

## THE HIGH PRIEST: PROJECT BRIEF

### Format

Limited Series Pilot

### Genre / Tone

Historical Drama / Psychological Biopic

*Mad Men* meets *Oppenheimer*, with the spiritual rise and collapse of a counterculture messiah.

### Budget / Buyer Lane

Prestige limited series / period drama with contained institutional settings and expanding counterculture scope

HBO, FX, Netflix, Apple TV Plus, Showtime lane

### Core Hook

A brilliant Harvard psychologist discovers psychedelics and begins as a scientist trying to cure human trauma, then slowly transforms into a counterculture prophet whose promise of liberation becomes inseparable from ego, spectacle, betrayal, and escape.

### One Sentence Pitch

After personal tragedy and academic ambition collide, Timothy Leary rises from respected behavioral psychologist to psychedelic prophet, celebrity fugitive, government informant, and cyberculture icon, leaving behind a trail of followers, wreckage, and unanswered questions about freedom, ego, and belief.

### Why It's Timely

It speaks to the psychedelic renaissance, guru culture, institutional failure, celebrity activism, political paranoia, mental health, tech immortality, and the recurring American hunger for charismatic figures who promise liberation without accountability.

### Series Engine

Each episode follows a different Leary: the scientist, the prophet, the celebrity, the exile, the rat, and the futurist. The series is not only about LSD. It is about a man who keeps reinventing himself whenever the previous version becomes impossible to defend.

### Main Characters

**Timothy Leary:** Brilliant, charming, wounded, and dangerously persuasive. He begins as a serious psychologist, but his gift for language and performance slowly overtakes his discipline.

**Susan Leary:** Leary's daughter and the emotional mirror of the pilot. While Leary tries to cure criminals, students, and society, Susan is the traumatized, motherless child sitting in his own living room, waiting for a father who keeps choosing the future over his family.

**Jack Leary:** Leary's son, who grows from child witness into one of the people least willing to accept his father's mythology. Later, Jack becomes a grounding force against Leary's prison era fantasies.

**Richard Alpert:** Leary's Harvard colleague and mirror. He is drawn to the same revelations, but his arc exposes Leary's loss of scientific rigor and the growing gap between inquiry and performance.

**Rosemary Woodruff:** Leary's lover, partner, and accomplice. She is pulled into the myth and danger of his life, but she also sees the reality Leary keeps dressing up as destiny.

**G. Gordon Liddy:** Leary's political opposite and public mirror at Millbrook. Liddy wants headlines as much as Leary does, proving that the prophet and the prosecutor are both performing for the same camera.

**Eldridge Cleaver:** The revolutionary who strips Leary of his aura. He sees Leary not as a prophet, but as a soft, privileged liability playing at revolution.

**Joanna Harcourt-Smith:** The late stage fabulist who helps Leary turn cooperation with the government into another story about genius, strategy, and survival.

**The Body:** In the final episode, Leary's true antagonist is no longer Harvard, Nixon, prison, or the establishment. It is his own failing body, refusing to participate in the myth.

### **Pilot Snapshot**

1. The pilot opens with Leary already in mythic motion, escaping prison and stepping into the fugitive version of himself.
2. The story cuts back to the wound that shaped him: Marianne's suicide, the children left behind, and the grief Leary learns to intellectualize rather than face.
3. At Harvard, Leary is a brilliant, charismatic psychologist who believes he has found a cure for human trauma.
4. His psychedelic research begins as science, but Leary starts crossing the line between studying transformation and selling it.
5. While he gives psychedelics to criminals, grad students, and seekers in the name of healing, Susan remains the proof of his actual failure. He is trying to save humanity while ignoring the wounded child in his own house.

### **Series Outline**

#### **Episode 1: The Scientist**

Leary's false belief: I am breaking the rules of academia because I have found the cure for human trauma.

Mirror character: Susan Leary. Richard Alpert reflects Leary's loss of scientific rigor, but Susan grounds the episode in his real failure. He is trying to cure criminals and graduate students while ignoring his traumatized, motherless daughter.

The lie he tells himself: The academic establishment is simply too rigid to understand my breakthrough. I did not abandon my post. They failed the future.

Closing image: Harvard is in the rearview mirror. Leary drives away feeling victorious and liberated, spinning a tale of revolution. In the backseat, Jack and Susan sit quietly among hastily packed boxes, looking out at an uncertain future.

#### **Episode 2: The Prophet**

Leary's false belief: I am building a utopian, ego free society at Millbrook.

Mirror character: G. Gordon Liddy. Liddy is the aggressive showman of the political right. Every time Liddy raids Millbrook to get his name in the papers, Leary responds by calling a press conference to get his own name in the papers. They use the same tactics for opposite ideologies.

The lie he tells himself: I am the reluctant, necessary vessel for this spiritual movement, not its architect.

