



If you are a fan of 'Night Shift,' that's all Sri Rao wrote, folks! Well, until next year...

So who wants to clone Sri Rao?

By Nelson Branco

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Head writer Sri Rao revived the real 'General Hospital' on 'Night Shift' this summer. Now that the series is about to flatline, will Rao join the mother ship?

Critics and fans bemoan the fact that there is no new blood in daytime. This past summer, ABC Daytime president Brian Frons took a chance on writer-director newcomer Sri Rao by giving him

the reins to the *General Hospital* spinoff, *Night Shift*.

Immediately, Rao refocused his weekly stories around the legendary hospital, penning emotional and physical journeys for veteran characters, bringing back iconic stars to the canvas, crafting romantic love stories, and introducing a gay couple and an Indian doctor.

But very few people know who exactly Rao is, so TVGuide.ca decided to meet the man who gave ABC fans back their *General Hospital* without relying on any gimmicks and bells and whistles.

TVGuide.ca: First question – who the hell is Sri Rao?

Sri Rao: I'm a simple boy from Pennsylvania! [Laughs.] I live in New York City. I own a production company [Sri & Company Inc.] as a film writer and director. I did an independent pilot, which was seen by The N, and they later ordered a series that I created titled *What Goes On*, about five teenagers growing up in a suburban neighborhood. It hasn't aired yet, but after ABC saw the series, they approached me to head-write *Night Shift*.

TVG: That must have been some pilot, mister!

SR: I guess it was. My favourite show of all time was *My So Called Life*, so writing a teen series was right up my alley. I'm also a big fan of the Canadian series *Degrassi: The Next Generation*.

TVG: I think I've heard of the show.

SR: *Degrassi* is a groundbreaking show in every sense of the word. I think I even wrote Linda Schuyler [*Degrassi's* co-creator and executive producer] a fan letter once. That's how I first found out about The N. After watching *Degrassi*, I approached The N with my series. I have a fondness in my heart for *Degrassi*.

TVG: Are you a soap fan? You clearly understand the genre.

SR: I grew up on *General Hospital*. It is the show I've watched the most in my life. I started watching at eight years old, and religiously tuned in for 15 years. In recent years, I've drifted in and out, but I always kept tabs on it.

When ABC approached me, I was surprised, because this gig wasn't something I sought out. I never considered writing for daytime TV, but when they called, it was perfect. It really was a dream come true. As a fan, it's like being given the keys to the candy store. I think every fan head-writes a soap in their head at one point or another. And I actually got to do it. It was a huge thrill. And a lot of fun.

TVG: The show ends next week.

SR: It's bittersweet. At the same time, I'm really proud of the stories we told and the journeys our characters embarked on. I got to tell the stories I wanted to tell. The whole experience ended on a good note for me.

TVG: From my couch, it looked like SoapNet/ABC gave you autonomy. Is that true? Because that's a very rare luxury these days.

SR: Yeah, they did. And yes, I know that's not often the case. The network has been amazing. They gave me the flexibility I needed. Also, their notes were really constructive. And I'm not blowing smoke up your a--. To a large extent, if you don't feel like the network supports you, it shows in the work. My creative process was never hindered at any point.

TVG: Everyone wants to know if you're joining the *GH* writing staff.

SR: I don't know what I'm doing next. My production company is working on a Bollywood movie project, so that's taking up a lot of my time. But I really need to take time off during Thanksgiving and the holidays. I think it's important for any artist to regenerate and re-fill the well.

I love scripted and reality TV, but I think a writer's well can run dry very quickly because of the pace of the medium. The key, at least for me, is to live your life so you have stories to tell. I realize that more than ever before with *Night Shift*. The stories I told, that I think turned out the best, were the personal ones I told.

TVG: Can you give me an example of one of those personal stories? I'm assuming one of them has to be the Robert's hit colon cancer thread ...

SR: Writing for Robert and Anna has been a dream come true. Last week, we aired a scene where Anna climbs into Robert's hospital bed. Anna confesses she always thought that after they completed their last mission they'd reunite. That scene is my proudest moment on *Night Shift*. Not only do they have great chemistry together but they also have such rich history.

