

PRODUCED BY

The Official Magazine of the Producers Guild of America / Winter 2009

A portrait of Hayma Washington, a Black man with a short beard and mustache, smiling. He is wearing a light blue button-down shirt. The background is a plain, light blue color.

Hayma "Screech" Washington

**"The producer is the driver.
Without the organizational
skill, it doesn't happen."**

In this issue:

That's Italian! Producing *Nine
Precious* beats the odds
Producers' passport: the PGA in Jordan



Hayma “Screech” Washington

At Lake Yamanaka in Tokyo, Japan

Photos courtesy of
Screech Washington

There’s no such thing as an easy production. There’s your difficult production. Then there’s your grueling production. Then there’s your I-can’t-even-conceive-of-how-they-pulled-that-off production.

And then there’s *The Amazing Race*.

It’s no exaggeration to say that *The Amazing Race* is literally in a class by itself. In 2003, the Television Academy first began presenting its Emmy Award for Outstanding Reality Competition program. *The Amazing Race* won that year. *The Amazing Race* won the next year. And the next. In fact, no other program has ever won the award. *Race* is a perfect seven-for-seven.

Among those seven-time winners: Hayma “Screech” Washington. After joining *Race* in its second season, Washington rose to become one of the series’ executive producers in 2005. Over the course of his years on the series, he’s been around the world more times than you can count on both hands, taking responsibility for a sequence of maximum-intensity marathon shoots on every habitable continent. As *The Amazing Race*’s chief engineer and final arbiter, it fell to Washington to turn the globe-spanning creative vision of Jerry Bruckheimer and Bertram Van Munster into a reality. The result is, in effect, the ultimate location shoot, with a run-and-gun crew trying to hit up to a dozen moving targets and every variable up for grabs, and “Screech” Washington in the center of it all.

It is, arguably, the most staggering production challenge in the history of television, one that’s only possible given the breadth of Washington’s experience as a producer and director, with roots in both the legendary Don Ohlmeyer’s production company and in the executive halls of Disney. The product of that training is a producer with immaculate organizational skills, relentless discipline, a keen eye for the human story, and the humility and good humor to remain sane by the time the day has wrapped. Washington has since left *The Amazing Race* to devote his attention to his own company Screechers Pix, redirecting the skills he refined during his racing days into a variety of film, television and, increasingly, new media projects.

This is the 44th in *Produced by*’s ongoing series of Case Studies of successful producers and their work. *Produced by* editor Chris Green joined Hayma “Screech” Washington at his Screechers Pix offices for a globe-spanning conversation that touched on such points as the organic design of *The Amazing Race*’s challenges, the virtues of never allowing yourself to be pigeonholed, and what it means to be “Screeching it.”

So... “Screech.” I have to think that there’s a story behind that name.

Well, what I tell you depends on the day of the week, or on how much we’ve been drinking. *[laughs]* The real story is actually not so much how I got it, but how I can’t get rid of it. You know, when your name is Hayma and you introduce yourself, sometimes you’ll say, “I’m Hayma, but you can call me Screech,” or “I’m Screech, but my name is Hayma,” people will ask, well, what do you want me to call you? And I’ll say: whichever one you choose. And then they think about how to pronounce Hayma, and then they always go back to Screech. Sometimes I think I should have a more common name. But I’ve been Screech since I was 17 years old, and I can’t seem to shake it. So you can call me Hayma, you can call me Screech, you can call me Hayma Screech.

be here. So one day, I just got in my Camaro and drove across the country. I got out of the car and I was broke in about a week and I started my journey.

So what was that journey like? What was your original ambition? Did you want to become a producer? Did you want to direct?

I started working for a production company called Jon Roseman Productions, and they were one of the original companies that made rock videos. Back in that day, there were very, very few companies making them. They were the company that made “Bohemian Rhapsody.” I didn’t work on “Bohemian Rhapsody,” but that company made it, and they made all the Rod Stewart videos, and one of the first video albums with the group Blondie. They worked with pretty

Ohlmeyer, because when I worked for DO we did reality, we did sports, we did live events, we did dramatic series... At Ohlmeyer Communications we did a little bit of everything. I think that’s when I got a better idea of what I really wanted to do with myself, because he was one of the most prolific, versatile, dynamic producers you could ever want to work for. So when I saw all the possibilities in that company, that’s when it became clear to me that I could pretty much do anything I put my mind to.

So once you’re in this atmosphere where you see the incredible diversity programming, how did you hone in on your personal direction?

who is the best teacher you could have, and then working for Disney I learned about the studio, being an executive, and branding. When you come out of both of those schools, the worst thing you could do is limit yourself.

Tell me a little about Disney and about that education. What were you hired to do there?

While working with Don, we were doing some of the really big



On location in Antananarivo, Madagascar



Standing in front of The Sphinx in Giza, Egypt

And as far as how you got the name?

