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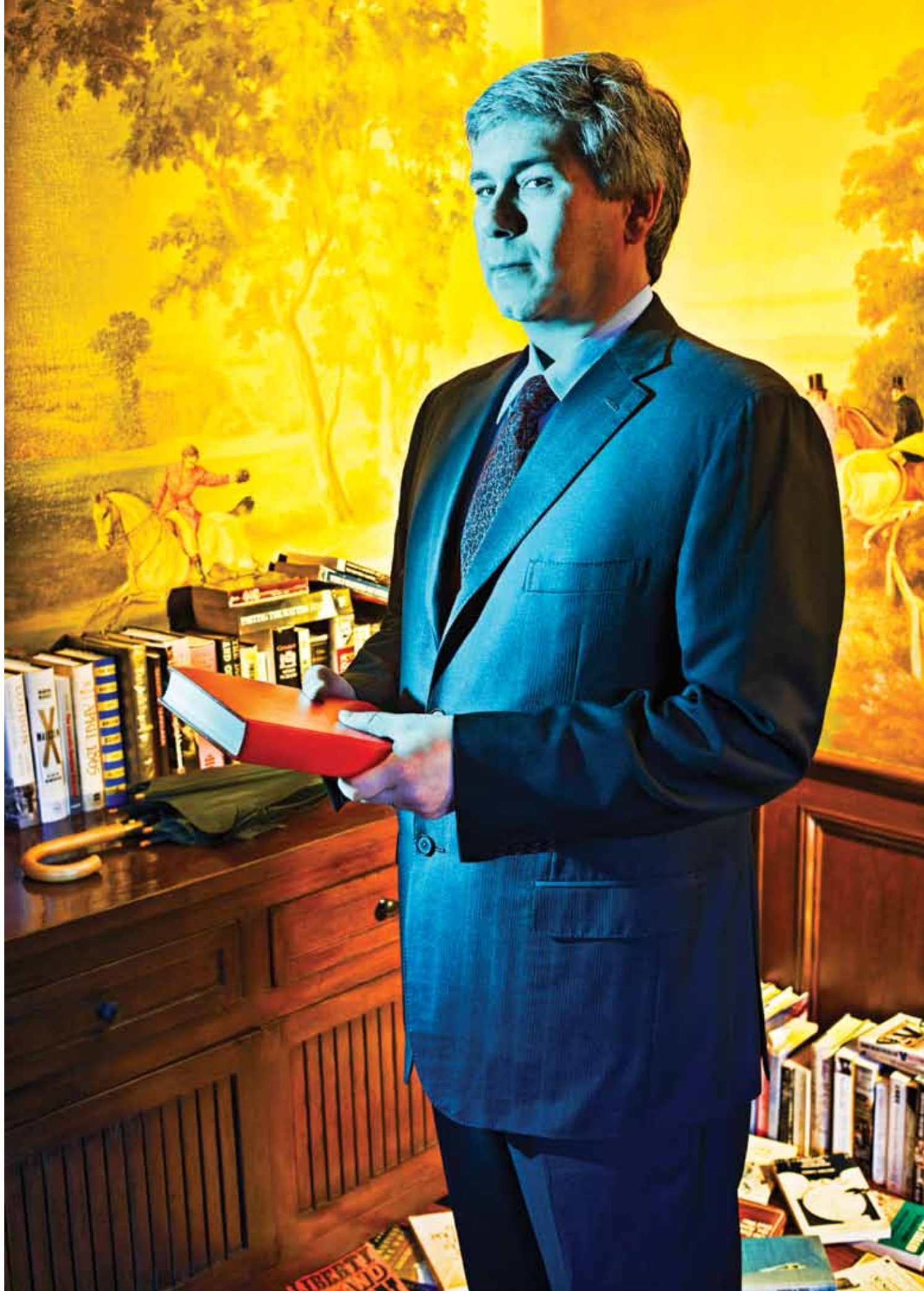
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In his series and films, **Christopher Keyser** is a master at creating problems for his characters. In real life, the former Harvard debate champ and law school grad — who turned to writing and never looked back — is known as a listener and a logical problem solver. He'll need those skills to defend the economic rights of writers as the new president of the Writers Guild of America, West.

