

George R. R. Martin on Writing TV's '*Beauty and the Beast*': "It Was Such a Smart Show"

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In a rare interview, the '*Game of Thrones*' creator reminisces about the cult fantasy series that launched his career: "Vincent was a classic, Romantic, Byronic hero. Being able to bring that to television and a mass audience was great."

Before *Beauty and the Beast* became a Ziegfeld-esque folly of dancing silverware in a 1991 Disney animated feature — now a blockbuster live-action adaptation — it captivated adults as a 1987 CBS fantasy-romance series.

The show, which drew inspiration from Jean Cocteau's 1946 classic *La Belle et la Bête*, envisioned the tale unfolding in modern-day Manhattan, where our beauty is Catherine Chandler (The Terminator's Linda Hamilton), a lawyer savagely attacked in Central Park and left to die. She is rescued by the lion-faced Vincent (Ron Perlman) — a sensitive, literate soul with savage tendencies — who inhabits a rich subterranean world located miles beneath Fifth Avenue.

Beast, which lasted two and a half seasons before Hamilton's exit led to its cancellation, was created by Ron Koslow (he went on to create the short-lived vampire romance *Moonlight* for CBS in 2007). Among the show's writing staff were a trio of green writers who would go on to some major things: *Game of Thrones* creator George R. R. Martin, and Howard Gordon and Alex Gansa, the duo behind *24* and *Homeland*.

Martin is currently working on the final volumes of the enormously popular fantasy novel series that inspired HBO's *Game of Thrones*, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, and so interviews with him are rarely granted. But for *Beauty and the Beast* — a project he is deeply fond and proud of — he made an exception.

Q: How did you get hired on *Beauty and the Beast*?

A: I'd been on *Twilight Zone* beforehand. That was the first show I had worked on — a CBS revival that ran from 1985 to 1986. I did five scripts for that, and when *Beauty and the Beast* was staffing up my agent submitted my materials and they liked them. I had an interview and next thing I know they hired me to join the staff. I was with it for all three seasons.

Q: So this was your first experience writing for a non-anthology series.

A: Well, I did a little work writing for *Max Headroom* [ABC, 1987], although I wasn't on the staff.

Q: Do you have positive associations with the series?

A: Sure. I loved the show. Like any show there were high points and low points, but for the most part it was a great show to work on. I learned a lot. I like to think I contributed a lot. We were nominated for a bunch of Emmys. It was a good show. I'm proud of my association with it.

Q: Take me back to the writers room. What was the team trying to achieve with the series?

A: It was a modern retelling of the *Beauty and the Beast* myth. Ron Koslow was the creator of the show, and it was his idea to set it in contemporary New York City. Ron was fond of saying that New York City is “a mythic place.” Its powers and its lights. When you step back from it and look at it from a distance there’s a magical aspect to New York itself.

He wrote the first script and it was made into a pilot. We got Ron Perlman and Linda Hamilton — an amazing cast to start with. I think it surprised everybody. Everyone said, “Well this is a great pilot script, but it’s such a weird concept. It will never get picked up to series.” But it did.

Q: Did any of your world-building in *Beauty* contribute to *Game of Thrones*?

A: Not directly. They are very different shows. I think the experience I gained while working on *Beauty and the Beast* served me in good stead when I did later work, including *Game of Thrones*. But I don’t think there’s any direct connection between the two, no.

I’ve always written fantasy. My entire career, which started in magazines and books in the early ‘70s, was largely in the field of fantasy and science fiction. That kind of material just appeals to me — imaginative literature.

Q: Did you ever find that CBS was constraining of your vision at all?

A: Well, certainly working for HBO in 2017 is a vastly different experience than working for CBS in 1988. Network TV had a lot of strictures. We had standards and practices reviewing all the scripts and giving us notes and counting the number of times someone said a naughty word. Certainly we had to be very careful of anything approaching sexuality or even anything that was too scary or horrific or so forth. That was all a factor — but we knew that going in.

It’s somewhat different today, but it’s not all that different. You accept the constraints of the form when you’re a writer-producer in television. Just as when you’re a poet writing a sonnet, you know the rules of the sonnet and you obey them — and when you’re writing for the rules of network TV you write for those. Not to say that we weren’t always trying to push the envelope — but the envelope would push back.

Q: What can you tell me about the final season of the show and its cancellation?

