

Mara Brock Akil, showrunner

Mara Brock Akil, a twenty-year veteran of the television industry, has worked as a writer, producer, and showrunner on series such as *Moesha* (1996–2001) and *Being Mary Jane* (2013–ongoing). Here Akil delineates the challenges of overseeing an Atlanta-based show from Los Angeles, and touches on issues of diversity in the contemporary writers’ room and the industry at large.

Describe your work. What do you do? What does a regular workweek look like?

Both are very difficult questions for me. I am a show creator, showrunner, and executive producer. All three of those things are woven together but require different skill sets. As a show creator, I come up with television show ideas. It mostly involves working through the development of ideas with executives at networks and studios. As a showrunner, I am the CEO of that show. I manage the execution of the idea. I hire a crew of about 100 to 150 people, who work for a particular television project. I work closely with the writers and with the producer. I often say I speak many languages—though I only speak English—because I make sure everyone shares the vision that I have for the show. I make sure that the network that bought the show and the studio that helps me make it are on the same page, and that I’m getting the best from both of them to execute my idea. Typically that’s working through big line items, like the budget, and making sure the show is properly supported in the marketplace with adequate marketing, advertising, and press.

Part of my showrunner hat is selling the show. This includes doing TV appearances and magazine interviews. It also includes talking to the actors, writers, directors, and all of the artisans—the production designers, costume designers, hair and

makeup, all of them. Do they understand my vision of the show? It requires different conversations with different people who speak different [creative and professional] languages. You need to know what is meaningful to them to effectively communicate your vision. Learning that skill set has been an ongoing experience. If you hire well, that certainly helps the job. If you don't, you can imagine the job becomes tougher. That's in line with my role as executive producer: keeping your eye on the story we are telling but with clear respect for the realities of producing a television show. I make sure we stay creative but don't go over budget. I am the morale booster. I am the cheerleader. In addition to my work roles, I am a mother and a wife. Those things I have to manage as well. I'm constantly thinking about the show, but I also have to think about my children, my husband, my life—and that's what sometimes makes the job harder to do, because I am always running out of time.

When I wake up every morning, I am a mother first. I make lunches and drive my kids to school. I work out, not just for my physical endurance but also because it's where I spend most of my time being creative. When I'm alone, I don't have to hear anybody. I don't have to manage anybody. My first stop after that is at Akil Productions. I talk with my head of development, my producing partner, who is my husband, and our assistants—we're a really small team—about what's needed for the management business of the day. Then I walk into the writers' room between ten o'clock and noon to dump all these ideas I had on my hike or while cycling. I talk about the things I thought about at three in the morning or in the car. I make sure the stories are progressing as they should. If they're not, I can spend all day in the writers' room making sure we get it right. If you don't get the script right, it just snowballs into larger problems throughout the day.

Then, I am often pulled away to answer questions for production. I can be pulled away to do press to promote the show, or to take a call with the network because they have notes or problems. Then I may go into editing. My favorite part of what I do is the writing and the editing. I love editing because it's like putting together a puzzle. If I have another show, I do all of this twice. I do enjoy production, but lately I've been physically away from the site of production. My shows are being produced in Atlanta while I'm here in L.A. Right now, my days end somewhere around seven o'clock. If it's a school night, I try to get home in time to spend some time with my kids and put them in bed. After I put them to bed, if [my husband] Salim is not in town, I go right back to work to keep on top of it all. Sometimes, to be honest, I am so exhausted that I just fall asleep. If my husband is in town, we take a moment to connect, so that our marriage doesn't fall by the wayside.

Working with my husband, it's important that we compartmentalize our lives so that work doesn't take over. If I'm on a work call on the way home, I'll sit in the driveway and finish that call. I won't enter the house on my phone doing business. When I cross the threshold of my home, I'm no longer the showrunner. I'm

mommy. It has been important learning how to let go, to trust that the people I hired have my back so I can replenish my real life. Disconnecting also helps me replenish creatively.

That's a very intensive schedule. Do you keep it up all year long, or do you have periods of downtime?