BY **GRAHAM FLASHNER**

PHOTOGRAPH BY **BRAKHA X2**



THERE'S SOMETHING

inherently reassuring about Christopher Keyser. He speaks calmly, precisely and intelligently. At fifty-one, he still looks boyish, exuding the all-American demeanor of a Jimmy Stewart character in a Frank Capra movie. That — combined with his background as a lawyer, debater and successful TV writer — undoubtedly played a factor in his election as president of the Writers Guild of America, West, a decisive victory winning over Patric Verrone in a race that got more than a bit contentious toward the end.

Bring up the election results to Keyser, however, and he politely demurs, praising Verrone and indicating that they share common goals for writers. Seated in a book-lined room in his Los Angeles home, Keyser would rather focus on the worries of the present than dissect the past.

"The world has gotten a lot more complicated," he says. "It's a tough time for writers."

Best known for the seminal Fox series *Party of Five*, which he co-created with longtime writing partner Amy Lippman, Keyser has been described as a writer's writer, someone who's worked in a variety of mediums and experienced success and failure at all levels. In other words, a regular guy that any working (or non-working) writer can relate to, a perception that — fairly or not — was not universally shared about Keyser's predecessor, über-producer John Wells.

"The perception of Chris is that he's a working writer who needs to have success to provide for his family," Lippman says. "I've sat in a room with him for twenty years and seen him solve problems of all kinds. He has a whole chapter of his life ahead of him in public service. It's like he was destined to do this."

Given Keyser's background, it would be hard to argue. Born in Brooklyn, he grew up on Long Island and later attended Harvard University. By his senior year he was president of the Harvard Debate Council. With interests in politics and law, he moved on to Harvard Law School, until one decision altered the course of his career: Keyser, who'd dabbled in acting as an undergrad, took a playwriting class, where his classmates included Conan O'Brien, Greg Daniels (*The Office*) and Lippman.

"I impressed him because I was certain I was going to go to New York and be a writer," Lippman recalls. "It had never occurred to Chris to be a writer. He

thought he was going to be a lawyer until he took that class."

"We obviously respected and liked each other," Keyser says. "It was like a marriage."

Early in 1988 Keyser — who'd been working as a Washington speechwriter since finishing law school — moved with his family to L.A. so he could pursue a writing career in earnest, a cross-country journey he jokingly likens to a "Jewish Grapes of Wrath." Lippman moved there as well.

As it happened, the Writers Guild was on strike, and Keyser still had one foot on Capitol Hill, as a speechwriter for then-Arizona Governor Bruce Babbitt during his short-lived presidential campaign. By the fall, Keyser was considering an offer to go back East to work for the Michael Dukakis presidential campaign. But a phone call from Twentieth Century Fox producer Laurence Mark changed all that. Mark optioned one of Keyser's scripts, and politics' loss soon became Hollywood's gain.

With his legal background, Keyser (by now partnered with Lippman) soon was getting freelance assignments for shows like NBC's *L.A. Law* and ABC's *Equal Justice* and staff work on ABC's *Eddie Dodd* and the NBC family drama *Sisters*. Then Fox — at that time the spunky new kid on the block — approached the pair with an idea about kids living without their parents.

"*Beverly Hills 90210* was ending, and they needed a companion piece," Keyser says. The network,

though, imagined a comic show about unsupervised teens on the loose. "They were thinking of kids driving across the Golden Gate Bridge at 1 a.m.; we came back with *Party of Five*."

Instead of a madcap teen comedy, Keyser and Lippman gave the network a heartfelt drama about dysfunctional siblings who somehow manage to take care of one another after their parents are killed by a drunk driver.

"It became an example of all of the things one wishes a family could do," Keyser says.

Party of Five ran for six seasons, from 1994 to 2000, and not only propelled Keyser and Lippman to the ranks of A-list showrunners, it also launched the careers of a handful of young actors and actresses, including Scott Wolf, Matthew Fox, Lacey Chabert, Neve Campbell and Jennifer Love Hewitt. After a Golden Globe win as best drama, it became Fox's signature show.

