

Beau Willimon on the Ides of March

Written by CUE Editor
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Beau Willimon (CC' 99, SOA '03) wrote the Academy Award nominated screenplay for *The Ides of March*

based on his play

Farragut North

before executive producing Netflix's first original series

House of Cards

. Beau graciously agreed to talk to CUE about the steps of his career and the process of writing

House of Cards

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1. What was your path from college to where you are now?

Well, it was a very rocky, curvy path. I went to Columbia College and majored in Visual Arts, specifically as a painter. I didn't take any writing classes as an undergrad.

When I graduated, I worked for the Estonian Government for a little while. I lived on Lower Eastside and worked odd jobs. I spent four months in Vietnam researching a screenplay – my first screenplay – based on the life of Tomas Vu, a Visual Arts professor at Columbia who grew up in Vietnam during the war.

And then I bullied Eduardo Machado, who was then the head of the playwriting program at Columbia, into letting me audit a playwriting class he was teaching. And we met during office hours and he told me to write and play and apply to the program, and if it was good enough, he'd accept me.

So I wrote a play and he accepted me and I did my 3 years there. When I graduated I had no plan. I worked a hodge podge of jobs. I was a barista. I taught SAT prep classes. I did internships. It was very hand-to-mouth. The whole time, I kept writing plays, but no one wanted to do them.

I had a friend, Jay Carson, who had a meteoric rise in the world of politics, and I worked with

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him in the past on campaigns for Schumer, Bradley, Hillary Clinton, so I followed him onto the Dean campaign in '04. Based on that experience I wrote the play *Farragut North*.

At first, I sent it out and no one wanted to do it. But later I got an agent who sent it out again, and we got a good response from commercial theater producers, so my agent sent it to LA as a writing sample to try to get me some meetings. We got a call from Warner Brothers, saying that George Clooney and Leonardo DiCaprio wanted to option it.

So, then things went from zero-to-sixty instantly. I mean, it was two years working on that play and six years toiling, but once names like Clooney and DiCaprio are involved doors open up instantly. I had never even been to LA.

So, we made of *Ides of March* and it did well. It's still surreal to me that I went to the Academy Awards.

While we were doing that, David Fincher had read *Farragut North* and he called me and asked if I wanted to adapt this UK miniseries

House of Cards

. I watched that and I was drawn to the great delicious story-telling in this cult classic. I spoke to David on the phone and we had a lot of the same instincts in general and about this particular project and I got a taste of his vast mind. I did not want to pass up an opportunity to work with him.

2. It's interesting that you pursued writing rather than directing, given your background in visual arts. Can you talk about that decision?

Well, I write very visually. I see the world visually. And to me, a movie or a play should work on mute. You should be able to turn off the sound and still know the basic story and what the characters are responding to. I see a script as a blueprint for behavior. That's what people are interested in watching.

I still paint. I still pursue my passion for visual arts. I was painting and drawing before I could

read and write. But, when I look back on work I did in college, I see that I was trying to cram all this narrative into my paintings.

In writing, you can tell stories in real time, in real space, in 3D. Painting can't do that. Writing liberated something for me and it changed my work as a visual artist. I don't feel the need to cram all this story into a rectangle.

3. What was the process of working on a Netflix original? How do you think it differs from working on a traditional television project?

Well, I did have a small taste of working in traditional television. My first gig was a pilot that I co-wrote with Sam Forman, another SOA alum. We pitched it to AMC and they bought it in the room. They didn't end up making it. They ended up doing *Mad Men* (which was the right choice), but I got an agent out of the experience, WGA membership, and a year's salary, so it was beneficial.

But *House of Cards* was a whole different deal. We were working on the script for a year before we had a home. We went out to a variety of places, but Netflix made us an offer we couldn't refuse: two seasons guaranteed and complete creative freedom. They don't give notes. I mean, we communicate constantly, but we don't get anything that could be labeled as "Network Notes."

Also, knowing we had two seasons meant we didn't have to play the ratings game, which changed the writing process. We could concentrate on it as long-form story-telling and not rely on manufactured cliff-hangers to keep audiences coming back.

We didn't know until half-way through though, that all thirteen would be released at once, so that did not affect the process. Even once we knew that's how they were releasing them, we didn't know how people would watch them – if they would binge or watch them spaced out. So, to me, the episodes had to work both ways.

4. Hearing about how most people are binge-watching, did that change anything in

writing the second season?

Do you know for a fact that most people are binge watching? I can't discuss specific numbers, but I will say to pre-suppose that the majority of people are binge-watching might not be accurate. Anyway, no, my philosophy has not changed on that front.

5. Any advice for aspiring writers?

Don't do it. It's setting yourself up for a life filled with rejection and despair. If you ignore that advice, then you are meant to be a writer. In that case, there's only piece of advice I can give that's worth anything: put in the hours. Writing is not rocket science. It's story and you learn that through hard work and trial and error. You have to fail in order to break through, and the only way you can do that is by putting in the time.