KINGDOM
A DirecTV Original Series

Byron Balasco:
Creator/Showrunner/Executive Producer

Byron Balasco’s first gig as a writer/producer was on the writing staff of the daring, critically acclaimed Showtime series, Huff (2006), created by Bob Lowry. Huff starred Hank Azaria, as Dr. Craig “Huff” Huffstodt, a psychiatrist in the throes of a severe midlife crisis. Blythe Danner won an Emmy for her tour de force performance as Huff’s manipulative, alcoholic, narcissistic, narrow-minded mom.

From 2006 to 2009, Balasco worked steadily on broadcast network 1-hour drama series: Without a Trace for CBS (2006-09), from story editor to supervising producer; followed by writer/producer roles on FlashForward, Happy Town and Detroit 1-8-7, all for ABC. In 2013, he wrote and executive produced his first go-pilot (for ABC), Westside, which was produced by McG (Shadowhunters, Supernatural) and Ilene Chaiken (Empire, The L Word).

As is the case with many of the content creators interviewed in this book, you can see Balasco’s early work as an auspicious training ground for Kingdom—which very much feels like his most personal, passion project, and the series he was born to create. A fan of mixed martial arts, Balasco captures the texture and authenticity of the sport, and each fight is choreographed for maximum impact—physically and emotionally. It takes a very specific type of person to commit to the rigorous training sessions before psyching himself up to enter the fighting cage. This series is, at the core, a character study.

The setting of the series, primarily in Venice Beach, California, plays another character in the series—not the picture postcard tourist trap, but the eccentricities of its locals; the racial tensions and turf wars; and the clash between pretty, superficial appearances and the darker realities of survival of the fittest.

Frank Grillo plays Alvey Kulina, the owner of Navy Street boxing gym, patriarch, and moral center of the show. Kiele Sanchez plays Alvey’s romantic and business partner, Lisa, who handles the administration and marketing at the gym, and helps keep Alvey (mostly) sane and (occasionally) sober. As with Huff, Alvey is going through his own midlife existential crisis, still reeling from a messy separation from his hot mess, estranged wife Christina, and struggling to hold his family together, including his younger son, Nate (a surprisingly good, buff, Nick Jonas), and Alvey’s elder son, Jay (Jonathan Tucker), a self-destructive adrenaline junkie who’s addicted to drugs, booze, sex and rumbling. Both Jay and Nate are trained MMA fighters, but
Jay is too unfocused and unreliable for competition. Nate is the great hope for the family. But, in the pilot episode, Nate is brutally beaten by a vengeful gang, leaving him for dead in the gutter. As Nate slowly recovers, Alvey must step up as a dad and partner to Lisa (Alvey sees a therapist); Jay must clean up his act; and Nate will come to terms with his sexuality. Former Jonas Brother as a sensitive, gay, mixed martial arts fighter—how can you not love this series?

Further complicating matters is the resurgence of Alvey’s estranged wife, and Jay and Nate’s mom, Christina—played with verve by Joanna Going (Mad Men, House of Cards). When we’re introduced to Christina in the pilot, she’s working as a drugged out prostitute. Nate and Jay liberate their mom from her pimp and addiction. And just when you thought the Kulina clan had enough misfortune: enter the pivotal character of the series, Lisa’s ex-boyfriend and former MMA champion, Ryan Wheeler, recently out on parole, and played with coiled, quiet intensity by a heavily tattooed Matt Lauria (a long way from mild-mannered, Texas farm boy, Luke Cafferty, on Friday Night Lights\(^1\)). Ryan is ready to get back in the cage, but will his demons from the past derail his second chance at life now that he’s out of that other cage, prison? Will he win Lisa back? Will Christina try to recapture Alvey’s heart and save their marriage? Can Christina redeem herself for being such a negligent mother to her boys?

If you’ve avoided or managed to miss Kingdom because mixed martial arts cage fighting isn’t your thing, think again. Sure, this is a blood sport, featuring graphic, bone crushing combat. But, like all well-crafted, emotionally resonant, binge-worthy TV series, it’s about a family. So tune in, get riled up and I dare you not to care.

