

Television

February 2021



**Natural history TV
From spectacle
to advocacy**

audionetwork 
an eOne company

HEAR MORE



COMEDY

From slapstick to satire, sitcom to sketch, belly laughs or subtle sniggers, discover a world of comedy through music - and bring your story to life

SEND US YOUR BRIEF
musicsearch@audionetwork.com

DISCOVER MORE
audionetwork.com/discover



From the CEO



Few issues of our times are more pressing than the need to accelerate sustainability and to effect to real social and workplace diversity and inclusion.

These two vital topics are highlighted in this edition of *Television*.

For our cover story, Shilpa Ganatra examines how natural history TV is developing a greater awareness of the planet's fragility and the need for urgent action on climate change.

As Sir David Attenborough likes

to say, the environmental crisis is a communications crisis.

Lenny Henry and Marcus Ryder are two of British TV's most devoted campaigners for greater diversity in our sector. Don't miss Narinder Minhas's compelling review of their new book, *Access All Areas: The Diversity Manifesto for TV and Beyond*.

They say that necessity is the mother of invention, and so it was with this month's two-day, virtual RTS Futures Careers Fair. By holding the event online, we've been able to provide greater access for attendees and

exhibitors across the UK. A record number of young people – more than 2,200 – signed up for the fair. As the TV talent of tomorrow cope with the impact of the pandemic on their education, I hope the fair provided valuable insights, encouragement and career opportunities.

Thanks so much to our 90 exhibitors and the many masterclass speakers and producers.

Theresa Wise

Contents

Cover: *Elephant* (Disney)

- 5 Nicola Shindler's TV Diary**
The drama producer wants to bring unheard voices to TV – and to cut down her chocolate intake
- 6 Comfort Classic: *The Good Life***
A show that gently sends up the English middle class is built on a sharp script and consummate acting, says Matthew Bell
- 7 Ear Candy: 10/10 (*Would Recommend*)**
Kate Holman takes advice from Tolani Shoneye and Gena-mour Barrett on what to watch on Netflix
- 8 Working Lives: Movement director**
Polly Bennett, whose work ranges from *The Crown* to *Bohemian Rhapsody*, explains what she does on set
- 10 The call of the wild**
Shilpa Ganatra investigates how the appeal of natural history TV is growing in eco-conscious times
- 12 Laughing all the way to the ballet**
Rob Beckett and Romesh Ranganathan reveal the secrets of their Sky 1 hit, *Rob and Romesh Vs*
- 14 For real and lasting change**
Narinder Minhas reviews a radical manifesto for transforming television by Lenny Henry and Marcus Ryder
- 16 Back against the odds**
David Mitchell, Robert Webb and Simon Blackwell tell the RTS how they dealt with emergency surgery and the pandemic to deliver the second series of *Back*
- 18 Refining Sky's winning strategy**
Sky's new CEO, Dana Strong, is a former engineer who knows how to stand out in a room, says Kate Bulkley
- 21 Our Friend in the South West**
Devon and Cornwall locations are a magnet for film-makers – and very appreciated in lockdown, writes Chris Williams
- 22 Daytime fun in the sun**
Season 2 of *The Mallorca Files* is guaranteed to bring some much-needed light to BBC One's winter line-up
- 24 A duty of care**
Ofcom is beefing up its rules to protect vulnerable people who appear on TV shows, reports Caroline Frost
- 26 A parenting nightmare**
Martin Freeman and his co-creators recall how they drew on their own experiences for *Breeders*, the no-holds-barred Sky 1 comedy
- 28 Sky reaches for the stars**
Zai Bennett reveals why the satellite giant is splashing out on a star-driven line-up for 2021
- 30 The race for space**
Tim Dams explains how the boom in scripted shows is driving the need for more UK studios
- 33 Careers fair spurs ambitions**
This year's virtual RTS Futures Careers Fair broke new ground and increased attendance, reports Matthew Bell

Editor
Steve Clarke
smclarke_333@hotmail.com
News editor and writer
Matthew Bell
bell127@btinternet.com

Production, design, advertising
Gordon Jamieson
gordon.jamieson.01@gmail.com
Sub-editor
Sarah Bancroft
smbancroft@me.com

Royal Television Society
3 Dorset Rise
London EC4V 8EN
T: 020 7822 2810
E: info@rts.org.uk
W: www.rts.org.uk

Subscription rates
UK £115
Overseas (surface) £146.11
Overseas (airmail) £172.22
Enquiries: publication@rts.org.uk

Printing
ISSN 0308-454X
Printer: FE Burman
20 Crimscott Street
London SE1 5TP

Legal notice
© Royal Television Society 2021.
The views expressed in *Television* are not necessarily those of the RTS.
Registered Charity 313 728

NFTS

NATIONAL
FILM AND
TELEVISION
SCHOOL

StandOut

in the Film, TV and Games industry

The NFTS runs more than 30 MA, Diploma and Certificate courses across a range of film, television and games disciplines.

For half a century, the School has developed some of Britain and the world's top creative talent.

Our world-class tutors, once-in-a-lifetime masterclasses and vast network will equip you with all you'll need to build a successful career bringing great ideas and stories to life.

Applications now open

nfts.co.uk

TV diary

Nicola Shindler wants her new production company to bring unheard voices to TV – and to cut down on her chocolate intake



Almost every minute of every day used to be very different. Now, what I'm doing might still vary all the time, but each day starts

pretty much the same as they have done since last March: heading to my home office after wrangling the kids to start their home schooling.

During lockdown, I have found it important to sit at my desk to start the day, even though I could work anywhere. Bed feels tempting but I've resisted so far. Luckily, my office is next to the kitchen, so I can supervise the family without moving and, occasionally, shout out orders and try to stop the kids from killing each other during lunchtime.

■ **I'm still getting used to the new normal. Being next to the kitchen makes restricting my chocolate intake harder than usual. I spend a lot of time trying *not* to eat all day.**

■ **But the pandemic has made the world smaller in many useful ways. Normally, I would be on the Manchester to London train, and back, at least once a week, which was tough.**

But the world of Zoom/Google/ Hangout/Teams means that I can meet anyone anywhere in the country (and the world), without the need to leave my own office. Which is

really useful – as well as, at times, being hugely frustrating.

I never knew how much I'd miss the "in-person" chit-chat around the meeting. This is where so many ideas were made better or originated.

■ **This year has been a real new start for me, even if the pandemic hasn't let me move far. I have launched my new company, Quay Street Productions, partnering with ITV Studios. It's been full-on and exciting talking about new ideas and developments with my new team.**

This is in addition to my continuing work of executive producing *Ridley Road*, *No Return*, *Traces* season 2 and *Stay Close*, as well as *Finding Alice* and *It's a Sin*, which have just gone to air. No day has been the same, which is challenging and fun. Never boring.

■ **In between having dozens more phone calls than pre-pandemic and working on the usual production jobs – looking at design photos, location photos, costume ideas, watching audition tapes, having conversations about scripts, watching edits, listening to sound edits and watching rushes – I've been having numerous meetings about Quay Street and the direction of my development slate.**

My new development team officially starts shortly, but they are already sparking new ideas. Working with my new book scout, I have a lot

of reading material alongside new scripts. It's vital to find space to read. I carve out time each day to read as much as possible.

■ **I've always tried to put the writer at the centre of the process to bring their story to the screen, and one of my ambitions at Quay Street is to work with brilliant new and established writers on their best work.**

There is a wealth of exciting and entertaining stories to tell, especially stories that are currently not represented on screen. I have a responsibility to seek out and work with voices that have been unheard, given less opportunity or just aren't on screen.

I want to make sure that those voices are given a platform and, ultimately, tell stories that are going to stand out from what's already on television. And, of course, be entertaining, fun, funny and watchable.

■ **While working at home, I've found that the day never really ends. Making tea and talking to the family merges into emails and more reading. When the office is an extension of the kitchen, the two worlds are going to stay very close!**

Nicola Shindler OBE is the award-winning drama producer behind hit series *The Stranger*, *Years and Years*, *Happy Valley* and *Queer as Folk*. She recently set up Quay Street Productions.

COMFORT CLASSIC

A show that gently sends up the English middle class is built on a sharp script and consummate acting, says **Matthew Bell**

There is, surely, no more fitting comfort comedy for lockdown than *The Good Life*, a tale of stay-at-home self-sufficiency. Tom and Barbara Good were the original artisan couple: sowing spuds, brewing booze and weaving wool.

The 1970s BBC sitcom was created by John Esmonde and Bob Larbey, friends since their Clapham schooldays, who had already created one comedy classic, ITV's *Please Sir!*. That starred John Alderton as an idealistic English teacher at a tough secondary school.

The Good Life couldn't have been more different. Set in Surbiton – now, thanks to the sitcom, a byword for English suburbia – the first episode begins with Tom Good (Richard Briers) suffering a mid-life crisis on his 40th birthday.

Stuck in a job he hates – designing plastic animals for cereal promotions – Tom quits the office and, with wife Barbara (Felicity Kendal), digs up the garden to grow veg and raise animals.

Next-door neighbour Jerry Leadbetter (Paul Eddington) works with Tom but, thanks to his native cunning and incessant crawling to the boss, he has climbed the career ladder and been made a manager. His wife, Margo (Penelope Keith) is humourless and an appalling snob. When the Goods bring home a goat, she looks down her nose and observes, "Degradation, misery and squalor – and we have to live next door to it".

The set-up seems obvious: we should love the Goods for quitting the rat race and embracing a green, wholesome life; we should hate the Thatcherite Leadbetters. But not so fast: the lovey-dovey Goods are also smug and maddening, while Jerry is droll and



Self-sufficiency in the suburbs: Felicity Kendal and Richard Briers as the Goods

The Good Life

BBC

perhaps even envious of Tom's new life, and Margo is actually quite sweet.

The BBC One sitcom ran for just four series from 1975 to 1978 and, at its peak, attracted audiences of 15 million-plus. It took Esmonde and Larbey into the pantheon of double-act comedy writers, joining Croft and Perry (*Dad's Army*), Clement and La Frenais (*The Likely Lads* and *Porridge*) and Galton and Simpson (*Steptoe and Son*).

For its quartet of stars, *The Good Life* brought TV stardom. Briers – the only actor who was well known at the time – went on to star in another Esmonde and Larbey sitcom, the much darker *Ever Decreasing Circles*. Years later, this was a big influence on Ricky Gervais when he (and Stephen Merchant) created *The Office*.

Briers achieved national-treasure status long before his death in 2013. He appeared in countless TV shows and performed Shakespeare on stage and film, for Kenneth Branagh, as well as voicing many ads and kids' shows.

Kendal became a sex symbol for middle-class blokes (which speaks volumes about repressed English male sexuality) and has now clocked up more than 50 years on TV. She is also a multi-award-winning stage actor. Keith was given her own comedy vehicle, *To the Manor Born*, and still presents TV docs when not working in the theatre.

Fame arrived late for Eddington. Already in his late forties when *The Good Life* came along, he went on to play the title role of Jim Hacker in the much-loved satirical sitcoms *Yes Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister*.

To the Young Turks of the alternative comedy scene, *The Good Life* stood for everything that was wrong with British sitcom. Vyvyan, the punk in *The Young Ones*, raged: "It's so bloody nice! Felicity 'Treacle' Kendal and Richard 'Sugar-Flavoured Snot' Briers!... They're nothing but a couple of reactionary stereotypes, confirming the myth that everyone in Britain is a lovable middle-class eccentric. And I hate them!"

This, I think, is unfair. Four decades on, *The Good Life* seems far less of a period piece than the supposedly anarchic *The Young Ones*. A sharp script and consummate acting count for a lot in TV comedy. And, of course, what could be more modern than working at home in splendid isolation, pickling veg and baking bread? ■

***The Good Life* is available on BritBox.**

Ear candy



If you have spent more hours scrolling through the endless options on Netflix than you have actually watching the platform's shows, *10/10 (Would Recommend)* is here to help.

The Receipts Podcast presenter Tolani Shoneye joins co-host and friend Gena-mour Barrett – who works for Netflix – on the streaming service's rebranded podcast, previously called *What to Watch on Netflix*.

The duo trawl through 32,600 hours of content on Netflix (though they may have fast-forwarded parts of the catalogue...) to the must-see shows for ultimate escapism, from big hitters to the hidden gems.