There's one particular moment where Robert says, 'I love you.' Finola Hughes covers her face because she starts crying. It was amazing. When Robert says, 'I love you, Anna Devane,' it was the one thing she has been waiting her whole life to hear. In a way, she's this amazing, powerful woman, but we have all those moments which sum up our whole life.

To me, that line summed up Anna's life. Everything has been about Anna and Robert. It was

painful, joyful and overwhelming to watch and write. Yes, the line I wrote was simple, so it had more to do with the acting, but it reminded me of the past *GH* I fell in love with. Remember when Felicia learned Maxie's heart came from BJ?

TVG: Yes!

SR: That moment when Felicia looks at Bobbie and without a word realizes Maxie is alive and BJ is dead and falls to the ground ... Wow. That kind of stuff is what daytime TV does better than anyone else. The only reason why those scenes work is because there is so much history on these shows.

TVG: When the writers in charge aren't busy destroying the show's legacy. Would you join *GH*?

SR: [Takes a beat.] I don't think I can do the pace of daytime. *Night Shift* is a daytime hybrid. *Night Shift* aired one day a week. I look at what they do over at *GH* and I'm just in awe of it. No hiatus after five episodes a week a year. It's insane! I don't know how they do it. My hat is off to everyone who works on soaps. I just don't work that quickly.

TVG: There's only one thing more dangerous than a sexy Italian man, and that's a blond Italian man! I love the 'Eric and Kyle' love story because it's not a message or platform plot. Was ABC hesitant at all when you pitched the story?

SR: The network didn't blink. At all. During my first interview with ABC President Brian Frons, I pitched him the stories I wanted to tell. I said, 'I want to bring back Jagger, Robert, and Anna. And I want to bring in a gay and Indian doctor.' It was never an issue. So, it's a testament to how far soaps have come.

TVG: Your appointment is really groundbreaking. Actually, it's unheard of, to be blunt. Not only are you an 'unproven,' young talent, but the network also allowed you free reign. I may have to put Brian Frons back on my Christmas card list.

SR: I know! I guess it is unheard of. I'm not going to question it though! [Laughs.] I don't know why ... but they have given me autonomy.

TVG: Are any of your characters like Eric, Kyle, and Claire moving over to the mother ship?

SR: I don't know. It's all up to [head writer] Bob Guza. The Kyle character is very close to my heart. *GH* has been on the air for over 45 years. I couldn't believe there hasn't been any Indian or gay doctor until now. The Lucas coming-out-story... well, it was a secondary storyline at best. I love what Adam Grimes has done with the storyline as Kyle.

TVG: Me, too. But Kyle needs a haircut badly! [Laughs.] I love the webisode with Patrick, Claire and Kyle in bed together! So cute and funny ...

SR: [Laughs.] I know, right! It was so cute. They did a great job with the webisodes. One of my scriptwriters, Tamar Laddy, wrote them and did all the medical research for our stories. She's also new to the medium, but has loads of talent.

TVG: How many writers were working underneath you? And did you get to handpick your writing staff?

SR: Seven — and yes, I did.

TVG: Some fans have renamed *Night Shift* to *Grey's Anatomy Lite*.

SR: Yes, I know. I did take direction from *Grey's* tonally because it showed me that it's possible to make a medical drama that is fun and dramatic at the same time. But the comparisons about individual storylines are not fair [most specifically, the white supremacist storyline and the kidney donor storyline], because I don't even watch *Grey's* regularly.

The fact of the matter is, there have been thousands of hours of medical dramas on television and it's inevitable that some stories we tell will have been told before — just as, I am sure, there are *Grey's* stories which had previously been told on *ER* which had previously been told on *St. Elsewhere*, and on and on ...

TVG: How old are you?

SR: I'm in my early thirties.

TVG: When did you realize you were a writer?

SR: Five years old. I wrote, cast and directed my first play at five. I still have my script on my three-line paper script. My parents wanted me to have a degree to fall back on though, so I went to Worton and was a business major. However, I had a quarter-life crisis at 24, and ultimately pursued my dream full-time by giving up a great-paying corporate gig. You need to lead an authentic life whether 'success' is a part of the picture or not.

TVG: I believe if you live your life authentically, success is a byproduct.

SR: Yes, it is. In all aspects of your life. From being true to your sexuality to following your professional path.

TVG: Did you have any soap writing idols growing up?