Neil Landau: The series’ original title was Navy Street (based on the name of the boxing gym on Navy Street in Venice, California) and then you changed it to Kingdom. What was the reason behind that? And what’s the significance of Kingdom?

Byron Balasco: It was initially called Navy Street—which was one of the few battles I couldn’t win. Somebody way out in the distribution world thought it was a confusing title.

NL: Because it sounded like the military?

BB: Yes, they would think it was a Navy show, which I thought, “What idiot would write a show about the Navy and call it Navy Street? But I could see their point. But Kingdom, the title felt like it kind of encompassed our world. I do believe that shows sort of make the title great retroactively. It took me a while to get my head out of—this show isn’t called Navy Street,\

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1 The critically acclaimed, Emmy and Peabody Award-winning Friday Night Lights (created for television and show-run by Jason Katims) ran for 2 seasons on NBC, before migrating to DirecTV for its final 3 seasons, ending in 2011.
because I lived with that title for so long. But now that the show has lived its life, now the title fits nicely with the show.

NL: Did you create Navy Street/Kingdom specifically for DirecTV or were you developing it anyway? What was the genesis of the project?

BB: It’s an idea I had for a long time. This world was really interesting to me, but it obviously wasn’t a world that would get a lot of networks excited in terms of the mainstream appeal of it. And every time I mentioned wanting to do this show, people’s eyes would glaze over, because they have sort of a preconceived idea of what it would be, based on what they know about the sport or the marketing around it. So I decided to just write it on spec, because I knew the show would literally be a slice of life/character study about these people. We’re not a big plot-driven kind of show. Almost everyone who read my spec pilot had the same reaction— “We love the script, but we don’t know how we can sell this kind of thing.” And Jeremy Gold [Executive Vice President of Creative Affairs at Endemol] read it and really liked it. We met and discussed what the show could be. Endemol shopped the project at various places, DirecTV eventually jumped on it and ordered 10 episodes straight-to-series as opposed to a pilot.

NL: Is working outside the traditional broadcast/cable network model more challenging or more liberating for you?

BB: It’s much more creatively liberating and again that’s not to say anything bad against broadcast. But, the whole point for these kinds of outlets is, networks are after that big broad appeal, so things tend to be neither fish nor fowl. Whereas here, the only goal is to make it great. And to make it great it has to be really focused, and very specific. You’re not really trying to hit any marks. You really have the freedom to just tell the story as it is, and put it out there. Hopefully it’s entertaining to people, but you’re not driven by numbers [Nielsen ratings]. You know you’re going to get 10 episodes, so you don’t have to cram it all into one box for fear that people are going to turn the channel and not come back.

NL: Any downside to the direct-to-series order and circumventing the pilot/testing process?

BB: It’s great getting green-lit straight to series, but it brings its own challenges: you don’t know who your actors are, and you don’t know what the look of the show is yet. You know conceptually what you want it to be, but there’s a big chasm between what you want and what you get. By the time you start seeing the evidence of what the show is, you’ve written 6 episodes. So it’s kind of operating without a net in that sense. Still, it’s much more creatively exciting and liberating to do it this way.

NL: Were you able to block shoot it like a 10-hour movie to save on production costs?

BB: We block shoot everything. We had a few completed scripts and were ready to go, but because it was the first season and we were getting the voice down, I ended up having to go
back and write everything straight through, so that set me back in terms of being ahead of production. A 10-episode order [versus 22 on broadcast network] is very manageable. It does get stressful, but you still get to maintain quality control.

**NL:** Do you have the ability to shoot pickups, course correct and alter plot?

**BB:** Yeah, we can shoot pickups. Obviously we can go back and change whatever scripts we want to change before they’re shot. You know, again, because we’re low budget, we’re not like, say, an HBO show—which I don’t know if this is true—but I imagine they can throw out entire seasons, because they have so much money, and just start over. We have to pretty much make your flaws a virtue. You can’t make a lot of mistakes, and if you do make mistakes, which happens, inevitably, you’ve got to course correct it in an interesting way. There were definitely things this year that I thought were a good idea, and then as it was going, I realized there was a better way to do this, or a better idea, or this wasn’t quite having the impact that I thought it would. So let’s figure out a way to switch gears, but also make it seem seamless in the storytelling.

