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Canadian TV ends homegrown success stories

Letterkenny, Sort Of and Transplant have all wrapped production as showrunners gear up for 2024

AMBER DOWLING

Nothing lasts forever, as much as some television executives may wish it would. Which is why, as Canadian television wraps up the 2023 season, creatives have clicked off the cameras on three homegrown success stories.

In December, Bilal Baig and Fab Filippo wrapped a three-season run of CBC comedy *Sort Of*. A couple of weeks later, Jared Keeso moved out of *Letterkenny* after one final six-pack of episodes on streaming service Crave. And early next year, Joseph Kay will close the doors to York Memorial Hospital on CTV's *Transplant* after four seasons.

In each case, the creatives were the ones to pull the plug on these series, despite solid fan bases, Canadian Screen Award wins and eager international partners. (*Transplant* is distributed by NBC Universal Global Distribution, *Sort Of* streams on Max in the U.S. and *Letterkenny* has been considered a Hulu original since Season 7.)

To many showrunners, it makes more sense to end at a natural stopping point rather than continuing indefinitely and fizzling out creatively.

"There's always a bit of, you're on TV and it's hard to get a green light and get things going. So when you say we're feeling the end, everybody kind of feels it," Filippo says. "But we were incredibly supported and given all the scariness around shutting down a show, everybody kind of felt what we felt – that it was the right time in the story."

Executives deferring to creatives on when to end a successful series isn't a new trend, particularly in Canadian television. Some of the country's most notable shows have wrapped when the creators felt it was time, including *Schitt's Creek*, *Kim's Convenience*, *Corner Gas* and *Orphan Black*.

That hasn't always been the case in American television. The final season of *Gilmore Girls* forged ahead without Dan



Bilal Baig, above, stars as Sabi in *Sort Of*, which wraps a three-season run at CBC this month. The comedy streams on Max in the U.S.



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Palladino and Amy Sherman-Palladino; *Superstore* remained open for Season 6 without creator Justin Spitzer; *Seinfeld* lasted two more seasons without Larry David; and *Supernatural* continued for 10 instalments after Eric Kripke wrapped his initial vision for the show.

One theory for Canadian creators being able to end projects on their own terms is because in Canada, the most successful shows are the ones with the most distinct voices and concepts. It would be disingenuous to have someone else come in and pick up the reins.

"Buyers have discovered there is general appeal in specificity," says Kay, whose concept for *Transplant* always involved a four-season arc. "Audiences are interested in specific stories about people's experiences that are unfamiliar to them."

That certainly seems to apply to this trio of series: a story about a non-binary millennial with Pakistani roots, a medical character drama revolving around a Syrian surgeon starting over in Toronto, and a small-town comedy starring hicks, skids and hockey players.

"Bilal and I have talked about

how some people will never want to watch our show and that's just the reality of what we did here," Filippo says. "We put it out there and made it as gentle and inviting and as warm and funny as we could as artists. But how ready is the world for a show like *Sort Of*? Much more ready than I ever anticipated, frankly. It's been celebrated and people of all ages and walks of life have reached out."

Letterkenny is loosely based on Keeso's own experiences growing up in Listowel, Ont. The actor wanted to take control of his career so he launched *Letterkenny Problems* on YouTube in 2013. Those shorts went viral, leading to the 2016 show that helped launch Crave. When it premiered, *Letterkenny* outperformed "library" shows such as *Seinfeld* and *The Big Bang Theory* on the streamer.

"The agreement has always been, whenever Jared was ready to hang up the skates and had told every story he could with *Letterkenny*, that would be the right time to end it," says Mark Montefiore, president of one of the companies behind the show, New Metric Media.

"It's very few times in this business you actually have control of that opportunity, of that timing."

Ending a series on a high note also comes with pressure, partic-

ularly for creatives who know what a show means to viewers who haven't always seen their stories represented onscreen. Who will fill those voids, how successful those shows will be and when they will finally premiere are all questions to consider.

"I don't have a sense of what's coming down the pipeline for Canadian content and I am a little nervous," Baig says. "I don't want us only to exist in this wormhole-type place. I want to see what the impact of a show like *Sort Of* has on the Canadian industry in the years to come."

For networks, solidifying deals with these creatives for future projects takes some of the sting out of ending a successful show. Jennifer Kawaja, the president of scripted and feature films for English content at Sphere Media, reveals she is already looking at impending work with Baig, Filippo and Kay. Her company produces both *Transplant* and *Sort Of*, and also serves as the worldwide distributor on the latter series.

"We feel incredibly proud of both shows and the Sphere teams who worked hard to help make them a success, and of course sad about the end of both shows," Kawaja said in a statement to *The Globe*.

"As shows go on, strong communities are created and friendships formed with the incredibly talented actors and crew. But hopefully those relationships can also continue."

