

Dani Shear's Blind TV Deal is a Slam(dance) Dunk

A couple of years back, Dani Shear wrote *Ex*, a sitcom about an engaged couple who are on their way to L.A., break-up mid-flight, and end up living together for financial and emotional considerations. In 2005 the dynamic redhead was encouraged by a friend to enter the pilot into the Slamdance Teleplay Competition (www.slamdance.com), which judges only spec television pilots, both hour dramas and half-hour comedies.

"I honestly didn't expect to hear anything from Slamdance," Shear modestly admitted to *Creative Screenwriting* this January, during the Slamdance Film Festival. "You always hear that baby writers should be writing specs rather than original pilots, so my manager and I were more focused on my *Will & Grace* and *Bernie Mac* scripts. I therefore didn't show anyone the pilot." Seventy-two hours later, Shear was awarded the largest grand prize for any teleplay competition in America: a \$30,000 blind script commitment with alternative television production studio Fox 21, an offshoot of 20th Century Fox Television.

The reason the Slamdance Teleplay Competition is one of the best in the country should be credited to the supportive partnership between the festival and Fox 21. Grand-prize winners earn a blind script deal: \$30,000 for a half-hour pilot or \$45,000 for a one-hour. And in April "Slamdance on Stage" hosted a reading of the pilots of the three finalists in Los Angeles, with actors such as *Just Shoot Me!* alums Laura San Giacomo, Enrico Colantoni, and Wendie Malick. Not only did the finalists get to see their work performed by professional actors, but so did hundreds of people from the entertainment industry.

Fox 21 VP of Development Brett Weitz explained that the mission statement of Fox 21 is "to bring a more independent, lower-budget content which is outside of the box." He listed Fox 21's credits such as *Beauty and the Geek* and this spring's premiere of *Free Ride*. Then there's their series that just got picked up called *Saved*—"a one-hour drama written by David Manson, about a paramedic with a dark side and an addiction to gambling." Weitz smiled and added, "We're not even two years old."

Slamdance Competition Director John Stoddard explained their goal is to "introduce talented new writers to members of the industry with the ability to get projects made. Fox 21 has proved to be a valuable partner in making things happen for our award winners." Fox 21 Senior Vice President Jane Francis reciprocated, praising the competition as an opportunity for Fox 21 to access the next generation of writers and creators.

The 2006 Teleplay Competition received over 500 submissions,

with the three finalists—Shear, Joel Metzger (*Hothouse Bruiser*), and John Woodard (*The Boys on June Street*)—all flown to Park City for Slamdance, which took place January 19–27, 2006. In just two years the competition has almost doubled its number of entries, up from 300 pilots received for the inaugural contest. That's when Fox 21 awarded its very first blind script deal in January 2005 to grand-prize winner Ken Pisani for *The Cousins Club*, with Hoyt Hilsman (*Foggy Bottom*) and Nikki Toscano (*Amnesty*) coming in as runners-up in this unique competition.

Fox 21's Weitz explains what happens once the winner gets back to Los Angeles. "Ken Pisani came into the office and we talked about three of his ideas. Out of those three we picked two. We then sat down with Jane Francis, who responded to [Pisani's pilot] *Holidays*. We went out with it and we're waiting to hear from the networks. It's been an amazing experience. We talk with Ken Pisani about every two days. I worked with him on his structure and what you need to sell a teleplay."

Shear has traveled farther than Utah to get where she is today. Born in Sydney, Australia, she came to the United States at the tender age of seven. Shear grew up in Washington, D.C., attending Northwestern University as a theater major. After graduation she relocated to Chicago where she worked in theater, later moving to New York City to do more theater, including a stint on Broadway in "Les Miserables." It was while performing with the "Les Miz" touring company in 1999 that she wrote "New Girl," a one-person show about her experiences, later performing her show around Los Angeles. That's where showrunner Cindy Chupack (*Sex and the City*) caught Shear on stage, and told her she should consider writing.

"She mentored me in the beginning," Shear recalls, "encouraging me to write my own pilot, which ended up a few years later being *Ex*. Writing the pilot, was easier than expected because I had had experience living with my ex-fiancé. It was an experience I could tap into."

Since winning the competition, many doors have opened for Shear. She's gone on several meetings with future agents, and has been in to pitch Fox 21 six separate television show ideas, which they've narrowed down to one: a dark comedy presently titled *Untitled Dani Shear Project*. Shear's original pilot got her in the door, but it might be another pilot she'll be pitching in the room.

"I've been busy fleshing out this new pilot, which is a lot darker than *Ex*. I'll go in and pitch to Jane Francis, and then Fox 21 will decide which one they want." CS

