

ON MAUREEN RYAN'S *BURN IT DOWN*

05.30.2023

If *Lost* is so great a work of art as to continue to be a topic of discussion after all these years, then it is cruel to expect those of us who were there to remain silent as to how the show was made. *Lost* succeeded because of the sustained contribution of many, many artists, many of them geniuses on their own right, and many of whom were treated quite badly and then disappeared in favor of "auteur showrunner" hagiography.

Since quitting the show at the end of its second season, I have mostly played along with the useful hypocrisy that *Lost* was successful because of two geniuses whose behavior behind the scenes was every bit as delightful as it is in conventions, interviews, and talk shows. I call this hypocrisy useful because it allowed me to continue to work after *Lost* without career-ending retribution. It also allowed "Darlton" to rise to great wealth and cultural influence.

I went on the record in Maureen Ryan's book *Burn It Down* for several reasons. First, I have known and followed Ryan for years. She is a meticulous investigator with the highest regard for objectivity and journalistic ethics. Though I did not witness every incident in *Burn It Down*, I can confirm that the behavior she reports took place constantly during my tenure on the show.

Second, I can't imagine "Darlton" being "cancelled", nor is it my goal. They are each too big to fail - and I assume crisis management experts, publicists, and litigators have been preparing before the publication of the book or its excerpt in *Vanity Fair*. What I do hope is that future abusers will be deterred, and that blowing the whistle on abusers becomes less stigmatized.

Finally, being part of a hypocrisy, even a useful one, eventually becomes too painful. This rage has truly scarred me. I am done paying that price for "Darlton's" ego.

In the words of Howard Beale, "I just ran out of bullshit."

To the charge of hypocrisy, I plead no contest. I cashed the checks. I affected friendship. I handed out high praise (some deserved). I even sought to mend fences with those who broke them well after it should have been clear that the effort was demeaning.

Sometimes hypocrisy is the only way people like me can survive people like them.

Below, for the record, are my complete remarks to Maureen Ryan, collected from text and email exchanges. Her quotes from me are accurate word-for-word.

Bolded passages indicate additional material included after my interviews to support and expand on points made in Ryan's reporting.

My professional coming of age took place in the early 1990's, a time when the TV writer *omerta* was in full force, and the pool of show-runners was small, homogeneously white, middle-aged, and vindictive as hell. Tolerating whatever humiliation the boss saw fit to dish out was expected and understood as both dues-paying and cost-of-admission.

Over the course of the first two decades of my career, including two years as a Primetime Series Executive at a network, I witnessed men in that position destroying the careers of others with depressing regularity. A show-runner I worked for in the 90s - one who was later written about and fired in the 2010's after multiple HR investigations - went as far as to brag to his writers that "it's not that hard to ruin someone's career, you just have to whisper something about a drug problem into the right ear".

A single word like "difficult" whispered into the right ear can be a death blow to a female or POC writer. In such a climate, you have to assume that anything but complete obeisance will be punished. As far as we think we may have gotten, that culture is still very much alive.

I for one have never stopped looking over my shoulder and, after saying all this, probably never will.

The writers room of *Lost* was a predatory ecosystem with its own carnivorous megafauna. Those of us lucky enough to have survived for any extended period of time paid for whatever scraps of the show's success we were tossed with our pride, dignity, and psychotherapy bills.

The overwhelming tone of the writers room was one of bullying disguised as "teasing". This behavior was absolutely modeled by upper management, and race and gender were always on the table. From one of the senior writer/producers posting Michelle Rodriguez's mugshot after she was arrested for DUI (and spinning a 'funny' story about how, as a wily Latina behind bars, she "sold" Cynthia Watros, a white cast member, to the other inmates for cigarettes) to the way in which our only Asian-American writer was routinely joked about, to her face, as the showrunners's "geisha" (down to the Mickey Rooney *Breakfast at Tiffany's* accent), it was a daily occurrence.

In *Burn it Down, Lost* writer/producers Monica Owusu-Breen, Melinda Hsu, and others staffers who remained off the record, tell stories of being driven to tears by the show's toxic work environment. I validate their claims.

One incident stands out in my memory. After one assistant left the office in tears, one showrunner addressed the event with an angry declaration that he did not understand why he had to treat women in his employ with the same sensitivity he would a girlfriend. The other explained that "the problem with female assistants" is that they grow so attached to the showrunner's power and privileges as to become "confused" about "their place".

As with most other shows of the time, the numbers tell the story of *Lost*'s relationship to women. There were four female writers on staff in the first season. Of twenty-two episodes, two were solo credits for women: one by a writer on staff, the other by a freelancer who was not asked to return. A second female writer on the staff got two credits, both shared with a male. Half the women writers on staff stayed on the bench entirely.

On season two there were two women on staff. They shared credit on two scripts, and the more senior of the two wrote an additional solo. A fourth script was co-written by a male and female assistant who were subsequently fired. Again: four scripts out of twenty-two.

Similarly, one episode in the first season was directed by a woman. That number increased to two in the second season.

