



By Hartley Plesham

From This Old House to This New House

Building a New TV Series for DIY

"I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change."

That's the title of a stage comedy. Thom Draudt might be forgiven if he also interpreted it as the mandate he received from the Do It Yourself (DIY) Network. They gave him the assignment of creating a sequel to one of the most popular programs in television history. He had to make it very different, without sacrificing the essence of the original show.

He had to turn This Old House, the longest running television program currently on the air, into This New House, a new series. It would, on one level, be a sequel/spinoff. And yet, on another level, it wouldn't be; it would, as the title clearly indicates, be a child independent of its parent (or, perhaps more to the point, grandparent, if one factors in the first spinoff from the original series, Ask This Old House). For one thing, it was the first time in television history that a series concept developed on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) migrated to a commercial cable channel.

Well, he did it. He did it so well that This New House is now entering its second season, with a truly prime slot on DIY's prime time schedule. As construction literally and figuratively begins on TNH's new season, Thom Draudt can look back on his rare accomplishment, in television, or anywhere else: improving on a masterpiece.

Thom's formal title is Senior Series Producer & Director of This New House. He might as well be thought of as its de facto creator.

"It's a brand extension. Up until now, the This Old House production company had two properties: This Old House and Ask This Old House. This Old House is the longest running television series currently on the air in America, 31 years. It's also the originator of home improvement television. It's part of the Scripps family of networks, which is HGTV, the Food Network, the Travel Channel, and DIY."

"With HGTV and DIY, their area is houses, and home improvement. So, it's a natural extension.

"When you're on PBS, you have a very good audience. You've had all those years to generate that audience, and you have a very strong brand. However, to grow that brand, at some point, you have to think about crossing the river into commercial channels, and cable.

"The difference there starts to get quite significant. That's where I come in. I had done a lot of television prior to that, for The History Channel, Discovery, Animal Planet. I had also done work previously with This Old House, doing these two-and-a-half minute profiles on the various artists and contractors who have appeared on the show. So, I had a relationship with the people at This Old House. It was a good match.

"How do you make the smarts of that brand, and the loyalty to that brand, work in a more

aggressive commercial context?"

Thom Draudt must have found the answer, because This New House is coming back for a second season.

This New House is a very different show from its parent and grandparent shows, and not just because of the addition of commercial breaks. It is much faster paced, with quick-cutting editing, and several segments within one program. Why does the new show have a new format? Thom Draudt's answer: the show's new address.

"The simple answer is we have a new boss. It's called DIY network. We answer to them, and their protocol, via their advertisers.

"DIY has an interesting concept, where they sell what they call their 'prime time' as a big advertising block. If you look at their 8:00 to 10:00 (p.m. time period), those are their biggest hitting shows. They will attract the biggest and best advertisers for whatever they program during that time.

"They put us on the Thursday at 8:00 slot during our first season, which is amazing! We were untested; we were the brand new kid on the block at that network. We were, frankly, a much different show than what they have on the rest of their lineup...

"So, we did a couple of cuts of our first episode, and it went back and forth. They were on us pretty hard about, 'No, this has got to be snappier, this and that.' That didn't scare me at all. This is the world that I come from.

"The bigger challenge was getting the people that I was working with at This Old House to sort of adjust to that. We finally did. Many people said, 'Wow! That is so different!' The main objective that I had was this has to represent the house brand; i.e., it's got to be smart, and deep enough, so that it doesn't appear to be whimsical, and sort of cheap, and that the fast cutting doesn't get away from the fact that there's a strong story, there's a strong message.

"I think that the house brand is a brand that people have come to trust. It was my job to make sure that you trusted, and learned, even though the pace was about ten times the pace of the other show."

Does he think that he was able to pull it off?

"I do. I absolutely do. It was really hard. Most of television is difficult to make, but there's nothing more difficult to make than a first season of any TV show. I have a number of years of experience doing those. There are a lot of unknowns.

But, Thom Draudt found a way, based on his knowledge of how the documentary/instructional/informational cable channels have developed their own aesthetic.