**NL:** How low budget? Are you in the $1m per episode range?

**BB:** Oh yeah, yeah, we’re above that. We shoot in Los Angeles where it’s more expensive, but our show takes place in LA so it looks like LA. So that, right there, adds a lot of production value. You can put the camera anywhere and you’re not trying to hide a palm tree or anything like that.

**NL:** With lower budgets, you’re also making less as a creator/showrunner than you would on broadcast network, right?

**BB:** You can make a choice of getting paid a little bit more money to do a network show upfront versus one that you really believe in and feel creatively excited by. And also, when you have the promise of a pilot versus the promise of all 10 episodes, I think it economically all evens out. A lot of the newer places creating content are starting to understand the investment that’s required.

**NL:** Do you have a writing staff?

**BB:** We do. It’s very small.

**NL:** Are you able to employ any freelancer writers and assign individual scripts?

**BB:** We didn’t last year, just because our schedule was so tight. We have a small staff. Everybody’s engaged. Everybody works hard, and you get through it.

**NL:** Do you have a writers’ room for a portion of the season?
**BB:** Yeah, last year we did a 10-week writers’ room and then we let a couple of writers go—which was always the plan—for budgetary reasons. I kept 2 guys with me for extra support through production.

**NL:** Did you know all the main character arcs from the start?

**BB:** Yes, but that doesn’t mean they’re going to have these giant epiphanies and evolve all that much. I think, emotionally, people end up where they started all the time, because that’s just the way life is. People try to change, but who the fuck really changes? You’re just trying all the time. So you have to try, even though you’re probably going to settle back into whatever the hell you are.

**NL:** Very true. What about major plot points and/or cliffhangers, story-wise?

**BB:** Yeah, but we would always try to make any kind of cliffhanger we had be more emotional than plot. I feel like there’s a good amount of story, but there’s not a lot of plot, not a lot of moves. There are moments of that. There are moves and tension where you’re like, “Oh shit what’s going to happen?” and all that kind of stuff, but we never really would write towards that. One of the things we always prided ourselves on is that the audience thinks you’re going down a path they’ve seen before and then it resolves itself in a way they weren’t expecting. Sometimes that’s a lot quieter of a resolution than they would imagine a story ending, but just felt more real. From what I can tell, the audience appreciates that.

**NL:** Do you have any idea how many people are watching? What is DirecTV’s metric for how the show is doing?

**BB:** I don’t have any idea how many people are watching. They don’t tell us. Honestly I haven’t asked. I’m obviously curious. They’ve picked us up for 2 more seasons — so whatever their reasons are, I’ll take it. The show is still relatively hard to find if you don’t have DirecTV. However, it also became available on iTunes in August 2015. So hopefully more and more people will start coming to it. Anecdotally, I can only go by people that stop me on the street, or what I hear, or if I go to a UFC fight. Jonathan Tucker (who plays Jay) and I go to a bunch of fights and we’ll get up to go to the bathroom and get stopped by a dozen people who recognize him from the show, so that’s cool. That’s always good. The MMA crowd is easier to know because they’re sort of concentrated. But as far as the general public, I have no idea.

**NL:** Getting a second will be an interesting proposition—because, obviously, it’s not a “cord-cutting” show. But a DirecTV original series is an anomaly right now. It’s SVOD but only via a customer’s satellite provider. Pivot TV works the same way.

**BB:** Right, but all providers are quickly realizing that they need to be more than distributors. They need to be in the original content business, too. And, I think for some of these places, the idea of going to Netflix, if they’re not an established brand, is less appealing because Netflix has branded themselves so well. So DirecTV or Audience Network isn’t getting the
benefit of a show branding them. They’re getting more eyeballs on it, but it’s not necessarily helping them become the destination place to watch that show. So it’s tricky. I think everyone’s still trying to figure it out.