It's most intense during production, because that's when you have to deal with all departments. At that point, every department is fully staffed. You're managing 150 crew members. You're managing the managers [the department heads]. You're managing the network's involvement. Production weeks, from prep until we wrap, were almost year-round this year [2014–15] because I have two shows, ten episodes apiece. We were on production for *Being Mary Jane* from mid-February until June 6 [2015]. However, right before, I was working on *The Game* (2006–15), which wrapped up December 6 [2014], but the writers' room started in June of that year. From June until December, we were working intensely. Because it was the series finale [of *The Game*], it just required more work. I was working that schedule year-round. Now that *Being Mary Jane* has wrapped, I'm currently editing and mixing the show. When it becomes lighter, of course, you don't relax. You add more to your plate. You start thinking, what's next? What else are we developing?

When you became a showrunner, what was the most remarkable difference from your work as a writer? How did your creative life change?

The biggest difference people don't talk much about is how, in the world of television, you enter showrunning through the writing. You have made your mark writing as part of this fantastic team. They're your posse. Once you transition to showrunning, it becomes a little odd. You're still technically one of the pack but you're not. You can laugh with your writers, but you're no longer part of the group. Now, you're the manager. You have to tell people what to do. You're the employer who decides whether they eat or not and when. It changes the chemistry even though you're basically peers. It was one of the first things I had to negotiate and manage right away. For instance, there are times when me being in a room is disruptive, not beneficial. It's like parenting. You tell your kid, this is the lesson, and you walk through it a couple of times. Then they're at a play date at someone else's house and the parent tells you, "Your kid does this and that great thing." You're like, my god, they never do that when I'm around! But when they're away from me, they're perfect at it. Sometimes this happens in the writers' room. I can't be part of the minutiae of the script. I created the overall world and the environment, but they have to go build it. I've got to let them do that and keep my eye on the entire thing.

The second difference between being a writer and being a showrunner is realizing that there are many people—not just the writers—whom I've got to manage to keep this ship moving. And it involves a very intentional approach. You have to be a bit of a politician. Like I mentioned earlier, you have to figure out how to communicate to different constituencies in a way that's meaningful to them even if your objective is always the same. I've discovered that my secret weapon is the script. The one thing that keeps people excited and motivated on all levels is a good script, a good story. Down to the audience who keeps watching, it has to be a good story with compelling characters. And it can't be just the one script; they *all* have to be great.

As a showrunner, what is the ideal environment in your writers' room? What do you strive for?

Honest communication. I think that's why I prefer comedy over drama. I was raised in a comedy room. What I love about it is that nothing is forbidden, even if it never makes it into the script. The vulnerability of comedy allows you access to some of the darkest parts of our humanity. It's about putting your stuff out there, making yourself vulnerable, and being honest. You can't be PC [politically correct] because we're not PC people. I want to get to the truth, even if it's uncomfortable. Ideally I want my writers' room to be a space where people can feel confident and safe to get at that truth, so we can get it onto the page and hold onto it until the show reaches the audience.

Do you think that some writers see the environment as more open than others? For example, are race and gender ever factors in the room that affect how the writers interact?

Great questions. In my writers' room, you will typically find an even split between male and female writers. You will find various religious beliefs. You will find diversity in sexual orientation. You will find writers from different class backgrounds. Some have come from affluence. Some have come from poor backgrounds. Honestly, we're all living in this world together, so how can only one of those experiences come to dominate the writers' room? It's that diversity that makes up the core truth about what it is to be American. There can be specificity, like telling stories from the perspective of a black female American. Yet there are still universal elements if you tell the story right. Getting to that truth requires input from a lot of different people with different experiences with regard to whatever subject we're discussing. So how do you get there? That's part of my job as showrunner: to provide a genuine, safe environment to get people to give you the truth. You have to create that environment. It's also part of my job to know that if I can't do it, I

need to hire somebody who's good at doing it, to help put together a great team of diverse people.

You actually set out to achieve diversity on your staff? When you set out to hire your team, you aim to establish a diverse room? That's at odds with what we've heard elsewhere. We've heard folks at the Writers Guild and Directors Guild say that they regularly struggle with producers who say, "I only want to hire the best. I only want to hire people I trust. I don't want to take a risk on an unknown just because it's good for diversity. There's too much at stake."

