

➔ dramas *Narcos* and *Hotel Cocaine*, admits to a fondness for creating antiheroes. “It’s always fun to watch people who are willing to do the things you’re not willing to do,” he says.

After growing up in Teaneck, New Jersey, Brancato attended Brown University and then moved to Los Angeles in 1989, where he broke into TV writing with *Beverly Hills, 90210*. His writing credits include the films *Species II* and *Stealing Harvard* and the TV series *Boomtown*.

He was always drawn to dark crime dramas. “But in the ’90s and 2000s, you couldn’t get those shows on ABC or CBS,” he recalls. “It took the advent of the streamers and cable to allow for creation of those shows that were more to my taste.”

In 2014, producers José Padilha and Eric Newman hired Brancato as writer and showrunner for the first season of their Netflix series *Narcos*, which tracked the rise of Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar (Wagner Moura) and starred Boyd Holbrook and Pedro Pascal as the DEA agents trying to take him down.

Brancato acknowledges that the series’ heavy reliance on voiceover — from Holbrook’s agent Steve Murphy — gave it a *Goodfellas* vibe. “The voiceover and the loosey-goosey camera style made *Narcos* different from your run-of-the-mill drug show,” he says. Another twist was having the actors speak Spanish: “I felt it would allow the non-Spanish speaking audience, via subtitles, to feel like they were getting a privileged view into a secret world.”

He delved further into the drug wars with the 2024 MGM+ series *Hotel Cocaine*, a darkly comic portrayal of the hedonism of 1970s Miami and its emerging drug culture. And MGM+ just greenlit *The Westies*, his crime drama set in 1980s New York.

Despite all this, Brancato has his insecurities. “For many years, I wondered if I was tricking people into believing I could write,” he says. “It reaches a point where you go, I’m either talented enough to be doing what I’m doing, or I’m a complete and total fraud.”

He smiles. “Does it really matter? I’m still working.” —GRAHAM FLASHNER

IN GOOD SPIRITS

AFTER GETTING HER BFA IN ACTING from Northern Illinois University, Mary Holland’s fervent desire was to play in a period drama, perhaps Chekhov. Well, she got her wish to take on a character from another era — this season on the CBS sitcom *Ghosts*, as Patience, the Puritan ghost who has anything but. In the last 12 months, the Virginia native has branched out both on TV and beyond, continuing a voiceover career that includes guest roles on *Bob’s Burgers* and *Star Trek: Lower Decks* while also appearing with Amy Adams in the acclaimed 2024 film *Nightbitch*.

FOLLOWING SERIOUS DRAMA TRAINING, Holland segued into improv at Upright Citizens Brigade: “I found that a big part of giving a good dramatic performance is having a strong comedic sensibility. The two enhance each other. I often saw that scenes were funnier if played super emotionally committed and grounded. The goal isn’t necessarily to make the character ‘funny’ but to make her real.”

VOICEOVER WORK WAS AN OUTGROWTH of improv and the connections she’d made with comedy writers. Her favorite gigs include Max’s *Harley Quinn* (“They gave me so many fun, different roles to play”) and Fox’s *HouseBroken*, on which she played an Irish setter named Ruby.

HOLLAND DESCRIBES PATIENCE as “a drama character who’s just plopped into a comedy. It’s fun to lean into her Puritan sensibilities and total lack of humor.” The scripts call for Patience to display a tic in the angry way she pronounces her own name but, Holland says, “How I interpreted that was to channel Gollum from *Lord of the Rings*.”

HER ROLE IN NIGHTBITCH

meant working with writer-director Marielle Heller and actress-producer Amy Adams, who she considers a personal hero. “The film was visceral and raw and darkly funny. I was so excited to be cast, because it felt like my chance to spread my wings into more dramatic genres. If I can follow that current and keep going into more surprising roles, that would be a real dream come true.”

—JIM COLUCCI