On each episode they are joined by guests to talk about their new shows and their TV obsessions. These include: *Death to 2020* creators Charlie Brooker and Annabel Jones, discussing their satirical take on last year; Netflix

favourite T'Nia Miller, on the experience of filming a horror series; *The Social Dilemma* creator Jeff Orlowski, who turns the spotlight on some of the negative impacts of social media; and *Bridgerton*'s Nicola Coughlan, who describes meeting Shonda Rhimes and talks about her favourite reality shows for binge viewing.

Shoneye and Barrett's mission is to encourage listeners to venture beyond the trending tab and explore the aisles of Netflix's virtual warehouse, name-checking such eclectic fare as *Three Identical Strangers* and *No Good Nick* as they go.

The pair display considerable comedic chemistry, and there's a good chance that they can point you to a show that you would be happy to recommend at your own virtual water-cooler (aka Zoom in your makeshift workspace by the kitchen sink). ■

Kate Holman

WORKING LIVES



The Great

Channel 4

Movement director

As a movement director, Polly Bennett has carved out a niche recreating famous figures in productions such as *Bohemian Rhapsody*, *Stan & Ollie* and *The Crown*. But the remit of the role is very broad.

What does the job involve?

Movement directors create and build physical sequences, and help actors to find a vocabulary of physical behaviour to tell a story. All movement directors work differently but my television and film work has largely developed around embodying well-known people, such as the Royal Family in *The Crown* or Elvis Presley in Baz Luhrmann's upcoming biopic. Working on the physical world of these characters can extend into choreography. It's a role that evolves with every job.

How did you first become a movement director?

As a young dancer and actor, I often led physical warm-ups and became the person who would say, "Wouldn't it be better if we tried this?"

After university, I took a job behind the scenes in television production, but ended up helping a model who was struggling to walk in time to music.

I knew then that my ability to describe movement was something to pursue, so I did an MA in movement, which led to me joining the choreography team of the London 2012 Olympics ceremonies. I developed my skill set in theatre, and now here I am.

How much does movement direction overlap with choreography?

They're part of the same world. While choreography is exclusively about dance and setting steps, movement

direction uses those and more tools to give a greater range of possibilities for actors.

How has the job changed over time?

Movement roles have been around in theatre since the beginning of the 20th century, whether they were known as musical staggers, dance répétiteurs, choreographers or movement directors. But they haven't always been acknowledged. The field is now growing and there's a greater understanding of the value of movement in a TV or film process. That means there's more opportunity to do great work.

What was the first TV programme you worked on?

I worked on the film *Stan & Ollie* first and, during *Bohemian Rhapsody*, I was put up for *Killing Eve*. I worked on a scene in the first series with Jodie

Polly Bennett working with actor Rami Malek (playing Freddie Mercury) during the making of *Bohemian Rhapsody*



Alex Bailey

rhythm from my dance training has formed the base of a lot of my work. I know lots of choreographers who aren't dancers, though – they are choreographers of feelings and ideas.

What common movement issues have you found?

Especially now, when we are looking at a lot of screens, there's a real potential to not be as in tune with our bodies as the animals that we originally were. So I see a lot of restraint and notice a lot of fear when people are asked to use their body. There's a lot of thinking rather than doing. My job involves enabling actors to trust that their bodies will make the right decisions.

Do you use any equipment?

The body is my only prop. Of course, I work with props if there's something specific in the scene, like a microphone, hooped skirts or a table. But I predominantly work by looking at the people I've got in the room and go from there.

What are the best and worst parts of the job?

Because it's a relatively new role in TV and film, sometimes it feels like I have to explain what I need to do my job, or I have to fight to be treated similarly to other creative people on the team. I haven't been credited on two jobs recently. That's not necessarily the worst part of the job – it's a challenge as the job comes into focus.

The best part of the job is when you see an actor or a scene come to life in front of you from a physical stimulus you've given. Another bonus is wearing elasticated clothing all the time.

Are there any tips or tricks you can share?

Move. Pick a song, put down your phone and move. You can get a real sense of where your body wants to go if you settle into your feet. It helps to put your feet on the floor, push your big toes into the ground to help your back fall into the right place, and align your hips. I think this works as an initial exercise for actors, but it's helpful for everyone. Release yourself from presentation and get ugly. It's where the good stories are. ■

Movement director Polly Bennett was interviewed by Shilpa Ganatra.

Comer, when she had to do a Russian dance as a way of spoofing her boss. Those projects, involving both movement and choreography, opened the door for me to work on *The Crown*, which was the first time I worked on a full television series.

What type of programmes benefit from having a movement director?

All programmes would. It's easy to think it's just about reimagining famous people, but a story is far more than words on a page: 95% of our communication is physical, so movement work can help invent characters, as well as feed into bold or nuanced choices.

Which departments do you work with closely?

On a TV programme such as *The Great*, I collaborated especially with stunts, costume, the camera operators and

casting, as well as the directors. I went to each department for physical information. Can people lift their arms in those dresses? How much blood will there be? What do you want the dance to feel like? I then fuse the information together to make the physical part of the puzzle with the actors.

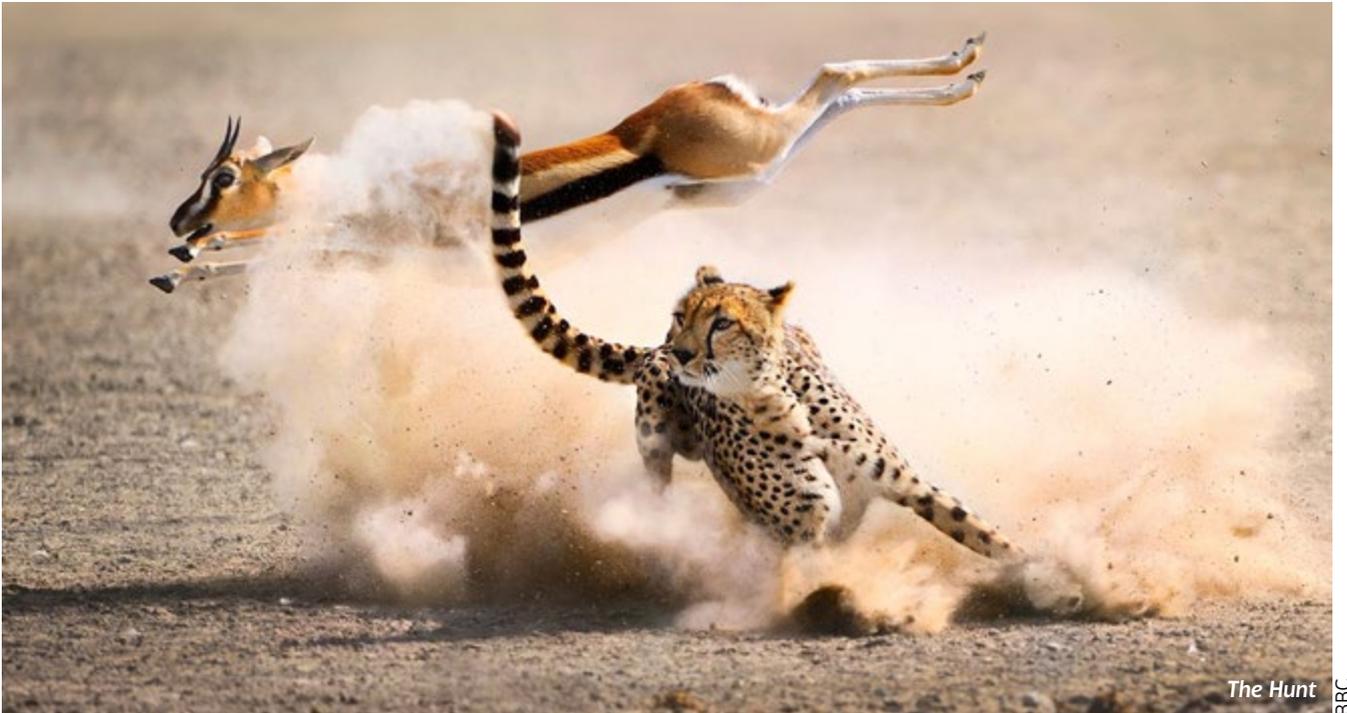
What makes a good movement director?

Curiosity. I try not to decide what something is before I start work. Asking questions helps kick off an idea and enables the actors to follow an impulse. The work is best when actors feel ownership of their part, rather than just doing what they are told.

Does it help to be a dancer?

I don't think you need to have a dance background but my personal understanding of technique, music and

The call of the wild



The Hunt BBC

Just three days into 2021, the BBC secured its first big hitter of the year: *A Perfect Planet*, narrated by Sir David Attenborough, drew in 6.2 million viewers. That's on a par with previous series premieres such as *Seven Worlds, One Planet* (6.8 million), *Dynasties* (5.7 million viewers) and *Blue Planet II* (10.4 million).

It's a sign that the natural history genre continues to thrive. Netflix, Disney+ and Apple TV+ are all commissioning high-end, original, nature programming; Discovery has recently announced a new nature-heavy streaming service, while Sky has a dedicated nature channel, spearheaded by three or four landmark series a year.

At the same time, the traditional beating heart of the genre, the BBC's Natural History Unit (NHU), has announced an expansion of its Bristol HQ and a new outpost in Los Angeles, as the global demand for nature programmes surges.

The gold rush was already in full flow when the pandemic hit. As Tom McDonald, director of BBC Studios Factual, explains, natural history ticks all the boxes for lockdown audiences.

"The trends in the pandemic are clear: audiences want escapism – things

Shilpa Ganatra investigates how the appeal of natural history TV is growing in eco-conscious times

with bright colours or the cosiness of shows such as *The Repair Shop*," he says. "Or they want escapism in the form of a complex narrative, such as twisty-turny crime with heroes and villains. Natural history speaks to both those needs at the same time. It's a comfort, but it's also thrilling and distracting.

"Another aspect is the interest in the environment. The BBC's Science Unit, which collaborates closely with the NHU, made *Extinction: The Facts*, which [attracted an audience of] 4 million in its opening week. That was incredible for a hard-hitting film in the middle of a pandemic."

We saw the tangible effect that film-making can have with *An Inconvenient Truth* in 2006 and *Blue Planet II* in 2017, both of which delivered persuasive environmental messages.

Keith Scholey, co-founder and co-CEO of Silverback Films, the

production company behind *A Perfect Planet* and *A Life on Our Planet* among others (and recently bought by All3Media), explains that "scientists know what needs to be done, but the world is not going that way because most people don't understand the seriousness of what's playing out.

"So natural history film-makers have a responsibility to urgently get that out. As David Attenborough says, in one way, the environmental crisis is a communication crisis."

But meeting the increased demand – even with higher commissioning budgets – is far from straightforward. For starters, the pandemic has halted production in key countries. And even when filming returns, there's no hurrying up giant tortoises so the crew can begin their next project.

Moreover, only a limited number of production staff have the specialist experience to deliver a premium show. "A landmark series can take four years to deliver, and you've got to work on three or four of those to become a producer," says Scholey.

"The danger is that people will get overpromoted and the quality will fall. And if buyers come in to a new genre expecting a certain standard because



Our Planet

Netflix

‘SCIENTISTS KNOW WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE, BUT... THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS IS A COMMUNICATION CRISIS’

of what they’ve seen before, and that doesn’t happen, they will think it doesn’t work and move on.”

BBC Studios NHU’s expansion to Los Angeles is both a symptom and a solution, as it addresses interest in natural history globally, while creating an opportunity to recruit and train to a best-in-class standard. Says McDonald: “If we weren’t setting up in LA, we would still be winning commissions from US broadcasters. The expansion is about the depth of the relationship we have, and the opportunity to tap into the brilliant emerging US film-makers out there.”

As the need for engaging natural history programmes increases, it is evident that there’s only one David Attenborough to go around. Has his dominance as a presenter of blue-chip shows stifled the search for new talent?

“Possibly,” concedes Scholey. “He’s an immense figure so, naturally, things have gravitated towards him. There are great presenters who have come through and we work with many of them. But they wouldn’t be asked to be Director-General of the BBC or present at the World Economic Forum.”

There’s a strong list of well-known wildlife presenters – such as Chris

Packham, Liz Bonnin and Steve Backshall – but newcomers would be forgiven for feeling that it’s a particularly tricky genre in which to make headway.

It’s a situation that’s familiar to Lizzie Daly, a Welsh wildlife biologist who has presented for Animal Planet, National Geographic and BBC Two, and is due to front a three-part series on the online platform *BBC Earth*.

