The television phenomenon known today as ER is on a completely different path than the one on which it started. In the 1970s, science fiction writer Michael Crichton was a medical student at Massachusetts General Hospital. He was writing novels, including The Andromeda Strain, for extra money, and decided to do a screenplay based on a day he spent studying in the emergency room. Crichton called it “Emergency Ward,” the common name hack then, and pitched it to director Steven Spielberg as a feature film. Spielberg liked it, but was even more interested in something else Crichton was working on. Together, they turned Jurassic Park into a blockbuster thriller. Shortly thereafter, “Emergency Ward” was relocated to stage 11 on the Warner Bros lot in Burbank, where a set similar to the original hospital was constructed. The two-hour pilot episode aired on a Tuesday night in September 1994, with the second episode in its permanent time slot of 10 P.M. Thursday. ER was an instant hit in that first season, scoring the most Emmy nominations in the history of television.

preproduction

The writers

The ER writing staff consists of some of the most talented scribes in Hollywood. Writers include R. Scott Gemmill, Dr. Joe Sachs, Yablin Chang, Bruce Miller, Julie Hebert, Dr. Lisa Zwerling, David Zabel, Dr. Mark Morocco, Dee Johnson, John Wells, and others invited to write annually. The writers

Once the initial ideas are bunched around and the medical story lines are discussed, the writers come up with an outline to firm up the plot of that episode. Each writer on the staff critiques the outline. Suggested alterations are considered and the first draft, typically running up to 80 pages, is produced. The first draft is reviewed again, corrections are made; multiple drafts are produced. Gemmill said, “Writing is like a Rubik’s cube; it is two dimensional and you have to make it three dimensional.”

TV’s hit ER: Learning how it’s made.

A non-medical, character-based story begins the process and the medicine is molded around that plot. One story often leads into another, generating a domino effect.

The production team had very little time programs. Gemmill said, “A test audience raved. Former ER actress Julianna Margulies once explained, “It was so fast paced. In an era of remote controls, where people like to flip channels, ER was the one where you never had to. One second you’re in one story and five seconds later you are in another story.” Finally, NBC picked it up for the new fall season. The crew relocated to stage 11 on the Warner Bros lot in Burbank, where a set similar to the original hospital was constructed. The two-hour pilot episode aired on a Tuesday night in September 1994, with the second episode in its permanent time slot of 10 P.M. Thursday ER was an instant hit in that first season, scoring the most Emmy nominations in the history of television.

preproduction

The writers

The ER writing staff consists of some of the most talented scribes in Hollywood. Writers include R. Scott Gemmill, Dr. Joe Sachs, Yablin Chang, Bruce Miller, Julie Hebert, Dr. Lisa Zwerling, David Zabel, Dr. Mark Morocco, Dee Johnson, John Wells, and others invited to write annually. Once the initial ideas are bunched around and the medical story lines are discussed, the writers come up with an outline to firm up the plot of that episode. Each writer on the staff critiques the outline. Suggested alterations are considered and the first draft, typically running up to 80 pages, is produced. The first draft is reviewed again, corrections are made; multiple drafts are produced. Gemmill said, “Writing is like a Rubik’s cube; it is two dimensional and you have to make it three dimensional.”

TV’s hit ER: Learning how it’s made.

The television phenomenon known today as ER is on a completely different path than the one on which it started. In the 1970s, science fiction writer Michael Crichton was a medical student at Massachusetts General Hospital. He was writing novels, including The Andromeda Strain, for extra money, and decided to do a screenplay based on a day he spent studying in the emergency room. Crichton called it “Emergency Ward,” the common name hack then, and pitched it to director Steven Spielberg as a feature film. Spielberg liked it, but was even more interested in something else Crichton was working on. Together, they turned Jurassic Park into a blockbuster thriller. Shortly thereafter, “Emergency Ward” was relocated to stage 11 on the Warner Bros lot in Burbank, where a set similar to the original hospital was constructed. The two-hour pilot episode aired on a Tuesday night in September 1994, with the second episode in its permanent time slot of 10 P.M. Thursday ER was an instant hit in that first season, scoring the most Emmy nominations in the history of television.

preproduction

The writers

The ER writing staff consists of some of the most talented scribes in Hollywood. Writers include R. Scott Gemmill, Dr. Joe Sachs, Yablin Chang, Bruce Miller, Julie Hebert, Dr. Lisa Zwerling, David Zabel, Dr. Mark Morocco, Dee Johnson, John Wells, and others invited to write annually. Once the initial ideas are bunched around and the medical story lines are discussed, the writers come up with an outline to firm up the plot of that episode. Each writer on the staff critiques the outline. Suggested alterations are considered and the first draft, typically running up to 80 pages, is produced. The first draft is reviewed again, corrections are made; multiple drafts are produced. Gemmill said, “Writing is like a Rubik’s cube; it is two dimensional and you have to make it three dimensional.”

