creator and showrunner of FX's "The Shield" and CBS' "The Unit" didn't think he could say no to Fox. "I didn't want to be stepping over another writer's dead body, but I'm really enjoying it," he says,

adding that compared with his past two serialized gigs, "Lie to Me" is a luxury: "We can actually work on two scripts at once." He's also shepherding "Terriers," a pilot at FX, and another put pilot at Fox called "Ridealong" that lands him back on the police beat.



Jenji Kohan
"Weeds" (Showtime)

Five years after launching her cable creation, Kohan measures her success in pounds: "I'm better about not eating everything in sight," she says, noting another evolution: "I was always fast at rewrites, but now I can do them in record time." A veteran pilot scribe and a producer on "Gilmore Girls" before she sold "Weeds," Kohan admits

"it's unusual to keep coming back to the same place each year," but earning a comedy series



Andy Breckman
"Monk" (USA Network)

A veteran of late-night variety shows like NBC's "Saturday Night Live," Breckman got his "Monk" deal "before I even knew what an act break was," he admits. Now, eight years later, he's in the middle of the show's final season, and he's steered star Tony Shalhoub to three Emmys. Breckman credits Shalhoub for teaching him how to be "generous" with writers. With the show behind him, Breckman will continue co-hosting the radio show he's done for decades, is co-writing a feature about Robert Frost, and he might even take on another mystery-comedy series. "I feel like I just put myself through eight years of college," he says. "It would be foolish to throw all of that education away."

Emmy nomination for the first time has been invigorating. "I want to keep this going, but also continue to create new shows. I want every writer I work with to have his or her own show that I can supervise."

Shane Brennan
"NCIS," "NCIS: Los Angeles" (CBS)

Brennan puts a lot of extra leg work into his showrunning duties: "NCIS," a top 10 ratings hit head-

ing into its seventh season, films in Valencia, Calif.; freshman offering "NCIS: Los Angeles," which premieres Sept. 22, is filmed an hour away on the Paramount lot in Hollywood, where Brennan is stationed. But he has his methods of keeping things well-oiled: All paperwork is



color-coded, and he has two assistants to keep him organized. "I say this with fingers crossed, but I had expected to be busier," says the Australia-born "CSI: Miami" veteran. "We're ahead on scripts for both shows, and I had the weekend off, so I can't complain."

A master of multitasking, Murphy has spent the better part of the year working on the last 18 episodes of "Nip/Tuck" while balancing his duties on the first 13 episodes of his high school comedy "Glee" — all while preparing to direct the feature "Eat, Pray, Love" starring Julia Roberts for Columbia.

Answering to two networks also upped the ante, he says: "It was very tricky."



Ryan Murphy
"Nip/Tuck" (FX); "Glee" (Fox)

vi • sion • ar • y [vizh ə 'nĕr ē] n.

1. An individual characterized by unusually acute foresight and imagination.

Congratulations Glenn!
Love,
Ron and Karen

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Everyone was worried about whether I could do it, but once I showed I could they were all incredibly supportive." Murphy's secret weapon? "A nurse who comes to the office once a week to give me B-12 shots. Now everyone's getting them."



Glenn Gordon Caron
"Medium" (CBS)

Few shows survive cancellation, but when NBC dropped "Medium" after its fifth season, CBS brought it back from the dead, setting up a supernatural block with the similarly themed "Ghost Whisperer." The result is "a wonderful honeymoon period," says Caron, who knows something about chaotic romances, having

created "Moonlighting" in the '80s. That pioneering show wouldn't seem to have much in common with a series about a psychic mom, but Caron recalls that Debra Winger once told him, "Everything you do is about the relationships between men and women." He says, "This may look like a crime show, but it's really about an American marriage."



Bill Lawrence
"Scrubs," "Cougar Town" (ABC)

Launching a new comedy is one thing; launching one while completely revamping your old comedy — now in its ninth season — is crazy talk. "I personally thought 'Scrubs' would be over," Lawrence admits. "But if there's an opportunity to keep 110 people employed, I'm willing to see if it can have new life."