“It’s a difficult industry to get into because there’s so much competition – there’s only a handful of landmark productions and they only want one presenter,” she says. “But now, if you’re passionate about the natural world, you’ll find ways to tell stories, even if it’s via YouTube.”

Natural history presenting is susceptible to becoming celebrity-led, like travel and entertainment shows. For example, Hollywood star Paul Rudd narrates the Apple TV+ series *Tiny World*.

But Daly hopes that the move towards a global approach will allow the reporting of local conservationists to come to the fore. “That trend’s become a lot more noticeable recently,” she says, citing *Our Gorongosa*, a film about the national park fronted by Dominique Gonçalves, who runs the Gorongosa Elephant Ecology Project.

“Audiences want the authenticity of someone who knows that topic well. That’s how David Attenborough became so respected. Plus, when it comes to on-screen presenting, we have a responsibility to not travel across the world all the time.”

Emerging cameraman/presenter Hamza Yassin (host of CBeebies’ *Let’s Go for a Walk* as Ranger Hamza) believes that an inclusive approach to presenting helps to tell natural history stories through a new lens. “It’s about reflecting the audience,” he says. “Also, finding new talent will bring in younger film-makers. As the older generation, we need to make sure that we’re including the younger generation, otherwise they’ll feel disconnected.”

The shift is not only in the “who” of the storytelling, but also the “how”. We have already seen a growing emphasis on narrative, “and, with super-saturation of the genre, it’s going to become even more key,” warns Scholey.

Technological innovation will continue to help inject new life to stories. Attenborough’s forthcoming series with the BBC, *The Green Planet*, will be accompanied by a 5G-friendly app that uses augmented reality to bring the show’s exotic plants into viewers’ homes.

“I think the golden ticket is always about the next visual perspective, in the way that *Seven Worlds* used drones so effectively,” says McDonald. “If you look back 10 years ago, it was all quite far away – you couldn’t get that close to animals. Audiences have an unbelievable proximity now, and they desire to be in the thick of the action. And I think we’ll see more CGI. That hybrid between fact and fiction is an interesting area.”

With these developments on the horizon, the slate for the months ahead already looks crammed with natural history. *Frozen Planet II* is due later this year, Greta Thunberg will be airing her debut series for the BBC, and *Planet Defenders* will be introduced to CBBC. Meanwhile, ITV re-enters the landmark natural history arena with *A Year on Planet Earth*.

While the genre is clearly in the middle of a purple patch, Scholey warns that, akin to its subject matter, balancing forces are at work.

“I’ve seen a few of these cycles before, so there’s a slight sense of déjà vu,” he says. “To me, the interesting thing is how long this boom will last for – and what happens afterwards.” ■

Rob Beckett and Romesh Ranganathan...
taking on the art world



**Rob Beckett and
Romesh Ranganathan**
reveal the secrets
of their Sky 1 hit,
Rob and Romesh Vs

Sky

Laughing all the way to the ballet

Comedy is hard graft. But comedians Rob Beckett and Romesh Ranganathan made light work of an RTS session that turned the spotlight on the pair's hilarious Sky 1 factual entertainment series, *Rob and Romesh Vs*. The third season starts this month.

The show sees the likely lads gamely taking on unfamiliar worlds and situations. It could be basketball or, more unlikely still, ballet.

They even underwent the indignities of colonic irrigation for the benefit of the cameras in series 2 – an experience Ranganathan told the RTS that he still regrets – while in LA getting the low-down on NBA basketball. “To give you an idea of how bad we were at basketball in the show, but we were allowed to have a colonic,” recalled Ranganathan.

Having TV stars do ridiculous things is a telly trope that goes back at least to

the BBC's *In at the Deep End*, featuring Chris Serle and Paul Heiney.

In the new series of *Rob and Romesh Vs*, the duo grapple with the worlds of tennis, drag performance and art.

In one episode of the last series they joined the Birmingham Royal Ballet, an experience that led to them performing *Swan Lake* live on stage. Yes, really. Watching them struggle into their ballet tights was not for the faint-hearted.

And, once they got down to learning to dance, it became clear that Ranganathan wasn't a natural.

“Everything we do, we're hoping we find some undiscovered ability – but it hasn't happened for me yet,” he explained, tongue planted firmly in cheek. “The ballet revealed a really annoying trait of Rob, where he's happy to say we're doing this as a team until he spots any kind of distance between us in ability.

“Once he knows he's better than you, he'll cut you loose in a heartbeat.”

Beckett conceded: “If I'm half good

at something, I'm like a rat up a drain-pipe.” The ever-enthusiastic Beckett provides the perfect foil to his comic partner's deadpan style.

The settings that they enter in the series have something in common – at least one of the pair is completely ignorant of these worlds. This is where the comedy comes in. And it helps that the pair's friendship is genuine, something that was abundantly clear during this good-natured chat, where, despite the limitations of Zoom, their rapport and affection for one another shone through. Like the series itself, the RTS session was a perfect pandemic pick-me-up.

“In this show, when we go and do mad things, when we're so out of our comfort zone, especially something like ballet... I don't think I could do those things without Romesh,” said Beckett.

Ranganathan added: “Often, when we're about to do something really terrifying, one of us will look at the other one and go, ‘This is going to be

OK, isn't it?" They agreed that the thrill of putting themselves up for these potentially intimidating situations was comparable to when they started doing stand-up, a feeling that tended to dissipate the more performances they clocked up.

"We still get off on that buzz when we throw ourselves into something as stressful as these situations," said Ranganathan. "When you're doing stand-up, you think that it is in your power to make this gig go well, whereas, if you're doing *Swan Lake*, it isn't in your power to make it go well.

Today, they are familiar faces on TV thanks to panel shows such as *8 Out of 10 Cats*, *Have I Got News for You* and *A League of Their Own*, and BBC Two's Bafta-winning *The Misadventures of Romesh Ranganathan*. "We first met in a pub playing to about eight people and, in 2019, we co-hosted the Royal Variety Performance. It's nice to have a mate alongside you for that ride," said Ranganathan.

True to his working-class roots, Beckett recalled how the pair wrote their script for the Royal Variety Performance over a cold apple juice at a

we immerse ourselves in any kind of world, we're always going to get something out of it," Ranganathan explained.

Having said that, sports do feature prominently in *Rob and Romesh Vs*. The pair had to watch five days of Test match cricket – something Beckett found akin to watching paint dry – and the new series reveals what happens when Ranganathan was introduced by Beckett to the joy – or otherwise – of golf.

As for working alongside the professionals, whether it was Carlos Acosta or cricketer Kevin Pietersen, the duo



Romesh Ranganathan and Rob Beckett... taking a crash course in golf

Sky

You're holding on, hoping you don't fuck it up too much."

"It's not like I've got a pirouette up my sleeve," chipped in Beckett, who met his partner on the stand-up circuit just over a decade ago. "I remember a friend saying, 'I've seen this Romesh and he's pretty good.' I thought: 'I'll be the judge of that.' I went to see him at his dad's pub and I thought, 'Yes, he is good.' I was quite annoyed at that point because I wanted to be the only good one at comedy."

Their careers on the stand-up circuit were on the same upward trajectory.

"I'd seen Rob perform. He was a bit obvious, but he smashed it," remembered Ranganathan, a former maths teacher.

"Coming up through comedy and telly, which is quite a middle-class world, we bonded because we both felt we didn't belong," said Beckett. "We really did get on... having a mate that you could share the madness with was great."

pub in Crawley that he'd driven to in his battered Nissan Micra.

One reason *Rob and Romesh Vs* worked, they thought, was because their friendship was genuine. "It resulted in the show, rather than the other way round," said Beckett. "I like to think that we're such good friends that we've never been competitive. We're never competing for the same job."

The show was created by its producer, CPL Productions, when Sky Sports wanted to find an original way to promote one of Anthony Joshua's big fights.

"I'm a big boxing fan," said Beckett. "They wanted to put together someone who knew about boxing with someone who knew nothing about it. Sky Sports said: 'You're really good friends with Romesh – why don't you lead him on this journey, showing him boxing?'"

The programme was a one-off but their evident on-screen chemistry persuaded Sky to commission a series. "Originally, the idea was just to do sports, but it soon became clear that, if

discovered that sports luminaries tended to be less forgiving of the pair's shortcomings than those from the arts.

"Carlos Acosta was so keen to promote ballet, and for people who are outsiders to get an idea of what it's like, that he was very welcoming to us," remembers Ranganathan. "But Kevin Pietersen just couldn't understand why we couldn't do any of this."

Commentating on a cricket match was, to be generous, challenging – as was playing it. "I couldn't even catch a ball. It was too hard," said Beckett. "Fashion, ballet, art – those worlds were a bit more open and accepting."

Although they made light of it, a lot of hard work went into the programmes. "We properly commit to it," said Beckett. "We don't just fake it for telly. We're not going through the motions." ■

Report by Steve Clarke. Rob Beckett and Romesh Ranganathan were in conversation with Caroline Frost on 5 January. It was a joint RTS-Sky event.

For real and lasting change

Narinder Minhas reviews a radical manifesto for transforming television by **Lenny Henry** and **Marcus Ryder**

Oh, noooo. The D word. Surely not Donald? No, not that D word – the other one. The one that makes your heart sink a little, too. The one that reminds you of years of struggle. The one that tells of endless meetings with fellow campaigners in drab rooms, banging heads against brick walls.

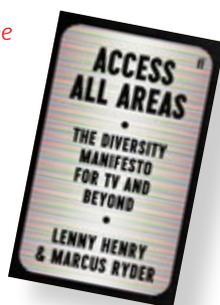
It is diversity, of course. The word that everybody hates, but no one can think of anything better. Don't get me wrong, diversity is one of the biggest issues facing the British media. And, as an Asian immigrant, who came to this country not speaking a word of English, with working-class parents, it has occupied my thoughts more times than I wish to remember.

But have we really moved on over the past 30 years? Forgive the jaded outlook, but do I really want to plough through *Access All Areas: The Diversity Manifesto for TV and Beyond* by Lenny Henry and Marcus Ryder? It feels like homework; it sounds like homework.

The reality, however, could not be more different. This is a book that everyone should read. Written in an accessible, punchy style, fizzing with ideas and warmth, with the very distinct voice of Henry beating at its heart, it is an inspiring call to arms. Don't be put off by the Jane Austen-esque references to "Dear Reader"; this is a modern text with a modern message. It is a political manifesto for today and tomorrow, demanding proper structural change. In fact, it reframes the entire conversation about diversity. And this particular reader, Dear Reader, is inspired.

Turning conventional wisdom upside

Access All Areas: The Diversity Manifesto for TV and Beyond by Lenny Henry and Marcus Ryder is published by Faber & Faber, priced £7.99. ISBN: 978-0571365128



down, the book starts with a bang, a Big Bang, challenging the very idea that diversity is about the "minority".

One of the more interesting characters in the book – and there are many – is Susie Symes, who runs a museum in London dedicated to immigration and diversity. She is a former Treasury economist, who knows her stats and does not mince her words. "One of the pieces of lazy thinking" she loves to squish is the idea that diversity is a minority issue. In fact, she says, "it is a majority issue".

But how could that possibly be true? Stay with this: "According to Suzie Symes, the people we generally think of as the majority – white, heterosexual, able-bodied males – make up less than a third of the population. The rest come under the umbrella term 'diverse'."

If we look at London, where most of the media is located and where power ultimately resides, the figures are even

'DIVERSITY IS NOT A MINORITY ISSUE... IT IS A MAJORITY ISSUE'

more staggering. Those white, able-bodied, heterosexual men in London make up just 3.1% of the national population. The other 96.9% are the rest of us, who, right across the country, are female, black, Asian, LGBT+, Welsh and many, many other identities.

As the book argues in its jaunty style, "We think of ourselves as the minority, when, really, we are the majority. If you are of the mind that this new drive to make society more 'diverse' does not include you – then you, my friend, like members of the Covid-19 fan club, are in a very, very small minority."

Just like the seven stages of grief, the book induces a range of emotions. I often got stuck at the "anger and bargaining" stage. Not surprising, given the truly disturbing statistics: women make up roughly half of the students at film school, but only 13.6% of film directors in the UK; non-white people make up 14% of England and Wales and yet only 2.2% of TV directors.

And, for disability, which is seriously neglected, it is even more depressing: 14% of people in employment aged 16 to 64 consider themselves disabled, but only 0.03% are found in the overall film workforce.