Right. I'm running for the board of the WGA, and increasing diversity is a key issue for me. The WGA has the power to change this within its own ranks. We don't need networks or studios to help us make a difference. I want to say to my peers, "You better catch up because soon you're not going connect with any audience." The audience does not care only about the world of white men. They're just not buying it anymore. In fact, I think there's waning interest in a solely American worldview. We live in a global society, and we are dependent on those global connections for financial solvency. So I would love for people to be more inclusive just for the kumbaya of it, but if you take a closer look at what's happening right now, it's simply good business, too.

Let's say you have a show with an all-white, all-male cast. How do you make five white male lead characters different and interesting? Maybe you give one of them a different class background. Maybe he's from a poor family and the other characters are rich. Why is he living in this world? Now, he's more interesting. Audiences want to know more about him. But we can make it even more interesting. Why don't you write a black woman into the show for one of the white male characters to bump heads with, for them to have conflict, for them—through that conflict—to find some deeper social truth. One of the core relationships in *The Game* is between Tasha Mack and Kelly Pitts, a black woman and a white woman, who initially didn't like each other. We built their relationship around racial stereotypes. They were always flinging disparaging remarks at each other. We got comedy from that. But it was intentional. I knew the conflict would allow them to go through that experience, develop as characters, and emerge on the other side as friends. And that is far more interesting. I've shown you how you can be friends, how you can get past differences and discover what you have in common.

These are complicated issues. On the one hand, some folks talk about "color-blind" hiring practices, where producers say they want only the best writers who are at the top of their game regardless of what they look like. We all recognize this aspiration for excellence. Yet we also know that some writers are given opportunities to train and develop and prove their excellence more than others; it's not an innocent meritocracy.

On the other hand, we argue that diversity makes both social and economic sense. That we have a social responsibility to improve diversity in front of and behind the camera, and market calculations support that goal. Do you think those things are incompatible?

The point I'm making here is that the problem is an institutional one. We're fighting against an institutionalized form of racism that champions excellence but implicitly defines that excellence as white and male. This excludes a large number of writers from ever getting an opportunity to work in the first place, and that puts an entire community of writers at a severe disadvantage. This is the world we live and work in. I know excellent writers who are women, who are minorities. So, I start with them. Once I hire them, I bring in other writers, some of them white and male. I try to mix it up, and then I say to all of them: "The first thing we all have to do is get over this assumption that you are 'less than' if you're not white or male." My room does not endorse that brand of excellence.

They may disagree with me. They may fully embrace the limited ways in which excellence has been branded in this industry, but what they can't deny is that the audience doesn't buy it anymore. They are changing. They don't give a shit about your [white, male] world all the time. In fact, there's already such a large library of content about that world, audiences can simply go seek it out if that's all they want to watch. What we are missing are the other stories. If you see yourself once, you only want more. So we—the storytellers, the creatives, the executives—do need to be more inclusive. If we don't act soon, audiences will find it somewhere else. You can already see it happening on social media. Audiences that have been on the periphery are saying, "Hey, I'll go somewhere else and see myself, even if that means me taking a selfie and putting it on Instagram. I am going to see myself. And I won't watch what you're serving me anymore. It's far better for me to sit up in my room and YouTube how funny and interesting I am before I am going to go watch your show."

People are no longer interested in seeing themselves excluded. They want to be included. If you include them, they will come to the party. I think we're starting to see that through the shows that are becoming successful. If you look at the core of why they're successful, it's that they're telling different stories. And there are audiences out there to sustain them. If you don't start recognizing that, you'll weed yourself out of this business.

So you feel that studio executives or showrunners are feeling more pressure to diversify writing staffs in part because of the new viewing options that audiences have?

Technology has made it possible for people who don't find themselves on any of the traditional media to just make up or seek out their own stories on newer

platforms. You can create your own world if no one else is including you in theirs. It's becoming easy to make movies on an iPhone. I'm not saying that it's going to wipe out television, but it does encourage television to better consider how it's going to draw a massive audience to its expensive platform. You can't just assume that it will happen. You have to be more inclusive and tell more interesting stories. And that requires different points of view and voices.

A 2012 story in the Hollywood Reporter about you and your husband [producer Salim Akil] opens with a paragraph that says, "They're black, Muslim, and gorgeous in an industry not known for its diverse embrace." It seems curious that they mention your religion in the header and never talk about it again in the article. And we don't see many references to your faith in other media reports. Do you think your faith plays a key role in your worldview as a showrunner and writer?

