

Steering Arctic Air onto the CBC: Ian Weir



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"I think like almost all Canadians, I've always had the sense of the north as being a really powerful part of my mythological, archetypal vision of Canada," says Ian Weir, creator and exec producer of *Arctic Air*, which is set to debut on CBC Jan. 10.

"Whether one lives in the north or not, the whole sense of being Canadian, whether it be iconic images of Pierre Trudeau in buckskin, paddling down the northern river, something in there resonates really powerfully," he tells *Playback Daily*.

So it made sense to Weir to say yes when Michael Chechik and Gabriela Schonbach from Omni Film Productions approached him about a year-and-a-half ago to write a pilot for a drama series about the world of aviation, set in the north.

Omni is the prodco behind [Ice Pilots](#), the factual entertainment series about the professional lives of a group of pilots from Yellowknife-based Buffalo Airways. The show is three seasons in and won two Gemini Awards in 2011.

Omni had pitched the idea of a dramatic series that explored the overall theme of flying in the north to the CBC and, says Weir, had a very enthusiastic response.

Over the next few months, Weir got to work on a bible, creating the characters and writing the show's pilot, and says at the time, they were assuming the best case scenario would have been for CBC to order a pilot episode – until the timeline changed in April.

"I got a frantic phone call in the middle of April from Michael in San Tropez, of all places," says Weir. "He was meeting with the CBC brass in Cannes and they asked him – what if we just skipped the pilot entirely and jumped straight to a first-season order? Can we have the first season on the air in January?"

In short, Weir says in only a few weeks they assembled a team of five writers and "hit the ground writing." The 10-episode season began production in September and will wrap in early January 2012, which gave them a handful of months to write the episodes and assemble a cast and crew.

Weir says he thinks the CBC went straight to a first season order because of the potential for storytelling offered by the northern setting, and the potential to draw a wide audience. Kirstine Stewart told *Playback* in the [Winter 2011 issue](#) that the way to gain back viewership of Canadian shows is to "put on series that people would follow," and *Arctic Air*, says Weir, fits that mandate.

"The CBC responded very positively to the same thing that really drew me to it – the chance to do an action-adventure show, which is also a character-driven show, which also – without being overtly political – resonates with themes which really go right to the root of what it means to be Canadian," he says.

He adds that the northern canvas, with its "vast spaces", and the innate adventure of aviation, fulfill the network's need for a franchise that could be sustained beyond the first few stories, something they had wanted assurance on before picking up the show.

Another draw is that *Arctic Air* has [Adam Beach on board](#). Though CBC was on board before any cast had been assembled, Weir says, Beach, whose film career has been ramping up lately, with turns in *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006), *Cowboys & Aliens* (2010) and two movies in post for 2012, was everyone's "dream casting."

"Adam was the first person we approached," says Weir. "In my mind, Adam came on board as soon as I started writing the pilot. I don't always write with actors in mind, but in this particular case, Bobby Martel [Beach's character] sang of Adam Beach."

Weir says he discussed the obvious questions with Chechik and Schonbach – would Beach be available, and would he be interested in doing a TV series when he has a thriving movie career? His response was unexpected, and extremely positive.

"In fact," says Weir, "he said at this particular time in his life, he actually had been looking for a project that could bring him back home to Canada, a television project."

The production has presented some challenges, however. The crew is filming interiors in the lower mainland just outside Vancouver, has taken three trips to Yellowknife for exteriors, and will make one trip to the interior of B.C. in January to get some snow – flying all necessary cast and crew. Weir says this hasn't butchered the budget completely, because they were able to reduce the crew size when shooting in Yellowknife.

Arctic Air is produced by Omni Film Productions Ltd. in association with CBC and the participation of the Canada Media Fund, [Cogeco Production Development Fund](#), the Province of British Columbia Incentive BC and the Canadian Film and Video Production Tax Credit program.

The series is created by Ian Weir, and executive produced by Michael Chechik, Gabriela Schonbach, Ian Weir and Gary Harvey.

Tags: [Adam Beach](#), [Arctic Air](#), [Gabriela Schonbach](#), [Ian Weir](#), [Michael Chechik](#), [Omni Film Productions](#)