And as Henry told *The Daily Telegraph* last month: "I don't believe men are six times more likely to be better directors than women, or white people are 6.3 times more likely to be better than someone from an ethnic minority, or able-bodied people are... OK, my calculator just had a nervous breakdown at this point, because the figures are so ridiculous!"

Behind these gruesome statistics are the real human stories. This is where



Lenny Henry

Getty Images

the book is at its most moving. Ryder tells the story of a friend of his, Jay Merriman-Mukoro, who drowned in Barbados in an accident before he could direct his first film. It was Ryder who was about to give him his first break as a director, something that should have happened a long time before: “His talent was so immense and obvious. He should have had a plethora of directing credits.”

This theme of “wasted talent” runs through the book and it was hard not to hold back the tears when I read: “Jay was never able to fulfil his potential. The same is true for too many people from diverse backgrounds working in television – we may not die as tragically and early as Jay, but our untapped potential follows us to the end of our careers.”

Instead of just touching on the emotional impact, the book delves deeper and makes some fascinating links between wasted talent and mental health. Apparently, the medical profession has a term – “self-discrepancy” – to describe the gap between where you are in society and where you should be.

And it is this gap that seems to be creating many of the problems:

“According to self-discrepancy theory, prejudice in the media industry could literally be making people from diverse backgrounds mentally ill. Especially as this prejudice is nearly always indirect rather than overtly in your face.”

If you combine this with the loneliness that many of us feel in the industry, including the famous names, such as Henry and historian David Olusoga, you are left with a deeply concerning and serious mental health crisis.

So, who is to blame for the appalling state of diversity in our industry? According to Henry, “nearly all the people I have met in television are nice and liberal. None of them are secret members of the Ku Klux Klan, nor do they go to anti-immigrant rallies on their days off.”

So, it can't be them, right?

For Henry and Ryder, the issue is one of what they call “fake diversity”: years of the industry pursuing cosmetic strategies that have led to very little structural change, resulting often in “blaming the victims”. You know the stuff: we can't find the right people; we must increase our training and mentoring spend. As Henry once said: “Idris Elba went to the US because he needed a

break, he didn't need more training.”

Yes, there is more representation on-screen, but, behind the camera, where the powerful sit, the picture is broadly unchanged. Henry calls this the “Milli Vanilli” syndrome, named after the famous lip-synching duo, who simply mouthed the words of the writers operating behind the scenes.

If I had to make one criticism of the book, and I do this reluctantly, as it deserves to be read widely, I would like to have had more on the solutions. But then, this a relatively short book, around 180 pages.

Its real strength lies in the reframing of diversity. And via a brilliant analysis of the problems, it gives us a road map to steer clear of the potholes of the past, as we search for a new way forward.

As Vimla (not her real name), a diversity officer in the industry, argues, we need a radically new approach, which avoids the broadcasters and those in power essentially “marking their own homework”, and high-fiving each other on hitting their own self-set low standards. ■

Narinder Minhas is Co-Managing Director of Cardiff Productions.

David Mitchell, Robert Webb and Simon Blackwell tell the RTS how they dealt with emergency surgery and the pandemic to deliver the second series of *Back*

Viewers have been kept waiting for a second outing of *Back*, David Mitchell and Robert Webb's biting Channel 4 sitcom, which returned to our screens at the end of last month.

The delay had nothing to do with a lack of commissioning courage – how could anyone find fault with the filth and comic fury of Simon Blackwell's scripts, the ever-watchable Mitchell and Webb or the fantastic ensemble cast?

Webb took up the story at a recent RTS event, beginning with a routine insurance medical in autumn 2019, as filming was due to start on series 2: "Normally, it's very perfunctory and the doctor just makes you cough. This time, he put a stethoscope on my heart and pulled a face and said, 'Oh dear, what have you been doing about the heart murmur?' And I said, 'What heart murmur?'"

"A couple of days later, I had a cardiologist tell me I had a mitral valve prolapse, that it wasn't something that could be fixed with drugs and that I needed surgery – otherwise, the heart was going to fail in the next two to six months. That was a bit of a shocker."

Filming resumed when Webb had recuperated, but then the pandemic brought the production to a shuddering halt. Finally, the show wrapped in autumn 2020.

It has been worth the wait.

Mitchell is Stephen, a man who has failed as a husband, a lawyer and at running his late father's pub. Worse, the charismatic Andrew (Webb), supposedly a foster child of Stephen's parents, has usurped him in his family's affections.

Series 1 ended in October 2017 with Stephen strung out on booze, and Andrew in charge of the pub and loved by all. "It seemed to be a nice way to finish, with Stephen catatonic in a chair... driven to the edge of his sanity," said Blackwell, whose credits include Armando Iannucci's political satire *The Thick of It* and parental comedy *Breeders*.

In series 2, Andrew's true character remains uncertain, said Blackwell: "Once you know for sure whether he's this guy coming back to a family where he was very happy or he's Satan... you



Channel 4

Back against the odds

Back series 2

let the air out of the set-up." There was, though, a handbrake turn, he added: "In series 2, the roles are reversed – [Stephen] comes back and Andrew is the boring, mundane one [working] in the pub. Suddenly, Stephen feels that he's the exotic one, having spent some time away in therapy. We thought that was a nice mirror to the first series."

The supporting cast returns, including Penny Downie's hippy mum, her vicar lover, John MacMillan, and Geoffrey McGivern as potty-mouthed uncle Geoff.

Mitchell was happy playing Stephen, whom he described as "disappointed and self-loathing and endlessly self-doubting, also intelligent and a little bit angry. I like to play the comic mattress on which people jump up and down

– there's a lot of comedy and fun acting to be had from the character who things are happening to."

The character, Mitchell maintained, was based on no one other than himself: "What he looked and sounded like was inspired by me.... They gave me other clothes to wear that some people have been good enough to say are sometimes distinguishable from the sort of things I wear anyway.

"I'm not going to claim for a moment that I got the walk from my old geography teacher and the look of despair from a homeless man in a doorway. No, I said the words like I thought people might say them if it was really happening, which it wasn't."

Mitchell was comically dismissive of



From left: Geoffrey McGivern, John MacMillan, David Mitchell and Penny Downie

Channel 4

Acting the part

...David Mitchell

'People talk in a lot of interviews about the tremendous pain and struggle of their creative processes – that's not my feeling in terms of performing. If it doesn't feel great, then it's not going well.

'I did *Upstart Crow* in the West End... it was going well and really good fun. But one thing I baulked at was when somebody came in to work on our voices... He said: "If it doesn't feel embarrassing, you're not doing it right."

[Webb shouts: 'Oh, fuck off', and then can't stop laughing as Mitchell builds up comic steam.]

'What I didn't say to him was, "Listen, I can't play the oboe, I can't dance, I can't sing. All I've got in this theatre is my sense of what feels shit. You're not going to pay my pension, sunshine. So, if it feels shit and there's an audience watching, stop." I didn't say that to him; I went along with it.'

...Robert Webb

'As an actor, you're massively conditioned [to the idea] that the show must go on. I went to work when my wife was in labour with our first baby... I've missed funerals; I've missed weddings...

'It took having quite serious surgery for me to go: "Do I need to be here? I don't think I should be creeping around the set trying to not have a fucking heart attack."

'[Now] there are certain things that you thought mattered that clearly don't matter.... There's at least a moment [every] day when I'm fairly close to being overcome by gratitude for being alive.'

his acting, comparing his philosophy to two of the greats: "Dustin Hoffman – transformative, method; Laurence Olivier – 'Why don't you just act?'; David Mitchell – 'Why don't you just read it out?'"

"David and I try not to look too deeply into what it is about our personalities that makes writers come up with people like this for us to play," added Webb.

There are marked similarities to both actors' dysfunctional characters in *Peep Show*, the RTS-award-winning sitcom created by Sam Bain and Jesse Armstrong, for which Blackwell also wrote.

"Andrew is a liar. So is [*Peep Show*'s] Jeremy, but Jeremy was an idiot, whereas Andrew is a better liar.... He goes around telling these whoppers," said Webb. "So Andrew is either this very needy person who's so desperate for approval that he will say potentially quite dangerous things, or he's an absolute maniac.

"I never really decided during series 1 or 2. I'm not sure if Simon [Blackwell] has decided. Certainly, the character doesn't know what he's doing. He's like [Tony] Blair, he believes it while he's saying it."

Mitchell and Webb met almost 30 years ago at an audition for a Footlights panto at Cambridge University and immediately began writing together. Their first attempt, recalled Webb, was "a terrible sketch called *War Farce*.... When we read it out to the rest

of the group, it completely died, but we had a brilliant time writing it and really made each other laugh. The same things amuse us and we amuse each other. That's been a very strong part of what's kept us going."

Mitchell added: "We've always been on – it's a sort of clichéd phrase – the same comic wavelength, and yet we don't come across like we're necessarily going to be..."

"We have always found the same things funny but we have contrasting personas."

The duo wrote for other people's shows, before landing roles in the BBC Two sketch show *Bruiser*, and then getting their own vehicle, *The Mitchell and Webb Situation*. The wonderful *Peep Show* followed.

Back is a worthy successor. On the eve of series 2, Webb was able to laugh at his ill-health, which he said was all too evident on screen: "The continuity is pretty funny on my face.... You've got someone who is clearly very, very ill... and then you've got someone who is not ill any more but pretty knackered, and then, finally, someone who is [pointing at his face] whatever you think of this face. It tickles me to watch that." ■

Report by Matthew Bell. 'Back preview and Q&A' was held on 20 January, chaired by journalist Caroline Frost and produced by the RTS and IJPR.

Refining Sky's winning strategy

Sky's new CEO, **Dana Strong**, is a dynamic former engineer who knows how to stand out in a room, says Kate Bulkley



Comcast

It is just over two years since Comcast bought Sky for a massive £30.6bn, but it is only now that the company has appointed one of its own senior executives to run the European pay-TV giant. Last month, the dynamic Dana Strong, head of Comcast Cable's consumer services business, was announced as the successor to Jeremy Darroch, who led Sky for 13 years and was chief financial officer before that.

Strong's appointment represents the end of an era for Sky and comes as the TV business is being challenged by the rise of direct-to-consumer streaming services led by Netflix, Amazon and Disney.

While Sky's brand and business remain strong, the impact of the pandemic, as live sports were cancelled and advertising fell, led to a 22.5% drop in earnings for the nine months to 30 September. Some observers argue that a pivot is needed to ensure Sky's future growth and market relevance.

For the past three years, Strong has been running Comcast's consumer

cable business in the US. There, she launched several new products and reset the strategy of the consumer cable unit to focus on changing consumer needs.

Strong, who has two teenage children and a husband who is an art history PhD student at Columbia, rebranded the Comcast broadband product to Xfinity and added wi-fi boosters and parental controls as part of the package.

"Dana knew that focusing on just speed and price wasn't going to move the needle," says a US colleague.

Strong's ability to lean into product segmentation comes from both her pedigree as an engineer and her 20 years' experience of working outside the US, in both Australia and Europe; she was COO for Virgin Media, and chief transformation officer at Liberty Global as well as CEO of Liberty's Irish cable TV operator, UPC Ireland.

"She really knows how to navigate the upper echelons of corporate environments very effectively and how to bring out the best in people who work for her," observed Claire Enders, who runs Enders Analysis. "That inspires

both great loyalty in them and good results for the company."

Although a native of the US – Strong was born in Ohio – most of her career has been spent outside of the US. She met her husband, Mark, when they were both studying in Philadelphia. A colleague notes that Strong jokes that she first left the US so long ago that Bill Clinton was still President.

Strong will report directly to Comcast CEO Brian Roberts, who poached her from Virgin Media in 2018 following reports that she was a rising star. A recruitment dinner in Philadelphia followed, when they discussed Comcast's family-oriented culture and she decided to accept his job offer.

Three years later, Roberts recognises there are big changes afoot in the cable business and figures that Strong has the right credentials to tackle them.

Even so, Craig Moffett of media analyst MoffettNathanson believes that the business case for Comcast's decision to buy Sky is still unclear. He argues that a more "platform-agnostic business model" is required to counteract the trends of cord cutting and companies



Babylon Berlin

SKY

prioritising their own direct-to-consumer distribution over third-party players such as Sky and Comcast.

However, others might counter that Sky is already “platform-agnostic”, because it owns NowTV, one of the UK’s biggest direct-to-consumer broadband services.

