

The Myth of Portlandia: Portlandia, Grimm, Leverage

An interview with Carl Abbott and Karin Magaldi
by Sara Gates



Carl Abbott and Karin
Magaldi

Carl Abbott is a professor of Urban Studies and Planning at Portland State University and a local expert on the intertwining relationships between the growth, urbanization, and cultural evolutions of cities. Since beginning his tenure at PSU in 1978, Dr. Abbott has published numerous books on Portland itself, as well as the urbanization of the American West; his most recent is Portland in Three Centuries: The Place and the People (2011).

Karin Magaldi is the department chair of Theatre & Film at PSU, with extensive experience in teaching screenwriting and production. In addition to directing several PSU departmental productions, she has also worked with local theatre groups including Portland Center Stage, Third Rail Repertory, and Artists Repertory Theatre.

Recently, Metroscape writer Sara Gates sat down with Dr. Abbott and Professor Magaldi to discuss a growing influence on Portland culture, both as it is perceived by the rest of the country and changing from within: a trio of television shows that are based and filmed in the metropolitan region. The conversation was edited for length and clarity.

Editor's Note: at publication, it was announced that Leverage would not be renewed.

For a more analytical approach that explores our region's demography and economics and the myth of Portlandia, go to the Metropolitan Knowledge Network at: mkn.research.pdx.edu

Sara Gates: Within the last two years, three major television shows have based their productions here in Portland. How do you think the way Grimm, Leverage, and, of course, Portlandia depict the city might affect the way the rest of the country thinks about us? Karin, you're laughing already!

Karin Magaldi: Well, I've seen some articles that refer to this, looking at Portland from the outside, and almost all of them talk about Portlandia and the scene from the first episode with the couple ordering chicken at a restaurant!

It seems as though all of the stereotypes of Portland are writ large, and they are ridiculous. But, there is always a truth to ridiculousness.

Carl Abbott: There certainly is a cult of local food, and we see it in farmer's markets and food carts, and in the availability of the agriculture that allows people to really focus on being "locavores." So there is a nugget of truth from which Portlandia can extrapolate a ridiculous response. Which, of course, is what the show is all about.

What strikes me, though, is that only certain aspects of the show are all that Portland-centric. The feminist bookstore, for example, could be almost any place. It could certainly be in Portland, but it's not so Portland-rooted. Or in the second

season, there is a couple who goes on a Battlestar Galactica binge, and watches the entire series in seven days straight. Sure, there's a science fiction and graphic novel community in Portland where you can see that theme, but there are TV nuts everywhere. People can do that anyplace.

KM: I used to live in Santa Cruz –

CA: Ooh! The Portland of California!

KM: Exactly. It really is the Portland of California. And between the two, I don't see much difference. So when I started watching Portlandia, I thought, yeah, that's Portland, but it's also Santa Cruz. And it's also the Bay Area. There are pockets of these things a lot of places.

CA: I think what's curious about Portland is that it acts like a university town without the classic university. Not to imply that Portland State isn't a university, but it's not like Cornell in Ithaca, or the University of Wisconsin in Madison, where the university is central to the life and identity of the city.

Here, Portland State is not central to the identity of Portland, yet in Portlandia's view we act like a big, overgrown Santa Cruz or Berkeley. And they act pretty funny in Berkeley!

KM: That's true – I went to Berkeley!

SG: What about within the Portland area? Portlandia obviously has been well received, with viewing parties in bars. Leverage and Grimm haven't had quite the same impact on Portlanders. Why do you think that is?

KM: We love to laugh at ourselves. And it's a certain kind of person who gets into those parties and laughs at themselves: "Hahaha, we're great!"

But, I do love watching Grimm to see all my friends, because

so many local theatre actors are involved in Grimm. Some of them are continuing characters, and lots play bad guys, which is really fun to see.

SG: Does the theatre community embrace Grimm, and watch it regularly?

KM: I think they watch to see their friends. They watch Grimm and say, "Oh! It's so-and-so!" And my students will often say, "I was on Grimm! Watch next week's episode!"

I just love the way they portray Portland, its residential streets. I love the way they light houses on Grimm. I love watching it to see all my friends. And they hire our students, too.

SG: Do you think these three shows filming here over the last few years has changed the way students think about working in film? Does it seem more feasible to them now?

KM: Absolutely. There's no question. We have a brand new film major that started in 2007 and because of that, we have students working in internships behind the scenes as grips or in tech roles, well as actors in front of the camera. They're able to network and make connections and it's lovely in terms of production, the way they can get in. It's exciting for our students.