"Whether you're working for The History Channel or Discovery or Animal Planet or NatGeo—all (these channels) have a certain



clockwise from top left
Kevin O'Connor and Amy Matthews are the co-hosts of This New House. Kevin comes from This Old House and Amy from DIY Network. Photo courtesy of DIY Network.

Thomas Draudt is the Senior Series Producer and Director of This New House a spin-off of This Old House that jumps from public television to a commercial cable network that is now beginning production for its second season right here in New England. Photo courtesy of This Old House Productions, Inc.

This New House Producer/Director Thomas Draudt at a new house, the Monolithic Dome. Photo courtesy of This New House Productions.

Co-Hosts Kevin O'Connor and Amy Matthews. Photo courtesy of This New House Productions.

Co-Hosts Amy Matthews and Kevin O'Connor flank This New House Producer/Director Thom Draudt on the set. Photo courtesy of This New House Productions.

Thom Draudt with Troy Sawyer's Band celebrating Brad Pitt's Make It Right (MIR) Foundation in the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans, LA. New pre-fabricated green building holds the key to bringing people back to the Lower Ninth Ward to proper housing in this disaster area. Photo courtesy of This Old House Productions.

This New House crew with Troy Sawyer's Band in New Orleans. Photo courtesy of This New House Productions.

This New House team captures shipping container homes in Long Beach, CA. Photo courtesy of This New House Productions.

This New House 2010-11 production crew: Production Manager Tristyn Sackmary, Producer Monzon, Senior Series Producer and Director Thomas Draudt, Production Coordinator Clifford Nash and Co-Host Amy Matthews. Photo courtesy of This New House Productions.

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identity. You have to find out what it is that they want. They do have these constructs that you do have to pay attention to. For DIY (I learned) much of it from just watching their network. You know that you have to do certain things.

“You have to do a lot of teases. You have to do a lot of little ‘bumps’, things like, ‘Coming up after the break...’ All that kind of extra stuff that you don’t do on PBS, because there are no commercials. You have to spend a lot of time doing the ‘delivery’ part of the thing, in addition to the actual content.

We were working in a new frontier of researching and experiencing knowledge, versus the other show.

(In this regard, Thom is quick to point out the contributions of the new show’s co-hosts, Kevin O’Conner and Amy Matthews. Kevin comes from This Old House, Amy from DIY. Thus, the show’s transitional character is reflected in its on-screen talent. “Excellent, knowledgeable and attractive” are the words Thom uses to describe his co-hosts.)

“We’re not staying at one house for a whole season, like This Old House does. We’re doing three field trips, from all around the country. Plus, a whole lot of little product parts. All in twenty minutes. It’s a very dense show.”

Also, perhaps, a more socially and economically relevant show than its creators originally planned. The severe recession has created a strong interest on the part of both home builders and buyers for houses of lasting quality, and energy efficiency. This is a fact not lost on Thom Draudt.

“Since the oil prices went up so high in 2008, there’s been a sea change in a lot of industries. Housing and the home have undergone a whole new thing, where efficiency and this word “green” have been bandied about.

“This space is so exciting now, because everyone is now looking at their house, (and saying), ‘I need better insulation, and I need solar panels.’ There is a whole new industry, and basically a whole new life for homes, which our show is addressing.

Thom Draudt’s first home was in Hamburg, NY, just south of Buffalo. (In what might be seen as a genetic indicator of his future career, his father owned a lumber yard and a hardware store.) But, his New Englandization came early. In the late 1970’s, he attended UMass, Amherst, where he quickly joined the campus video club (as film and video production had yet to join the UMass curriculum). “I just got the bug; I was off and running.”

Thom ran off to Cambridge, MA, where he interned at MIT’s Educational Video Resources. Thom acquired his skill in producing “short pieces” there, as he created work with the artists who visited MIT. He also joined the legendary and much lamented Boston Film and Video Foundation. According to Thom—and, to the many who were a part of it and remember it, “It was just an incredible time” for aspiring film and video makers in Boston.