To bolster its distribution business, Sky has already committed to doubling its content spend, reaching £1bn a year by 2024. In June 2019, the company also unveiled Sky Studios, a pan-European production arm that will create new shows for Sky channels, Universal Pictures and NBC broadcast and cable, as well as for third parties. Meanwhile, Sky Elstree Studios is set to open in 2022, creating up to 1,500 jobs.

Sky has agreed deals to acquire Netflix, Disney+, Discovery+ and Amazon’s Prime Video on its platform, but creating original content is clearly a big part of the plan. The focus will be on drama and comedy following the success of the multi-award-winning *Chernobyl*, *Gomorra* from Sky Italy and *Babylon Berlin* from Sky Deutschland.

The content side of the business will

arguably be the steepest learning curve for Strong. Some observers have expressed concerns that, under Strong, Comcast could scale back Sky’s investment in content or integrate it more with NBCUniversal.

“Dana is going to have quite a few big questions to answer, with the biggest probably being deciding what the growth plan is,” said a TV executive who has worked with her. “Sky is a different business to what she has run before. She understands the retail side well, but she has never done the content side.”

While the UK business is far and away the most profitable part of Sky, there are potentially bigger growth opportunities in the German and Italian markets. In Italy, a big push on broadband and mobile products has already begun, while, in early 2020, Sky Deutschland appointed its new CEO, Devesh Raj. Before joining Sky he was a senior vice-president for strategic and financial planning at Comcast NBCUniversal in the US.

Raj and the CEO of Sky Italy have both reported to the head of Sky’s UK

business, Stephen van Rooyen, for the past year, an indication that, under former CEO Darroch, there had been a move to centralise Sky. It seems likely that Strong will continue to bed this in.

Having worked in Comcast’s Philadelphia HQ for the past three years, Strong should be able to drive still more co-ordination between Comcast and Sky, for example in R&D and product innovation.

Sky has built its brand on pioneering technology and product innovation. Coupling that with the scale and ambition of Comcast will allow Sky to “double down on innovation”, says a Sky observer.

Clearly, there are some challenges ahead. Finding a growth plan in Germany may mean thinking beyond pay-TV. In the UK, it may be about identifying new products, such as home security or new mobile services – initiatives that will help “sweat” the subscriber base harder as well helping Sky reach new customers.

Growth could also be achieved through acquisitions or expanding the geographic footprint, which might be easier to persuade Comcast to fund, given Strong’s credibility with Roberts and the HQ team in Philadelphia.

Enders believes that Strong is joining Sky at an opportune moment. She says that Sky is noted for its “disciplined” approach to what it is willing to pay for live sports rights – particularly the English Premier League. With most other key content rights secure until 2026, working out the long-term telecoms strategy of Sky will be Strong’s biggest challenge.

“There is a transition to the fibre universe that is coming by the end of the decade, and positioning for that will be a strategic challenge,” says Enders.

The growth plan and the rationale for Comcast to pay as much as it did for Sky may still elude media analyst Moffett, but he concedes that “sharing managerial talent can be one source of synergy, and Dana Strong is an exceptionally talented leader with rare experience in both the US and Europe”.

Strong also has flair, a characteristic noted by Enders, who booked her to speak at the annual Deloitte Enders conference when she was still working at Virgin Media. “She has an articulateness and a freshness in her approach that is compelling,” says Enders. “I also remember the trouser suit she wore which was in that bright Virgin Media red. It was so *Avengers*, so cool.” ■

Sargent-Disc's end-to-end digital payroll workflow



CrewStart™



Payroll



Payslip

An end-to-end digital payroll and auto enrolment workflow that has been designed to allow safe and efficient remote working for your production and accounts teams.

CrewStart™

- Start forms and contracts
- Time and attendance
- Hot costs
- Timesheets

Payroll

- Payroll worksheet submitted to SD
- Auto enrolment assessment
- Pre-processing
- Draft reports
- Approval for processing
- Final reports
- Payments sent

Payslip

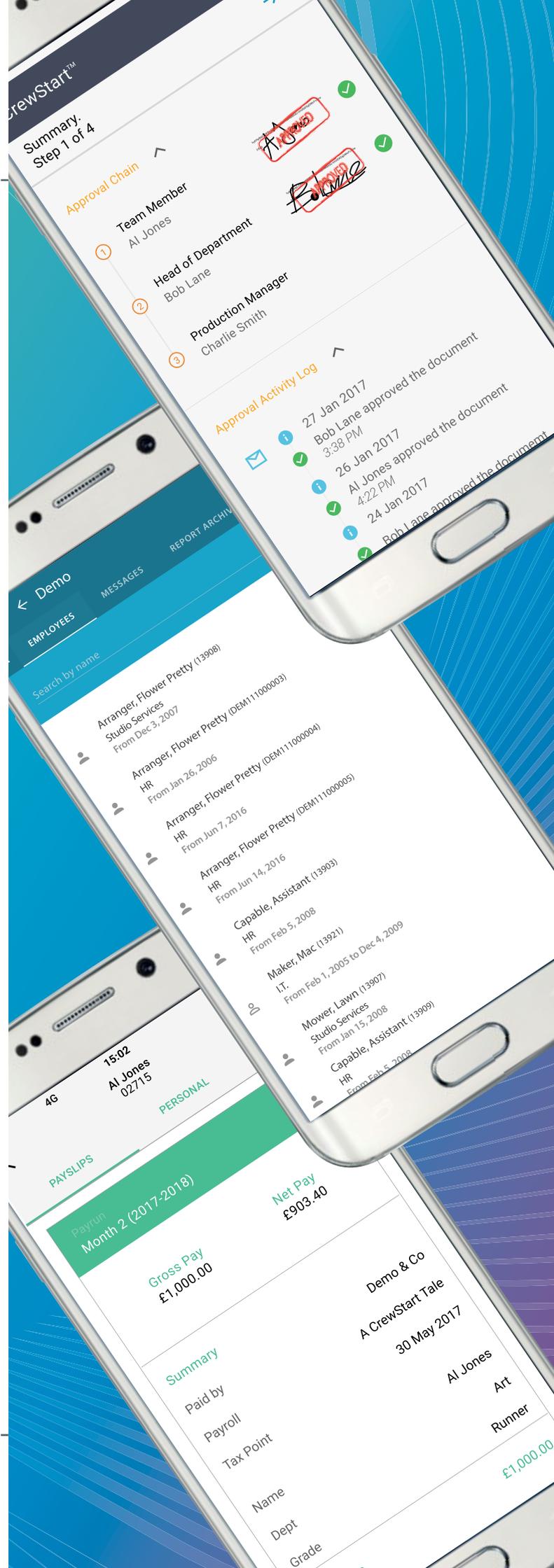
- Payslips published securely
- Auto enrolment notices published securely
- P45s/P60s published securely

Overwhelmed by start paperwork?

To find out how you can save time and go paperless on your next production whilst reducing administration and ensuring accuracy, visit the Digital Production Office® website.

or contact us for more information:

T: +44 (0)1753 630300 E: info@sargent-disc.com



OUR FRIEND IN THE SOUTH WEST

‘I have never before been gifted with such an abundance of natural beauty.’ The words of Steven Spielberg when asked his thoughts on Devon when he was here filming *War Horse* on Dartmoor in 2011.

Cinema has long held a fascination with Devon and Cornwall. Some of Hollywood’s most celebrated directors have shot here. Ang Lee filmed *Sense and Sensibility* in South Devon. Roger Mitchell shot *My Cousin Rachel* there, too, and Tim Burton has used both counties as a backdrop.

TV dramas have a love affair with the landscape of Devon and Cornwall as well. *Wycliffe* was filming in Cornwall way back in 1994 for five series. *Doc Martin* has been running for 16 years. The Dawn French vehicles *Wild West*, *Delicious* and, most recently, *The Trouble with Maggie Cole* were all shot here.

There was the Dartmoor-set Julia Ormond drama *Gold Digger*, and the endless succession of Rosamunde Pilcher, Agatha Christie and Daphne du Maurier adaptations. The list goes on and on.

But it’s not just Hollywood and TV dramas that are drawn to this most beautiful corner of the country. Factual programming has also found it a rich seam to mine.

At Twofour, we’ve always been at the front of the line for championing the region. From two series of *Cornwall with Caroline Quentin* to the most recent series of *Cornwall and Devon Walks with Julia Bradbury*.

In between, we’ve done everything from following the marines in Lympstone to the Royal Navy schools in

Devon and Cornwall locations are a magnet for filmmakers – and never more appreciated than in lockdown, says **Chris Williams**



Chris Williams

Plymouth and, most recently, a holiday park in Looe!

Others have been quick to follow with a plethora of shows, including *Cornwall: This Fishing Life*, *Cornwall with Simon Reeve* and *Rick Stein’s Cornwall*. And Channel 4 is on its third series of *Devon and Cornwall*.

What’s driving this love affair with the South West? Is it simply a rural fantasy of a bygone age of rolling hills and sun-kissed beaches? Is it because the two counties conjure nostalgic bucket-and-spade memories of family holidays?

Undoubtedly, Covid has a part to play in our current obsession. When it comes to leisure, the pandemic has forced us to reassess our relationship with travel, narrow our field of vision

and appreciate our own backyard a bit more.

But I think it has also encouraged a yearning for a more innocent world, and maybe a more relaxed and simple life. There is a perception that Cornwall and Devon are somehow trapped in a time capsule, a glimpse of Britain 30, 40 or even 50 years ago.

It’s an idyllic vision of small-town, tight-knit communities; hardworking fishermen, caring farmers, passionate artists and independent businesses. All looking out for each other.

It’s not just a myth, or a TV artifice. Those stories do exist. They are here. It’s not the complete picture of life in these two counties, as Simon Reeve’s series poignantly points out, but it’s at least a partial truth.

Living and working in Devon, I’m very aware of its natural wonders, its breadth of breathtaking landscapes, its picture-postcard villages and its rich cultural history.

But it’s more than that. It’s not just the climate, or the cream teas, the beaches or the pasties. To me, it’s the atmosphere and the attitude. The spirit of the people.

From a programme-maker’s perspective, it’s a great place to live and work. And a great place to film, a treasure chest of heart-warming stories and stunning locations.

At Twofour, we are very lucky to have such a bounty on our doorstep. And we are proud of this region and all it has to offer. In a world of negatives, it’s a positive that we are celebrating our homeland. ■

Chris Williams is the series director of Twofour’s ITV show *Cornwall and Devon Walks with Julia Bradbury*.

Season 2 of
The Mallorca Files
is guaranteed to bring
some much-needed
light to BBC One's
winter line-up

The first series of BBC One's *The Mallorca Files* aired at the tail end of 2019 and proved a huge hit with critics and day-time audiences. On the surface, it's fluff, but it's also clever, funny, and beautifully shot and acted.

More than anything, *The Mallorca Files* recalls the wildly successful 1980s comedy drama *Moonlighting*, in which Bruce Willis and Cybill Shepherd sleuthed and flirted in equal measure.

This is no accident, as the show's creator Dan Sefton admitted at an RTS event in mid-January: "Definitely, just totally stole it. From the very beginning, part of the discussion was that we don't really do those buddy cop, light crime shows any more. I grew up with *Moonlighting* – loved it, it was fantastic."

Sefton, a former doctor who penned ITV's *The Good Karma Hospital* and BBC thriller *Trust Me*, recalled the one-line pitch for the series: "Essentially, it was German and British cop on Mallorca." The tweak, which confounds any lazy stereotyping, is that it is the German who is gregarious and loves life but proves less than efficient as a detective.

Sefton was thrilled at the reception for the first series: "[We] wanted to make a fun, light-hearted, sexy, sunny show... and I think the vast majority of people really bought into that."

Series 2, which began its new run on BBC One at the beginning of the month, offers more of the "will they, won't they get it together" relationship between Welsh cop DC Miranda Blake (Elen Rhys) and her German colleague, DC Max Winter. The latter is played by the Vienna-born and -raised Julian Looman, a new face to British TV audiences. Rhys is best known for BBC drama *Ordinary Lies*.

The Mallorca Files offers some much-needed escapism during the UK's third coronavirus lockdown. "We can't wait to get it into the schedules," said BBC daytime commissioning editor Helen Munson at an RTS preview in early January. "Winter is pretty dark and



BBC

Daytime fun in the sun

dreary, and you want a bit of lovely light and sunshine. But this year, more than ever, it's so important – the sun and scenery are what we're all craving."