SR: No, but my TV idols are Marshall Herskovitz and Edward Zwick from *thirtysomething* and *Once and Again*. They taught me that you can write dialogue that is intensely realistic and normal and by doing so be immensely powerful.

TVG: Soap fans really watch for those little moments. They are the big moments, really.

SR: Let me ask you a question: how do you feel people are responding to Kyle and Eric?

TVG: Well, I think they're a hit. The only problem with Kyle and Eric is viewers have a hard time investing in a character or storyline in soaps when they know it's only going to last for three episodes.

SR: Right. Chad re-sign for one more episode.

TVG: *GH* would be smart to absorb Eric and Kyle, especially with Nuke on *As The World Turns* simmering on the backburner. Chad Allen told me he'd consider traversing over to *GH*.

SR: Oh, he did?

TVG: Yep. Maybe *GH* could hire you just to write Eric and Kyle's storyline. Or the whole show ...

SR: [Laughs.] Um, it's interesting. I really enjoy and get excited writing their story.

TVG: Do you think the future of daytime will end up as short-term nighttime series on SoapNet?

SR: Honestly, I don't know if it's possible to hook a 16-year-old or a 24-year-old into a show at 2 in the afternoon anymore. We watched them back in the day because of our families. I think networks are trying to win that losing battle.

But if you change the fight or the battle, it may turn in their favour. Let's go after the older viewers. That may be what we've demonstrated on *Night Shift*. There is a segment of the audience to cater to and really grow. By bringing in Robert and Anna, and refocusing on Patrick and Robin, we hoped to reinvest in our loyal audience.

I think by combining history and legacy characters with [postmodern] new characters, we really invigorated the core characters and brought in some new viewers. That could be a partial solution to daytime's problem.

TVG: Not respecting the soap's history chased away veteran viewers who wielded the sole power to hook in their offspring. It was akin to biting your nose to spite your face. That's one of the reasons daytime's death knell rung so early. Which is why when I learned you were bringing in Sean and Tiffany, of all characters, I knew immediately you were a GH fan. You weren't Googling GH at 3 a.m.!

SR: Totally! My mother tuned out when all these teenagers infiltrated Port Charles. And it certainly tuned me out as a young viewer. I haven't seen the data, but I doubt they attracted any new viewers.

TVG: Um, no they didn't. It's a proven fact that younger viewers prefer watching The Quartermaines not the Spinellis.

SR: From a writing story point, it's so much easier writing for Anna and Robert than these newbies who are three-weeks-old.

TVG: What's your relationship with GH head writer Bob Guza like?

SR: Bob has been very gracious and I have nothing bad to say about him. I know he gets a lot of crap on the Internet. I don't know what that's all about. *Night Shift* was his show, but he couldn't do both soaps, so he was very gracious to give up *NS*. Bob offered to be there for me in terms of talking things out and/or correlating stories and characters. And that's the God damn honest truth.

TVG: Finally, critics and fans are scared you may kill off Robert Scorpio next week. Don't spoil anything, but I have to admit I have no fingernails left after worrying he could be dead soon. I've finally really fallen in love with Robert. I'm simply gaga over Tristan Rogers' revelatory performance.

SR: Well, thank you — that's the greatest compliment I could receive. I want the audience to worry. You'll have to tune in to find out ...

TVG: Sounds like the old days again.

Want to dish the soaps with Nelson Branco? Join The Suds Report discussion group today on Facebook.com.



Nelson Branco is a Toronto freelance entertainment journalist, who regularly contributes to *Hello! Canada*, *The National Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*' theenvelope.com, *TV Guide USA*, *tvguide.com*, *Inside Entertainment*, *OUT*, and *fab* magazine, along with spearheading the soap coverage for TVGuide.ca's popular daytime TV hub. After graduating from Ryerson University in 1997, he moved from Toronto to New York in 1998 to take on the roles as senior news editor at *Soap Opera Update*. Branco first freelanced for *Soap Opera Weekly* as an intern in 1994, and after leaving *Soap Update* to help create and launch Bauer Publishing's *In Touch Weekly* in 2003, Branco continued to freelance occasionally for its sister publication, *Soaps In Depth*. Most recently, he helped create and launch Canada's first celebrity magazine, *Weekly Scoop* in 2005 as its news and entertainment director. Branco is also a contributor to a new TV show titled *Planet Soap* to air in Canada and America.