**NL:** What seems to be happening though, is the only reason for people to really subscribe is if they want to watch a sports or other live event. So if your show is promoted and builds, people will find it where they need to find it. And that’s why you wrote it on spec because it’s niche and better suited to a niche cable or digital TV network anyway.

**BB:** If you’re doing any kind of subculture, you’ve just got to go on cable, because that’s the only way to do it real. Otherwise, it’s going to look like the CSI episode 271 where an MMA fighter gets killed. You would just have the surface of that world to make it relatable and you’re just dealing in generalities.

**NL:** Your storytelling and the entire ensemble is top notch, but the main publicity for the series is focused on Nick Jonas playing Nate. But it’s not as if the entire show was built around him. How did Jonas get involved with the project?

**BB:** He came in and interviewed like 3 times, just like everybody else. But his fame and following from the music world certainly helps promote the show.

**NL:** And he’s a terrific actor. Just right for the role: wounded, guarded and mysterious. I could see Kingdom airing on A&E or Spike or those kinds of male centric places. And yet, having a major character who’s gay could potentially alienate your hardcore macho audience. Did that ever become a controversial decision?

**BB:** It wasn’t because we were never chasing the MMA crowd. It was that I wanted the MMA crowd to love it because I have so much respect for the sport. Through this process I’ve become close to a lot of the fighters and coaches, and once you really know those guys, they’re as complicated and as open-minded as anybody. And some aren’t, but a lot of the perception of how people would react to that is an outsider’s perception of how the sport’s marketed. It’s not necessarily the reality of the people that are living it and doing it. But, again the truth is… I’m never chasing any specific audience with this show. The main thing I’ve heard was that you’ll never get women to watch it and we have a ton of female fans.

**NL:** And your female characters are also very well drawn.

**BB:** Well, yeah, exactly. Look in the TCA’s [Television Critics Association]… before anybody had seen the show, the first question I got was from some reporter saying how stereotypical the female characters were.

**NL:** They didn’t watch the whole season?

**BB:** Well, they hadn’t seen the pilot. They just heard “mom, prostitute, girlfriend.” But, from my point of view, everyone fits into some kind of stereotype. It’s just how you draw the
character. Everybody's a son, or a brother, or a daughter, or a mom. If you draw the characters right, people are going to like it.

**I don’t ever worry about how the audience will react because I also think no matter how loud someone is in the comments section of some review or some bullshit thing, no one wants to watch a TV show and say, “OK, good. What I wanted to happen, happened.” You wouldn’t want to watch the show anymore. You want to get mad about it, or you want to get exhilarated by it. And you can’t feel that if you know what’s going to happen, or you’re getting everything you want.**

**NL:** I’ve been very surprised how the first season’s love triangle developed. I think Lisa is a super strong character. She holds her own in every argument, and she’s a big draw. Even if the whole thing was from her point of view, it’s just really compelling how she fits into that world. With the Christina character (Joanna Going), I’ll be honest: at first, I worried. But then that whole subplot took so many interesting twists and turns, especially when Alvey (Frank Grillo) and Lisa (Kiele Sanchez) are on the rocks, and Christina shows up at Alvey’s house. I’ll avoid spoilers for the uninitiated, but despite how vulnerable they both are it’s not the interaction I was expecting. I really like how you twisted that around.

**BB:** The fun with that character is that your expectation is that she’s here for some super-calculated reason. But the truth is, she’s just searching, emotionally, to fill something, and is trying to get it any way she can, and just never can quite get it, and drifts off.

**NL:** Even though I’m not a big boxing or wrestling fan (I hate the violence) the quality of your show totally pulled me in anyway. The test for me is not being able to watch the fights, not because of the blood, but because I care so much about what happens to the characters. Also, without getting too philosophical or academic about it, the cage fighting is kind of an allegory for life.

**BB:** Oh, for sure.

**NL:** Everybody goes to work and gets beat up by somebody or you’re out in the world just trying to get by and I love that it’s sort of this great metaphor for the struggles.