I don’t think we’ve drank enough yet. *[laughs]*

Okay, maybe another day. So talk a little bit about how you found your way in the industry.

I’m from Columbus, Ohio... I literally got in my car and on New Year’s Day — I was 21 — I drove out with a buddy that I worked with and we came here searching. I had visited California when I was 13 years old; I won a contest sponsored by a local grocery store chain where you save grocery receipts. They flew a group of the winners out here and I smelled the air, saw the palm trees ... they took us to Disneyland and on the Universal Studios tour and I was smitten by it. I came here on that trip and after that I think I just always wanted to

much all of the A-list artists around at that time, including Michael Jackson. I was the bookkeeper by day, and gaffer, grip, A2 by night, and I learned the business literally from the ground up or the checkbook up, depending on what time of day it was. So that was where I learned what a producer was, what a line producer was, and I learned pretty much how to operate on all levels. When I got in the business, you started as a PA, you were lucky if you were promoted to coordinator, and when they called you an associate producer, you were calling home. It was like the most unbelievable accomplishment in your life. So from there, I went on to work on shows like *You Asked for It*, and I worked on *Games People Play* ... those were some of the original reality shows. But my career went to the next level when I started working for Don

Nowadays, it’s hard to avoid being pigeonholed, the way the business is. You know ... you’re scripted, you’re not scripted; you’re a director, you’re a producer. Maybe I missed that class, but no one told me that you couldn’t do as many things as you found stimulating and exciting. I’m always trying to do new things; one day I have my director’s hat on... I always seem to have my producing hat on. It seems more each day, that to survive in this business you almost have to be a producer. I also worked for Disney for 10 years ... working there was like earning a master’s degree in the business of production. So I had Ohlmeyer,



Working with actor Christopher Cass (left) on his first film, *The Drive*

events for Disney Studios at Disneyworld and Disneyland — such as 4th of July and other holiday specials and park openings. Disney became one of our important clients and eventually, I was offered a job to be in charge of physical production for Buena Vista. I started working for Buena Vista when the syndicated division of the studio was fairly new. I came in

after the new team had gotten their feet on the ground and were ready to expand; everyone there was the best at what they did. I had the opportunity to work on the domestic side for first-run syndication and also the international division. I had the best of both worlds; it was a fantastic job. To give you an idea of the versatility of it, within the job, as the VP of production, I helped put together the television series of *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*. I was also the 2nd unit director on that series, which is one of the first real shows that I was a director on. I guess it was a special time, when people were just willing to help you do what you dreamed and desired to do. Around that time I knew I was going to leave Disney; that's when I made my — I call it my student film — my own first independent short film, called *The Drive*. I was still a VP at the studio when I did that... I made it on the weekends. I just

as a VP at the studio you should probably stick with that, and probably shouldn't spend your time making a short film. But by doing *The Drive* it let me know that it's always okay to reinvent yourself, it's always okay to dream, and it's always okay to just go for it. So I think that it kind of revitalized my belief that as a producer you're not limited. I direct; I do a lot of things. But I feel the producer is the driver. Without the organizational skill, it doesn't happen. When I finished *The Drive*, I knew that anything I wanted to do, I could at least try.

So how did you find your way from *The Drive* to *The Amazing Race*?

After I left Disney I went into scripted TV. I worked as a producer and director for the scripted series *The Jersey*, for the Disney channel. My next big project was a pair of reality

specials for the Discovery channel, which was an eco-challenge race; it was *Discovery's World Championship* and it was in Switzerland. So I went to Switzerland and worked on that project as the supervising producer. I worked for Craig Piligian at Pilgrim Films; Craig had worked for us at Disney. That's another thing that I always like to remind people, you just never know; Craig had worked for us at Disney and I was now working for Craig. We really worked hard in producing this race to give it a reality feel, and make it up close and personal, where you really got to know the contestants/racers. I was flying home from this show when 9/11 happened, and I was unable to get back into the country. My flight was over Canada; we had been flying for six hours when they came on and told us the World Trade Center had been destroyed and we're like, "that can't be right." And then they said they were turning the plane around and going

back to Switzerland, and we thought, "Are you kidding?" We barely got there on fumes, and found out what had happened and it was just devastating. So I was one of those people that for eight days was trying to figure how to get back into the country. When I finally got back, I think that within 30 days



In Kuwait City, Kuwait

never, ever settled. There I was, a production executive, and I'm making a short film. It really solidified for me that if you have a dream, a desire, and a vision of a story, the first thing you have to do is recognize what it is you want to say, and then you have to just do it. You know, someone could say that





Maybe I missed that class, but no one told me that you couldn't do as many things as you found stimulating and exciting.

