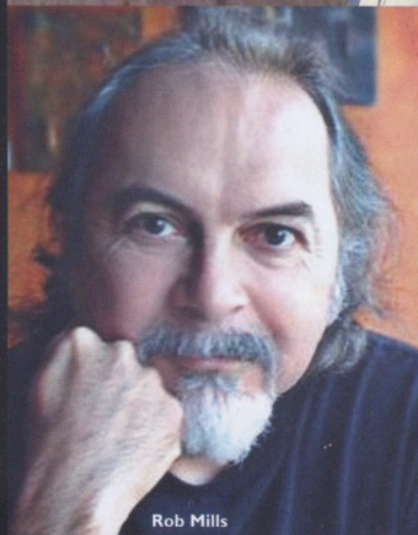All the classics of film, theatre and literature - enacted by Rubber Chickens! Official Selection of the first Toronto WebFest, www.rubberchickenplayers.tv is written by **Jim Taylor**, **Fred Stinson** and **Rob Mills** and produced and directed by **Rob Mills**.

IN A WORLD ...
WHERE RUBBER CHICKENS
ARE THE STARS

www.rubberchickenplayers.tv

Ruffus The Dog, (top right) produced, written and directed by **Rob Mills**, features a wisecracking canine, performed by Rob. Ruffus lives in a bookshop and acts out the roles from famous fairy tales and classic works of literature. Originally produced for broadcast on YTV, the children's series received multiple Gemini Nominations and a Writer's Guild Award. Check it out at **ruffusthedog.net**.

Ruffus The Dog's
CHRISTMAS CAROL

Ruffus The Dog

Rob Mills

Pictured here in the web series *Microwave Porn*, creator and star **Ash Catherwood**.

SNOOF Riders is Ash Catherwood's time travelling, rock-n'-roll comedy currently in development. L to R: **Rick Green**, **Ash Catherwood** and **Alice Moran**.
Photo: Joanna Haughton

Unlimited Shelf Space

By Jeremy Webb

With the growing use of computers, tablets and phones to view dramatic content, and with the changes that come with viewer demand, it is a good time to look at the so-called web series to discover how they are made. It really can't be that hard, can it? Surely, you just grab your smart phone and point it at your ACTRA talent, upload to YouTube and "budda-bing, budda-boom" — you are a web series producer!

I'm sitting down with web series creators **Rob Mills** and **Ash Catherwood** who can set me on the right path.

Rob Mills has been an ACTRA member and working in the film and television industry (as a performer, writer, director and producer) for over 30 years, and during that time, he tells me, he's seen a lot of changes in the technology being used and how the business itself is run. "Having been an early adopter of the internet," he says, "I was keenly aware of the changes coming down the pipe which would irrevocably alter our creative landscape."

Even when Mills ran his own TV production company he was experimenting with the possibilities that online video content offered. "We're walking around with a mini movie studio in our smart phones - and I have always found that to be very exciting."

Mills' first serious foray into web series was with *Ruffus The Dog*, originally broadcast on YTV, that he had produced back in the late 1990s. "When I left my company for greener pastures, the first thing I did was put all those original episodes online and then start to make more content based on those characters."

There are a bunch of other web series projects he is currently involved in, including *Rubber Chicken Players* and *In The Toobs*.

Katie Boland in the web series *Long Story, Short* which she wrote and created.

I ask Rob why he embraced the web series format and he bristles very slightly. "When people call web series a "format" I get a little uncomfortable. It's not a format. It's just another way of delivering the same content as movies and television."

Rob concedes that web series are at least similar to TV, but without the constraints of established viewing schedules and (most importantly), he says, "with none of the limitations of "shelf space" inherent in the existing television model."

Ash Catherwood, also an ACTRA member, is one of the co-founders and current president of the IWCC (Independent Web-series Creators of Canada), an organization dedicated to furthering the web series industry in Canada – in fact: the world.

For Ash, diving into the world of creating online content was a natural progression. "The importance of self-created work was always hammered into our skulls in school," he explains. "At the time, buying a camera was cheaper than renting theatre space – that simple economic fact has influenced my career more than anything else."

He has been creating web series for a solid decade. "My first series, created and released before the days of YouTube and the current massive levels of online video consumption, was born of necessity," he tells me. "I was a young actor, graduating from a theatre school and frustrated with a sudden drop in 'structured acting work'. The web series format is near and dear to my heart. Inherently experimental, it satiates the artistic drive."

