

## THE NETWORK TELEVISION MINI-SERIES

and the creation and making of

## HERCULES

by Kate McCallum

Over the years the television mini-series has been hailed as one of the great vehicles for deeper storytelling. Classics such as *Roots*, *The Thorn Birds* and *Lonesome Dove*, all highly regarded and well-received “event programming,” have garnered numerous awards and high ratings for the networks who aired them. The mini, which falls under the format category “long form,” has reached a new level of pedigree in the broadcast marketplace with the cable channels jumping in with such content as HBO’s *Angels in America* or A&E’s *Horatio Hornblower*. Hallmark Entertainment has been one of the most prolific providers of the mini-series content recently. They have produced such titles as *The 10th Kingdom*, *Children of Dune*, *Dead Man’s Walk*, *Dinotopia* and now NBC’s *Hercules*. I was fortunate to interview screenwriter Charles Pogue about his experience penning this Herculean task.

Charles Edward Pogue launched his career with a pair of scary classics, *Psycho III* and *The Fly*. Shifting from horror to fantasy, Pogue penned the swashbuckling epic, *Dragonheart*, with Sean Connery as the voice of Draco, the computer-animated dragon. His film noir mystery, *D.O.A.*, starred Dennis Quaid and Meg Ryan. In addition, he has written three Sherlock Holmes mysteries: *The Sign of Four*,

*The Hound of The Baskervilles* and *Hands of a Murderer*.

Prior to writing, Pogue spent many years as a stage actor in such plays as *Cyrano De Bergerac*, *Duchess of Malfi*, *The Rainmaker*, *Hay Fever*, *Angel Street*, *Flea in Her Ear* and, oddly enough, in a Sherlock Holmes play, *The Crucifer of Blood* which starred Charlton Heston and the late Jeremy Brett as Holmes and Watson respectively.

A member of WGA, SAG, AFTRA, Actors’ Equity and The Dramatists Guild, Pogue is also a popular guest speaker and has lectured on film and screenwriting at UCLA, USC and universities across the country, as well as for the Writers Guild at film festivals in Cannes, Beaune, Brazil and Seattle. He recently finished a screenplay adaptation of H. Rider Haggard’s immortal classic *She* and is currently writing a personal film project and another novel.

**scr(i)pt:** *What inspired the idea to bring Hercules to the screen?*

**CHARLES POGUE:** Mythology is an area that I’ve always liked, particularly the Greek mythologies. I study it a lot; and eons ago, when I was first starting out as a writer, I wrote a 176-page bible for a 10-hour mini-series about the Trojan War. It was a very detailed, scene-for-scene treatment.

**scr(i)pt:** *Were you hired to do the treatment?*

**CP:** No, I did it on my own because I just wanted to do it. It was a very good calling card and got floated around a lot. Nothing ever came of it, unfortunately. Then a few years ago, my friend, David Madden, who is the head of Fox TV, e-mailed me: “Do you think there’s an idea in doing a mythologically serious *Hercules*?” I wrote him back: “Yes, and I’m the guy to do it.” We sat down and had a quick exploratory meeting about how to approach the idea. I didn’t want to do a Ray Harryhausen version, like the gods are up in the heavens playing chess with all the mortals, because that immediately deflates the heroism of the piece. To me, a hero has to make his own decisions versus just being manipulated by the gods. I wanted the gods to be a very wide presence in the minds of the people, but I didn’t want to see any manifestations of gods. My approach was going to be *I, Claudius* meets *The Lord of The Rings*. I told David, “Don’t worry, we’ll have plenty of blood and thunder, CGI and technology; but there’s going to be a brain in this. I want to really get into the nitty-gritty seriousness of it as well.” He asked what I needed; and I said, “Give me a few months; I’ve got to do some reading,” because I’m a very rigid researcher.

Screenwriter **Charles Pogue**

I immersed myself in all sorts of mythology, read tons of novels in this whole arena and very quickly found out that I wanted to deal with the mother worship, which actually preceded all the panoply of gods. The story is basically about Hera's having it in for Hercules because he's the son of Zeus. If you go back far enough into the myths, you find out that the Greeks were great worshippers of the goddess before Zeus. So the story became about the conflict of the mother/father worship cults. I then pitched David a rough idea and he liked it.