Alas, again like so many others in that creative and fun scene, Thom had to go elsewhere to make a living. For him, that meant returning to western Massachusetts, where he worked at WGGB-TV in Springfield. There, he did “everything,” including shooting News footage.

A new opportunity opened up in a new field, local origination cable TV. Thom created

and produced an arts show for Continental Cablevision in Springfield.

From there, it was off to Veritech Video Productions in East Longmeadow, where Thom worked in corporate video.

He moved to San Francisco, where he would spend the next fifteen years. He became a full-time video director; his clients included the top corporations in the Bay Area, including The Gap.

Thom came to the attention of Northern California’s corporate elite at a propitious time. These corporate clients had seen, and loved, Thom’s video art work (including his mixing of Super 8 and video), and it was the Golden Age of hip capitalism in hip capitalism’s capital, the Bay Area. (Including, of course, Silicon Valley.) According to Thom, it was “the perfect meeting of art and commerce.”

Then, the Dotcom bubble burst in the late 1990’s, and it was all over in San Francisco. (“It devastated that town like the earthquake.”) After waiting for a year for the Golden Age to return (it didn’t), that and family obligations brought Thom back to New England.

Joel Olicker of Powderhouse Productions in Somerville, MA invited Thom to produce and direct a pilot for The History Channel. “They saw it, called back and said, ‘We want ten of those,’” said Thom. (It eventually became the series The Works.) Work on two series for Animal Planet soon followed. Then came the offer from David Vos at This Old House to work on a series called This New House. Thom Draudt had arrived in the emerging world of How-To Television.

“I (could) combine all my years of commercial experience, and all my years of production experience, into a new form.”

“I love it. It’s a big challenge, but now I’m a story teller, now I’m a producer. I’d always been a producer, but now I’m a producer on a different level.”

So, does Thom have any How-To advice as to how to do How-To Television? “You need to know how the networks think, how the advertisers think. You need to know how to tell a story. That’s the thing. You’ve really got to know how to hook people, keep them there, and bring them back after the break. There’s a science to it.”

Thom Draudt would seem to be an expert in his field: the creation and production of television series designed to show people what goes on in the process of making things. Perhaps, someday, he’ll make a TV series about that: This New TV Show, anyone?

Hartley Pleshaw has been active in Boston-area television, radio, journalism, theater, film and video for the past thirty years. He has written for IMAGINE since 2006. His email address is: hartleypleshaw@gmail.com.

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dom and just make minor adjustments. Our editor, Michael Bernard at Fuel Creative, did a wonderful job helping me clarify the story elements.

What was it like to see your film on a big screen with an audience seeing it for the first time?

It was a fantastic experience. We had the world premiere of BIGHORN in Custer’s home town of Monroe, Michigan, during their 12th Annual Custer Week at the same theater where the classic Custer film THEY DIED WITH THEIR BOOTS ON starring Errol Flynn premiered in 1941. The theater

was packed and the audience, many of whom were in 1876 period costumes, loved it. One week later, we screened it at The Music Hall in Portsmouth, NH, on opening night of the New Hampshire Film Festival and then on to the SNOB (Somewhat North of Boston) Film Festival at the Red River Theatres in Concord, NH, where it won an Audience Award. The crowds have been great and we’ve been thrilled with the reaction.

Did you have a Q&A? What did the audience want to know or have to say about the film?

We’ve had a Q&A at all of the screenings. The questions have really been varied. There have been quite a lot about authenticity and technical aspects. I also remember being asked whether we used a real herd of buffalo (yes) and whether Adam Vinatieri has seen the film (I recently gave a DVD to the P.R. Director of Vinatieri’s current team, the Indianapolis Colts, who told me he would give it to Adam but I don’t know if he’s seen it yet). I think someone should have asked how we got the herd of buffalo to run in the same direction on cue. The answer is that we had someone chase them with a backhoe!

Will you have a chance to show the film to the New England Patriots? Where will it screen next?