It's that freedom of style that seems to turn these guys on. Catherwood explains "The lack of any gatekeepers in the space frees up the artist to tell the story for the story's sake, without arbitrary cultural or financial constraints."

Rob Mills has had years of experience dealing with a variety of broadcasters and distributors and funders who all inhabited the role of these mythical-sounding gatekeepers.

With the advent of web series this has now changed.

"I do not need to ask anyone for permission to make my shows for the web; and that for me is the single underlying factor in whey I have embraced this field."

A WINNING FORMULA

I ask them if there is a winning formula for a web-series and Catherwood jumps in straight away. "Format is a rapidly changing concept," he begins. "The standard 22/44 minute broadcast block isn't necessary when viewers are in control of the viewing experience."

Mills is quick to answer, with what I see now as his constant state of enthusiastic passion. "There is no winning formula. There is no sure-fire method for making anything 'go viral.' Anyone who says there is, is peddling a copious amount of bullshit."

"It was always "common wisdom" that web series episodes couldn't be any longer than three minutes in length," he sneers. "Or six minutes." He curses at the conformity.

"Broadcast television dictates that shows must be a very specific length… because they have to leave room for the commercials."

Web series creators do not want to be part of a cookie cutter industry. The story should dictate the episode length, Mills and Catherwood expain to me.

"There are numerous examples of web series creators trying to constrain themselves into any given format," says Rob Mills. "Tell your story and tell it well. It's as simple as that."

The two guys agree that it will be interesting to watch these commonly accepted standards change with the growth of Netflix and other online, non-commercial dependent distributors.

Catherwood has some simple advice for future web-series creators. "Don't piss off the audience. Don't alienate the audience. Don't ignore the audience."

I am feeling inspired and I am seriously considering making my own web series. So, Rob also chimes in with some solid and direct advice. "Avoid making something that is already available on TV. Do we really need a web version of *Duck Dynasty*? No. We do not."

For the record my web series will not be a version of *Duck Dynasty*.

"Make something you want to watch," he continues, "Make something you want to say. Make something that none of the established media outlets will show. At the end of the day you know you're not alone and there is a large audience out there of people who want to see the same thing as you. So give it to them."

THE BOTTOM LINE

So, if I am going to now become a fully-fledged ACTRA member-producer of an audience-loving web-series that people are begging to watch, with gloriously unconventional episode lengths, how do I fund my show?

"Good question," chuckles Mills. "You want to invest?" His smile disappears. He's serious. "There are as many ways to fund a web series as there are genres and audiences of web series. Some people finance their productions off their credit cards. Others go through the traditional routes of various funding agencies and tax credits."

"Some garner sponsors who either bookend the show or have their goods featured within the program itself. Some go begging on IndieGoGo or Kickstarter or Patreon. Some choose to use the various VOD options available. It all depends on what you need."

Catherwood agrees, "Funding a web series is often a series specific exercise, and what works for one won't necessarily work for the bunch."

"Currently in Canada we have one fund that is solely dedicated to providing financial support for web series production and that's the IPF," adds Mills. He is referring to the Independent Production Fund.

Unlimited Shelf Space

Ruffus The Dog, produced, written and directed by Rob Mills.

The Independent Production Fund was established in 1991 as a private Foundation with an endowment now valued at $32 M. The revenues generated by the endowment and recoupment from investments are used to support the production of Canadian drama series. **The Web Drama Series Program** was undertaken as an experimental project in 2010. As of 2013, this program has been extended indefinitely.

The intent of the fund is to assist independent producers/creators to finance the production of original drama series created initially for the web.

Both the Independent Production Fund and the IWCC (Independent Web Series Creators of Canada) provide very valuable information resources that cover all aspects of web series creation.

Catherwood thinks the trick is to know how much is absolutely needed "And then get creative." Making a web series requires creative thinking even when dealing with the bottom line. "There are constantly new funding models and avenues being announced and invented."

"The scale of your production should, of course, be dictated by the stories you're striving to tell," concludes Mills. "It really is: 'Whatever works.'" He looks me right in the eye. "Just go and do it." It's hard to argue. So, I don't.

ACTRA AND WEB-SERIES

The web series coming out of Canada are highly regarded around the world, garner acclaim and awards and audiences everywhere. Web festivals in Los Angeles, Austin, New York, Marseilles, Australia and Hong Kong are consistently dominated by the outstanding quality of Canadian web series.