Duplicating that success, however, was another story. In 1998 *Significant Others*, starring Jennifer Garner, lasted only six episodes. And the 1999 show *Time of Your Life*, a spinoff of *Party of Five* starring Love Hewitt and Garner, had the misfortune to go up against the ABC juggernaut *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* and was gone after one season.

"It seemed unfair in some sense that we should work so hard and a show fails," Keyser says, "but *POS* was just as likely to have failed as succeeded. There are little twists of fate that depend on the time slot, the public mood, advertising — you can't control any of that."

Fatigued by the TV grind, Keyser went on hiatus, stepping away from the small screen to pursue feature projects. "Amy and I said, when we left television, that we wanted to be heard by new people," he recalls.

In 2010 the duo returned to television to supervise six episodes of the new Fox drama *Lone Star*, created by Kyle Killen — the first time Keyser and Lippman worked on something they hadn't created.

But the TV landscape had changed dramatically in the interim. Episodic drama had moved from character-based shows to procedurals, and competition from the reality genre and the many cable channels had eroded the audience. *Lone Star*, a challenging character piece about a Texas-based con man, got some of the most spectacular reviews of Keyser and Lippman's career — and was an equally spectacular failure, dead on arrival after just two episodes.

"There wasn't any reason to bang our heads against the wall and push against the tide," Keyser says. "Sometimes it's not just a question of how deep you can go, but how many different things in life you can experience."

Keyser had been active in the Writers Guild since 2004, serving on the union's negotiating committee and as a trustee of the health and pension fund. When the nominating committee asked him to enter the race for president, he welcomed the opportunity. After a two-year term that began in 2009, Wells had opted not to run for reelection, but Verrone, who had been guild president from 2005 to 2009, decided to run again.

Guild members were divided over the tactics Verrone employed against the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers during the 2008 strike; some deemed them overly aggressive. As the contest unfolded, heavy hitters like Shawn Ryan (*The Shield*), who had initially supported Verrone for reelection, crossed over to Keyser, won over by his campaign of pragmatism.

"Overblown rhetoric unites management against us," he said in his candidate statement. "Reasonable talk isolates moderates from extremists... nothing good can come out of an atmosphere of complete mistrust."

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"Chris came with a blank slate and a fresh start, with no baggage from the strike and its aftermath," Ryan says. "He's very smart, and we're going to have to outsmart the people who spend 365 days a year thinking about how they can give us less."

Adds WGA vice-president Howard Rodman: "Chris listens well; he considers multiple points of view. I've yet to run into anyone who doesn't have a lot of respect for him."

The greatest challenge facing the guild, Keyser also said in his candidate statement, is "how to make economically viable the long-term decision to choose a career as a writer."

"There are more people looking for jobs than there are jobs to be had," Keyser says, expanding on that point. "We have to protect the middle-class writers. We have to prepare them to move from one sub-field to another — web series, video games, TV, features — it requires a way of thinking somewhat different than what writers needed to adapt to twenty to thirty years ago."

Or, as Rodman puts it: "If we're not careful, we're going to continue to have 100 percent coverage of 4 percent of the industry."

In television, Keyser hopes to boost basic cable compensation to broadcast network levels and to help writers get greater ownership over shows they create. On the feature side, he wants to correct the "one-step deal" system that requires screenwriters to crank out unofficial drafts of a script (known as pre-writes) without compensation.

"When writers are doing multiple drafts for the price of one draft, it's a reduction in our wages," he says. "It's a much bigger problem for the middle-class writer, where one job every one to two years may just barely allow them to break even."

With Keyser's term ending before the WGA's contract comes up for renegotiation in 2014, Keyser has two years to make an imprint — while still finding time to further his own career, which is heading more into feature film territory.

Upcoming is the independent film *Highland Park*, starring Parker Posey and Danny Glover, which he cowrote with director Andrew Meieran. Keyser is also in the process of securing financing for *A Great Education*, a script he hopes to direct. And he and Lippman are trying to close a deal on a Showtime pilot.

"I've learned that I have less control than I once thought I might've had over my career," he says. "Increasingly, in this day and age, you need to have a lot of things going to have one thing happen." ©