The Balearic island landscape shares joint billing with Rhys and Looman. The producers, Clerkenwell Films and Cosmopolitan Pictures, worked closely with the island's film body to find standout locations. "At the beginning,

when we started talking to the producers, we were a little bit worried [about] Mallorca as a crime set," said Pedro Barbadillo, head of the Mallorca Film Commission. "But it's a great way to show what locations Mallorca has to offer for other series and films. We are very happy to host the series."

Munson added: "Mallorca is very familiar to a lot of our audience but not



The Mallorca Files

BBC

Will they, won't they?

The odd-couple relationship between the detectives played by Elen Rhys and Julian Looman is at the heart of *The Mallorca Files*.

The producers tried out four different Mirandas with four Maxes at audition but, recalled Looman at the time, 'it was immediately obvious that I had the best chemistry with Elen'.

Will the chalk-and-cheese detectives – Max Winter is a lazy cop with a big personality, while Miranda Blake is professionally driven but uptight – finally get it together?

As series 2 starts, Blake has rejected a promotion in the UK and decided to put down roots on Mallorca. 'It gives her the opportunity to enjoy island life and be a bit more open and relaxed,' said Rhys. 'As she and Max become better friends and their partnership grows, she's influenced by him and his approach to life... Hopefully, you'll see a bit of a warmer, more open Miranda.'

Looman revealed that Max tries to become a better cop and person. 'Max's big [thing] is his... lack of responsibility in season 1. In season 2, he's taking [more] responsibility – there's a growth'

Yes, but will they or won't they...? Rhys was coy about revealing too much: 'You'd like to think that the "will they, won't they" element is what keeps bringing people back – the core of the series is the Max and Miranda relationship. But, with anything like that, the moment they do get together, perhaps, might dispel some of the magic.'

'In series 2, we didn't want to keep playing on that one tone... so their relationship develops in a different way... it's like a slow burn.'

Looman added: 'We have made six episodes out of 10, so we still have four in the pocket – it's a surprise what will happen.'

the bits of Mallorca that we're showing in this series. People see it as a beach-holiday destination but, in these episodes, you're seeing so much more about island life. As well as the dynamic between the two leads, that's certainly what appealed to us.'

Series 2 features a chase up the Calvari Steps in Pollensa, atmospheric old Palma streets and bars, and even a scene filmed during the half-time break of Real Club Deportivo Mallorca's La Liga match against Valencia. 'We had just 20 minutes to shoot the sequence on the pitch – there was a lot of pressure on us,' recalled Looman.

Sefton promised more scenery and escapism for the show's second outing, but also revealed that it would take on tougher topics, such as the Spanish Civil War.

This is the subject of an episode – Sefton's favourite of the new series – featuring Phil Daniels playing a 'hard-bitten, ex-pat private detective'. The showrunner added: 'There are lots of great references to [film] noir, so I think it's a great example of what we do well. It's funny – you can watch it on one level but it's clever as well.'

'Some of the information is shocking and disturbing but, if you did a

very po-faced drama about this, it wouldn't be as accessible to people,' said Sefton.

'It's about that mix of tone. It's not easy to do and you're always trying to get the balance right,' he continued. 'We try and keep it contemporary and relevant but, at the same time, it's an entertainment show.'

Filming on the second series was curtailed by coronavirus restrictions early last year. 'We had to leave before the last four [were shot]. I'm very pleased that we were able to get six out, but I'm also sad because we had some great new writers [on board]. There's some great material still waiting there,' said Sefton.

'We're in a very good position to carry on as soon as it opens up – we're a show that could start straight away.'

The stars of the show are both keen to return to Mallorca. 'I've loved living there for half of the year and miss it terribly. I'm desperate to go back,' said Rhys. 'We get to go to the most beautiful locations. It's a dream job.' ■

Report by Matthew Bell. The Mallorca Files preview and Q&A was held on 12 January. It was chaired by journalist Emma Bullimore and produced by the RTS.

A duty of care

Ofcom is beefing up rules aimed at protecting vulnerable people who appear on TV shows, reports
Caroline Frost

For decades, putting members of the public on screen was a win-win situation. From *Blind Date* to *The Generation Game*, from *Survivor* to *Big Brother*, there was always new fodder for the tabloids, huge audiences for advertisers – including that vital but hard to reach 16-24 demographic – and, for ordinary folk, the chance for a few dazzling moments to make their lives extraordinary.

In 2018, everything changed with the death of Sophie Gradon. The former *Love Island* contestant's suicide prompted questions about the mental health of those who participate in reality shows. In the digital era, these contestants experience unprecedented personal scrutiny in mainstream media and, especially, on social media.

Another contestant from *Love Island*, Mike Thalassitis, killed himself in March 2019 and more questions were asked. Two months later, a contestant on *The Jeremy Kyle Show*, Steve Dymond, killed himself a week after appearing on the show. Instantly, we were reminded that these “characters” were, in fact, not caricatures created in a writers room, but real people.

Parliament swung into action. An inquiry was set up to examine what was happening on these programmes. Suddenly, reality TV had got all too real.

Now, 18 months after the inquiry began, Ofcom has announced changes to its rules. Specific guidelines coming in March, and to be enforced from April, will extend the scope of the Broadcasting Code.

While the regulator has long



Love Island

protected the rights of under-18s and other vulnerable people, the new guidelines extend that duty of care to people made vulnerable by their participation in TV shows. This applies during production and broadcast, and afterwards, particularly on social media.

Damian Collins MP chaired the House of Commons select committee inquiry into reality television. For him, a wider duty of care is a basic responsibility of broadcasters and programme-makers.

“It’s not a special duty of care. It’s bringing them on a par with other professionals,” he says. “People should know what they’re signing up for. It’s not a news broadcast where someone talks and goes. You’re bringing in members of the public, where you’re going to present them a certain way, whether it’s as a liar or as cheat. You’re stripping them of their agency.”

With the new rules covering public participants appearing across all TV genres, not just reality shows, it seems there’s good news and bad for

broadcasters and programme-makers.

The good news for companies is that this new requirement will result in few changes to the procedures they have been following in recent years regarding reality-TV participants.

David Jordan, the BBC’s director of editorial policy and standards, says: “We’ve had guidance on that for the past decade. We recognise that even people who don’t have inherent vulnerabilities can be made vulnerable as a result of being put in the public gaze. That runs through the gamut of shows, although it’s more pronounced in constructed reality.”

Paul Moore, head of communications and corporate affairs at ITV, highlights the benefit of the altered code: “There is nothing in these amended rules that we weren’t already doing. The great benefit you get when you formalise them, is that you are much more likely to think more deeply and clearly about what the risks are, and, therefore, what mitigation you need to put in place.”



ITV

However, one of the most challenging aspects of the whole exercise is that it is, frequently, the most vulnerable people who are affected. The people who are often the most enthusiastic to sign up for a trip to the *Love Island* villa, a stint in the *Big Brother* house or a dramatic reunion with an *Ex on the Beach*, are the very people who, as Ricky Gervais so damningly described it, “live their lives like an open wound to be famous”.

Prash Naik, former general counsel for Channel 4 and now a lawyer at Reviewed and Cleared, makes the point that producers can rely only on material that contributors are prepared to disclose: “Experience says that there will always be certain information your contributor won’t share, if they think it means they’ll be excluded.”

For Jordan, the risk assessment approach – analysing and, if necessary, rejecting participants – is one the BBC has been used to taking: “The screening process is very important. It is sad that,

sometimes, we do have to turn people down because we don’t think they’re psychologically suited to the kind of scrutiny they’ll get if they take part in a show.”

For Moore, clearly sensitive to ITV’s tragic record in contributors’ vulnerability, any extra money or resources committed to risk assessment early on in the process is well worth the outlay: “Investing the money in better analysis and improved screening gives everyone more guarantees that only people with adequate resilience will be allowed to participate in the higher-risk genres. You don’t want people dropping out or being affected afterwards.”

One of Ofcom’s senior associates, Lily Bewick, stresses that there is no wish on the part of the regulator to squash participants’ opportunities: “We don’t want to dissuade anybody from taking part. But it’s important that, when they do, they are properly informed as to what that entails, both during the show and afterwards.”

The bigger challenge for broadcasters, the one that might be seen as the bad news, seems to be Ofcom’s standard procedure of applying its guidelines equally across the industry and to all programme genres.

Naik says that, while the makers of established reality-TV shows will not be adversely affected by the code’s changes, other genres will experience a significant impact. He explains: “It will require putting in place risk assessment and care procedures with a clear paper trail so that, in the event of a complaint by a participant that they have suffered harm, the producer or broadcaster can demonstrate that they took reasonable steps to mitigate against this.”

He argues that, while news and current affairs, with their quick turnarounds, should not have been subject to such provisions, producers can take some comfort that the rules include a public interest exception and a proportionality requirement.

So, for example, a game show contestant may require a lesser duty of care than a *Love Island* contestant, and a subject of a news investigation even less when measured against the public interest. “Ultimately, these are value judgements,” Naik believes.

The BBC’s Jordan thinks that having a “one-rule-fits-all” approach represents a challenge for many different genres: “The difficulty is ensuring that something devised to cope with the kind of instances we’ve seen in reality-TV does not have a deleterious effect on news and other output, which is not the reason this came into being.

“We’re still wrestling with that, trying to minimise the impact on areas which were never the problem.”

At its best, reality TV will continue to provide great entertainment and drama without anyone suffering in the process. One recent example of what is possible was the 2019 series of *Love Island*, when contestant Amy Hart was left heartbroken by Curtis Pritchard and decided to leave the villa.

Moore remembers: “It was clear to the viewer that Amy had the support she needed. She worked her way to leaving with her head held high, and that narrative arc was as compelling as any we’ve had.”

So what will success look like? For Collins, it is straightforward: “We don’t see a repeat of the tragedies we’ve seen in the past, as a consequence of people being misrepresented and not being supported.” ■

“I opened the door and f***** exploded.” Dreams can be wild – stories that our minds involuntarily create as we sleep. While most of us forget them the next morning, Martin Freeman had one five or six years ago that became the inspiration for a TV series.

“I knew I had gone through this many times in real life... I was going up the stairs to go and shout at my children,” he recalled. “With each step, I was talking myself down: ‘You know you’re better than this, and they won’t respond positively.’”

“I thought I’d got the better of my temper before I opened the children’s bedroom door...”

The opening scene of *Breeders*, a raw, pacey, swearsy comedy about parenting, produced by Avalon and FX Productions and broadcast on Sky 1, was taken directly from Freeman’s dream.