This sort of environment doesn't only poison the dynamic behind the scenes, it shows up on screen in the attitudes of the characters, their dialogue, and the stories themselves. It's no surprise to me that the main Latinx character in the show was frequently portrayed as feckless, ignorant, and gluttonous - and therefore the justifiable butt of countless fat jokes.

It's very easy, especially twenty years after the fact, to think 'well, it can't have been that bad or someone would have done something.' Let me say it loud and clear: it was that bad, and no one did anything because retribution was a constant and looming presence.

When a showrunner makes a clear statement to his writers room that "I'm petty and I bear grudges," as ours did with absolutely no irony, you know exactly what you stand to lose by rocking the boat. It is also very hard to overstate the degree to which female and POC television writers lived in a climate of uncertainty back then, with no real improvement to this day.

Most importantly, the notion that it could all be chalked up to inexperience alone is fucking risible. Simple decency and managerial experience are not mutually dependent.

It boggles the mind that billion-dollar corporations are willing to hand stewardship of a globally-consumed product that costs millions to people without the necessary experience, or the simple human decency, to do the job professionally and humanely.

This is a major spoke in the wheel of madness, rage, and abuse I have seen endlessly repeated over the span of my thirty year career. When you throw inexperience into a stew that already includes large sums of money, massive but fragile egos, rock star-level fame, award ceremonies, and the natural inclination of the business to not rock a successful boat, the end result is inevitably dysfunctional and abusive management protected by the higher-ups in the name of profit. The cycle continues because once a person is successful, they have very little incentive to change; the world has validated their way of doing things as the "secret sauce".

That much said, if you're a white person with the slightest self-awareness, there's the inescapable truth that the casino is rigged in your favor, you didn't get here on hard work and talent alone, and that - all other things being equal - someone else could have had your seat at the table.

In *Burn it Down*, several writers of *Lost* discuss the psychological and economic consequences of toxic management in television. The abuse of the power to remove writers from the writers room, and to make script assignments, are also mentioned in *Burn it Down*. I witnessed both.

Shortly after *Lost* premiered, a founding member of the writing staff was declared "difficult" and exiled from the writers room through the end of his contract. In the same way that Monica Owusu-Breen describes being "sent to casting" in *Burn It Down*, this writer was given duties in production and conspicuously taken off the script rotation. The consequences of not toeing the party line were clear in no uncertain terms.

Deliberately "benching" a writer or using the assignation of scripts as a badge of favor is not just an emotional blow, but a significant financial one. Script fees are separate from salaries and total in the five figures.

In the spring of 2006, at the end of my tenure on *Lost*, I was assigned to work on an alternate reality game/promotional project called "The Lost Experience". This is how I was exiled from the writers room and script rotation.

As the project took shape, Carlton Cuse took me aside and told me not to disclose my involvement on social media in order to "preserve the illusion," assuring me that "when the curtain falls" on the project a few months after its launch, everyone would be credited for their work. Cuse went on to tell me not "mention" my work on the "Lost Experience" to the Writers Guild.

Our union, Cuse explained, was being "difficult" about additional compensation for work done by staffed writers in the then-nascent field of internet content, and it would be best if

they didn't know who was doing the actual writing. While this was not an unusual request in the early, unregulated, days of online content, two details distinguish this episode from the era's standard duplicity.

The first is that Cuse served in the Writers Guild Negotiating committee through the strike of 2007. The strike was primarily based on fair compensation for online content.

The second is that only days after the "Lost Experience" premiered during the 2006 May sweeps to much media buzz and audience expectation, Cuse presented himself in the New York Times as a pivotal creative voice behind the campaign.

In *Burn It Down, Lost*, writer/producer Melinda Hsu tells a story of overhearing Carlton Cuse taking credit for her work. This was not an isolated incident.

A good example was during *Lost's* first panel at the Paley Television Festival. From the stage, Cuse expounded on the process of selecting the show's main title. From the audience, a few of us founding writer/producers looked at one another in shock. The title treatment and musical drone that JJ Abrams created on his Apple PowerBook while writing the pilot had long been decided upon, and was locked in multiple episodes.

Later in the same presentation, Cuse exclaims that "at the beginning, we didn't think it was going to work".

By the start of Cuse's tenure on the show, production of the series had been active for months, we had written seven scripts - one of which went on to be nominated for an Emmy - with two more in advanced development - the present day/flashback format of the show had been nailed down conclusively, the character stories that made up those flashbacks had been extensively fleshed out, we had had a triumphant screening at the San Diego Comic-Con, the show had tested through the roof, ABC had shown exceptional confidence in their marketing, and the audience buzz was off the charts because by the time Cuse came in to work with us full time the show **HAD ALREADY PREMIERED TO RECORD RATINGS.**

I would gladly retrieve the recording of this event from the Paley Museum's archive, but I don't have to: at the three minute mark of this video Cuse says "we had certain set ideas very early, like the show opened with Jack's eye opening and was gonna end with Jack's eye closing" Again, Cuse was not on *Lost* when those ideas were adopted.