CA: And in economic terms, we're building a critical mass of professionals—not only actors—that can provide the lights, and scout locations, and negotiate with homeowners to film there.

KM: People to find these lovely homes and then people to light them!

CA: Films have been made here for years, but it will be one movie one year, and then a couple years later another. Gus Van Sant himself couldn't support a whole infrastructure. You need lots of filmmakers and TV shows to turn into Vancouver.

KM: And our governors have been supporting filmmaking. I understand Leverage, which is more interiors and you don't see the outside as much as Grimm, and at first it wasn't situated in Portland. And now this year, it's not only filmed in Portland but set here, too.

SG: Right, now Leverage has even started basing storylines in our local landmarks and history. For instance, they recently did an episode about D.B. Cooper, the hijacker who jumped out of an airplane in the 1970s and was never seen again. What impact do you think this sort of local history has on people who think the Pacific Northwest is just a mysterious little corner of the country where Bigfoot lives?

CA: Is there really anything except Bigfoot? DB Cooper is a kind of Bigfoot. It's in the legend category. I mean, who knows? But the guy jumped out of the plane and died – at least that's what I think happened. That, I think, plays to the mysteriousness of this cold, wet, damp, kind of foggy, mysterious kind of place, which is what Grimm does.

KM: Yes, absolutely. Grimm doesn't skewer, necessarily, what we are here. What I find very, very interesting is the fairy tale and fantasy side of Grimm, and the way they use Portland as the backdrop to the sinister happenings.

CA: It's like the way The X-Files ambiance came from filming in Vancouver, B.C. Lots of dark places, lots of mysterious settings. Similarly, that plays on Portland and Oregon as the not-sophisticated. It's not New York. It's not Los Angeles. It's this other place, where Bigfoot walks.

KM: Where myth is born. There could be legends, and there's something darker underneath the surface. You certainly see that in Grimm where faces go through transformations and you see the masks of its monsters.

CA: And of course the Northwest is full of vampires. Forks, Washington [the setting for the vampire saga Twilight] is

supposed to be the dampest part of these places, the dampest place in the country that you could find. Whereas Portland has the city and its scenery, but then 20 minutes outside you have some very fairytale-like environments.

SG: So these days we are being portrayed quite differently than the darker films Gus Van Sant was making here twenty years ago, where the seediness of Portland was central to their edge. Now we have Portlandia, which is like visual candy, and Grimm is essentially a fairytale. Do you think that reflects the way Portland has changed?

CA: The seedy element is harder to find. And the core of a lot of cities has gone through that kind of process. It's hard to find.

KM: When I think about My Own Private Idaho [Van Sant's 1991 drama], which I use in film classes, the underbelly and the youth culture is still here, but it's not as visible downtown. I think it has shifted to a different place in the city.

CA: Scattered, maybe. Although, I read in the paper this morning about a confrontation between street kids and food cart owners.

KM: So it's still there, but maybe it's being portrayed in a different way. It seems like a bigger sociological question.

CA: It's true. And do you recognize a My Own Private Idaho character or a Drugstore Cowboy character in shows like Leverage or Grimm?

KM: No. They definitely don't portray characters like that. Portlandia especially is a stand-up comedy routine, and the joke is on Portland. So they don't do gritty social realism.

SG: Has that removed this idea of Portland as a gritty kind of place in the national consciousness? We used to be known as the city where Courtney Love and Kurt Cobain met, and now

we're known for making pickles.

CA: I don't know a whole lot about the current music scene, but there certainly is a long distance between Courtney Love and Colin Meloy of The Decemberists writing a children's fantasy novel about Forest Park [2011's *Wildwood*].

KM: Right! It's a very different sensibility. It's a good question – what is it that shifts those perceptions? Is it Portland itself changing, or the national perception just looking for entertainment?

CA: On the gritty side, it's an interesting question. Twenty years ago Ursula Le Guin collaborated with a photographer on a book about Thurman Street, going from the river up to Willamette Heights. It was a very gritty kind of street they were portraying. It was pre-Pearl District, just before that change really began. It's another example of a very different way of perceiving the city.

In a sense what *Portlandia* does is remind people of that... in order to satirize the city in this way, there must be something that has changed. Viewers elsewhere are primed to accept that yes, this could be Portland. And you wouldn't have been able to make this twenty years ago.

There are probably the same kinds of nutsy people hanging out in Indianapolis but people would say "Indianapolis? Bah! But Portland, yeah, I've heard that about Portland." There is sort of a re-affirming cycle. And it's true – all the statistics show – that over the last 20 years Portland has been attracting college-educated young people.

