



KALLY BARNES

Reality-TV producer Thom Beers in Adelaide

Testosterone TV king hails his heroes

MICHAEL BODEY

MALCOLM Gladwell's book *Outliers* posits that mentors are crucial in the development of high achievers. Reality-TV producer Thom Beers has had some incredible mentors, chief among them famed acting tutor Lee Strasberg, film studio boss Peter Guber and media titan Ted Turner.

And US-based Beers has made the most of them, turning himself into one of the globe's most prolific producers of reality-TV hits, including *Ice Road Truckers*, *Deadliest Catch*, and *Black Gold*.

In the process, Beers has owned the hard-to-capture 18-34 male demographic and created a genre dubbed "testoreality".

So successful has he been, FremantleMedia this month bought a 75 per cent stake in his company for close to \$US100 million (\$111.6m). He currently has 14 shows in production for seven networks.

"I'm unabashedly a male making testosterone television," he says. "Believe me, my wife is not appreciative of it; she's always up my ass about where's your show for women?"

"There are plenty of people who can do that — I can't. I refuse to do it. I celebrate hard-working men. When a guy goes to work, he pays his bills and he looks after his family but he risks his life to do so, that's my hero. I want to celebrate those men and that's what I do."

Beers' shows have premises that appear tedious but prove to be incredibly entertaining. A show about crab fishing became the alluring *Deadliest Catch*.

Beers was asked to turn out a one-hour documentary about drivers who transport supplies across frozen Canadian lakes to remote diamond mines.

"So I've got to film four men in a truck by themselves, driving in a straight line, driving 15 miles an hour for 12 hours?" Beers smiles. "What the f... k? What show am I making? It was unbelievable the challenge of trying to turn that into something; but... you realise very quickly it's about the characters and the competition, that macho us-against-the-world thing."

He has turned that macho thing into an incredible production, merchandising and publishing business in which he looks to optimise every opportunity. Turner once told him: "You've got a cow here, and I'm going to make money out of every part of that cow including the moo."

"I realised early on that branding is really important," Beers says. "The brand is the most important thing you have. I realised (after establishing Original Productions in 1999)

that my brand was these male shows, which were really taking off. I thought, if I focus on a tight genre, maybe I can own it."

In owning it, he has also rejuvenated the American male that, in Hollywood at least, has become a fey, sensitive thing, even in action films. He envies Australia's leading men.

"If you look at Russell Crowe and Hugh Jackman, it's amazing how you've cornered it, and Sam Worthington. They're real men, and I'm unashamedly that's what it's about," he says. "I want real men who do real, honest, dangerous work — high risk, high reward — and I think that really strikes a chord around the world."

"Of any country in the world, Australia is closest to the testosterone model of the old American male," he adds. "Down here it's real men and I'm surprised you guys don't do more of those kind of shows."

But our creative industries shun the macho stuff and are embarrassed by characters like *Crocodile Dundee*, I reply.

"But why? Do they think that's a stereotype that they're embarrassed by? I wouldn't be," he says.

Beers is playfully outspoken. He can afford to be but you also sense it's part of his schtick now that he's king of his genre. He's an enthusiast whose constant refrain is "now, this story's great!"

And he brings to TV production an actor's eye, which in more analytical actors can be an incredible asset. He applies the classic three-act structure to his storytelling.

"Everything has to have character arcs, story arc, dramatic arcs. You really have to feed that beast and it's a meticulous build that we do for each show," he says.

And he's indulgent, or says he is, of his employees. "I embrace the artists; you treat the producers and editor as real artists," he says. "I don't get up their ass if they're an hour late. If you set it up right, when they show up they'll give you everything they've got."

He dismisses criticisms that any of his shows are not authentic. "You push storylines," he says.

In the series *Black Gold*, about oil rig workers, he casts oil workers "who have that particular gene we're looking for." He says he's only "scripting through casting".

"The difference between what I do and scripted shows is this: *Deadliest Catch* has nothing scripted but I'm shooting 400 hours to one (hour of broadcast) and what I've done is created an infrastructure that can handle that. If you can't create drama out of 400 hours of stuff, you're a moron."