After a few months, I came back with a very detailed cradle-to-grave treatment of *Hercules* with everything I wanted it to be in terms of the seriousness of the tone. This wasn't your Steve Reeves *Hercules* or a Kevin Sorbo *Hercules*. This wasn't L.A. flip. It was very dark. David and I pitched it a few places, and nobody would bite. Later that summer we heard Robert Halmi of Hallmark Entertainment and NBC were looking to do *Hercules*. David, who is one of the few true gentlemen I've actually met in this business, said, "I haven't been able to set this up. It's your outline. It's your work, so take it and see if they're interested in it." We sent the treatment over after he gave me his blessing. They liked what they read, and so that's how it got set up at NBC.

**scr(i)pt:** *To whom at Hallmark did you pitch?*

**CP:** Lynn Holtz, with whom I'd worked before on another project that never came quite to fruition. She is very much into mythology and ancient culture, as well, so she really got it.

**scr(i)pt:** *How about at NBC?*

**CP:** Stephen Bulka was our executive at NBC, and he also got it. They really liked the resonance of the piece, though there were some notes and concerns because of the tone. I had to take into consideration that there was another audience demographic we were trying to reach as well. The first thing we addressed was that after *Hercules* goes through all the labours, he really can't be killed off. So, the two things I had to find most in the story were ... that dreaded word ... character arc or ...

**scr(i)pt:** *The plot throughline?*

**CP:** Yes, the throughline—and thematic structure—what the story was really about, and taking all these incidences and creating a storyline that had a real trajectory—a beginning, middle and end. Then, I went back through some of the myths again to find their origins; and what I found was that the story was basically about the tyranny of religion—pretty much kind of what we're going through today ...

**scr(i)pt:** *Absolutely, that eternal myth—and how very relevant. It's quite remarkable, isn't it?*

**CP:** Not only in the Middle East but also here with the extremists' viewpoints and fundamentalists' viewpoints—this whole idea that people are restricted and stifled because they think God wants them to do something. Sometimes it's something they don't even understand, like a dumb, empty ritual piece of mummery that's come down through the ages and nobody understands why it was done in the first place. It's probably been perverted and diluted from the meanings and intent of its origin. The journey of Hercules' labours is to appease, supposedly, the gods. But through his labours, he re-defines the

goddess/god conflict, realizing that humans need to embrace the finest aspects of both the god and the goddess to find the true balance of life. So he slowly breaks the chains of religion and leads the masses toward a monotheistic ideal that's not about capricious divinities imposing a bunch of arcane kindergarten rules upon humanity. Religion should be uplifting and freeing; not stifling and punishing. Hercules strives to live his life with honor and honesty, dignity and decency, and proclaims that that's pretty much all any god can expect.

But, in the meantime, we've still got lots of blood and thunder and also Hercules initially thinking he's the son of a god. He starts with a certain amount of arrogance, then is humbled and finds his divinity when he discovers his humanity. Those became the themes of the piece and gave me a trajectory. The other challenge was dealing with all the disparate labours and making them interesting—exploring again the myth behind the myth. I knew I couldn't do all 12 labours simply because there were some that were just repetitive and impossible to conjure into something interesting. I think we finally ended up with six. The goal was to find a twist on each one and make it not what you expected it was going to be. Then, [the labour] had to inform the lessons Hercules had to learn and the whole thematic structure and the direction he was going.

For example, one task ultimately got cut for budgetary reasons. It was the famous one about Hercules' cleaning out the Aegean stables. You think, geez, who wants to see Hercules with a broom, shoveling a bunch of horse poop? That's not going to be too dramatic. But, somewhere in the research I read that this was actually a cavalry charge of some kind; and I thought suddenly, now *that's* interesting. What the scene then becomes is that, at some point, Zeus arouses the ire of this king who sends his cavalry to attack. Meanwhile, Hercules diverts a river and drowns the cavalry so the water comes washing in and sweeps the cavalry away. That action becomes his "cleaning the stable."

**scr(i)pt:** *So you're really showing us what the meaning could be under these mythic tales, in a way. You're attempting to prove a myth or rather reveal the existing contextual truth that might be underlying it?*

**CP:** Well, you figure all these myths have a grain of truth to them somewhere. We try to uncover what the story actually was at the time and how it got expounded and mythologized and twisted into something different through the ages.

**scr(i)pt:** *How were you thinking of this script in terms of structure? Three acts split into two nights?*

**CP:** I never write toward acts. In TV all the acts are false anyway because they're geared toward commercials. I always figure there are going to be enough organ stings and cliffhangers in the piece that you can cut away from a commercial and figure out where the breaks are. I can go through the piece and tell you where the acts are after the fact, but it's not something I really have ever written.