TV’s hit ER: Learning how it’s made.
is jam-packed with last year the biggest challenge employs two professional writers meet since the first season is filmed in a fashion similar to a always has been known for its acting is a tightly structure to fit the commercials in. For Today, he said, “TV has a four-act television has changed that tradition. Gemmill said, were meant to have a reach those viewers. Television and film, Gemmill said, have been with large cast members, recurring guest casts totaling about 100 on-set workers, 11 main cast members, recurring guest stars, stand-ins, and dozens of extras.

Here is a closer look at the major elements of the production team.

Props
The prop department is a group of men managed by head props masters Rick Kurns and Rick Ladomade. While Kurns works on one episode, Ladomade prepares to work on the next. They and assistant props master John Fairchild have been with ER since the first season 10 years ago. Roman Myktykin is in charge of everything electrical, including heart monitors, oxygen machines, and other devices. All of the blood, vomit, and other fun medical paraphernalia is created, built, or placed there by the props department. The needles used in many episodes are amazingly realistic fakes. One of the props masters constructs them for about $3.00 each, using tiny springs to make it appear they penetrate the skin, while actually being pushed back up into the barrel of the syringe. Vomit is a favorite of the prop crew, who produce a substance the consistency and color of the real thing, while still giving an acceptable taste in the actor’s mouth. It has a tomato soup and milk base with other soups added for texture. The result is a thick, almost nauseating prop durable enough for use in six or more takes. All of Roman’s medical equipment is completely functional. Some is borrowed from or donated by major companies. Each monitor in the two trauma rooms on the set is worth an estimated $25,000. For the filming, the monitors are silenced to avoid problems with sound. Those and other sounds are added in post-production. All the monitors attached to the main character "victims" are rigged. The props department sets the vital signs to fit the plot of the story. If a “patient” goes into ventricular fibrillation, the monitor has been preset to show that result.

Each character has a bevy of props. The props crew has a bag for each actor similar to one in the makeup department. The bag contains everything that would be on the person. It contains ID tags, glasses, wallets, watches, stethoscopes, rings, and anything else important to his or her character. Each bag has multiple copies of these props as well, in case of damage or loss. Some have larger props, so the crew keeps three copies of the cane used by Laura Innes’ character, Dr. Weaver.

Wardrobe
The wardrobe department consists of a busy, highly organized staff to manage almost two-thirds of a mile of clothing racks in a number of buildings. Each of the main characters and recurring guest stars has several copies of each outfit. If a scene requires that someone throw up or drip blood on a shirt, there must be more identical shirts. There is no way a director is going to get it just right in one take, so the wardrobe department stands by with the extra copies. Costumer Radford Polinsky is a one-man wardrobe emergency squad, loaded with pins and clips in the event of a small tear or other mishap, ready to fix or switch an article in the wardrobe.

Cinematography
ER is filmed in a fashion similar to a major motion picture, on 35mm film with large Panavision cameras. From the inception of the series, the filmmakers thought it would be better for the pace of the show to use what was then a new and untested tool—the steadicam. Cameraman Terrence Nightingale straps this 75-pound contraption to his body over a vest with several bars that attach to the camera. They keep it from bouncing when he walks, allowing him to move in an out of spaces that are inaccessible to a regular dolly. The director of the pilot, Rod Holcomb, had the original idea. He said, “I wanted to use the steadicam a lot because I thought I needed to get in and out. The floors were so bad we couldn’t use the dolly.” ER is shot in widescreen format, so the viewer sees just what the camera does.

