Actually, I wrote a couple more for credit in school,” Sussman says, with a wry smile, “and I remember one of my teachers saying, ‘Y’know, you really ought to write something else—this Star Trek thing is never going to go anywhere.’”

Of course, Sussman admits his early drive to write was first sparked by a love of all things Trek.

And, like so many who watch his work today, it began as a kid—in his case, as a Philly native, then in New Jersey before growing up in Florida. His office proudly displays not only action figures from numerous genres—a common site around Star Trek offices, of course—but also a couple of choice boyhood snapshots, including one clowning around in a pool raft lettered ENTERPRISE.

Mike Sussman, the Enterprise writing producer now in his fourth season at Star Trek, obviously relishes the advice he got in college after writing Star Trek for his first assignment in a script-writing class—a big Klingon story—so he could submit it to The Next Generation.

enterprise scribe

Mike Sussman is another writer who brings a fan’s perspective...
"We had two or three other rafts, usually named Yorktown or Constellation—one of the original 12," he adds, betraying still more telltale fannishness.

Throw in his drawing comic-book stories of Trek as a kid, writing letters to the local station when they dropped the reruns, or audio-taping the episodes off TV in the pre-VHS days—yes, you could call Sussman an old-school fan, right down to being inspired and educated by David Gerrold’s classic 1973 The Making of "The Trouble With Tribbles."

"It made you realize that the actors don’t just make these things up, and that these scripts are written and this is the process and this is how it works," he says, remembering its impact on him early on. "And so, maybe unknowingly, it set me thinking along this line—I think writing/directing was what I was always interested in."

Sussman takes pride in bringing a fan’s feel to all that he writes, but he’s no stranger to TV land elsewhere. A local news writer and producer in both Florida and L.A., he tread the free-lance route for years before winning a staff job on Voyager’s final season after partnering with Phyllis Strong. They met, he recalls, in a real “pay your dues” moment: Separately hired, the two were literally thrown together from a lack of office space on a low-budget, short-lived adventure series filmed for overseas.

"No one ever saw it—I hesitate to mention the name of it, it was so bad," he recalls with a laugh. "So they put us in the conference room, together—but they treated us like a writing team! Separately hired, the two were literally thrown together from a lack of office space on a low-budget, short-lived adventure series filmed for overseas."

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Of course, this season on Enterprise has been a breakout year for the show as well as the writing staff, with Sussman solo or sharing credit on “Anomaly,” “Hatchery,” “Strategem,” the upcoming “E2” and the well-received “Twilight.” But as part of a team that has reinvigorated the series, he’s really just applying the sum total of lessons that anyone learns while honing a craft like writing—starting, in his case, all the way back with those spec script days and the hunt for an internship after hitting Los Angeles in 1993.

"I had a very humbling experience, but it taught me quite a bit," Sussman recalls. "When you grow up away from Hollywood, you think it’s all about ‘who you know,’ not how good you are—and I actually kind of believed that. And it was relatively easy for me to get a meeting with Ira Behr on DS9—and
then after I got the meeting, I realized how unprepared I was; I didn’t have a proper script sample. I hadn’t finished rewriting this script that I was going to give him. I had felt that once I just showed up, and had enthusiasm, he’d just give me the internship. And I totally blew it. It was my own fault for being so naïve. He was very nice to me, but it was very obvious that he was asking questions I couldn’t answer.

Thanks to having a second series to try again with, he later interned with Voyager—“I learned more in six weeks than I did in four years of college about the business and television writing”—and wrapped up by selling a story that would become Season 2’s “Meld.” Another year brought the pitch that became “The Swarm,” plus a shot at another less-than-I-did-in-four-years-of-college-about-the-business-and-television-writing”—and-wrapped-up-by-selling-a-story-that-would-become-season-2’s-meld.”

Another difference: the captain’s love life. “You can’t quite be as blatant as they were in the original series, a girl in every port,” Sussman says. “Unless the story’s about the romance, you don’t want to just put it in because the captain ought to be getting some action.”

Like their first script, most of the debut season began as Berman-Braga stories so the co-creators could make sure the series had a unified voice. Sussman notes; not until the next year did the staff get a crack at more of their own ideas and personal touches. In his own case, while teamed with Strong, that extended from the premiere season’s “Civilization,” “Shadows of P’Jem” and “Detained” to the later “Dead Stop,”
"The Catwalk," "Future Tense," "Regeneration" and "Bounty."

While "P'Jem" offered these TOS fans a chance to "finally write some Andorian battle action," Sussman says the experience with the anti-prejudice them of "Detained" honed his opinion of "message shows."

"I'm just not a big fan of allegory episodes," he admits. "People get on their soapboxes and talk about the original series and how it was always about something—they always bring up 'Let That Be Your Last Battlefield' and 'Plato's Stepchildren' and the Vietnam one, 'A Private Little War.' They were just a little too obvious for me."

His list of TOS faves is topped by "Amok Time," "The Trouble with Tribbles," "The Doomsday Machine," "The Ultimate Computer," and the like. "If it has plenty of great interaction, if it's intelligent, interesting, surprising—it doesn't need some hit-you-over-the-head message: 'This is what the show wants to teach you this week.' You might get a write-up in TV Guide, but I think those episodes tend to date very quickly."