Of course it does! It's a part of who I am and how I treat people. You can call me a Muslim. I also live the life of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Knowledge, beauty, excellence: all these things are also part of my religion. Islam is inclusive. Right now, it's not depicted that way. But you're not Muslim if you're killing people. And you're not Christian if you're killing people. Interestingly, though, I have yet to bring any of these issues into any of my characters.

Is there a reason for that? Of the episodes we've seen, we didn't notice any particularly significant religious threads. Or are they there, and we are missing something?

I do think about it. You'll see most of my characters have been depicted as Christians of some sort. While we don't talk about religion, we do talk about faith if you look closely. It's more about faith and spirituality. We bring it up because those issues are very true to so many of us. I find that our culture is secular. Religion is secondary. So, I'm trying to use themes of faith or religion within more secular storytelling. When I do decide to address my religion more explicitly, I want it to be very special because it's special to me. And you have to be careful with it.

Faith is such a central part of many people's lives, yet by and large religion is emptied out of our entertainment media. Do you think that will change?

Yes, I do. I think it's already changing. As storytelling has become more niche and more specific, those details matter. One of the reasons why I personally have not done it yet is because it's 2015, but I open my window and it still looks like it's 1964. Authorities are killing black people. They're hosing them down in the streets. So, right now, I am focused on painting the humanity of a black person. I want to create that image so audiences understand what it looks like. It's been a struggle

to really, fully take that on, and we have a lot of work to do. But we're doing it. I have to take my time and allow the audience to catch up to ensure a productive dialogue. I'm not quite ready to take on being black and Muslim.

You have written or run shows for both broadcast and cable networks. Do you see differences between them?

There is tremendous excitement in cable because there is so much creativity in that space right now. Cable channels want to make some noise and put themselves on the map. There is opportunity for bold ideas. But not so great in cable are the budgets. There are lots of cost-saving mechanisms to confront. For instance, you may find your production happening in one city and your writers' room in another. One of my fears in this model is that the writers and the show's creator are getting further and further away from the content. You need to be close to the work so you can tweak it as the process unfolds. You can control the quality.

Stacking scripts [writing multiple scripts to film at once] is another mechanism I've encountered. It just makes the process that much more difficult to manage. It's harder to ensure quality execution when you're no longer shooting one but three episodes in a week. It also takes a toll on personal lives. If you go with the production, you're going to miss your family. You can only keep it up so long and still get the best out of people. And overall, writers are getting paid less because the episode orders are becoming smaller. When writers are more worried about being broke than about creating the story, then the project is going to suffer. Those are the downsides.

Broadcast has a much more finely tuned process with the benefit of quality control: the writers come in six or seven weeks before production, and they continue to work while the production is going. You're in much closer physical proximity to the work because so much broadcast content is filmed in a studio. That allows showrunners or producers to keep an eye on it and make sure everything is working well. Maybe the creativity suffers a little because you're focused on appealing to a much larger audience. Are we watering down the story so much that nobody watches?

*You just mentioned the dispersal of production to other cities as a growing concern. We wanted to ask you about it. For example, when you started producing **The Game** for the CW, it was based in Los Angeles. When you switched to BET, the series went to Atlanta. Tell us about that change.*

It was an interesting process. We did five seasons. Each season was a different episode order. We were cancelled in 2009. We premiered again in 2011. Being off air for two years meant that all of the sets and other assets had been destroyed. Our budget was lower, so we couldn't bring any of the writers with us to Atlanta. Comedy needs comedy writers nearby. You need the constant punch

up. It's easy to do in Los Angeles when the writers are on set. But we lost that asset in Atlanta. We prepared for it. We knew we couldn't afford to bring them so we decided early on to change the tone of the show in order to better manage quality. We wanted it to be a little more dramatic and a little less funny. It's just easier to control.

Another reason we moved away from the comedy elements was because my husband and our producing partner Kenny Smith decided to cross-board all thirteen episodes. It was completely crazy, and likely unprecedented. But we needed to do it as a cost-savings measure. We needed to do it to get the show on the air. Ultimately it means your actors may film a scene from episode one the same day they film a scene from episode thirteen. You can imagine how difficult it is to keep the story straight when you film in that way. It's not fair. It's not right. And it's certainly not conducive to comedy when you need to see how the jokes land within an episode so you can punch up what needs it.