Talent and direction
ER always has been known for its acting ensemble. Actors including George Clooney and Anthony Edwards have walked through the doors of County General. Actor Noah Wyle is the “senior” cast member, the only one to be in the show since the pilot. The cast also includes Laura Innes as brilliant yet difficult Dr. Kerry Weaver. Sherry Stringfield was a member of the original cast and returned in season eight after a five-year absence to reprise her role as Dr. Susan Lewis. Paul McCrane joined the good-old-from-his-native-Croatia character in season four as Dr. Robert “Rocket” Romano. Maura Tierney (Nurse Abby Lockhart), Goran Visnjic (Dr. Luka Kovac), and Ming-Na Wen (Dr. Jing-Me “Deb” Chen) started in season six. Sharif Atkins and Alkemi Phifer (Drs. Gallant and Pratt) joined in season eight. Finally, in season 10, actresses Parminder Nagra and Linda Cardellini appeared as medical student Neela Rasgothra and nurse Sam Taggart. Their remarkable work keeps ER in the top ten every week.

Goran Visnjic emigrated to the U.S. from his native Croatia 15 days before ER started filming in 1994. He joined the cast in the beginning of season six as Dr. Luca Kovac, a medical attending. When he learned he was going to play a doctor, Visnjic visited hospitals, consulted with ER’s medical staff, and even practiced suturing daily until his first shoot.

Cast members get the script only five to seven days before filming. A read-through three days before the filming helps work out any dialogue difficulties. Since both Croatian and medical terminology have Latin at their roots, Visnjic had less difficulty with his lines than he first anticipated. He tries to memorize them in bulk rather than day by day. In the years he’s been on ER, Visnjic’s character has faced many physical demands. Kovac has run around at the site of a train wreck, survived an explosion in the hospital, and (his personal favorite) nearly died in a Congo civil war. He revels in the physical acting and does it all himself. Visnjic takes that athleticism to a new level as he plays the lead role in Spartacus, a new mini series.

While each of these stars has an intriguing story, the experience of actor Paul McCrane has been shared by some of the cast as well. After winning the part of a regular dolly. The director of the pilot, Rod Holcomb, had the original idea. He said, “I wanted to use the steadicam a lot because I thought I needed to get in and out. The floors were so bad we couldn’t use the dolly.” ER is shot in widescreen format, so the viewer sees just what the camera does.

Talent and direction
ER always has been known for its acting ensemble. Actors including George Clooney and Anthony Edwards have walked through the doors of County General. Actor Noah Wyle is the “senior” cast member, the only one to be in the show since the pilot. The cast also includes Laura Innes as brilliant yet difficult Dr. Kerry Weaver. Sherry Stringfield was a member of the original cast and returned in season eight after a five-year absence to reprise her role as Dr. Susan Lewis. Paul McCrane joined the good-old-from-his-native-Croatia character in season four as Dr. Robert “Rocket” Romano. Maura Tierney (Nurse Abby Lockhart), Goran Visnjic (Dr. Luka Kovac), and Ming-Na Wen (Dr. Jing-Me “Deb” Chen) started in season six. Sharif Atkins and Alkemi Phifer (Drs. Gallant and Pratt) joined in season eight. Finally, in season 10, actresses Parminder Nagra and Linda Cardellini appeared as medical student Neela Rasgothra and nurse Sam Taggart. Their remarkable work keeps ER in the top ten every week.

Goran Visnjic emigrated to the U.S. from his native Croatia 15 days before ER started filming in 1994. He joined the cast in the beginning of season six as Dr. Luca Kovac, a medical attending. When he learned he was going to play a doctor, Visnjic visited hospitals, consulted with ER’s medical staff, and even practiced suturing daily until his first shoot.

Cast members get the script only five to seven days before filming. A read-through three days before the filming helps work out any dialogue difficulties. Since both Croatian and medical terminology have Latin at their roots, Visnjic had less difficulty with his lines than he first anticipated. He tries to memorize them in bulk rather than day by day. In the years he’s been on ER, Visnjic’s character has faced many physical demands. Kovac has run around at the site of a train wreck, survived an explosion in the hospital, and (his personal favorite) nearly died in a Congo civil war. He revels in the physical acting and does it all himself. Visnjic takes that athleticism to a new level as he plays the lead role in Spartacus, a new mini series.

While each of these stars has an intriguing story, the experience of actor Paul McCrane has been shared by some of the cast as well. After winning the part of
As he began his preparation for the episode, the Director’s Guild of America, which establishes work rules for that part of the film industry, allowed him 10 days of preparation. He tried to follow what he called the best piece of advice he’s ever received about directing: “He prepared in the right way,” a reference to the fact that many directors will over prepare, literally driving themselves crazy.

