



David Collins

REALITY GETS 'SCOUT-IFIED'

THE PIONEERING COMPANY BEHIND *QUEER EYE* FOR THE STRAIGHT GUY AND *LEGENDARY* CONJURES THE MAGIC BEHIND THE MARGINALIZED.

WRITTEN BY ROBERT ABELE



Renata Lombardo



Rob Eric



Queer Eye for the Straight Guy's latest Fab Five

Where stars are born, producers often are, too. In 2003, when Scout Productions cofounder David Collins was in New York trying to get his big bold reality idea *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* into pilot shape, he was staying at the apartment of Carson Kressley, one of Collins' audition finds. Collins hoped Kressley would become a gay superhero—one of five such makeover specialists—for viewers energized by this burgeoning TV genre highlighting real people.

But on those New York trips, every time Collins started airing his grievances about producing the show, Kressley's art school-educated roommate would roll his eyes, implying that he knew how to fix it. As in: "Well, if you'd just hired me...." The roommate, who had his own design company and skin care line, had also auditioned for the show, but didn't

make the Fab Five.

Ultimately Collins picked up on the fact that the roommate, Rob Eric, was "a creative renaissance genius," and born to be a producer on the culturally ground-shifting, award-winning smash.

Today Eric and Collins can laugh about the lemonade-from-lemons beginnings of their deep friendship. Eric now oversees creative strategy and artistic execution at Scout as its chief creative officer and is an executive producer on all the company's programs.

"It's beautiful how it's worked over 20 years," says Collins. He describes his and Eric's alchemy as the former's "passion and fire" meeting the latter's "creative prowess." Whatever project they throw their energy behind, "We always end up together in the middle holding our baby, and it looks half like him, half like me."

When it comes to *Queer Eye*, which was rebooted on Netflix in 2018 to even

more acclaim, awards, and cultural impact, Eric can extend the parenting metaphor. "We now have full-grown children we can be proud of," he says.

It's a professional partnership that has helped elevate the company Collins and Michael Williams cofounded in 1994 as a Boston-based film enterprise into an unscripted producing powerhouse. Among its successes: the voguing competition series *Legendary* and streetwear design contest *The Hype* on HBO Max, and the Disney+ fantasy competition series *The Quest*.

In the pipeline are upcoming series in the works at Peacock (*The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning* with Amy Poehler) and Hulu (a yet-to-be-announced dating show), plus a new documentary division that produced the gay rights history docuseries *Equal*. The latter has led to fertile partnerships with *Vanity Fair* and BuzzFeed.

Scout's cachet is considerable, but according to Collins, it requires diligence to prioritize the passion they need to make something more than a network's or streamer's desire to be in business with them.

"You can't sell it if you don't believe in it," he says. "I'm not 20 anymore. I no longer have it in me not to love something. I know what it takes to not only come up with the idea, but to develop it and get the sizzle reel, deck, and sales materials ready to pitch. And when they say yes, I know the amount of work to get it delivered to air. That's a two-year window of your time, right? It's a commitment. And we have ideas coming left and right. So in success, I think learning to say no has probably been our hardest lesson."

Eric says the producer in him makes it hard to dismiss an idea. "Don't show me a rope with a knot in it and think I'm not going to try to take that knot out of it!"

Even in the current climate of upheaval at the streamers, with layoffs and reorganizations and rethinking about programming, Scout isn't slowing down. Credit their established hits, solid relationships, and reputation for turning a concept into a visually dazzling, richly entertaining show. "If you've got money to spend on something," says Eric, "are you going to spend it on someone you don't know, or on somebody who will give 100% because you've worked with them before, and they made a mountain? What we're most proud of is people trust our aesthetic and our storytelling."

When *Legendary* was developed

at Scout, the idea was to celebrate what was magical about the ballroom world—the voguing balls, the spectacle, the performative invention, the closeness that distinguishes each house—rather than reinforce its history as a marginalized culture.

"It could quickly feel like we were stepping into something that wasn't ours if we didn't do it right," says Renata Lombardo, who brought *Legendary* to Scout before joining the company to develop it. Scout brought in representatives from the ballroom community, consulted with leading lights like Jack Mizrahi (*House of Gucci*) and Dashaun Wesley, asked what they'd like to see, and discovered that this was a culture ready for the grandest spotlight. "The community



Fashion stylist Law Roach serves as a judge on the voguing competition series *Legendary*.

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pushed us to think bigger.”

That meant instead of a docuseries, doing a glitzy, impeccably designed competition show in the style of a ratcheted-up *American Idol* or *The Voice*. And yet inside each glittery, music-filled hour of eye-popping fashion displays, choreographed dance-offs and wittily raucous judging—more than 17 cameras cover the stage action—there’s room for backstage moments and lively, poignant, pre-filmed interviews with each house. After the first season, filmed in a Connecticut studio for the tax breaks, HBO Max was happy enough with the response—especially how it exploded on social media—to let Scout move the production to Los Angeles.