Rob Mills has some sobering news for me. "The bulk of these works are non-ACTRA and I believe that needs to change," he says. "The members of the web series community (and not just those who are also ACTRA members) are eager to work with ACTRA performers."

However, it needs to be recognized that web series do not always fit the same established moulds of standard television production. ACTRA has to adapt and get creative to enable our members to take part in these shows, either as performers, or more often, as actively engaged creators themselves.

"ACTRA is essential for the future of web series creation in this country," says Catherwood. "Canada is the envy of the international marketplace when it comes to independent web series creation, with more funding opportunities, more festival awards, a tighter knit community and an insanely talented workforce."
"There is a danger in such a widespread democratization of the entertainment industry," he continues. "Literally anyone with a smartphone is capable of producing quality content, and many many, many do. Many of these start-up productions operate outside of any union agreement, and often take advantage of the workforce."

ACTRA has a very unique opportunity and responsibility in the shaping of the next generation of creators. By making it easier for ACTRA members to create their own content, they are ensuring that the Canadian voice will continue to be heard internationally. By enabling ACTRA members to work in the field, the strength of ACTRA performances will ensure Canada retains its leading edge in the digital platform.

"Over the years, ACTRA has successfully adapted to changes in the business, amending our agreements to respond to new means of production and new forms of distribution," according to Stephen Waddell, ACTRA's National Executive Director. "ACTRA's ongoing interest is in enabling our members to work on ACTRA contracts on all types of production for all screens; and for performers to receive equitable compensation, and ACTRA contract protection for production and use of content on all media platforms."

As a former president of the IWCC (and still as a current member) Rob Mills has been involved in a series of ongoing information discussions with various web series creators, distributors, broadcasters, guilds and other interested parties (including ACTRA) and he is encouraged by the perspectives and ideas which form the body of these conversations.

Mills is keen to encourage any ACTRA members who are interested in creating web series to inform themselves about the exciting possibilities which lie before them and to become active in helping ACTRA formulate policies that will help ACTRA members to participate in every level of this very rich opportunity.

DISTRIBUTING TO THE WORLD

I am not quite through picking the brains of these creators and ask them about what happens after the show is 'in the can?' (The irony of using that phrase seems stronger than ever, as cans of film are a thing of the distant past, it seems.)

I want to know what I have to do as a web series producer after post-production? Do I need distribution skills?

"Web series creation is a many-hat field," Catherwood says. "Marketing and rollout have to be considered and shaped just as the story is considered and shaped. Audience development often begins during pre-production. Web series and web series business will live or die based on the audience alone."
"Understanding a specific audience's needs, and delivering those needs pointedly will get a creator so much farther than simply finding an online distributor."

Rob Mills confirms that web series producing is "Much more than just making a show and slapping it online." Knowing your intended audience is vital. "That way you can seek them out and engage them with your plans, become part of their community," he pauses.

"Without just being a self-interested slime-ball marketing weasel," he smiles.

They suggest again that I turn to the IPF and IWCC web sites to find the core information I'll be needing. Both men are encouraging me on.

"If you are serious about making web series," says Mills, "Find a partner, build a team. Assemble the people around you who possess the skills or sensibilities you lack in the various areas needed, whether they be technical, financial, artistic, organizational or promotional. Many heads can wear more hats than one."

THE FUTURE?

I wonder what changes they have seen in web series production even in the last few years?

"When I began making web series the small portable screens which are so ubiquitous today were only beginning to find themselves into people's hands," Mills reminisces. "The file sharing communities have driven distribution to seriously consider and implement different release strategies to satisfy the desire of the "I Want It Now" audience."

"If you have a smart phone, take it out and hold it in your hand,"

Mills tells me and I do exactly that with my beaten up iPhone. "That thing there is not a phone. It is, in fact, for the purposes of this discussion, a complete movie studio."

I hold my complete movie studio in my hand, tenderly.

"And the only thing standing between you and that goal is you," he points at me and I believe him. That guy can spot a procrastinator at 25 yards!

"Things are only getting easier," interjects Catherwood, rescuing me from Mills' steely gaze. "It is getting easier and easier to reach a specific audience, with more and more people discovering web series content, and more ways to connect to that audience, it will continue to be easier."

"Competition for web series isn't the same as television — we aren't competing for a time slot. Shows that are very similar often share audience, to each show's benefit. It's a great time to be creating!"

I push them on what's to come, asking for a prediction of the future for web series.

