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WOMEN BEHIND CANADIAN TV: WINNIFRED JONG

Bridget Liszewski | February 4, 2019 | [Canadian TV](#) | [No Comments](#)

Ramona Diaconescu

Director Winnifred Jong was having one of those classic 'now or never' moments. After working as a script supervisor successfully for years on some of Canada's most prominent series such as *Flashpoint*, *Bomb Girls* and *X Company*, Jong was ready to make a change. She wanted to shift her career from script supervising to directing, jump in with both feet, and really go for it. But turning down good, steady work in order to go for your dreams is no easy task. Thankfully, Jong had many supporters in the industry that were ready and willing to help her directing dreams come true.



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Jong, fresh off her first stint directing a network drama, an upcoming episode of CBC's new series *Coroner*, recently spoke with *The TV Junkies* as part of our Women Behind Canadian TV [series](#). She detailed for us how she went about shifting the direction of her career, and how those like *Coroner* director and executive producer [Adrienne Mitchell](#) assisted her along the way. Jong, named one of Playback's 2018 [5 to Watch](#), also shared with us her shadowing experience and why programs such as *Women in the Director's Chair (WIDC)* are so important in helping young creators.

When we spoke with Jong she had just wrapped filming on a new web series, *Tokens*, that discusses diversity in the industry and that Jong hopes is a conversation starter for other issues. She discussed what it's been like for her as an Asian female working in Canada's television industry, and how some of the challenges she has faced have led her to try to share the success of other people of colour and to keep highlighting their work.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

The TV Junkies: Let's go back to the beginning, was working in TV something you always knew you wanted to do? How did you get into working behind the scenes on all these TV shows?

Winnifred Jong: I always wanted to do it and went to film school for it. I won a shadowing program, back in the day when they let you shadow any position, and it was a Canada-wide academy program. I decided that I wanted to shadow a director, but coming out of film school when you've done just about every position, I realized quickly that I didn't feel confident in my directing to just announce to the world that I was a director. The script supervisor said to me that I'd be working alongside directors, learn from them and be that person.

I ended up being good at that position which meant I didn't stop working, and time just kind of slipped by. When I realized that too much time had slipped by and that the climate was changing, I had to try to convince people that I could direct. Before they used to just let you direct, but now you had to have a reel, had to commit, had to have gone to the CFC (Canadian Film Centre) and all these things. Now you can't just upgrade. There's only a few people that could upgrade and most were cinematographers. Mostly men.

TTVJ: I definitely want to focus on your directing work and where your focus is now, but as you said, you worked as a script supervisor for so long. In order to understand the shift you made, can you talk a little bit about what working in that position entails?

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WJ: The script supervisor is the person that is the eyes and ears for the editor. It's tracking anything that is in the script that's technical or whether or not the script is being followed on set. Also in terms of coverage, the director decides where the shots are, but if you feel like something is missing, then you're responsible for bringing that up. It can be adhered to or dismissed depending on the vision, but you're always pointing things out. In a lot of ways, you're following the director and making sure that he or she has the material they need in post production. In doing so, you're also responsible for continuity, always talking to the actors about whether or not certain things matched or not. You have to have a delicate personality because you don't want to be the person to talk about mistakes, but you have to figure out which ones are irrelevant and which are not.

I always sat beside the director and we always had conversations about performance, or shots required or story continuity. We were always thinking 'what would happen if we lost this scene? Would it make a difference?' I was always immensely interested in the storytelling portion of my job and that's what led people, like Adrienne Mitchell, recognizing that I really wanted to direct. We talked about it right after I'd done *Bomb Girls*, and she recognized that I didn't just have continuity on the brain, but was also interested in story, character and all the directorial aspects of the job. So I told her I wanted to direct and she actually gave me my first big chance. I then became the 2nd Unit Director on her next series *Played*. She gave me an opportunity where I could take some scenes with main characters and shoot them when it didn't fit in the schedule. We kept our relationship and I showed her practically any short I ever shot, asked for advice and took coffee meetings.

Finally, she said that she had a series [*Coroner*] and wanted to do a special thing, and that is to split a block. Normally, she'll have one director shoot two episodes at a time which helps budget. She decided with her partner and permission of the broadcaster, that she was going to put forward me and Sherren Lee as directors of one block. It gave us a little more time to prepare and it also gave me an opportunity to look at the way the show was shot, the style and tone of the show so I could emulate it as much as I could.

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TTVJ: In addition to that, I saw that you did a few other things such as shadow Rachel Talalay on *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, or offer work as a script supervisor on the *Frankie Drake* web series in exchange for directing it. Adrienne giving you that chance is huge, and it's something she does for a lot of women in the industry, but can you talk about some of the other things you did that helped you to be seen as a director?

WJ: *Frankie Drake* was new and I had been approached to do it as a script supervisor. Cal Coons was an executive producer, and I've known him and he knows I have directing aspirations. I basically pitched to him that because it's Season 1, it'd be a really good opportunity for me to direct the webisodes because Shaftesbury is very keen to use them as a way of drawing audiences and adding value to their product. Having been on this new series, I felt like I could have an advantage over a new director who just came in for the webisodes. I knew the characters, the look of the show and could put my own imprint on it while being comfortable with the actors on a short schedule that will be in style.