It was barely manageable, but we knew we had to do it for the show. What we lacked in money we made up for in our labor and creativity. And I could not have asked for a better cast. They were stellar. They took the heat because they're veterans. They loved the show, and they were committed to it. It was absolutely crazy, though. I want to tip my hat to both Salim and Kenny, who managed that on the ground. I helped manage it from afar.

That's an amazing story. Did the scale of resources differ between the CW and BET? What was the difference in cost per episode between the two?

To be very candid with you: I don't know. When I worked in broadcast television, I always knew my budget and how to manage it. When I started to deal with BET—and maybe it was a learning curve for them—they gave me an ideal number within which they wanted me to work, but there always was this idea that we were over budget. I'm like, well, where is the budget? It never appeared. In fact, I told them it was better to shut down the show and get the numbers right because we were hemorrhaging money. I knew we were spending more than what was needed. I'm not trying to throw BET under the bus. I'm only saying that the cost savings you get from the tax incentive in Georgia and cross-boarding episodes doesn't negate the way in which you make a television series. There's a way to do it: you put in more money up front so you can manage your budget once the train starts rolling. Without knowing what you have to spend, you can't prioritize. You end up spending more money because you can't make strategic decisions.

So, I can't accurately answer your question because I never saw a final budget from BET. What I can tell you is that whereas we had about \$1.2 million for each episode at the CW, BET wanted us to do it for about \$800,000 an episode. It was an impossible number.

Being Mary Jane started its first year in Georgia. Did you encounter different challenges? Was it easier to produce at a distance because it's a drama?

I think we learned from the experience on *The Game*. We also benefited from building the series from the ground up in Atlanta. And, yes, I think it's a bit easier to hold onto the creative aspects from a distance when you're not doing comedy. We ended up doing something I don't recommend: we cross-boarded the first season to get it on the air. Because there was this idea that if you stacked eight scripts and then shot them out of order like scenes for a movie, it would save money. But having done it, I don't think that's the case. Now, we just cross-board two episodes. It's more manageable. Ideally you should do one episode a week but no more than two: one director cross-boards two scripts.

My battle was always getting enough money to do the show, but that's not unique to me or to this show. Every producer across every genre and every outlet is going to fight for more money while the studio will always fight to give you less.

But the advantage will always be to do it in Los Angeles. It just gives you more quality control. If you want a great show, you need to have the showrunner and the writers close to production.

So the center of the industry in your mind is still Los Angeles?

You see some locations establishing a crew base there, but we're still flying our department heads from L.A. into Atlanta. Top talent is still based here. And the best of the best in Atlanta or New Orleans are hired quickly. If your production isn't first in line, you miss out. It's challenging.

There's so much talk about motion picture production being dispersed around the country and even the world, but you're suggesting that the critical element—talent and your connection to it—is still rooted in Southern California.

Yes. I want to end by saying this. We're people. We're creative people. We're not robots. There's so much said about runaway production from a cost-savings perspective that we tend to forget that it's actually hurting people. It's tough to manage your relationship with your husband and children when you're in Atlanta and they are in Los Angeles. People do it because they have to work. But I don't know that we're getting the best out of people when they're distracted by these other stressors from shooting out of state.

I get it, some things have to be shot out of state, but you've got to provide a situation whereby people can stay replenished. Replenishment will be different for everybody. For some of us, it may have to do with our family time. That won't be it for everyone. But the idea of replenishing people is about making sure you're

doing what you can to get the best out of them. I worry we are losing the ability to get the best out of people. If I'm worried about my kids because I'm so far away from them, I am a distracted employee. Or someone says, "I can do one season. I cannot do two, three, or four." You spend all that time building up a crew and generating chemistry only to have it ruptured every time someone leaves. Of course, people think that you can just replace that person. But finding talent is hard. It's not like replacing parts in a machine.

NOTE

1. Kim Masters, "Hollywood's Undercover Hitmakers," *Hollywood Reporter*, August 9, 2012, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/sparkle-whitney-houston-salim-mara-brock-akil-359947>.