He picked up tips on showrunning from fellow "Spin City" co-creator Gary David Goldberg, including "don't ask an actor what he thinks about his character unless you have three or four hours to spare." Lawrence says his devil is still time management, especially finding time for his most important side project: "Trying to see my kids every couple of days."



Marc Cherry
"Desperate Housewives" (ABC)

With five high-rated seasons under his belt, Cherry has learned a few things about managing a hit show. "I don't freak out as much as I used to," he says. "Despite the best-laid plans, something will always go wrong and I'll find a way to fix it." That includes being unafraid to mix up the cast. This season Cherry introduces former "Sopranos" star Drea de Matteo, while Season 1's Jesse



>> Seth MacFarlane

"Family Guy," "American Dad," "The Cleveland Show" (Fox)

MacFarlane managed to land a historic comedy series Emmy nomination for "Family Guy" this year while creating two notable episodes — one confined to a single room and another about abortion (which is going direct to DVD). "If we break ground we haven't broken before, even if it's something that could potentially ruin the series, we'll do it," laughs MacFarlane. He continues to voice many characters but he says he knows his limits, leaving day-to-day duties on his "American Dad" to co-creators Mike Barker and Matt Weitzman, and "The Cleveland Show" (which premieres Sept. 27) to co-creators Rich Appel and Mike Henry. "I'm not as creatively satisfied splitting my time between three projects equally," MacFarlane says.

Metcalf will reprise his hunky gardener character. And in true primetime soap style, there'll be a "Who Shot J.R.?"-esque mystery, though Cherry is a bit anxious about the new territory. "I've never done anything like this before," he says.



Jason Katims
"Friday Night Lights" (NBC/DirectTV)
"Parenthood" (NBC)

Katims' critically acclaimed but low-rated "Lights" (4.4 million watched the Season 3 finale) was picked up for two more seasons, making it syndicable. He celebrated by signing on for a second series. "Parenthood" has been delayed to midseason because of star Maura Tierney's illness but Katims remains calm: "You have to roll with the

punches," says the New York-born playwright, who was tapped by Ed Zwick to write scripts for "My So-Called Life." He's since learned that running a show doesn't mean doing every job himself, so he leaves the office to pen episodes. "I can't write in the office. I always write at Starbucks or coffee shops. I wear one place out and go to the next."

Chuck Lorre
"The Big Bang Theory," "Two and a Half Men" (CBS)

In his 25-year career, Lorre has earned the right to sit back as a fig-

urehead, but he remains as hands-on as ever with his shows. "I'm running back and forth and trying to learn how to delegate," he says. "But it's not in my nature." He has a secret to all that stamina: "human growth steroids," he jokes. The one-time singer-guitarist got his TV start on "Charles in Charge" and his big break as a supervising producer on "Roseanne." Now two of his leads (Charlie Sheen, Jim Parsons) will face off in



the comedy lead actor Emmy category. "I'm always rising to a new level of incompetence and inefficiency," Lorre says. "I think, 'Oh God, this sucks, and we're all going to die!'"

When you've got "Frasier" on your résumé, you should feel confident about your new creation — especially when ABC was so high on "Modern Family" it was screened in its entirety at May's upfronts. But Levitan and Lloyd are still in flinch mode since their last series, 2007's "Back To You," wasn't renewed by Fox. "Now that we're in production, we're feeling calmer," Levitan says. The single-camera series has brought a welcome challenge to their partnership, which is built on checks and balances: "Chris is more careful and deliberate, and I am more prone to flights of fancy," Levitan says.