KM: I read one study that said the median age here is about 35. People come here to open food carts, be writers, join the music scene, and now we have a film scene beginning to happen.

CA: People know that maybe Portland's a place to get into the film and TV industry. Things are happening there, and there

can't be too many people there with the same film degree they have from NYU or whatever. They think it'll be easier to break in in Portland than in Los Angeles. Certainly cheaper to live.

KM: People from L.A. are moving up here, because it's not as difficult to break into the scene there. It's a smaller pool here, but there are still opportunities. Our film major at Portland State was originally projected in the first five years to have 50 students. We now have over 300. It went through the roof.

SG: Do you find many out-of-state students coming for film?

KM: Yeah, we have a lot of out-of-state, and in-state too. And now that films have all gone digital, there is so much that students can do cheaply that they couldn't a long time ago. And they know there are some opportunities here. Just think about all the different film festivals Portland hosts now.

SG: What role do you think the tax incentives the state provides to the film industry plays? The legislature is reviewing them for the next budget, but they're capped at \$6 million. For instance, one new TNT drama is based in a Portland hospital, but they're filming in L.A. because the incentive money ran out.

KM: Yes, there's a cap, and the money ran out. These three shows have gobbled it up.

SG: Do you think raising those incentives makes sense?

KM: Absolutely. It's less expensive to film here, but without incentives, it's hard to convince financiers to base production here.

SG: What about economics? What effect do you think an increasing film industry would have in terms of attracting more industry?

KM: I have to speak from what I know, and we keep growing.

We're not stopping. And if you couple that with increased tax incentives and the film festivals we keep starting, I see that synergy only promoting more growth. I think a cap of film incentives is the only thing that could stop that.

CA: And we have this crop of film majors who will, to be honest, work cheap!

KM: Yes! I mean, I don't want to promote the abuse of interns, but I think it can work really well for all parties because internships provide these amazing connections and introductions for students, and help keep costs down for film crews.

CA: Another thing about Leverage— which I have not watched consistently because it's not a very good show — is that to set a show like that in Portland, I think it recognizes that we are a big enough city to supply those stories. For instance, if you want a CSI-type of show, it's CSI in Las Vegas, Miami, New York... but CSI Topeka wouldn't be very convincing. So, Portland has to be big enough to have the plausibility.

SG: Do you think that would have happened ten years ago?

CA: In terms of size, yes... but I think it's a change of recognition. Probably in the last 15 years, Portland has started making an impression on people who don't know geography at all. There are people who knew that there was a big city somewhere out north of San Francisco, and they figured out it was Seattle. If you're from New York, you had a hard time holding in your mind that there could be multiple big cities out in this cold, wet part of the country. And you knew it was Seattle because of the Space Needle, or Bill Gates, or knowing they made airplanes. They needed something iconic to hold onto to keep that recognition. And now, people know that there is a Portland.

KM: And I think it's fascinating because we've got three very

different TV programs. There's Leverage with the big-city feel. And there's Grimm, which keys into the whole fairy-tale aspect. And there's Portlandia, which is a standup comedy routine about all the silliness of Portland. And the city can sustain all three of those images. That's fascinating... we're big enough.

SG: You sound proud.

KM: Yeah! I am!

SG: Most of Portland seems to take a certain pride in all the attention being paid to the city by television audiences. Do you think the surrounding suburbs and counties that are part of the metro area feel neglected?

CA: In general? Probably. In the last election, Clackamas County voters were definitely saying, "We don't want to get Portlandized". And some of it is cultural. There's an idea that "If Portland is really like these Portlandia people, we don't want them out here!" There's always been that city/suburbs idea.

Portlandia obviously is focused on the city, because I don't think there's a whole lot of Portlandia fodder in Gresham. But because of their focus, the other shows can be anywhere, and people can identify with them a little easier. There are criminals and bad guys and fraudsters that sometimes hang out in the suburbs!

SG: Right – Leverage did an episode recently about sabotaging a big-box retail outlet out in the suburbs to save the local mom-and-pop hardware stores.

CA: All right! There's an urban-studies theme!

SG: Any other thoughts on Portland and its TV image?

CA: Well, we've had this kind of hip, progressive, cool brand, and simultaneously this idea of being a well-planned city with

lots of participation: kind of wonky and less cool. I think the show we could host is something about bureaucrats and city planning – kind of an urban Parks and Recreation.

KM: We should pitch a spin-off! If you can do all those CSI's, why not a Parks and Rec: Portland?