So I pitched it on the value of having someone from the inside do it and he agreed. He thought it was a great idea and pitched it to Shaftesbury. They felt like it was a great opportunity and thought it was a good platform for me to start showing them what I could do. They were super supportive, and really allowed me to work through the scripts with Julie Lacey and the *Frankie Drake* writers and producers to try and launch the show with the webisodes. It was something that was very dear to Christina [Jennings] heart, and so I knew I just had to do a great job of showcasing *Frankie*. Having that kind of rapport with Cal really gave me the confidence to ask for that.



Steve Wilkie

TTVJ: It's really nice to hear these stories of people looking out for others and really trying to bring them up alongside them.

WJ: For sure! It was Cal that told me that I had to stop script supervising. If you really want to do what you say you want to do, then you just have to be that. It's scary because you're turning down work that you're used to. I did that though.

I know Rachel Talalay and had worked as a script supervisor on some shows she had come in and directed. We corresponded and she knew that I was interested in photography and she liked my photographic eye. We would always talk about shots and have that same collaborative spirit. So when I went to Women in the Director's Chair in Vancouver we touched base again. She suggested that I come shadow her. She does a lot of work with Greg Berlanti and Warner Brothers, and she thought that might be a good fit for me to be introduced.

When she came on board *Sabrina*, Warner Brothers offered her someone else to shadow her, but she suggested me instead. She knew I'd be available, was someone that she trusted and was someone that should be given a shot. She really went on the line as a guest director, but she had that belief in me to suggest that I could do it. So I went to Vancouver and shadowed her on *Sabrina*. I also went to Los Angeles, met with some of the executives at Berlanti's office so they knew of me when the shadow was suggested. It was part of all these little boxes that you have to tick in terms of being approved because you now have to be approved to shadow on big network shows. They don't want just anybody being on the show and disrupting the show, so having all the set experience made it easier for them to allow me to see behind the scenes.

The producers at *Sabrina* were super supportive, and I didn't feel like an extra body they had to work around. I was given a lot of access to the behind the scenes which helped a lot in terms of informing me about my first directing experience — the meetings involved, the details you have to cover, the amount of work involved. Coming from script, you're only privileged to the information that's on the floor in the day to day production and not behind the scenes. So it was really fascinating to see all the meetings you have to take, and the decisions you have to make, and it really helped me.

TTVJ: She's such an amazing accomplished director too. What a wonderful person to get to shadow.

WJ: I also shadowed **Amanda Tapping** briefly on *Dark Matter*, but because of the way that worked I didn't get as much access because they were already in motion on the prep. I didn't get to follow her as much as I liked to, but Amanda is another great director to be supported by.

TTVJ: You are alumnae of Women In the Director's Chair (WIDC). What was that experience like and what are the benefits of a program like that?

WJ: What Carol Whiteman [President & CEO] does is extraordinary. She single-handedly showcases all the women directors that come through the program. My series *Tokens* was a Telefilm Microbudget project and that always has to go through a nominating partner. Women in the Director's Chair saw my project and I applied to be nominated. As such, I was nominated in the web series category and with that there was mentorship, advice and help in putting together the application. That's when it was successful with Telefilm because of work I did with Women in the Director's Chair. They helped me get funding for my web series *Tokens* through their mentorship and development program. That's huge.



Ramona Diaconescu

TTVJ: Speaking of *Tokens*, I know you recently wrapped shooting on that. What was that experience like and what is the series about? I know it deals a lot with diversity so can you share the motivations behind it?

WJ: It's a comedic web series about an on call casting agency that sends diverse actors to set in roles that they'd never normally be cast in. It's like Uber for actors for when a show would go 'oops! We don't have enough diversity!' In this world, they don't have enough diversity so then they call this casting agency. It's a bit of a commentary I have regarding blind casting, diversity mandates, what works and what doesn't, how people are stereotyped and how people can break free from those stereotypes by finding inner strength. It's more a discussion about diversity that I want to start.

I've worked and succeeded quite well in the industry. With my connections as crew, I've actually managed to live my life the way I want to and work where I want to work in the industry I love. I wasn't 'woe is me. I'm Asian and don't get any opportunities.' It's more that I see a lot of things where shows are trying to be diverse, but they are never the lead. So I wanted to create a show where the leads are people of colour. Being a web series was quite freeing because there's a lot less overseeing in terms of what I'm creating.

TTVJ: Have you had that experience of being the token person of colour on set?

WJ: Oh yea! Of course. There's very few Asians in the film industry. In Toronto, the crews are still quite caucasian. So when we see each other we kind of go 'oh! We're together!' We know who everyone is, even though Toronto is one of the biggest centers for film in North America. We actually know each other though, who we are and what department we work in. We don't often see each other. I don't get hired because I'm Asian, but I do sometimes feel like I'm an island in a sea of creative voices.