"If I really truly knew what the hell lies ahead I'd be a billionaire already," says Mills. "Oddly (or perhaps not) it always helps to look back in order to see where the future lies. In 1964 Marshall McLuhan wrote in his book *Understanding Media* that: "Old media becomes the content of new media." — and we are seeing that this is so very true." He continues, "Television and film are not going to die — but they are going to transform. The ways and means by which audiences find and enjoy their motion picture experiences is changing — but not the desire and need for that experience. The internet — which includes the world wide web — is much more than just movies and TV and music and porn and funny cats."

It all seems rather hopeful. I came into this conversation expecting to be depressed by how content is created and what that means for an ACTRA member.

Regardless of whatever further technological or funding changes occur between now and the day after tomorrow you can be rest assured that the artists now have a direct connection with their audiences they have never had before.

Mills explains it so well. "As a performer, you do not need to audition for yourself, nor do you need the pat-on-the-head permission of a producer, director or casting agent. If you are so inclined, it is very freeing and inspiring to realize that YOU are now in charge." ●

Jeremy Webb is an ACTRA member and National Councillor for ACTRA Maritimes, based in Halifax, Nova Scotia. He has directed and produced a couple of award-winning short films. His web-series, *Shakespeare On Trial*, based on his play has not been made yet, but when Webb re-reads this article he will, no doubt, ask you for financial assistance to get the thing made. With a full cast of talented ACTRA members. **Webb's website is www.offtheleash.ca**

Siobhan McCarthy

Siobhan McCarthy is an actor, writer, director and as a result, by de-fault: a producer. Her web series, *Parked*, is drawn from experiences in her own home life.

"In 2008 I became a parent," she explains. "As a self-employed artist, there was no official "maternity leave" at the time so I worked contracts teaching, working as a digital media strategist and social media community manager for network television shows." All of which afforded her the time to conceive her own productions and be an involved, hands-on parent.

In the beginning, as affordable childcare was not readily available, McCarthy's son's father shared in the parenting duties. They worked contracts and would co-parent.

"When I would come home from teaching a three-hour class, I would hear stories about his day with our son and how lonely parenting was for him as a new dad." All community programs were geared to new moms.

"In 2009, my co-creator, Adam O. Thomas also became a parent. We had collaborated many years before on a short film that I wrote, directed and produced called, *Happy Meal*. At a friend's party,

Adam's wife told me that he was working on an idea for a comedy show about dads." The raw comedy that comes from the ridiculous moments that come with parenting inspired McCarthy to offer to option, develop and produce the property.

"In the spring of 2012 Tracey Mack came on board and we shot a digital pilot/ sizzle reel/ sales tool under the UBCP Ultra Low 20/20 agreement," she explains.

"In a social media campaign to build audience and garner entrance into the CFC media lab's ideaBOOST program, we launched our digital half pilot. Within 24 hours it went viral and made the title page of Reddit, receiving over 100,000 views on YouTube in less than 24 hours. We leveraged that success to a successful IPF (Independent Production Fund) application."

Then came a new challenge. "We had to re-brand due to the launch and fail of another comedy show under the same name with Fox."

In November 2013 shooting began on the newly titled *Parked*. In just three weekends 30 episodes were shot, and then released every week on Dailymotion and YouTube in early 2014.

The web series is a calling card for McCarthy. "As a result of my work on *Parked* and other properties, I was selected as a Bell Media National Fellow in 2014 and short-listed for their Producer Lab Accelerator. I won the Women In Film and Television Banff

Scholarship in 2013 from Vancouver's Chapter and in 2014 from Toronto's Chapter."

"We purposefully created *Parked* in an edgy way and keenly understand it is only suited for Pay/ specialty cable and/or the web."

UBCP/ACTRA

"We approached UBCP/ACTRA," the producer explains. "We worked with their amazing officers Julie Gil and Lesley Brady to find an agreement that would enable us to work with our incredible ensemble cast of union actors."

"If we can raise enough funds to do it again, it will be determined by how popular our season one is."

"As a team, we have decided that we don't want to change the show or its format in regards to reducing it. We have no interest in producing a smaller, ground down season two. We don't want to compromise our quality. We want to build upon our brand."

"We are constantly working at growing our audience and seeding our show strategically on various platforms. We hope more people will blog about our show, and help share it with their friends, family and networks via social media and beyond."

It would seem that the ACTRA membership has just been issued a happy challenge: check out www.parkedtheshow.com and persuade McCarthy and her creative team to get back to work! ●

David Lewis, Sean Amsing, Matty Granger, Kirby Morrow.