

This Week In Web Videos: 'With Friends Like These'

by Luke Kelly-Clyne | June 26th, 2014



The digital age of entertainment is no longer “on the horizon” or “about to break” or whatever other stupid phrase any number of automaton trends bloggers vomited out over the past three years. It’s here. Ask Reed Hastings, ask Kevin Spacey, ask Jeff Bezos, and... Mr. Hulu. We no longer watch TV. We watch content. That means two important things. First, the term “web series” is useless. Second, we, as independent producers, have to start upping our game. Created by and starring Christopher Graves and TJ Del Reno, *With Friends Like These* is an interesting foray into the world of intricately narrative, highly produced content built for a new generation of video.

What’s your comedy background?

Christopher: I’ve been a commercial and voice actor for a couple of years and I started doing comedy with TJ Del Reno, a buddy who went through all of the training at UCB with me. We had done a little bit of writing here and there but decided that we really wanted to work on a project together and play off of our crazy opposite lives. So we kind of made so jokes about that and that eventually lead to this project.

What were your specific inspirations for the series?

Christopher: We would go out to places and his outlook is kind of a very unpolished, goof ball kind of, and I come from a background that’s a bit more prepared, a bit more PC. So we would run into a lot of different experiences like going to the movies together and almost getting into fights with someone because he’s mad that they’re talking too loud or they brought food in or something like that. So we thought that it would be a funny dynamic to write something like that that was a little deeper than just a two or three minute sketch. Like he grew up as a scrappy mall rat and I’m from Texas and grew up with a completely different background, so we decided to throw those two together. Sometimes I’m the hero of an episode, but then sometimes his goofiness randomly saves the day.

What's your writing process like?

Christopher: We get together and brainstorm and sort of storyboard out the general idea. We come up with a broad scenario that we think is funny and we try to make sure there are a couple of different layers in each episode. We do episodes a little bit longer than the typical web series because we try to have multiple storylines. We start out with trying to figure out what the episode is going to be about, then we try to find a way to get there and kind of improvise together in my apartment, taking notes of everything we're doing. Then I write the full episode on my own and then we put it on the television and read it together and weigh in on it to see if it actually sounds like it's his voice and my voice coming through.

Very thorough.

Christopher: Yeah, it's very important to really go over it and make sure it is in everyone's voice that you are writing for.

That's difficult when it's only coming from one set of fingertips.

Christopher: That's the thing that I actually like about writing alone. I find when you write with a group of people, you kind of end up with something that feels watered down as opposed to getting everyone's opinions on something and then going off and writing it. I think that it stays more consistent. I find that sometimes, even if two people are writing funny banter that would be really funny if it was just off the cuff, when you write it down, it can become really de-fanged. I think it's best to let one person or one voice do it.

Do you think that dilution happens because everyone wants to hear their own voices?

Christopher: I think it's two-fold. I think there's always going to be a level of ego involved. You wouldn't be a performer or a writer if you didn't feel like you had something to say. I think, in good partnerships, you can check each other's egos and make sure nothing goes wrong. I also think there are more people who enjoy comedy or who have ideas about comedy than there are people who can actually watch or read something comedic and build on that in a way that is good.

What's next for this series?

Christopher: We want to do a second season of this where we take TJ and myself out of the office more, going to more adventurous places.

Were you at all apprehensive about making the series significantly longer than most on the Internet?

Christopher: TJ and I have both had success in the voice over and commercial acting world but there's not a lot of control over that and, in doing this, we wanted to be able to control the environment, to make a really good product [regardless of length]. That's how we looked at it initially. To me, 10 minutes is about the amount of time I would spend binging on a short film and that's kind of the angle that I came at this with. Making a web series that has the production quality and feel of a short film.

People will watch a good short.

Christopher: We definitely have people watching it and I really wanted people in the first three episodes to see an arc before we started going off into really crazy places. But the question was "Would we have an audience that was patient enough to wait for that payoff?" And, to be honest, I don't really care about that shit. I just really want to make a good product and something that I would be proud of and I would want to see.

What advice do you have for creators looking to break into digital comedy?

Christopher: Planning is huge. Pre-production, pre-production, pre-production. Often times in our production, we do a read through and we'll do a pre-production meeting and then we'll have an actual rehearsal before we go to the actual shoot. When you pre-plan it all out, it can make having to do multiple days of filming less stressful.

What was your budget for this series?

Christopher: Budget was around \$16,000.

Did you guys Kickstarter it or use your personal cash?

Christopher: It's personal. I didn't really want to ask people to help pay for this until I was able to show them that it was actually a good product. When I go into a second season, I'll definitely try to get some funding from the corporate world, I have some connections there, but I wanted to initially show that I was willing to put my money behind the product and, so far, I'm really satisfied with it.

Here are your three reasons to watch.

1. Christopher Graves

Watching Christopher Graves is a pleasure. He nails subtle moments of dramedy in a way that so few actors can. We'll likely see more of him because of it.

2. Production value

With Friends Like These looks and feels like a TV show. That's important now that it and series like it are directly competing with actual TV shows on millions of little screens, clenched by the fickle hands of the tablet-toting masses.

3. Female characters

The women in this series made me laugh out loud. It's refreshing to see delicate consideration go into casting supporting female characters.

Luke is a writer for CollegeHumor and a watcher of many web videos. Send him yours @LKellyClyne.