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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

by larry nemecek

:: mike sussman is another writer who brings a fan's perspective



Age 7: On the Ocean City beach with "Klingon Power"!

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.

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MIKE SUSSMAN

"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! We realized then we had kind of a dynamic—we were both *Star Trek* fans, we helped each other out, we both wrote *X-Files* specs, we gave each other notes. ... Years later, when we decided our careers were going nowhere fast, it seemed to make sense to team up. You usually can't go wrong with a two-fer."

It seemed to work: Then-executive producer Ken Biller asked the two aboard for the final season of *Voyager*, beginning their full-time *Star Trek* immersion—each with their own office!—just on the eve of the big *Enterprise* launch.

"Phyllis and I were lucky to survive three purges," he adds, noting the writer turnover before and after the new series' maiden shake-down. "The end of *Voyager*, *Enterprise* Season 1, and now Season 2.

"It was sad in some ways," he adds, "because we got to know and be friends

IT'S HARD TO FIND PEOPLE WHO CAN WRITE STAR TREK; IT'S HARD FOR PEOPLE WHO AREN'T FAMILIAR WITH ALL THE DIFFERENT SERIES TO GET UP TO SPEED ON WHAT'S BEEN DONE BEFORE AND WHY THINGS ARE DONE CERTAIN WAYS."

with a lot of the people who came in, very talented writers. But it's hard to find people who can write *Star Trek*; it's hard for people who aren't familiar with all the different series to get up to speed on what's been done before and why things are done certain ways. And we've been lucky enough—knock wood—so far; they don't have to rewrite us too much."

Actually, sharp-eyed credits-watchers will note that he and Strong formally ended their writing partnership this season, but Sussman notes the change was "nothing personal."

"In fact, we're gonna continue to work together as we move on individually, and still do all the things that worked for us as partners," he says. "Brainstorming, giving notes—but in the end, you want to find your own voice."



Age 12: The best raft in the fleet! (with brother Bob, 9)

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"—

office, it all sounded so fantastic!" he says and laughs. "He gave us top-secret copies of the script, which we took with us on vacation; I was so afraid I was going to lose it and 'get fired.' But I loved the pilot, I loved the concept, I loved the characters—I thought it was a great way to rejuvenate the show."

Assigned the second one-hour story, "Strange New World," the partners realized they'd be the first besides the creators to dive into this new show—and its mysteries. "They hadn't started main casting!" Sussman recalls. "We wrote 'EXT. SPACE—ENTERPRISE' and I go, 'I wonder what the *Enterprise* looks like?' We had

didn't seem quite right to just kill him off and not deal with the loss," he says. "They didn't want it to be as 'redshirted' as Captain Kirk, where you get a report: 'Seven crewmen killed'/'Ah, OK,' and he brushes it off! So at the last minute, Novokovich got a reprieve—instead of a phone call from the governor, he got a call from the executive producer!"

Who knew then that, two years later, the lack of casualties would be criticized to the other extreme as unrealistic. "It was never intentional," Sussman says. "It's just that whenever we tried to kill someone, it never quite seemed the right way to do it, so it never happened." The writer took up the cause himself, finally making it a goal in this year's *Enterprise*-era "Anomaly."

bounty "Sarek has that one line: 'Tellarites do not argue for reasons—they simply argue.' Now, he could just be making a generic insult, [but] I would imagine Tellarites are like that Monty Python skit, 'The Argument Clinic'—I think the Tellarites are people who 'argue in their spare time!'"



BRANNON [BRAGA] CALLED US IN AND SAID, 'Y'KNOW, WE'D LIKE TO HIRE YOU AS OUR FIRST WRITERS ON THE NEW SHOW: IT'S A PREQUEL, IT'S CALLED *ENTERPRISE*, IT'S A HUNDRED YEARS BEFORE CAPTAIN KIRK.'



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 the teleplay credit—and another lesson learned.

"You spend your whole life, when you're writing, just in a room by yourself—you do it the way you want," he explains. "And it's quite a shock to suddenly have to do it *their* way. I had a lot to learn about how to take notes and be more collaborative."

And then came the day of the sneak peek at Rick Berman and Brannon Braga's super-secret new series.

"Brannon—we'd worked for Ken all this time, remember—called us in and said, 'Y'know, we'd like to hire you as our first writers on the new show: It's a prequel, it's called *Enterprise*, it's a hundred years before Captain Kirk'—and I nearly wet myself right there in his

dead stop "There was a moment where the story almost got thrown out, because we were three-quarters of the way through the break and we were concerned. What's it about? But in the end, we found little character moments for everybody. That scene where Archer was chewing out Trip and Reed in his Ready Room—very reminiscent of Kirk and Scotty in 'The Trouble with Tribbles.'"

just gotten used to writing for *Voyager* and its characters; and now we have brand-new characters who are from 200 years earlier and we had to 'unlearn' everything we learned. But I liked the take on the characters—much more like people from the present; more easily related to, I think, by the audience."

The writers would find still more ways *Enterprise* differed from the other series—especially the 1960s original. For one thing, Sussman says "Strange New World" was originally to have seen the first death among Archer's crew—Crewman Novokovich, in the alien planet cave—but instead it led to a monkey on everyone's back.

"It was brought up quite late, while the show was already shooting, that it

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

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."

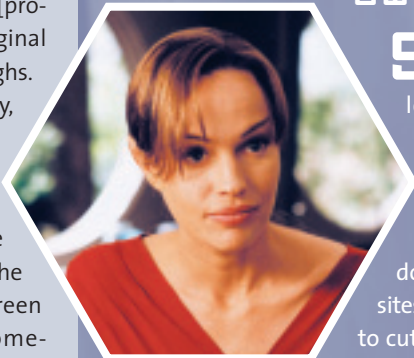
And the end result for Archer's report? "They only know some debris from an alien ship crashed on Earth 100 years ago... and they somehow came back to life, but fortunately were stopped. At some point in the future, I think—probably after Picard's encounter—I'm sure somebody will put 2 and 2 together 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."



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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

"You don't want to do something that's relentlessly grim," Sussman says. "We did try and lighten 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

"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

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anomaly "It was really important to kill somebody [after two seasons of no crew fatalities], and get the ship into really dire circumstances—and show the audience that this arc this season is really going to be different. A lot of ideas in it were not mine: André had this idea of the Spheres that's been kicking around for a year or two, and the Archer scene in the airlock is just very memorable; I can't take credit—it's just pure Brannon."

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Future tense "We didn't see them [Tholians], but it was really great when they were knocking on the door. I thought all the fans were gonna love it, 'cause in your mind's eye, behind this door you're going to see these guys. But again—once you finally show them, it's like, 'Ohhh—is that it? Is that all?' But it was cool to inject the long-time fan speculation that they were a hot-planet species."

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 light-hearted "North Star" and Manny Coto's reflective "Similitude"—even as the drive of the Xindi crisis shaded them as well.

to pick up on humanity's reaction to the crisis, their fate resting with Archer and his lone ship.

Initially, though, Sussman had his concerns—especially that scripts would have to be straight-jacketed or "committee-designed" to fit the arc's storytelling.

"For me, a great Star Trek episode has a great sci-fi concept and a strong character component," he says. "And if those didn't necessarily fit into what we needed this week, well, tough—I'd have to write it anyway. But I was very lucky this season: Every episode that I've worked on I've been very excited about. And the episodes, in the end, have been better because they *were* part of this whole arc."

Of them all, "Twilight" and its tale of an alternate future where T'Pol cares for a memory-disabled Archer became his pet project for the year—though he had doubts.

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.