Lost in Ideas

Television’s Carlton Cuse on what animates his work
by Lydialyle Gibson

When an idea keeps him up at night—nudges him awake to lie there, eyes wide and mind working—that’s when television writer and producer Carlton Cuse ’81 knows it’s good. An epidemic of vampirism in New York City that, chillingly, sends the infected chasing after those they love; a reimagining of Alfred Hitchcock’s Psycho as an eerie, tragic almost-romance between a mother and son; a plane crash on a seemingly deserted island whose secret powers slowly, menacingly come into view: “The more I do this, the more intuitive and the less intellectual the process is of choosing an idea, whether it’s mine or one that’s pitched to me,” Cuse says. “If I feel it, and if I find myself continually thinking about it for days or weeks, then I know.”

Cuse is perhaps best known as a co-showrunner and co-writer for the hit TV series Lost, which debuted in 2004 and took the shipwrecked survivors of Oceanic Flight 815 on a circuitous six-season odyssey that millions watched obsessively and dissected online every week. The producer and writer is now knee-deep in two other series: The Strain, based on vampire novels by horror director Guillermo del Toro; and Bates Motel, Cuse’s revival, with co-writer and co-producer Kerry Ehrin, of the Psycho story. “What really interested me there was the idea of Norma Bates”—the murderer’s mother—“a really iconic character in American cinema that we knew virtually nothing about,” Cuse says. (She appears in the
original movie, plus two 1980s sequels and a later prequel, only as a ghostly voice or corpse; Hitchcock famously kept an empty chair marked “Mrs. Bates” on the set of the 1960 film.) “You’d think that Norma Bates was this horrible shrew who berates her kid into becoming crazy,” he adds, “but what if that wasn’t the case at all? What if she loved her child to death, and there was just some flaw? So really it’s a story about two people who love each other, and as an audience we’re sort of hoping against hope that the tragedy we know is coming doesn’t befall them.”

More recently, Cuse has been staying up nights with his latest project, Colony. He describes the show as a “family drama crossed with an espionage thriller, with a science-fiction overlay.” The story is set in a Los Angeles occupied by a mysterious invading force. A 300-foot metallic wall surrounds the city; a proxy government is in power. Cuse says he and co-creator Ryan Condal wanted to explore a modern-day version of a scenario like Vichy Paris: “The idea that you have Parisians going about their lives and drinking espressos in sidewalk cafés while Nazi stormtroopers are marching down the street.” Colony reflects that same split, often felt in occupied countries or totalitarian societies, between apparent normalcy and the anxiety it belies. “In certain ways things function well” in the show’s imagined L.A., Cuse explains. There’s no street crime; a bus ride across the city takes 12 minutes. “But there are enormous costs and consequences to living under this imposed colonialism. And that’s what the show explores.”

Growing up, Cuse’s afterschool hours were filled with reruns of Highway Patrol, Gunsmoke, Bonanza, The Rifleman, Green Acres, I Love Lucy, The Twilight Zone, The Outer Limits. But it was The Chronicles of Narnia, which his fifth-grade teacher read aloud to the class, that hooked him on narrative and made him want to write. Enthralled and impatient with her chapter-a-day pace, he convinced his mother to buy the books so he could read them all at once. He entered Harvard as a pre-med student—a family ambition more than his own—but had begun to drift toward other subjects by his junior year, when the makers of Airplane came to campus. Cuse was recruited to help set up a screening in the Science Center. “They were recording a laugh track,” he says, “and they wanted an ‘intelligent audience.’” He had never met anyone who made movies, and here suddenly were writers and directors. “It was like a bell went off,” he says. He asked Tom Parry ’74, a Harvard grad who’d recently gone to Hollywood (and who brought the Airplane filmmakers to Cambridge), how to get there himself. “And he said, ‘Make a movie.’” So Cuse, a member of the varsity crew, made Power Ten, a documentary on rowing. “It’s this esoteric sport, and people outside it don’t really understand why anyone would get up at three in the morning to train and work like crazy for what amounts to, like, five six-minute races in the spring.” To fund the film, he sneaked into the boathouse at

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Montage

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