I was hired on *The Amazing Race*. They had finished the first season and decided to increase the staff, and they brought me in to work on the logistics side. That's where it began; it's kind of one of those things where you think you'll do it for a season or two and then it's 7½ years, 14 seasons later, seven Emmys, a PGA Award ... and one day you stop and you know you have been part of one of the most phenomenal production experiences ever.

So, how do you pull off a show like that?

It was amazing, because as a producer someone says to you, you're going to do the biggest, most challenging ... whether they wanna call it a game, or a competition, a study of social interaction ... whatever you want to call it, it's the biggest one, it's never been done, you have no models, and even though they had produced one season before, you have a whole new set of destinations. The phenomenal thing about *Amazing Race* is that every show is distinctly different. You've got *Bertram Van Munster*, and the show as he says, is basically an extension of his life. The only way you can make a show like *Race* is by having an executive producer who has traveled just about everywhere and seen even more. So you're sitting there trying not to run out the door because you know that you're about to do something that is probably way beyond your experience and it's going to take everything that you've learned to make it happen, and that's actually quite exciting.

So break it down for me. What are the first elements that you look for? Was it the cast? Figuring out the challenges?

The first thing we'd do is sit down with Bert. Because as I said, he's traveled more than anybody you will ever meet. He'll tell you, "We are going to Buenos Aires, and when we get there we are going to go down this alley where there is a music store. And there is going to be a guy there named

Pedro, and he is going to have a parrot on his shoulder." So you fly 5,000-plus miles, get off the plane, you get in the car, and you find yourself rushing up a street, then down an alley, up to a music store, and then — you guessed it — there is a



In Athens, Greece, near the area of the ancient Agora

guy there named Pedro with a parrot on his shoulder. It's unbelievable. And the guy still remembers Bert from years ago. So, first of all, you start with the map or course that he lays out, and then you have to start thinking, okay, what are the logistics of it? What are the challenges of it? What could go wrong? What can go right? And you try to find that balance between those wrongs and the rights. Now keep in mind, once we design the course, we never touch it. So after the teams take off, we are as much participants in *The Amazing Race* as they are. Trust me, you are *in it*. I'll never forget my very first one. I trained, I practiced, I traveled, I was ready. We were in Brazil and I had gotten off the plane, ahead of the teams and I was thinking, okay, here we go, it's getting ready to happen. Then, the teams got off the plane, 12 teams with their camera

crews, 48 people with gear and equipment, and they are running at you, and they are jumping over carts and jumping into cabs, and rushing so fast that your hair blows back, barreling down the street and then you suddenly realize: *you're behind them*. That's what the race is about, realizing that this thing is moving faster than you, and you better figure out a way to get in front of them, because they don't care that you're behind them! Their job is to win the race, and my job is to make a TV show.

So how do you anticipate that? How do you regain that advantage?



In the streets in Salvador, Brazil

You go through the course. And you go “what if?” and then you go “what if?” again and again. Actually there is a term for that, known as “Screeching it.” People haven’t used it to my face, but I have heard it. *[laughs]* When a producer comes to me and says this is what we are doing, this is where we are going, etc., then it’s my job to say okay, did you do this? Did you check that? Did you check in there? What if the door opens the other way? What if the taxis don’t come? It’s a relentless list of stuff. In foreign countries things are just different, things change and sometimes you get there and they forgot to tell you, or maybe they aren’t going to tell you, because the world doesn’t run on your production schedule. The world

runs on its own and you need to figure out your production schedule around it ... so there is no limit to the amount of things you need to check, because when those teams go, they are gone. Their job is to win the race and that can keep you off balance. They don’t do it intentionally. It’s not their motivation. But when they’re trying to win that race, everything that you’ve been planning for, they are working against.

Is there any sort of interaction between the crew and racers?

The rule is that you don’t talk to the teams. I would sometimes have to talk to them because I was the officiator of the rules, so at the end of the course when it came time for eliminations,

if there were any questions because of a fairness issue, sometimes I would step in. But on the course you have to try to be invisible. When they get to a location, it should be a real experience. If they see me standing around and they see the medic standing around, it tells them that they’re okay, and it breaks the magic. *The Amazing Race* is magic ... when they get in the cab and the driver is crazy, when they run into a place and the clue says to eat a fish head, and there is no one in there but the owner, and they’re wondering, “Do I eat *this* fish head...?” that’s the magic. If we were standing around saying oh, yeah, you’re supposed to eat *those* fish heads, there’s no magic. The magic is that they have a true-life experience running a race

around the world. If I hear viewers say, “I never see a camera, I never see a boom,” that means we had a good day.

How do you work to make each season different?