**scr(i)pt:** *Did you have to prove the story and the treatment prior to going to the script, or did they give you leeway?*

**CP:** Both Lynn and Stephen liked my outline. Lynn's a big fan of what she calls my base notes—all the dark stuff. But, again, we knew we had to lighten it up and make it a bit more palatable for those 12-year-old boys, you know?

**scr(i)pt:** *For family viewing?*

**CP:** Yes, because it was probably more *I, Claudius* than *The Lord of The Rings*, and *The Lord of The Rings* itself is pretty dark. But, anything I write usually has lots of laughs in it anyway. There's lots of humor in it to basically balance things and probably a lot more sexuality than there needed to be. Stephen and Lynn and I met for a couple of days, and we went through the outline in detail. They had questions for me to answer; and, by the end of the two days, we were clear. Both Lynn and Stephen worked the way I liked to work, which is very detailed. They get into the minutia. We don't let anything get by us. Later on, in the drafts, they would go scene by scene, page by page, line by line and word by word.

**scr(i)pt:** *Wow, that's quite unusual.*

**CP:** It's the way I love to work, and it's so rare to find executives who will do that with you. Usually, they say just go fix that, you know? Just go execute this note. [Stephen and Lynn] were right there with it all the time. We started this very wonderfully detailed process of just going through the script, page by page, line by line, finding the places that we could cut and chop. The script was so dense in its resonance because I like to layer things and have everything working on different levels. For the people who like blood and thunder, [there are scenes where] Hercules fights the beasties. For those who like good dialogue, that's in the script, too. For those who like intellectual and thematic content, there's that. So it was how do we cut the script without losing that kind of resonance? Lynn and Stephen were very good about [the process]. This was not just a one-draft thing; there were several.

**scr(i)pt:** *Did you stay on through the whole production?*

**CP:** Yes, but I did not go on location. I didn't have to, really. I don't mind going on location, but I find filming is like watching grass grow. I like to go because I'm an old actor. I like to sit around and drink with the actors, as my reward for being a good, hardworking team player. And, in case anything comes up, I do want to be the guy to fix it.

**scr(i)pt:** *Where did they shoot?*

**CP:** New Zealand.

**scr(i)pt:** *When your director Roger Young came on, did he give you notes?*

**CP:** Roger had his notes and some ideas, actually several that had been in my initial outline. We did his notes, and a lot of Roger's stuff got incorporated. By that time, Stephen, Lynn and I had worked so hard on it, I thought it was their script as well as my script. They helped me so much in terms of streamlining and getting it down and agonizing with me over cutting the scenes and figuring out what we could replace so we could get the same beats.

**scr(i)pt:** *That's great.*

**CP:** You know, in many ways Stephen was probably more protective of that script than I was. When we had something that we liked, they fought tooth and nail for it. They would go to the higher-ups and say this is what we need. But there were still certain pragmatic concerns that we just had to accommodate and notes that Roger had. We had some particular things with the goddess cult. [In a scene] where there is a sacrifice going on, Roger, very rightly, was concerned that we would make the women practitioners of this cult look unsympathetic ... which we didn't want to do. These women are victims as much as anybody because they're just following these time-old rituals that do not truly reflect the ideals of the goddess. So we had to be very careful to really get it right and make the idea clear that they weren't villains or bad people. They were just trapped in a syndrome that was of their time and beliefs.

**scr(i)pt:** *Their paradigm?*

**CP:** Exactly. One of the things that worked very well was making sure that every antagonist has his point of view, reasons and colors. Some of the people who oppose Hercules can be looked at with great sympathy and understanding. They have wonderful, powerful, almost tragic qualities to them at times, so [the story] didn't get two-dimensional.

**scr(i)pt:** *Did you see dailies when they came in?*

**CP:** Stephen generously made an offer and said anytime I wanted to come over and look at them, I could. But, I just haven't because it's one of those things that, if my going in and seeing something I didn't like or if it wasn't the way I envisioned it—it's sort of after the fact, and it's not going to help anything.

**scr(i)pt:** *So you'd rather wait?*

**CP:** I don't need that frustration, and certainly nobody needs me harping. It's not my part of the process. It's their part to do what they have to do to put the script on its feet. So, I say let them do their job. When there's an assemblage or something that I can actually make notes on that might be helpful, as opposed to just a writer being crabby and (LAUGHS) stupid, or bitching, which we're always guilty of—sometimes justly and sometimes not—then fine. I don't need the hassle right now. It was an exhausting experience. We were working right up through the first two or three weeks of shooting, fixing things; and when everything was timed and the budget came in, there were things that were just too expensive or sections too long that we had to cut. I think we probably cut close to 60 to 70 pages. Because the thing is so interlocked and the thematic stuff and the character arcs were so diligently constructed, it was challenging.