Rob Eric says that with the success of *Legendary*, followed by *The Hype*—with its stylish focus on hot young

designers plus jazzed-up sizzle reels, project decks, and vision boards for pitch meetings—there’s now a term in the industry for what they do: *Scout-ified*. “When we push the aesthetics up with unscripted to make it bigger and better, that’s referred to as being Scout-ified,” says Eric. “The networks will call and say, ‘We have this idea; we need it to be Scout-ified.’”

That descriptor also refers to another key aspect of Scout’s producing identity: inclusiveness behind the scenes and in front of the camera. Collins knows Scout is seen as a gay outfit because of *Queer Eye*, but he prefers the term “omnicultural,” which to him suggests all communities. “People need to tell their stories,” he says. “That’s how we connect—when we see the humanity in each other.”

Lombardo, who is now Scout’s senior vice president in charge of unscripted programming, calls that omnicultural mindset a responsibility, and the industry has noticed. “I can’t tell you how many times people want to meet us because they’re like, ‘I want to understand how you guys got a show on the air for three seasons with a cast primarily of black, brown, queer and trans people.’”

Queer Eye and *Legendary* proved what happens when so-called niche is given the chance to reach a wider audience. “We’re making TV for the masses, not only for people to see themselves, but to be introduced to people, ideas and cultures they maybe haven’t been exposed to,” says Lombardo. “You can see the trickle effect. It starts a conversation.”

Adds Eric: “We will always push that. Is this voice being heard? Is that voice being heard? We will continue to be the company we’re proud of being because we represent ourselves, our world, our friends and our community, which is everybody.”

He recounts a talk he gave recently about their work in inclusivity, after which a woman asked what Scout was doing in the world of disabled programming. “I said, ‘You know what? Not enough.’ Now our team is working on that. It’s a reminder that we need to continue to grow.”

Where Scout is now couldn’t be more different than when Collins and Williams started it. But there is a through line that began when they produced Errol Morris documentaries, including the Oscar-winning *The Fog of War* (2011). That led to the short-lived doc series *First Person*, Scout’s first television sale.

That TV pivot proved fortuitous when one day Collins and Williams witnessed a group of sleekly dressed, champagne-drinking gay men swoop in on a public marital spat between an exasperated wife and her disheveled husband, whom they began sprucing up. A light bulb went off. Collins called

Khanh, Barth and
Knox on *The Hype*



the only executive he knew at the time —Bravo’s Frances Berwick, who’d bought *First Person*—and reality TV history, not to mention representational TV history, was made.

“Stories became our mission,” says Collins of how Scout has exploded since the *Queer Eye* reboot showed they could catch lightning in a bottle twice, then expand on it. “Transformation through information, told with comedy that has heart. We use that for everything.”

And that Scout-ifying emphasis on aesthetics? “If you’re going to blame us for being gay,” he quips, “blame us for having good taste!”

That taste extends to how to approach a decluttering show like *The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning*, based on Margareta Magnusson’s bestseller. The book focuses on helping families facing the loss of a loved one deal with their life’s belongings.

Knowing it would be a tough sell as a project, Scout sought Amy Poehler, and her Paper Kite shingle, as a producing partner. Poehler would also be the talent draw. She signed on to narrate each episode, ensuring the right mix of levity and emotion. They also did their due diligence in selecting whose lives to enter. They waited until Scout cofounder Michael Williams and the showrunner could visit each applicant personally to ensure their house looked like it did in pictures, and that they were who they said they were in Zoom interviews.

That personal attention not only strengthens the

connection between the production and the subjects, but gives a director like Ramy Romany—who had worked on *The Hype* and sought a similarly rich look for *Death Cleaning*—a heads-up on what to shoot. That way, the crew isn’t flying blind on filming days. They’re able to go inside people’s homes and get the artfully composed shots that give warmth and beauty to a show built around remembrance.

“Weeks of thought and preparation go into it,” says Lombardo. “We designate time to shoot beautiful intros. A lot of unscripted shows can’t prioritize that because they don’t have the resources. But we figure that out because it’s important to us.”

They also hired a showrunner, J.J. Duncan, who’d recently experienced her own major loss, ensuring a connection to the show’s healing spirit. “We knew the show was going to be in good hands,” says Lombardo. Sensitivity to the lives of the people they’re putting on camera is paramount, so across all their shows, their subjects are referred to as “heroes.”

“It’s a good way to remind producers, and all of us at Scout, that it’s about them. It’s their beginning, middle and end.”

In other words, everyone has a story, and Scout exists to give those people their life-affirming, brilliantly stylized due.

“Now it’s great to have all these platforms and to be creating premium content for those who aren’t scared to take big swings and tell stories that need to be out there.” ■