Steve Levitan
"Modern Family" (ABC)



Christopher Lloyd
"Modern Family" (ABC)

"The inherent challenge in doing anything for five years — a television show, a charity event, a marriage — is keeping it fresh and alive," says Duff, a relative newcomer to series TV,

who started out scripting the 1992 Jim Carrey movie-of-the-week "Doing Time on Maple Drive." Today, he's driving TNT's original programming engine, drawing

about 7 million viewers per week to his Kyra Sedgwick crime drama — numbers that best some broadcast shows. Duff's success means TNT has



James Duff
"The Closer" (TNT)

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been able to grow other shows, which in turn helps "Closer." "TNT having more dramas has been a plus for us because they've been able to promote 'The Closer' on many different platforms on its own network."



Ed Bernero
"Criminal Minds"
(CBS)

With the CBS stalwart approaching its 100th episode this season, Bernero admits one of his biggest headaches is avoiding repeating story lines. "The challenge we give to each other is asking, 'Wait, didn't we do that in Episode 4?'" he says. This season

"Minds" goes up against another speed bump — facing off with NBC's "Law & Order: SVU," which is shifting to compete with "Minds." "Is that right?" asks the former beat cop, who signed a two-year overall deal with ABC Studios in August. "I think there's room for all shows. It's too difficult to worry what we're going to be going up against."



Damon Lindelof
"Lost" (ABC)



Carlton Cuse
"Lost" (ABC)

vision," says Cuse, citing a quote from the show: "Live together, die alone?"

Cuse and Lindelof are used to being stars at Comic-Con, but this year's "Lost" presentation added a new dimension: skits. "In our wildest dreams we never thought we'd be doing a pseudo-Broadway show for 6,500 fans," Cuse says. In seven months the duo finally escape the island, and neither is revealing what project he'll tackle next. Having known each other since "Nash Bridges," Lindelof says he "begged" Cuse to come aboard

"Lost" when co-creator J.J. Abrams departed to make 2006's "Mission: Impossible III," and they've shared showrunning duties ever since. "Unity of management helps us execute our



Don Reo
"Til Death,"
"Brothers" (Fox)

Reo's credits range from "M*A*S*H*" to the recently canceled "Everybody Hates Chris," and he isn't just running two sitcoms in the fall, he's got his own hourlong block on Friday nights. "It gives me the opportunity to be a colossal failure," he jokes. But to streamline budgets, he's using the same staff on

both shows, shooting on different days on adjacent sound stages. "It's about as simple as you can make it," says the "My Wife and Kids" co-creator, "but it's still complicated."

Twenty-odd years in, the "L&O" franchise might be a little creaky, but all are back this season and "SVU," now filming its 11th season, maintains a firm ratings grip. All are headed by first-time, franchise-loyal showrunners. "You have to support writers to the death," says Baer, who learned the trade working for John Wells on "ER." But, he admits, "the worst part is having to fire somebody, anybody." The

The Cast and Crew of CSI: Miami Congratulate our showrunner

ANN DONAHUE

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CSI: MIAMI

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Rene Balcer
"Law & Order"
(NBC)



Neal Baer
"Law & Order: SVU"
(NBC)



Walon Green
"Law & Order: CI"
(USA Network)

"L&O" team communicates regularly but Balcer is not fond of co-showrunner arrangements. "Networks and studios have found this way to undermine the moral authority of the showrunner and make them more like hired hands," he grouses. A former pediatrician, Baer picks other battles: Showing cigarette smoking on "SVU" is banned virtually outright.



Tina Fey
"30 Rock" (NBC)

Fey gets the American Express commercials and the Vanity Fair covers but Carlock is just as involved in making the Emmy-winning show happen each week. He characterizes their management style as "generally panicked," adding: "We're so grateful for the attention, but we still act

like we're underdogs and are as unhappy with everything we do as possible." The duo developed their collaboration skills on "Saturday Night Live." "Tina's very good at keeping the crazier stuff in check," Carlock says, "while I'm maybe better at pushing it."



Robert Carlock
"30 Rock" (NBC)



Brenda Hampton
"Secret Life of the American Teenager"
(ABC Family)

"Teenager" began as a show about an unplanned teen pregnancy. But after its first season set ratings records for the cabler, Hampton's second season had to work around co-star Molly Ringwald's real-life expectancy. A hiatus is a challenge for any showrunner but Hampton — who also created the long-running "7th Heaven" — keeps control of her show's budget as well as its creative side. She prefers running the production "the old-fashioned way," she says.