A: Well, Linda Hamilton left the show. I think Linda was as surprised as anybody when the show got picked up. Everybody agreed it was a beautiful pilot but, as I said, they didn’t expect it to go. We were not a megahit but we were a pretty popular show. We were winning our time slot in the first season. But I think Linda wanted to get back to doing films, and she also wanted a child. I won’t go into all the legalities of contracts and things like that, but when the opportunity came to leave the show, she left the show.

Q: Which puts you in a difficult situation.

A: We had a decision to make which was not of our choosing: We could either recast the part of Catherine Chandler with another actress; or we could write Catherine Chandler out of the show by killing her, which is what we chose to do; or we could come up with an alternative,

like suddenly she had to move to Australia. We actually considered the moving to Australia thing, but that seemed like a feeble ending for a tragic love story. "I'm sorry. I said I'd love you for all time, but now I have a good job opportunity in Melbourne." So that would not have worked. Our choice was really between recasting and death, and we chose death because that was inherently more dramatic.

Basically I look back on it now and think we were in a no-win situation. I think we did some very fine work in the third season, but the core of the show was the romance. It was Vincent and Catherine. We brought in a new Beauty in the person of Jo Anderson, who was a wonderful actress in the part of Diana Bennett. She was great to work with. But you can't do two seasons of telling the world, "This is a love story for the ages, this is Romeo and Juliet," and then suddenly third seasons say, "Juliet? Forget Juliet. It's Romeo and Harriet. Here's a different love story for the ages!" So that didn't work. When the love story stopped, our core audience left. If Linda had not left the show we could have gone for five years at least.

Q: I'd read that your disappointing experiences writing for TV is what led you into novel writing and *Game of Thrones*, but it sounds to me as though you had a really positive experience on this show.

A: I did. Yes, I did. As I said there were bad times. Certainly the way it ended is not how I would have picked. But we had an amazing cast to write for. Certainly Linda Hamilton is a wonderful actress. Roy Dotrice, who played Father, has done all the narration on the *Game of Thrones* audiobooks. He's a fantastic actor. And of course Ron Perlman. Working with Ron Perlman was one of the great pleasures of my life. He was just a joy to write for.

Q: Who was your favorite to write for?

A: A lot of my own contribution to the show was the people of the Underground — the secondary and tertiary characters. People like Mouse and Winslow and all of the mythic caverns — the Chamber of Whispers and the Chamber of Mists and things like that.

You know, there is a real underground in New York. There is a basis in reality for the show. But it consists largely of steam tunnels and subways and sewer lines. There are really no gigantic caverns with waterfalls or mysterious underground rivers. That was my doing, me exercising my fantasy.

Q: And what about Howard Gordon and Alex Gansa?

A: "The lads" we called them. They were just starting out in the business. They've both gone on to become big deals since. It was a great writing staff.

Q: And so your frustrations writing for TV came later?

A: After *Beauty and the Beast*, I had reached a position in the industry where I was doing pilots and features and development. There's a reason they call it "development hell." Working on *Beauty and the Beast* and *Twilight Zone*, you wrote a script, you rewrote it a few times and suddenly it was being filmed and millions of people watched it. That's far more satisfying than spending a year developing a pilot only not to make the show.

Q: The show has a devoted cult following. What do you think draws them to it 30 years later?

A: It was such a literate show and such a smart show. Vincent may have been a beast, but he was highly read and always fond of quoting poetry and citing Shakespeare and dropping in a sonnet from one poet or another. That had an enormous effect. We would get letters from librarians across the country about all the people who would come into the libraries on Monday after we'd aired on Friday saying, "What was that poem Vincent read?" They were going back to Shakespeare.

I was able to do an episode called "*Ozymandias*" where we had Ron Perlman read the entirety of the poem by Shelley. To be able to do that kind of thing was amazing, to work in some of the classics of English literature that way. Vincent was an intellectual who loved words and stories and poems. He was not, by that reason, like a geek or a figure the other characters made fun of, but was in fact a classic, Romantic, Byronic hero. Being able to bring that to television, to a mass audience, was great.

Q: The production values were also pretty ambitious for the time.

A: It was a gorgeous-looking show. There was a beautiful, lush look to the whole Underground world. By the standards of 2017, television has come so far in terms of its cinematography and its look. But if you compare *Beauty and the Beast* from 1988 in terms of the other shows that were on, the photography was so lush, the sets and costumes, the Beast makeup created by Rick Baker — it took Ron four hours to get in and out of it. You could stand next to him at the craft services and not tell he was even wearing makeup, it was so brilliantly done.