Closing image: The 1967 Human Be In. Thirty thousand faces look up at Leary as he delivers, "Turn on, tune in, drop out." The camera pushes in on his face until the crowd blurs behind him. It captures the quiet, terrifying moment he realizes how much power he has, and how much he loves it.

#### **Episode 3: The Celebrity**

Leary's false belief: My fame makes me politically untouchable.

Mirror character: Rosemary Woodruff. As the walls close in legally, Leary wants to run for Governor and record songs with John Lennon. Rosemary sees the real threat. The Nixon administration is hunting them. She challenges his belief that charm can outmaneuver the federal government.

The lie he tells himself: Going on the run is a profound act of political rebellion, not an act of personal desperation.

Closing image: The immediate aftermath of the prison escape. Leary, shivering, exhausted, and covered in mud, slides into the Weather Underground getaway car. He gives the young radicals in the front seat a practiced, messianic smile, masking his utter human terror.

#### **Episode 4: The Exile**

Leary's false belief: I am a global revolutionary leader, universally respected by the underground.

Mirror character: Eldridge Cleaver. Cleaver dismantles Leary's aura. He treats him not as a prophet, but as a liability, a privileged white man playing revolutionary. When Leary tries to use charisma, Cleaver answers with the barrel of a gun.

The lie he tells himself: The movement simply is not evolved enough for my level of liberation. I need allies who understand my unique value.

Closing image: Switzerland. Rosemary realizes Leary is consumed by survival and delusions of grandeur. She slips away into the underground alone. Leary does not chase her. He turns back to Joanna, his new aristocratic benefactor, trading the spiritual movement for a paranoid fantasy.

#### **Episode 5: The Rat**

Leary's false belief: I am outsmarting the federal government by feeding them a maze of half truths.

Mirror character: Joanna Harcourt-Smith. Visiting him in prison, she feeds his delusion. She convinces him that cooperating with the FBI is actually a brilliant espionage maneuver. Jack Leary refuses to play along, confronting his father with the reality of his isolation.

The lie he tells himself: I did not betray anyone who did not deserve it. I had to survive so I could continue the Great Work.

Closing image: 1976. Leary is paroled. He steps through the prison gates into the California sun, expecting protesters, supporters, cameras, or some sign that the myth is waiting. There is nothing. Just an empty street. The most famous counterculture icon in the world is completely, finally alone.

#### **Episode 6: The Futurist**

Leary's false belief: Cyberspace is the ultimate liberation from the physical body. I can upload my myth and cheat mortality.

Mirror character: The physical body. For his whole life, Leary's antagonist was the government, the academy, or the establishment. Now it is his own decaying biology. His young tech entourage wants him to be an immortal cyberpunk god, but his failing body refuses to cooperate with the narrative.

The lie he tells himself: I am choreographing my own transition into the digital ether. I am still in control of the narrative.

Closing image: The reality of his deathbed. Monitors, early webcams, and computers blink around him, livestreaming to the internet. But the camera ignores the screens. It focuses on his frail human hand twitching on the bedsheets, unable to operate the mouse. The performer has left the stage. Only the man remains.

#### **Theme in One Line**

A man can spend his life preaching liberation and still never escape himself.

#### **Positioning**

It's a prestige limited series about Timothy Leary as visionary, showman, father, fugitive, informant, and warning sign. He tried to free the mind, but kept turning his own wounds into movements other people had to survive.

#### **Materials Available**

Pilot script and series materials available upon request or through the private script library.

## **RYAN CLARKE**

Screenwriter & Playwright | Albuquerque, NM

Dark Comedy | Satire | Character Drama | Social Thriller

Ryan Clarke is an Albuquerque-based screenwriter and playwright whose work blends dark comedy, social satire, and intimate character drama. Across a slate of 20+ feature scripts, his stories often follow deeply flawed people pushed into impossible situations, finding humor, tension, and humanity in characters who are entirely in over their heads.

His screenwriting recognition includes Grand Prize Winner, 30th Annual Fade In Awards Comedy Competition (*#FightForNoah*); Semifinalist, 30th Annual Fade In Awards Comedy Competition (*The Trencherman*); 2026 Top 10 Finalist, ISA Table Read My Screenplay at Cannes (*A Walking Shadow*); 2026 Quarterfinalist, Finish Line Script Competition (*#FightForNoah*); two-time Semifinalist, ISA Emerging Screenwriters Competition (*Flashbang* and *Ghost of the Highway*); and four additional 2026 Honorable Mentions from Finish Line (*The Finalists*, *How to Be a Human: A Musical with No Songs*, *Ghost of the Highway*, and *Dead Signals*).

As a playwright, Ryan is a three-time winner of FUSION Theatre Company's short works festival, "The SEVEN", in 2024, 2025, and 2026. The stage version of *A Walking Shadow* was also selected in 2026 for The Road Theatre Company's 17th Summer Playwrights Festival.

## **CONTACT**

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