Later in the video Cuse claims that "we wrote the story from beginning to end". Who is "we"? The only person who can credibly make that statement is Damon Lindelof.

I would also point to the first edition of Alan Sepinwall's book *The Revolution Was Televised*, in which Cuse explains that: "I really thought it could last. The good thing is that there were not many people who believed that at the time, so my agent got me out of my

deal, I came over, and we set out to do the show. And it was kind of great. Everybody left us alone, because they were convinced that the show was 12 [episodes] and out, and it gave us the liberation to make the best version of the show we could - the one we wanted to watch. There was no fear of failure, because in this particular circumstance, failure was not an unattractive option."

I reiterate: by the start of Cuse's tenure on the show, production of the series had been active for months, we had written seven scripts - one of which went on to be nominated for an Emmy - with two more in advanced development - the present day/flashback format of the show had been nailed down conclusively, the character stories that made up those flashbacks had been extensively fleshed out, we had had a triumphant screening at the San Diego Comic-Con, the show had tested through the roof, ABC had shown exceptional confidence in their marketing, and the audience buzz was off the charts because by the time Cuse came in to work with us full time the show **HAD ALREADY PREMIERED TO RECORD RATINGS.**

No one "left us alone" to make *Lost* - the development was one of the most fraught affairs I have ever witnessed. ABC committed tens of millions to the pilot based on an outline, a risk I had never and have not since seen a network take, and all eyes were on JJ Abrams's daring gambit. We were as far from an obscure upstart endeavor as humanly possible.

You will not find Cuse's comments in the second edition of *The Revolution Was Televised*, after reading the book I published a 40,000 word piece detailing the timeline of the show's creation and Cuse's comments were edited to reflect the new information, but that doesn't mean that this false narrative has not been central to Cuse's self-promotion over many, many years. Here he is, quoted in his own Alma Mater's newspaper, the Harvard Gazette as having left other more lucrative work to help develop the *Lost* pilot:

The mantra applied to his experience with "Lost," said Cuse, who got out of a deal with another studio and took a cut in pay to follow his passion and help develop the show's pilot.

"I just couldn't get it out of my head."

He called the leap of faith required to work on a show everyone else was convinced would flop "liberating."

Cuse said he and his collaborator, Damon Lindelof, started breaking TV rules, introducing a complex narrative and large and ethnically diverse cast that included characters with dark pasts. They also purposely left story lines ambiguous to allow the audience to discuss the meaning of the plot with each other.

"Every time we were supposed to go right, we asked ourselves, 'Well what happens if we go left instead?'"

Needless to say, every time Cuse repeats this tale, he demeans every one of us who did the actual work of developing *Lost* at the pilot and early series stage.

This slippery claiming of authorship through distortion, association and omission, combined with toxic management, and the purging of the series' entire inaugural staff (as well as the firing of two Co-Executive Producers halfway through the second season) all add up to one reality; "Darlton" was the only genius. Anyone who tried to disturb that perception was made to vanish.

I have a great deal of guilt attached to my time in the *Lost* writers' room because, out of the nine who started the first season, I was the only one to survive into the second. I was afraid for my career, and the stakes were enormous. I can't hold my head up high and declare that I was a 'good ally' who called out abuses wherever I saw them. I went along to get along, and I laughed and nodded when I should have balked and argued. All that said, one can only hide behind the excuse of fear for so long. I eventually quit the show.

Even that cannot be portrayed as some heroic act of moral outrage. By season two, I had fallen so far out of favor with "Darlton" that I was assigned no script work beyond the eighth episode of the twenty-two episode season, and was exiled from the writers room soon thereafter. I had seen this tactic before and knew what it meant.

My work on *Lost* included aiding in the development of the series before the pilot episode was written. I wrote two scripts and co-wrote an additional three in the Emmy Award-winning first season; Cuse asked me to co-write his own first script, as well as those of every new writer he hired in season one, because I knew "how to write the show". I also co-wrote two of the first eight episodes of the second season.

I was exhausted from playing hunger games for a job I had earned several times over.

Quitting for me was not only a way to escape a place that had become a poison kitchen, but also to take control over my future. After all I gave, the last thing I wanted was for the narrative to be that I was fired.

You may remember how characters in *Lost* frequently made fun of Tallahassee.

One day, the office received a very game letter from the Mayor of Tallahassee, along with all the attendant brochures, suggesting that we might want to get to know the good things about the city. In response, Damon told the writers room to double down on Tallahassee. When asked why, he replied with a straight face that the only thing funnier than punching someone in the face for no

reason is punching them harder when they ask why. If you can imagine that as a management philosophy, you can understand what it was like to work on *Lost*.

The biggest life lesson I took from working on *Lost* was this: the worst thing you can do to someone publicly anointed as a genius is to have known them before they were a genius. Your presence alone becomes an inconvenient and irritating reminder of the before-times, and no matter how hard you play nice, how dutifully you try to toe the party line, you will be destroyed.