In those 10 days he took several steps to prepare for the episode. The first was “to read the script a lot and understand the motives of the characters.” Second, he identified the basic theme. In “Next of Kin,” the idea of family was central to the episode. The third step was to be clear about the point of view, which really is the answer to the question: “Whose story are we following?”

The director wants for dramatic effect. Another frequent problem is that the director wants for dramatic effect. A reference to the fact that many directors will over prepare, literally driving themselves crazy.

Whether he be an actor or a director, if McCrane wants to have the scene filmed during 16 takes of a scene, the director must be approved by the writer of the episode. Even if the change was subtle, it could alter the whole tone or affect other parts of the scene. While in production, script changes are unlikely, but not impossible. The writer may want a change, and a script may undergo numerous changes. But because every day in production costs about $100,000, speed is important.

**post-production**

Because ER is shot on 35mm film, it is necessary to transfer images to another format before the editing process can take place. As soon as a day’s shoot is complete, the film goes to the Warner Brothers transfer house to be put on DVD, so the producers can view it the next day. Once the DVDs are in the hands of the editors, they can begin to cut, correct, and add elements before the program can air.

Often during post-production, editors will have difficulty hearing the dialogue, sometimes due to an actor’s low or soft voice. When necessary, actors are called back to re-record their lines. Other sound equipment, which would have caused problems during filming, are added at this point, as is any music the director wants for dramatic effect.

**A day in Carly’s Journal**

*Thursday, August 14, 2003*

Thursday’s call time was pushed back a bit to accommodate the company and equipment move from stage 11 to the back lots known as New York Street. There are several exterior locations including the ambulance bay and corridor, entrance to the “L” train, and mockup of the tracks.

There is also one interior location that can fit very few people. Dr. Kovac’s apartment was built in a part of the ambulance bay. It is fully furnished and has a little bit of pre-set lighting. Only the director, director of photography, camera (and assistants), essential cast, stand-ins, boom operators, and the lighting crew were allowed in during the shoot. They let me come up and watch the short scene between Maura Tierney, Goran Visnjic, and Simone-Ellis Girard. They completed filming of this spot by 11 a.m., a bit behind schedule.

We then transposed all of the equipment down to the ambulance bay for a short scene between Mekhi Phifer and Glenn Howerton. There was a bit of construction going on across the street which was halted just about every five seconds to accommodate the filming. It was a relatively short filming, 6/8 of a page. They quickly moved back to stage 11 for the next scene. I observed the two on stage 11 while focusing on the short scene between Maura Tierney, Goran Visnjic, and Simone-Ellis Girard. They completed filming of this spot by 11 a.m., a bit behind schedule.

We then transposed all of the equipment down to the ambulance bay for a short scene between Mekhi Phifer and Glenn Howerton. There was a bit of construction going on across the street which was halted just about every five seconds to accommodate the filming. It was a relatively short filming, 6/8 of a page. They quickly moved back to stage 11 for the next scene. I observed the two on stage 11 while focusing on the short scene between Maura Tierney, Goran Visnjic, and Simone-Ellis Girard. They completed filming of this spot by 11 a.m., a bit behind schedule.

We then transposed all of the equipment down to the ambulance bay for a short scene between Mekhi Phifer and Glenn Howerton. There was a bit of construction going on across the street which was halted just about every five seconds to accommodate the filming. It was a relatively short filming, 6/8 of a page. They quickly moved back to stage 11 for the next scene. I observed the two on stage 11 while focusing on the short scene between Maura Tierney, Goran Visnjic, and Simone-Ellis Girard. They completed filming of this spot by 11 a.m., a bit behind schedule.

We then transposed all of the equipment down to the ambulance bay for a short scene between Mekhi Phifer and Glenn Howerton. There was a bit of construction going on across the street which was halted just about every five seconds to accommodate the filming. It was a relatively short filming, 6/8 of a page. They quickly moved back to stage 11 for the next scene. I observed the two on stage 11 while focusing on the short scene between Maura Tierney, Goran Visnjic, and Simone-Ellis Girard. They completed filming of this spot by 11 a.m., a bit behind schedule.