Meanwhile, Sussman the fan isn't alone in finding small ways to bring Enterprise full circle to the classic first/next series. "There's a bit of a race—among people like André [Bormanis] and me and Chris Black [profiled in Issue 143]—to get in original series references," he says and laughs. "Now, the Malurians are very funny, because they get wiped out by Nomad a hundred years later [in "The Changeling"]—so it was like, 'Wouldn't it be great to see these guys?' So we made them the bad guys in 'Civilization,' the green lizard guys—they get their comeuppance a hundred years from now!"

The TOS references are not just "to be cute," he maintains, "but to show what was Earth's first encounter with the Orions, or the Tholians, or whatever species we've seen before. I want to fill in those blanks. But you just can't say, 'OK! Now we're going to do an interview

MIKE SUSSMAN

media
dossier
letters

FAN TO FAN

regeneration

Sussman knows many fans criticized any Borg contact with humans some 200 years before Picard's Q-induced glimpse of the Collective in "Q Who?"—or before the secret research of Seven of Nine's human parents a decade before that in Voyager's "Dark Frontier."

"A lot of people disavow the whole Voyager/Hansens Borg plot, but even in 'Q Who' there are continuity problems," he says. "As soon as they scan that cratered planet, Data says the destruction is identical to what happened in the Neutral Zone. For some reason, the fans forget about all that: 'Q threw the Enterprise into the Delta Quadrant'—well, he didn't; he threw them only 7,000 light-years, so the Borg were already here!"

In fact, Sussman says he pushed to get in a point to help continuity. "In the end, we find out the Borg sent a signal to the Delta Quadrant—which they were trying to do in First Contact, remember—and that it would take 200 years for it to get there. We were deliberately trying to set up a very circular time paradox."

And the end result for Archer's report? "They only know some debris from an alien ship crashed on Earth 100 years ago... and they somehow came back to life, but fortunately were stopped. At some point in the future, I think—probably after Picard's encounter—I'm sure somebody will put 2 and 2 together and figure out they were the same guys. But the idea that after 'Regeneration' Starfleet will set the alarm clock for 200 years and know 'We're gonna be invaded'? I don't think that's the case at all."

twilight

Some fans cried foul over a "reset button" when this future alternate-reality romance left no lasting repercussions once reality is restored, but Sussman says it's a non sequitur.

"I wanted Archer and/or T'Pol to take away something from that experience, too—but to me it would have been a cheat to do that. Archer doesn't get 'thrown back in time' when the parasites are destroyed; we as the writers simply decided to cut back to that point of departure where his life had changed.

"So why would he have remembered future events from an alternate reality that (a) are in an alternate reality and (b) haven't happened yet? That show was set 20 years in the future; say in the real Star Trek universe, Archer is now the first president of the Federation and he's married to T'Pol—we could have just cut back to that and said, 'OK, it's 20 years later, still; we haven't changed the time, but we're back in the proper timeline. Well, that would have been bizarre.'"
episode that tells us where the Orion pirates came from. You have to have a good story, and if it just so happens to be about pirates, OK—we’ll make this about Orion pirates.” He almost got his chance with the marauders in “Anomaly,” he adds, but the reference was changed to “Ossarians” during rewrites.

Still, that story was his first after returning for Season 3 and the wholesale reinvention of the show amid the “Expanse arc.” With the new plan laid down by Berman and Braga for Earth’s attack and the five Xindi species, Sussman reports, the writers took a two-day retreat to brainstorm a huge memo that led to the first 10 or so episodes.

“It was literally like writing for a brand-new show—it started the season off with a bang,” he says. “I think we found out the hard way that exploration for exploration’s sake isn’t always riveting television. I think it can be, and it’s definitely a part of Star Trek and will remain a part of it. But when it’s just that all the time, it got a little old. When we’re just bumbling explorers—getting into trouble on our own, the Lewis and Clark approach—the episodes just don’t have that weight and that gravity.”

Even so, there was still room for shows like David Goodman’s lighthearted “North Star” and Manny Coto’s reflective “Similitude”—even as the drive of the Xindi crisis shaded them as well.

“You don’t want to do something that’s relentlessly grim,” Sussman says. “We did try and light it up. There was discussion, for example, about what would happen to movie night? Seems kinda silly, but at the same time this was going to take a whole year—they need a little bit of a break.” An idea he would have liked to have seen this season was an Earth-bound story for exploration’s sake isn’t always riveting television. I think it can be, and it’s definitely a part of Star Trek and will remain a part of it. But when it’s just that all the time, it got a little old. When we’re just bumbling explorers—getting into trouble on our own, the Lewis and Clark approach—the episodes just don’t have that weight and that gravity.”

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“I knew they were already had plans for a Trip/T’Pol arc, so I wasn’t sure they’d want to do a T’Pol/Archer ‘love story,’” he says. “But in the end, I think it fit in just fine; I think Scott was happy to get the girl! There’s a wonderful moment where he says to her, ‘Exactly how far has our relationship evolved?’ And her response—the original line of dialog was—‘Not that far’ And that line ended up disappearing at some point! Now she just gives him a look—which I think is great.”

As the Xindi plot climaxes by season’s end, one has to ask: What do you do for an encore? The choice is in his bosses’ hands, of course, but Sussman has some thoughts on the future.

“I think what this season showed us is that it’s important to give these people a mission,” he says. “It doesn’t have to be the same mission—it doesn’t have to be ‘save Earth every week.’ But the original series crew has an assignment nearly every episode, as did Picard and his crew: ‘You have to go to this system and make friends with these people.’ Or you have to get this trade route, or you have to see why this area of space is a problem for freighters; you need a reason for people to get in trouble every week.”

More profiles of all the Enterprise staff writers will follow after the 150th Communicator anniversary issue.