**scr(i)pt:** *Would you do another mini-series?*

**CP:** This was the best experience I've ever had in my writing career since my first experience writing a couple of Sherlock Holmes films. I had incredible power. This is the way it's supposed to work all the time for a writer—having supportive executives who are not there to tear anything down but to just improve on what was there and to address the pragmatic. Again, my first draft, I always say, is my vision if money and time were no object—the one I'd go out and shoot.

**scr(i)pt:** *Is that your philosophy on how you approach writing? Do you always write that way?*

**CP:** Yes. The first vision belongs to me; and I know it will always be overwritten. In a way, it's like a novel. Again, if I give them everything, it's easier to take away than to add something that's not there because, if you take away stuff, you know what's there. I don't know how many times we went back to old drafts to find something we had lost. We would rewrite a scene and then realize the scene played better in the last draft; so we'd go back and look at it and say, "If we take this line here and this line here and match and marry and cut this one here, it'll tie together better"—that kind of work. Lynn and I loved to get into the aesthetics of things, and we'd just yammer and yammer on all that. Stephen was the one who always brought us back to earth to get to the pragmatic concerns. [The process] was terribly hard and at times frustrating, but I'm one of these people who believes art is forged in the fires of passion. You had to get passionate and really discuss things, break them down and at times say, "Okay, we talked our heads off about this. Now, let's get down to the nuts and bolts and just find a way to do it."

**scr(i)pt:** *Would you advise writers to explore other mediums? If you're a feature writer, to look at television for opportunities as well?*

**CP:** My thing is, I always write to the passion. I don't care whether it's TV, a mini-series or film. I just want to write stories I can grab and throttle and feel, "This is for me. I really want to do this." The one or two times I've written for the money, it's been a disaster from beginning to end. You ask for impossible money, and they give it to you; and then you're stuck doing a job you're not

into. But, even on those jobs I eventually would find a way into it. I could get passionate about it. Why set your sights on just one thing? Go where the energy is and wherever you think it best suits the story.

**scr(i)pt:** *Do you have any thoughts about the future of long-form television or movies for television, as far as what you're seeing on the landscape?*

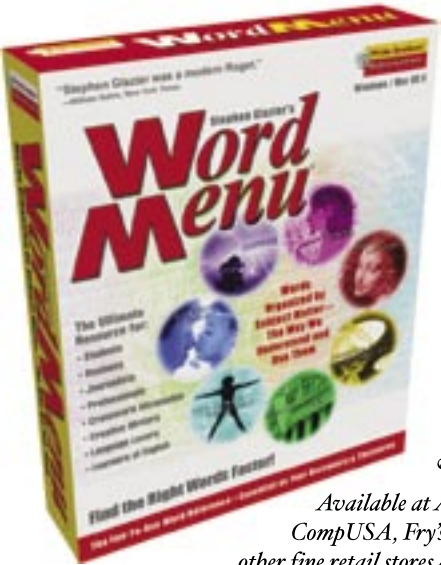
**CP:** I think it's a great format, and I think the limited series or a mini-series is a great way to go because you can really explore a theme or a story and take your time developing it. Unlike a TV series, it actually does have a trajectory, and it's not just about the same people every week. You're going in a direction somewhere that has an end to it, which I love. I wish they'd bring back the nine, 10-hour mini-series, which I think they're sort of doing with these limited series projects. You can take more time with the story because you're not pressured to deliver something every week. The luxury of *Hercules* was, as Stephen would tell me time and again, there's no hurry on this. We're not locked into an air date yet; so we were allowed to luxuriate in the minutia and get it right, as opposed to having to get it done by a certain date.

**scr(i)pt:** *What's next?*

**CP:** I'm actually working on some private, personal things that I've been trying to do for years. There's a feature, a novel. I have 13 to 14 binders filled with ideas in various stages, and then there's a list of dream projects underneath the Plexiglass® on my desk. My problem is I never come up with that usual modern-day commercial thriller. It's always something that's like *Troy*.

Charles Pogue's *Hercules* will air as a mini-series on NBC (to be announced). Go to [Nbc.com](http://Nbc.com) for details and scheduling times. (i)

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