I'm not pointing fingers at anybody, but I hear the struggles of actors of colour. I take a lot of information in by just listening and they are sort of saying 'I did my degree in acting so what do I do now? There's nothing for me. It's so much harder.' If you're not on *Kim's Convenience* then what show can you be on, right? You can be number 10 on the call sheet and a lot of times you don't have a name. You're there for one episode as a guest star and you have a few lines, but never the leading role. That's now changing quite a bit which is good.

TTVJ: I believe I heard that on *Coroner* they just did open casting — races, genders, everything.

WJ: Oh yea. When I was working on *Coroner*, for all the guest roles I had the opportunity to cast, I was sent males and females for a role that may have been written for a man. So something like 'guest detective' could be anybody, and I would have audition tapes from men, women, people of color, the whole gamut. It was liberating to get to see so many great actors. Unfortunately, you can't cast them all, but it was really refreshing to see that even though the script would say one thing, we didn't have to adhere to it. It was very dynamic in that respect and people changed all the time. We just picked the best actor for the role.



Jan Thijs

TTVJ: It's great to see shows like *Coroner* taking those steps. Are there any other positive steps or initiatives being taken that we need to keep doing or see more of?

WJ: I'm one of the founding members of the National Directors of Canada Women's Directors Committee. It's the first committee of women directors in the DGC. Adrienne Mitchell and Norma Bailey are also on it, and we're trying to create subcommittees and also address the imbalance of female directors in film and television. Part of it is political, some is advocacy and some of it is support in light of the #MeToo movement. That's a new initiative that's just starting, and we're trying to gather partners for the opportunity where we have some sort of template where we could make changes. Then women don't just shadow but they actually get jobs.

With every initiative there's always a backlash. I was a recipient of the Netflix Banff Diversity of Voices [initiative](#) that benefits women, francophones and indigenous storytellers. The **BIPOC** (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) community was disappointed because men of

colour were not considered diverse in this mandate. In terms of what they called diversity there was a lot of criticism. There's always someone that's left out and feels like they need to be a part of it, but as the recipient of this initiative, I felt very fortunate to represent female person of colour stories. I'm lucky that I could qualify, but I know that a lot of men of colour felt a little bit left out. Even though I want to highlight it, it's not a catch all for all things diverse.

Nathalie Younglai also founded a group called BIPOC and I can't admire her enough. She really pushes that agenda forward and is the voice in terms of all the unions. I represent the Director's Guild but she's in the Writer's Guild. I'm trying to partner with actor diversity committees because of *Tokens* and it all has to be together. It has to reach the funding levels too. The only way it'll be successful isn't with these programs, but with funding and getting the stories we want to tell out there.

It is happening and I'm less of a pessimist. I'm actually quite positive about the direction of where everything is going, but I'm also benefiting from it. I don't know what my answer would be if I wasn't so on the receiving end of it because I know a lot of people are frustrated. So part of what I've been trying to do is recognize the strengths of everybody and highlight the successes of other women directors and people of colour. The success we have collectively can be shared. I don't mind sharing that success and trying to grow it into something bigger.

TTVJ: It's not pie. It can all be shared.

WJ: That's it. It isn't pie. What was thrilling about *Tokens* was that the cast was spectacular. I'm so excited with them and it doesn't feel like a web series. Based on the feedback we've had with cast that are actually stars on their own television series, and the fact that there's support and excitement from them about the messaging and storytelling, then we don't have to be pessimistic. I think there's positivity for sure.

TTVJ: How did your first experience then directing a network drama go on *Coroner* this season?

WJ: My episode is a little bit different and you get to concentrate a little bit more on Jenny (Serinda Swan) and her life. As such, some of the darkness that exists in her life and is hinted at up until that point, we get to live in that for a moment. I don't want to give anything away, so I better just say that while she's a truthseeker, there's a truth within her that she needs to discover. It is character-based, and I really lucked out being able to play with the actors and explore all different levels of emotion by being able to give direction that's not just an action. We got to delve into their characters

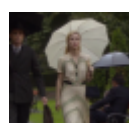
and get great performances that way. I'm lucky because I had a more contained episode for my first one, but it was so rich with character-driven dialogue and scenes that it was so strong. It's not as procedural as the rest of the show, and as a result of the work I did on *Coroner*, I now am directing an episode of *Nurses*.

Do you have thoughts on Jong's story? Share them below!

Coroner airs Mondays at 9 p.m. ET on CBC. Read more from our *Women Behind Canadian TV* series [here](#).



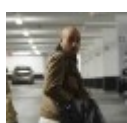
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Editor in Chief Bridget Liszewski comes from a long line of TV Junkies who fostered her love of television from a very young age. She's channeled that passion into covering both US and Canadian television shows, and is thankful everyday for the invention of the DVR. A graduate of the University of Notre Dame, she loves college football and is a fan of sports in general. Bridget is always up for talking TV and you can follow her on twitter at [@BridgetOnTV](#).