**BB:** And everybody is always searching for definition in their lives, and when you’re in the cage you either win or lose, so it’s really binary in that sense. And I think—not to beat ourselves over the head with a metaphor—but once you go out of the cage, that’s when the shit’s complicated because there’s really no real concrete way to measure yourself.

**NL:** And things can come at you from anywhere because there’s not just one known adversary.
**BB:** Right.

**NL:** I realize you wrote the pilot on spec, but when you were having your early discussions with DirecTV about moving forward and probably even now that you got the next 2 seasons, are they giving you guidance about pushing the envelope? How involved were/are they in the development and the process?

**BB:** They are great in the sense that they put their trust in the people/person making the show. They react to certain things but there’s no agenda that they’re pushing us towards. So they will react to what we present to them, and it’s generally... the reaction is thoughts, or questions, or suggestions, but never once have I been forced to do something I didn’t want to do. Never once was I prodded to be more salacious, or show more nudity, or “Don’t do that,” you know. I mean every once in a while they’d be like, “Man, it seems like he’s hitting that guy one too many times.” But my point would be, “Well that’s what it is, and we should never not feel like this doesn’t hurt like hell.” You know what I mean? You can’t shy away from that. Anyway, both the studio and the network really support what we have been doing creatively. They’re never about how do we broaden ourselves and reach more people. They understand. The only way to cut through is to make something great. Every once in a while there’s a *Walking Dead* that breaks through and captures a huge mass of people, but otherwise I think everyone’s just in search of quality and a more narrow audience.

**NL:** Originality and authenticity are the keys to the digital television revolution—telling stories about characters customarily relegated to the sidelines, the fringe.

**BB:** And those narrow audiences will grow. It doesn’t mean you get a narrow audience and that’s your crew the whole way. You start building until it reaches a kind of critical mass. It feels like TV definitely got really lucky by seeing the obliteration of the music industry. I think seeing that first helped them understand different ways to drive their products.

**NL:** And to monetize it. What is really happening that is different in your situation, because DirecTV is already a behemoth (now owned by AT&T), is that as soon as a niche show starts to break out and attract a lot of attention, then a big conglomerate swoops down and signs them up. The risk of proof-of-concept rests now, more than ever, with the content creators. One of the main assertions put forth in my last book, *The TV Showrunner’s Roadmap*, is: *every show is about a family*, whether they’re related by blood or not. Do you agree?

**BB:** Yes, that’s a 1000 percent right. I was going to say, I always describe this show as a family drama.

**NL:** And to me if this show is about a family, then it’s universal and can travel. But, I wonder if that was ever part of the conversation from Endemol’s point of view, “Is this going to travel well and can we sell it in other countries?” Is it on in other countries?
**BB:** It was definitely part of the math that Endemol had to do before they bought the script from me initially, before we even set it up with DirecTV. I know Endemol North America, which is the studio arm, had to talk to their people in Europe about this idea, this arena and the script; have them all read it to get a sense of if they could sell this foreign—if there’s a foreign market. MMA happens to be a fairly international sport that is growing in other countries as well, and we have that family drama component, so it was a good bet for them. So once they got the, “Yeah, we can sell this,” then we made the deal and it took us a year and a half to 2 years to get it set up at DirecTV. But, yeah, selling internationally is huge. Endemol took a couple actors and I out to MIP in Cannes to sell it internationally; we did a screening and a panel, and talked to buyers from all the other countries. I know that *Kingdom* has sold in most major territories around the world.

**NL:** Well you’ve got great eye candy—male and female. As soon as you see the billboard, it catches everyone’s attention immediately.

**BB:** I can’t overstate how important the cast is for this show—a show that, quite frankly, I could not have cast this way on network television, just in terms of how many layers. Perhaps our people are not as necessarily mainstream appealing, so you can take more chances with casting that pays off in a big way.

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2 MIPCOM: (Marché Internationale de Programmes Communications, or International Market of Communications Programmes in English, is an annual trade show held in Cannes, France, geared towards as a marketplace for TV studios and networks to buy and sell new content and formats for international distribution.)