This past spring, Schwartz rode a showrunner roller coaster: "Gossip Girl" was renewed early but his pilot for a spinoff missed the cut. Then "Chuck" survived with an eleventh-hour midseason order. Now he's busy giving each of his series a third-season revamping, as the "Gossip" teens go to college and Chuck discovers new powers. The 33-year-old is already a showrunning veteran, having



Josh Schwartz
"Gossip Girl," (CW)
"Chuck" (NBC)



>> **Steve Franks**
"Psych" (USA Network)

TV newcomer Franks would like his crew and staff to have fun ("or at least remember what it's like to be happy") while working. But he's not afraid to push, declaring that he wanted six scripts ready by the first day of production this season. "We got seven," he boasts. With a boosted budget thanks to strong ratings, Franks is working through a wish list of genres: "This year, we get to make a Western, a caper and a Bollywood musical — on consecutive weeks," he says. He's also working on a spec feature script. "Long term, I want to find collaborators who will allow me to continue to direct — and I'd like to get my guitar out of the garage."

landed his first series ("The O.C.") at 26. So he knows that he needs to be willing to shake things up. "You want to be able to keep delivering the show that the audience has come to expect, but also push the series in new, unexpected directions."



Howard Gordon
"24" (Fox)

Gordon had a busy year, even by showrunner standards. He filmed a two-hour "24" movie while shooting regular season episodes, then moved his show's setting from L.A. to Washington, rethought the season's story arc during a brief production shutdown and in his spare time

dealt with Kiefer Sutherland's legal issues. But something worked: "24: Redemption" earned Sutherland another Emmy nom, and while ratings for the show's seventh season dipped, new cast member Cherry Jones scored an Emmy nom. "We just put the movie in our regular production schedule, it was remarkably seamless," Gordon says. Showrunning "24" since 2005, he says his management style is inclusive. "I don't have any illusion that I have papal immunity and I'm always right," he says. "Everyone should have a voice and a stake in the show?"



Matt Nix
"Burn Notice"
(USA Network)

If USA Network is on fire, partial credit goes to Nix, who drew 7.6 million viewers to "Burn's" August finale, which earned a fourth season renewal. As a first-time creator-showrunner (he also got a 13-episode order for a new Fox series), Nix says he's com-

pensated for a lack of experience by surrounding himself with a carefully selected co-workers: "I have no mercenaries who come to do the work for a paycheck," he

says. Nix also makes sure his team bonds in other ways — like at paintball matches.

After three seasons, HBO's polygamy drama is finally getting critical affection, including a best drama series Emmy nomination. Not bad for a show created by newbies to the TV biz. Olsen and Scheffer — who also are married to one another — did have Tom Hanks in an exec producing berth, but learning the



Mark V. Olsen
"Big Love" (HBO)



Will Scheffer
"Big Love" (HBO)

ropes took time. "The first season we looked at the 12 episodes and we referred to each as a small movie," Olsen explains. But with a fourth-season pickup and an average of 2 million viewers, they've adjusted their focus: "Now we look at the 12 episodes in a season as chapters in a novel."

Clyde Phillips
"Dexter" (Showtime)

Now in its fourth season, Phillips' serial killer drama hasn't lost its edge — introducing a child for the anti-hero and casting John Lithgow as a villain. "We don't hold anything back," says Phillips, who got his start in 1970s telefilms. "If we think of something and it's terrific, we play it now, then figure out how to top it next year." Another challenge is keeping Dexter interesting and to some extent sympathetic — but not too much so. "If he actually becomes 'human,' we can't continue doing the show," he says. At least Phillips doesn't have to worry about a pickup — Showtime renewed it through at least Season 5.

Profiles by Nellie Andreeva, Rebecca Ascher-Walsh, Rande Dawn and James Hibberd.