When Bell Media announced the end of *Letterkenny* after 12 seasons, it had already renewed spinoff *Shoresy* for a third round. A few weeks after both of those announcements, Bell Media and New Metric Media unveiled an exclusive 49-episode deal with Keeso that encompasses a new series and more *Letterkenny* spinoffs for Crave.

"I'd be not as thrilled about the show ending if we didn't have *Shoresy*," acknowledges Justin Stockman, the vice-president of English content development and programming at Bell Media.

"It made it less scary, knowing the day *Letterkenny* ends might come. I would be happy to have more, but if Jared feels this is the end we can support that – especially because we do have other irons in the fire within the *Letterkenny* space."

Special to *The Globe and Mail*

Northern Indigenous people define a sense of home in exhibition

ALEX BOZIKOVIC

OPINION

ARCHITECTURE

As you step into the University of Toronto's John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design, you are also stepping onto someone's porch. Wooden racks crowded with coats, fishing implements and snowshoes line a corridor. Along one wall hangs a qamutiik, a traditional Inuit sled.

This is *The Porch*, an installation by Taqralik Partridge and Tiffany Shaw that recognizes a specific kind of space in northern households. It is also the starting point for the exhibition *Towards Home*, now running at the University of Toronto Architecture and Design Gallery until March. And this porch is meant to create a very specific atmosphere: home. "I want Inuit to feel welcome in exhibitions that I've curated," Partridge said. "And I hope that, by extension, everyone else will feel welcome as well."

Towards Home is an exceptionally rare thing: an Indigenous-led exhibition on architecture. The show began at the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) in Montreal in 2022. It is co-curated by Partridge, an associate curator at the National Gallery of Ontario; Sámi architect and artist Joar Nango; Jocelyn Piirainen, an associate curator at the National Gallery of Canada; and Rafico Ruiz, the associate director of research at the CCA.

While the CCA is internationally known for its exhibitions on



Towards Home, an Indigenous-led exhibition on architecture, is now running at the University of Toronto Architecture and Design Gallery until March. The show began at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal in 2022. HARRY CHOI PHOTOGRAPHY/ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN GALLERY

architectural culture and for its library, it has had blind spots. "The CCA has been, I think, rather slow in foregrounding questions of Indigenous design," Ruiz said. "This is really a first step – and a fantastic first step." Now, with the Toronto exhibition, "we are passing the baton" to Daniels.

The exhibition's approach to architecture is loose – inevitably so. It explores the expansive ways in which Northern Indigenous people define, and strive for, a sense of home. This begins with the idea of a porch – which, Partridge said, is not just a room

but a "liminal space" between indoors and outdoors. "It holds all the things that signify your connection to the land and all your daily activities," she said. As such, "it's a symbol of being connected to the land and relying on the land." Home is not a building; it is a place and a state of being.

Such expansive ideas about place spill through the exhibition, in which the artists pose some broad questions about domesticity. That idea is inevitably complex for individuals and peoples whose homes and lives have

been profoundly disrupted by the rippling effects of colonization.

The exhibition design, by Métis architect and designer Shaw, takes advantage of the gallery at the Daniels school – one of very few gallery spaces in the country that feature architecture. An elevated corridor snakes around the edges of the space, revealing design models and craft by young Indigenous makers. The main volume is filled with a handful of sizable installations carried over from the Montreal version of the show.

The first of these is artist Geronimo Inuitiq's *I'm Calling Home*, a commissioned radio broadcast that recalls the central role that radio plays as a tool of communication. (Inuitiq's mother worked for the CBC, so this work is personal.) Within an interior that approximates his own childhood house, Inuitiq presents a "Northern Virtual Broadcast" that mixes real conversation with other Inuit with hits of magic realism. (A heat wave in Northern Quebec. It's fantastical, at least for now.) For Inuitiq, this is an effort to connect emotionally with a childhood home with which "it is now difficult to reconnect," he said. "Through my art, and my practice, I create a conversation with my heritage."

In another installation, *Nuna*, artist Asinnajaq creates a tent-like structure that recalls a mossy nook where she had "the best nap of my life," as she explained at the opening event. A glowing textile drapes over a frame of elegantly joined wooden members before a squiggle of neon that evokes a campfire. "This is not a depiction of a traditional space," she said. "It's imagining having a space – a space to work, a space to be with family, a space to be with other people."

Among the other elements of the show are Partridge's photographs of landscapes in Iqaluit and Montreal – landscapes that many Inuit have seen as they come to the city, for reasons including medical treatment. "These are places that Inuit inhabit even if they are not obviously places of beauty," Partridge said. "Inuit relate to the land wherever we are. Everything we stand on is part of the Earth." And so, in a sense, it is home.