The key is you don’t try to create challenges; you look at the way people live around the world. You may go to a place and see a person with a goat and their belongings strapped on a bicycle ... that’s how they travel. You see people with huge baskets on their heads. That’s where the challenges come from ... because we think, wow, look at what they do. It’s organic, which means you’ll never run out of challenges, because culture is organic. If you go in with the view that,





FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

BEST PICTURE
PRODUCED BY
DAVID HEYMAN DAVID BARRON

"The film is captivating from the first frame
and the story unfolds in a stately and unhurried fashion
with nuanced performances and witty dialogue."

Claudia Puig, USA Today

Harry Potter
AND THE
HALF-BLOOD
PRINCE

HEYDAY FILMS

www.WARNERBROS2009.COM



This thing is moving faster than you, and you better figure out a way to get in front of them, because they don't care that you're behind them! Their job is to win the race, and my job is to make a TV show.

"Let the world teach me the way it lives," you'll never run out of events. Sure, you have to make some rules: Is it fair? Can a little woman do it versus a big guy? But it starts with a rice

who works on *Race* is an artist in their field. You have to have a love for it. When you're freezing because the contestants are outside you can't say, "I don't want to do this." But I think



Washington (far left) directing *The Drive*

paddy; it starts with a guy with a water buffalo plowing his field. That's the magic of the show; the world is the magic, and we just stand back and let it unfold.

It really does have a seamless kind of feel, the way it functions as both a game and travelogue.

And it's shot so well. Our camera guys and audio guys are true artists. They're not just covering the action, but they are doing it on trains, planes, sleeping outdoors and working in crowded cities. When you see those shots, that's because everybody

that it's in the hardest moments when the best comes out, and that goes for both the contestants and crew, which includes an entire team of story producers.

How do you work with your story producers?

Principally by making sure that the information gets to them, and that there is clear communication. We're constantly observing story points or meltdowns, to give them a heads-up so that they can cover it. Often, it's as simple as getting them to where they need to be, making sure they are there getting



their front-row seat so they are seeing what they need to see. It's just as challenging getting them around, even though they come secondary to the teams. Like I said, you have no idea the amount of detail it takes, whether it be tracking the race or figuring out the logistics of it. It varies depending on the number of episodes we produce, but it takes about 2,000 or more people worldwide to do a race; the teams, crew, production staff, post, and the list goes on. It's a book. It's definitely a book or a movie, someday.

Apart from *The Amazing Race*, what else have you been following?

In the midst of doing *Amazing Race*, that's when I did my second scripted series, *Phil of the Future*; we had a stretch in *Race*, where we did not get our series picked up right away, so I had some downtime there. I went away and helped set that series up, which gave me a chance to get back into scripted TV. So in the midst of one of the largest reality shows ever, I got a chance to switch gears and do a children's series about a family from the future. So now, I'm done with *Race*, and it's a maze of so many really exciting new possibilities, with new media. Everything is changing; it's not that there are so many new ideas, but there are so many new ways to approach production. In order to be successful now, you've got to really go back to your knowledge of how to get things done, and get them done efficiently. For me, coming off of *Race* ... the show taught me discipline and perseverance, which is critical, and that foresight is mandatory. If you don't pay attention to the changes in today's broadcast and its possibilities, and platforms, and how you can get that show done in an efficient way, it's going to be hard.

How do you approach your projects today, as opposed to earlier in your career?

I look at it differently. A show is no longer one-dimensional, it has multiple layers; you have Web components, voting, audience participation. A show on the Web can get so popular that it gets picked up by network or cable, and may even stimulate a line of products. I think you have to be open to all these possibilities; you can't just want to make a show and put it on the networks. I think you've got to be ready to go in at any entry point and think about how it can work on all platforms.

It's like another version of *The Amazing Race*, with all of these variables to take into account...

Everything is moving so fast. To give an example, think about mail, the fax machine, and the Internet. We used to have to be patient and wait for a day to get something via Fed Ex. Then we became impatient when a fax would take a few hours. Now someone sends you something via email and 30 seconds later asks, "Why haven't you responded to it yet?" So that is how fast our production platforms and distribution platforms are changing. First of all, it started out with me realizing that the diverse platforms of new media are things that, as a producer, I need to learn as much about as I can. When I'm watching TV, I am thinking, "What is the younger viewer looking at now?" Because they will be my demo tomorrow. Especially within the context of the PGA, I talk to the new media producers, because I need them to educate me on where I'm headed, and hopefully I'm educating them too. We all know that at some point, what we consider new media today, will soon simply be thought of as *our* media. 📺

"An exquisitely done, emotional love story that marries heartbreaking passion to formidable filmmaking."

-Kenneth Turan, *Los Angeles Times*



"Scrupulously well-crafted."

-Michael Phillips,
Chicago Tribune

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

BEST PICTURE
PRODUCED BY

JAN CHAPMAN CAROLINE HEWITT

A JANE CAMPION FILM

Bright Star

BRIGHTSTAR-MOVIE.COM
APPARITIONSCREENINGS.COM

APPARITION
© 2009 APPARITION LLC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.