The Patriots have been given a copy of BIGHORN and we’re hoping to coordinate something with them. It’s a very celebratory film with regard to the Patriots. We’re now getting it out on the film festival circuit and it’s also viewable online at www.BighornMovie.com

How would you characterize your filmmaking career so far? You began as a screenwriter. Have you always been a writer? I remember when two of your scripts were among three finalists of the Tony Cox Screenwriting Awards at the Nantucket Film Festival. When did you begin producing your own scripts?

I’ve always been a writer. I began writing feature scripts and was a winner or finalist in 21 screenwriting competitions with three different scripts over three years. They included Final Draft (top 8 out of approximately 2500 entries) twice, Austin Film Festival Heart of Film (top 25 out of 4000), Script Magazine Open Door three times, the New Hampshire Film Festival (Grand Prize Winner and wrote two of the four finalists), San Diego Film Festival, Chesterfield sponsored by Paramount, Francis Ford Coppola’s American Zoetrope, Fade In Magazine Screenwriting Awards, Rhode Island International Film Festival Screenplay Competition, Monterey County Film Commission Screenplay Competition, Texas Film Institute Screenwriting Competition, and the Nantucket Film Festival Screenwriting Competition sponsored by Showtime in which I wrote two of the three finalist scripts in a blind competition. I started making short films because I very much wanted to direct, to see how my writing translated to the screen, and was intrigued by the challenge of telling a three-act story concisely.

What do you plan to do next?

I’m next moving on to feature films and have several in development including feature versions of BIGHORN and my previous short, THE NORMAN ROCKWELL CODE. Glenn Gardner and I are also in pre-production on an upcoming feature comedy with the Super Secret Project who did the viral hit “Granite State of Mind.”

For more information and to view BIGHORN visit <http://www.BighornMovie.com>

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What about distribution?

Unresolved is the most common subject of independent producers: distribution. Links to the major channels (National Geographic, History, PBS, Discover) remain mysterious. New sales channels via the Internet are yet to be finalized or tested.

What’s next?

We have three to four full-length documentaries ‘on the boards’ at the idea stage. January 1, 2011, is a date we’ve set for our bringing one of the four to life.

For more information visit Kogainon Films at www.kogainonfilms.com.

Dan Dimancescu founded BEH llc parent company of Kogainon Films. He brings his own experience in media-related projects including four National Geographic Magazine expeditions that led to articles and film productions. He is author of a number of books on management and technology. His education includes Dartmouth College, the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, and the Harvard Business School.

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the need to wallow in its checkered past. She’s still very much in the 3D game herself. She’s the President and Chief Technical Officer of StereoJet, Inc. in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

What’s she up to now in the world of 3D? “We’re making stills, not motion pictures. We’re concentrating on making those as high quality as we can. We see a lot of opportunities for displays, both in the entertainment world and in a wide range of technical applications.

“We’ve done imaging for a number of fields. (We’ve) been working with some major 3D photographers to make demonstration prints. Several of these photographers have had 3D gallery shows. We’re very optimistic about the applications.

“The Fuji 3D cameras are really very exciting. People are producing wonderful images with them. Fuji came out—last year?—with the Fuji W1, and then the W3, which is even better. There’s great enthusiasm on the part of both amateur and professional photographers for these cameras.”

In terms of enthusiasm, Vivian Walworth has a great deal for her own company, StereoJet, Inc., which is made up of those who shared the glory days of Polaroid with her: “I reported directly to (Dr. Edwin Land) for several years, starting around 1970, until he left Polaroid in 1982 to continue research at the Rowland Institute for Science, which he had founded earlier.

“(Dr. Land) always said, ‘Nothing is worth doing unless it is almost impossible.’ He had the extraordinary ability to, as they say now, think outside the box. His enthusiasm for research was contagious.”

And so, what does 3D pioneer Vivian Walworth think of the future of the technology to which she has devoted so much of her life? “I think it’s here to stay in the entertainment world, for sure. Not only in motion pictures, but in gaming, which is a very big field. And, certainly, in scientific and technical applications.”

StereoJet, Inc.’s website is: www.stereojetinc.com.

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