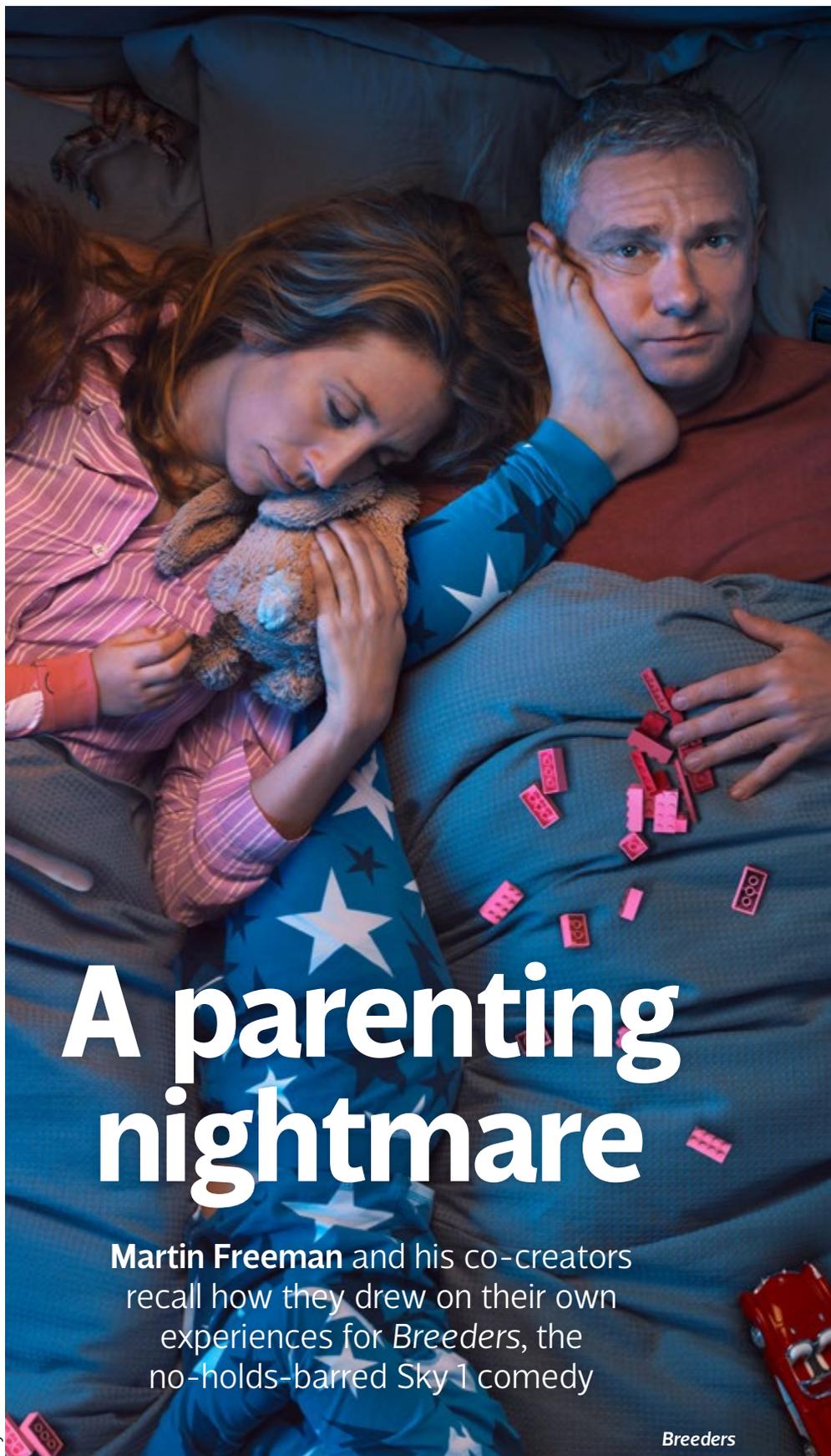
Created by Freeman, director Chris Addison and writer Simon Blackwell, the 10-part series aired last spring and is an uncompromising look at modern parenthood. A second series was commissioned in May and is due to air later this year.

Addison and Blackwell have impeccable comic credentials, having collaborated with Armando Iannucci on such masterpieces as *The Thick of It*; Blackwell wrote for the brilliant *Peep Show*.

“That scene became the opening episode of a comedy that spoke to what it truly means to be a parent in my and Chris and Simon’s shared experience,” said Freeman. “We found enough common ground between the three of us – all the stuff you don’t say in polite society and all the truths you’re harbouring about how you sometimes speak to your kids.”

Freeman plays fortysomething passive-aggressive parent Paul, juggling the stresses and strains of fatherhood, work and maintaining his relationship with his wife, Ally, played by Daisy Haggard.

There is a lot of Freeman in Paul, who, alongside Haggard, Addison and Blackwell joined broadcaster and journalist Edith Bowman to discuss *Breeders* for an RTS event. He acknowledged that he is, in effect, playing himself. “If there is ever a character that is as close to me as possible, then it’s Paul, and it’s unashamedly so.”



A parenting nightmare

Martin Freeman and his co-creators recall how they drew on their own experiences for *Breeders*, the no-holds-barred Sky 1 comedy

Sky

Breeders

He added: "I enjoy playing a character close to myself because it takes off the pressure of, 'Oh, you've got to do a limp or an accent or whatever'.

"Paul's not me but he's quite like me. The idea was to get as close [as possible] to the truth of parenting in a comedic setting.

"I loved *Outnumbered* [the mould-breaking BBC One sitcom created by Andy Hamilton and Guy Jenkin that ran for five series]. They struck gold but what was always missing was: why is someone not threatening to put someone's head through a window?"

Breeders appears to have been cathartic not only for audiences, especially those stuck at home with their offspring during the pandemic, but also for its creators.

"[Our meetings] felt like therapy – we all said, when we talked about our various [parenting] experiences, that it felt like we were in a sort of support group," remarked Blackwell as he recounted the trio's early brainstorming sessions for *Breeders*.

"Audiences have thanked us for saying the things they didn't think we were allowed to say," said Addison.

Haggard was similarly impressed with the show's realistic tone – and, despite having recently given birth to her second child, was keen to audition for *Breeders*. "I could hardly walk and was exhausted, but I read the script and it was brilliant," she said. "It made me laugh so much but I thought: how am I going to do this? I already had a three-year-old.

"I remember sitting at home on the floor, rocking the baby in a car seat with my foot while my husband held the script out in front of me so I could read it."

In common with *Outnumbered*, *Breeders* strives for naturalism. While *Outnumbered* contained a lot of improvisation, *Breeders* "is pretty much scripted – but the naturalism of it is a testament to the cast", said Blackwell.

Sometimes, though, it is better if nothing is said at all. If a picture paints a thousand words, a look on the actor's face can sum up an entire scene.

"Once we get into the edit, sometimes we might lose a line because we've got a look that does the job," Addison said.

With so much swearing in *Breeders*,

the programme's makers had to devise a way to conceal the four-letter words from the child actors who are a key part of the show.

Freeman revealed that "we would do our non-swearing version with the kids. Then we'd take the kids out of the room, do our swearing – they've got headphones on, so they don't hear any bad words."

Haggard, grinning, noted how they would substitute polite words for

such an intense experience that we wanted to have that pace and that volume of story. It's quite fragmented in terms of style, flash backwards and forwards and sideways."

A case in point was the very first episode, which depicts Paul and Ally's tortuous struggle to get to sleep – and to get their kids to sleep – while other characters and side stories are introduced that were not part of the main storyline.



Breeders Sky

four-letter ones – using the word "clock", for example.

Addison explained that the mezzanine-styled set was a device to give the feeling that the characters were always under pressure and in the presence of each other: "It gives you nowhere to hide. If you look down the stairwell and you see the den at the bottom, it is full of crap – all that plastic stuff that kids accrue."

Another important device in *Breeders* is the flashback and the flashforward, which help hit the balance between humour and drama. "You're allowed, when you flash away from whatever the crisis is, to get some comedy in there," said Blackwell.

He added: "Parenting young kids is

"It makes it more interesting than it would be if you just filmed it as someone's story through the night, unable to sleep," he suggested.

But the show is not all humour. Bowman pointed out that "you laugh your pants off but there are some brilliant emotional threads in there as well".

Blackwell said it was important to keep *Breeders* feeling authentic: "If you do push things too far and it stops feeling real, then you pull it back until it feels real and universal and primal. We wanted to make it feel serious in certain points, but equally, if you push it too far, you end up in soap land." ■

Report by Omar Mehtab. *Breeders* was an RTS event held on 11 January.



Sky reaches for the stars

Zai Bennett reveals why the satellite giant is splashing out on a star-driven line-up for 2021

Intergalactic

The prospect of a brand-new Michael Winterbottom drama starring Kenneth Branagh as a pandemic-beleaguered Boris Johnson has already got mouths watering among audiences and critics alike, and *This Sceptred Isle* is just one of Sky's bumper line-up of 125 new Sky Originals promised for 2021.

Keeley Hawes, Rita Ora and Dame Judi Dench are among the other big names bringing star power to Sky, with the broadcaster announcing 30 exclusive original films and 30 documentaries, all part of an impressive roster that promises 50% more original content than last year.

If this seems a highly ambitious project after the production chaos of 2020, Zai Bennett, managing director of content for Sky UK and Ireland, explained that it was the culmination of half a decade's investment across drama, comedy and entertainment. This has been boosted by Comcast – Sky's owner since 2018 – pledging to support Sky's aim of owning its own content: Sky plans to spend £1bn a year on originals by 2024.

Bennett told the RTS: "We're getting into original film for our Sky Cinema service, and landing documentaries in a really big way. We're about investing in authorship."

He revealed that he had already binged on one high-end drama, *Intergalactic*. Coming to Sky 1 in April, the series is a mix of soap and sci-fi, following a mutiny on a women's prison ship in space – what he described as "Orange is the New Black in space". He noted that "the vast majority of the cast is female – in the sci-fi world, that's not normally the case. It's fun, with great production – the money is on screen."

Away from drama, the factual commissions sound equally broad, with titles such as *Liverpool Narcos* and *The Bangers: Murder at the Farm*. Bennett said: "It's about a theatrical premium experience. Character and narrative are really important in our documentaries."

The list includes new profile documentaries on Stephen Hawking and Tina Turner, and Bennett sounded particularly enthused by *Bruno vs Tyson*. "It's the story of society at that time through the fights these two guys had," he said, confident that it would find a large audience beyond boxing fans.

Despite the big names on the list, there was good news for aspiring

Sky

film-makers and producers across the board, claimed Bennett: “For front of screen, it’s all about the narrative and the story. The story’s the star. We’re often looking for shows, developing them from the beginning, investing in authorship.”

In factual, too, there was room for more: “We’re commissioning docs at a fairly fierce rate. We’re coming into this marketplace and we want really high-end pieces.

“Across the genres, there’s plenty of scope for companies to get involved with us. For small companies, there are many ways we can help you or partner up to get those shows away. Our doors are open.”

Anyone visiting Sky’s huge compound at Osterley, west London, comes away aware of the broadcaster’s focus on sustainability. Bennett said: “Sky takes it incredibly seriously. We’ve done it across the board, making sure productions are net carbon neutral. Telly is such an amazing force for change. Where we can have an important impact, we want to try.”

Alongside this concern, sits Sky’s commitment to workplace diversity. Its target is to have a fifth of its employees from ethnic minority backgrounds by 2025. “Sky likes setting itself a target and then smashing it,” he said. “Doing it for our societal good as well is a great thing. We’ve had targets in production since 2014. It’s a moment to judge ourselves, to say to the world, ‘This is how we’re doing it.’”

On-screen, too, he agrees that a bunch of white men together is no longer a good look: “Audiences will desert you. It would be terrible. We can’t make any show that doesn’t reflect the world that we live in.

“We need to help producers, and ask them, ‘Do you need more time to make a show, more money?’ Every show is bespoke, and every solution to inclusion is bespoke.”

Sky’s big plans for 2021 follow a year in which its shows, like those of other broadcasters and streamers, have found big audiences thanks to the lockdowns. “Viewing has gone up massively – the pie got bigger and our share of that pie has grown by 7%,” said Bennett, citing titles such as *Gangs of London* and Billie Piper’s impressive turn in *I Hate Suzie*.

This purple patch, however, began the year before with the all-conquering, multiple-award-winning *Chernobyl*, the

epic drama co-funded by Sky that became, as Bennett proudly reminded us, the most-awarded single show ever at the Baftas. Of showrunner Craig Mazin’s phenomenal achievement, Bennett said his own job had been, as it was now, to be the “quality controller”. “All we can do is invest in the creator’s vision. We were there to help them realise that.”

Bennett looked back on the success of the miniseries as a turning point in Sky’s approach to content: “We’d been making pretty good telly up until then

the broadcasting of live performances. “It’s about promoting the arts and being a force for good for the arts,” said Bennett.

With the BBC’s increased focus on iPlayer on the one hand and the growing audiences and deep pockets of the streaming platforms on the other, Sky occupies a unique position in the British marketplace. For Bennett, the broadcaster’s mission remains straightforward: “It’s about adding value to the Sky subscription. The channels are brands. Commissions need to be talked



RTS

but *Chernobyl* was a moment when everyone said, ‘We’ve got to take you guys seriously’. We’re shoulder to shoulder with the best in the world now.”

As for whether such critical acclaim is more or less important than commercial success, Bennett argued that the two went hand in hand. “Sky is a commercial entity. We make money by our customers being satisfied with shows they can’t get anywhere else, that they think are awesome. Part of people thinking the shows are awesome is winning the odd award.”

Another demonstration of Sky’s ever-broadening goals was the recent addition of Sky Arts to Freeview. “That’s about Sky giving back something to the nation,” was how Bennett explained the decision to take Sky Arts free-to-air. “We want people to enjoy and love that service, showing that we are really part of the cultural community in the UK.”

Brand-building ideas for the channel have included artists being invited to take over the channel for a period and

about, to be loved, to be something that sparks conversation.

“We’re not necessarily looking at ratings themselves, it’s more about making sure that customers have choice, that there’s something for everyone in your home that is one of their favourite shows – it’s about the shows being brilliant.”

