

Globe Arts' Artists of the Year: Vince Gilligan, father of *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White

[John Doyle](#)

The Globe and Mail

Published Saturday, Dec. 28 2013, 6:00 AM EST

Last updated Saturday, Dec. 28 2013, 6:00 AM EST

Vince Gilligan has this air about him. He tends to say, “Oh, gosh.” And he speaks fondly about “the folks” who work on his show.

In July, just before the last batch of *Breaking Bad* episodes aired, Gilligan came to Los Angeles to talk to TV critics at our summer press tour. The room was packed and there was total silence when Gilligan spoke. As usual, he seemed surprised by the attention, taken aback by the heft of his opinion. He adopted a quizzical air when asked a question about the journey of the characters on *Breaking Bad* and how the actors might have contributed to the development of the characters.

ARTISTS OF THE YEAR

- [Globe Arts' Artists of the Year: Teresa Przybylski, master of the set](#)
- [Globe Arts' Artists of the Year: Steve McQueen, teacher of perspective](#)
- [Globe Arts' Artists of the Year: Vince Gilligan, father of *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White](#)
- [Globe Arts' Artists of the Year: The best in publishing, dance, classical and architecture](#)
- [Globe Arts' Artists of the Year: Kim Dorland, champion of the wild](#)
- [Globe Arts' Artists of the Year: Daft Punk, defenders of disco](#)

After starting with, “Oh, gosh,” he launched into a meandering answer. It meandered because he struggled to include and thank as many people as possible. “I should preface this by saying all of the actors have added immensely to these characters,” he said. “They have added depth and breadth and complexity and just onion-like layers of wonderfulness. As my writers and I have gotten to know them, they have imparted many interesting elements to the characters.”

He cited Dean Norris, who played Hank on *Breaking Bad* as an example of an actor who, as he got to know him, gave Gilligan the freedom to increase the intricacy of the character. “He went to Harvard, and he’s an interesting and deep fellow, who just by knowing him enriched my ability to write him. That’s a good example right there. You know, TV is this great, organic, living, breathing thing. It’s what I love so much about it. If you roll with it, as a showrunner, if you let the folks in front of the camera and the folks behind

the camera add all of their personality and their intellect and their artistry and their talent to the show at hand, provided everyone's pulling the rope in the same direction, wonderful things derive from that, and, well, it's a blessing to get to work in so collaborative a medium."

And with that, Gilligan felt he'd imparted all that needs to be known. It isn't, of course. At a time when the creators of the major cable dramas are thought of as driven, difficult auteurs, Gilligan is peculiar in his insistence on being bashful, on giving credit and being generous. Thing is, he could be abundantly arrogant about *Breaking Bad* and his achievement, and no one would begrudge him the swagger.

Breaking Bad arrived on AMC in January, 2008. (It's remarkable to think, now, of what AMC did by launching *Mad Men* in July, 2007, and *Breaking Bad* six months later.) Only seven episodes aired, because the writers' strike stopped production. It had a profound effect, at first more inside television than with a mass audience. The thrust of Gilligan's story – the radical change wrought upon Walter White (Bryan Cranston) after a cancer diagnosis, alerted everyone to a soberly spectacular narrative about values, crime and class in America. As further seasons arrived the storytelling blossomed, as did the characters – the radicalization of Skyler (Anna Gunn), Walter's wife, the tortured journey of his sidekick and faux-son Jesse (Aaron Paul) and the terrible events visited upon Hank, who tried to be the decent brother-in-law and lawman. A moral compass was shattered, and a group of people were lost to an American economy gone brutally awry. As it finished, right down to a dying Walter on the floor of a meth lab, as Badfinger's *Baby Blue* arrived in the soundtrack, Gilligan's vision, something previously unimaginable in television, was beautifully achieved. And gosh, with help, as he graciously acknowledges.

RUNNERS-UP

Phillip Iscove The 33-year-old, Toronto-born Ryerson graduate is the co-creator of *Sleepy Hollow*, his first entry into TV. Fox's *Sleepy Hollow* was the first breakout hit of the 2013/14 TV season and the first show given a second-season commitment by a network. A remarkable achievement for a first-timer.

Jeremy Larter, Jason Larter and Geoff Read Together the three Prince Edward Island filmmakers created the nutty, hilarious online TV comedy *Just Passing Through*. More original and funnier than most Canadian network comedies of the last decade.

Follow John Doyle on Twitter: [@MisterJohnDoyle](https://twitter.com/@MisterJohnDoyle) [<https://twitter.com/@MisterJohnDoyle>]

Topics:

- [Vince Gilligan](#)