Pressed on what brilliant shows he had been watching during these strange days and long evenings, Bennett declined to reveal his personal favourites from the many comedies, dramas and factual shows he had commissioned. “That would be a way to make all of my genre routines for the future really awkward,” he said.

Like the rest of us, though, it seems that he is a sucker for something to escape into: “At home, I tend to watch fiction and narrative pieces to relax.” ■

Report by Caroline Frost. Zai Bennett was in conversation with Minnie Stephenson of Channel 4 News for the RTS on 25 January. The producer was Lisa Campbell.

New stages under construction at Elstree



The race for space

With three dramas shooting early this year, *Chernobyl* producer Sister has run into a familiar problem for many producers of scripted shows – finding studio space in the UK.

Sister's head of production, Magali Gibert, says it has been difficult to find what it needs for upcoming adaptations *The Power* (for Amazon) and *This is Going to Hurt* (for the BBC and AMC) and crime drama *Landscapers* (Sky and HBO).

Sister is just one of many producers vying for limited studio space in an era of buoyant UK content production, which hit £3.62bn in 2019. Growing demand for shows from streamers and US studios, attractive tax incentives for making films and high-end TV here, and the country's highly regarded crews, talent and infrastructure have all conspired to drive up output and, with it, the need for more sound stages.

Yet very little new studio space has come on to the market, despite plenty of announcements about new developments (see box opposite). "There is a long way between a press release and a shovel in the ground," says Stephen

Tim Dams explains how the boom in scripted shows is driving the need for more UK studios

Bristow, partner in the film and television unit at media accountants Saffery Champness, who played a key role in the introduction of the UK's tax relief scheme for high-end drama.

The new Sky Studios Elstree, which has 13 sound stages under construction, will be one of the first to open, aiming for the first half of 2022. Eastbrook Studios in Dagenham, east London, with 12 sound stages, is targeting 2023.

Sky Studios COO Caroline Cooper says the investment in its new studios comes as the Comcast-owned firm has more than doubled its investment in original content. "We need places to put those shows," she says.

Sky is working in partnership with sister-company NBCUniversal on the new studios. "They really enjoy making movies in the UK, and they'd make more if they had more space to do it," says Cooper. "Between the two of us,

there was a real demand for some more capacity."

Pressure on studio space has also been growing since Disney and Netflix signed long-term deals to lease all the stages at Pinewood and sister studio Shepperton Studios, respectively.

Saffery Champness is projecting double-digit annual growth in UK film and TV production over the next five years. As a result, Bristow doesn't think the new studio developments will lead to oversupply. "It will be good for the industry to have more studio competition," he says. "Producers pay a lot of money for studio space in the UK, so the more entrants the better."

In the short term, the need for stages is only likely to grow, thanks to Covid-19 and Brexit.

Covid has led to producers looking for relatively safe, controlled studio environments at a time when many locations are nervous about accepting large film crews. International travel restrictions make shooting abroad a major challenge, and have caused many to opt instead for UK bases.

Brexit has added to the challenge of filming UK productions in the EU, given the need for work permits and

carnets in many countries. There are also short-term worries about moving kit to and from the continent to hit shooting deadlines due to port bottlenecks and paperwork problems.

Environmental concerns, adds Gibert, are also leading many producers to favour building (and recycling) sets in a UK studio, rather than flying cast, crew and kit around the world.

Not every production requires a studio, of course. It is possible to be creative and to film in converted warehouses or shoot extensively on location in the UK. But a professionally run studio, with its ancillary services, such as props, parking, make-up and costume,

housing, you are really struggling.”

Until recently, most studio expansions and new builds were led by local authority investment, as the studio business model is a risky one. Most tenants only stay for short periods; long void periods can be very difficult for the business.

Local authorities were prepared to invest because they recognised the long-term benefits that studio facilities brought to their communities, such as skilled and well-paid jobs, and growth among support-service companies.

Now, however, private-sector money is increasingly attracted to the sector, particularly in the South East. Aermont



Netflix's *The Crown* has required a number of lavish studio sets

Netflix

is a big draw for complex, high-end productions.

In 2019, Lambert Smith Hampton (LSH) – a leading property advisor to the UK film and TV industry, and involved in developments such as Eastbrook Studios and Sky Studios Elstree – estimated that an additional 170,000m² of studio space would be required in the UK by 2025.

LSH head of media real estate Christopher Berry stands by that figure. He notes that existing studios, such as Pinewood and Leavesden, have added new stages since then but no new complexes have been completed. “There have been hardly any new stages built and, if anything, demand is stronger.”

Securing sites, and funding and building studios takes time, explains Berry. In particular, there’s strong competition for sites from other industries. “Logistics is the hot investment sector,” says Berry, citing the growth of online shopping and its demand for large distribution warehouses.

The needs of the logistics and studio sectors are identical, he adds. Both want big sites that are well connected in the South East of England. “When you throw in demand for residential

Capital’s 2016 acquisition of Pinewood for £323m is widely seen as a success, particularly in light of the studios’ long-term tenancy deals with Netflix and Disney. This has given other investors the confidence to follow suit.

Post Covid, some think studios look more attractive for real-estate investors – certainly compared with office property, as home-working looks set to continue. Given the underlying growth rates in production, studios are also, arguably, a safer bet than the overheated logistics sector.

Indeed, Hollywood property developer Hackman Capital Partners is investing more than £300m in Eastbrook Studios in Dagenham. Legal & General, meanwhile, is providing financing for Sky Studios Elstree. Elsewhere, New York-based Bateleur Capital is backing studio developer Quartermaster, which plans to open a number of studios in the UK.

In the medium to long term, this means the studio development boom is likely to bear fruit and drive up the number of stages available to producers. But in the short term, finding studio space is likely to remain as challenging as ever. ■

New studios in development

■ Sky and NBCUniversal have begun construction on Sky Studios Elstree, with 13 stages set to open in the first half of 2022. Sky Studios CFO Caroline Cooper says construction is on track and has been ‘remarkably unaffected by coronavirus’.

■ Hollywood property developer Hackman Capital Partners has agreed a £300m deal to build Eastbrook Studios in Dagenham. With 12 sound stages, it has a 2023 completion target date.

■ Leeds Studios, backed by Allied London’s Versa Studios, is set to open this spring, with four stages located near Channel 4’s base in the city.

■ US studio operator Blackhall Studios says it will invest £150m in a studio complex near Reading.

■ In Liverpool, two stages are being developed as part of plan to transform the former Littlewoods Pools building.

■ *Peaky Blinders* creator Steven Knight is developing Birmingham’s Mercian Studios with six stages. It is targeting a 2022 launch.

■ Last month, news emerged of three new stages being built as part of the Meridian Water development in Edmonton, north London, by Troubadour Theatres, and opening this spring.

■ In Kent, the Creative District Improvement Company and Quinn Estates are behind the Ashford Studios project on a 15-acre site.

■ Studio operator Quartermaster is developing two television studios, in London and Birmingham. It is also working on four film studio developments within the M25.

■ Elsewhere, Manchester’s Space Studios and north London’s Elstree Studios are adding two stages each. In Northern Ireland, Belfast Harbour Studios plans to build six more stages. Pinewood has consent for 26 more stages at both Pinewood and Shepperton. Great Point Media has taken over the lease of Wales Seren Studios, with an option to expand the site. Bristol’s Bottle Yard Studios is adding three stages as part of an £11.8m expansion.



ROYAL
TELEVISION
SOCIETY

RTS TELEVISION JOURNALISM AWARDS 2021

THE RTS CONGRATULATES
ALL THE NOMINEES

LIVE STREAMED ON
24 FEBRUARY

HOSTED BY MISHAL HUSAIN

#RTSawards

FULL NOMINATIONS AT:
rts.org.uk/award/tvj2021

This year's RTS careers fair broke new ground and increased attendance, reports Matthew Bell

The annual RTS Futures Careers Fair returned early this month in a new and bigger form, with exhibitors from the length and breadth of the UK.

Held over two days, More than 2,200 people signed up for the two-day virtual event, hoping to get their foot on the first rungs of the TV ladder.

"This year's virtual careers fair has been a huge success. We have welcomed more attendees, and offered more sessions and industry exhibitors than ever before," said RTS Futures Chair Alex Wootten. "It has also been more accessible and inclusive.

"It is testament to the hard work of the RTS Futures team and all the industry professionals who volunteered their time to inspire and inform our members at the start of their careers."

The fair, which was sponsored by the National Film and Television School and IMG Studios, offered almost 90 interactive exhibitor booths. These allowed companies to speak to attendees, who could also attend a CV clinic, an "ask me anything" area and sessions geared to newcomers and those in the early stages of their TV careers.

More than 1,400 CVs were submitted, and the total number of chats across the "virtual booths" was just under 6,000.

A session on access schemes offered the inspiring story of Toby Winson, a young Kent builder who discovered a love for writing through blogging about his recovery from alcoholism.

He entered the Media Trust's "Breaking into news" competition to find journalists from diverse backgrounds. ITV Meridian journalist Chloe Oliver mentored Winson, whose winning report on alcohol education in schools was broadcast on TV. "The scheme gave me contacts and the chance to show people in a newsroom what I could do," he said.

Winson took every opportunity going for work experience and was rewarded with a series of short-term contracts. He now has a permanent



Job fair spurs ambitions

Emmanuellelhoni.com

job at *ITV News Meridian*, producing lunchtime news bulletins. "It's been life-changing," he said. "If I can make it, anyone can. Trust me."

In "Making the local news", *ITV News Meridian* reporter Kit Bradshaw, BBC East executive Rachel Sharman and BBC regional journalist Emmanuelle Lhoni, discussed journalism outside the capital.

Bradshaw worked on radio and TV national news at Sky, before moving to *ITV News Meridian* as an on-screen journalist. National broadcasters tend to react to events, he said, whereas with "regional news – and it's what I love about it – nine times out of 10, you are generating your own stories."

Sharman started out in radio, before becoming an early video journalist, filming and editing her own packages for TV. Currently, she produces the *BBC Look East* evening news. She said: "A regional newsroom throws you in – there are not that many people to hold your hand. You are going to go and film and get on telly [quickly]"

Lhoni worked for the BBC World

Service as a bilingual reporter (she speaks French and English) and a news presenter, before returning to her native Manchester to work for *BBC North West Tonight*.

She stressed the importance of work experience: "It doesn't have to be with an established, well-known company – you can do community or hospital radio... or have your own YouTube channel – anything that shows you are interested in the field and have the commitment to make your own content in your own time."

The remaining sessions on the first day of the fair were "Get ready for your first job in TV", with line producer Jude Winstanley, and a Q&A with award-winning director David G Croft who now runs the entertainment TV course at the National Film and Television School.

On day two, there was a session on programme development; a masterclass on long-running BBC drama *Silent Witness* and a session on opportunities for women in broadcast media technology. ■



Intelligence: Nick Mohammed and David Schwimmer

Sky

Schwimmer crosses pond

Steve Clarke learns how an ex-President informed the *Friends* actor's character in Sky 1's GCHQ-set comedy, *Intelligence*

RTS London Over the years, much has been written about the difference between British and American TV comedy. The Brits go for short series and tend to avoid writers rooms. Across the Atlantic, 22-part comedies are common and writers rooms essential.

But, according to one of the biggest stars of US sitcom, these distinctions tend to be exaggerated.

"There are different cultural references and, sometimes,

there's a difference in humour, but I think funny is funny," David Schwimmer told an RTS London event in January. He was discussing his first comedy show since *Friends*, Sky 1's six-part *Intelligence*, a workplace caper set in a fictionalised GCHQ.

The actor added: "The main difference is our process. *Friends* was performed live, in front of an audience with four cameras, and was like doing a one-act play every week. You rehearsed four days a week.

"*Intelligence* is mostly single camera – two when there is likely to be lots of improvisation. It was more like shooting a movie or a single-camera, half-hour comedy."

Schwimmer joined Nick Mohammed, who wrote and also stars in *Intelligence*, for the RTS discussion; both men are executive producers on the show.

It emerged that the *Intelligence* character played by the former *Friends* star, the maverick Jerry, owes

some of his brashness to Donald Trump.

"He is inspired not only by our former President, but by a lot of the white men in power who've been enabling him," said Schwimmer.

"They're just as dangerous, if not more so. But it was important to realise that each of these men, the senators and congressmen and others, are real human beings and have their own weaknesses.

"What we landed on was that Jerry's need for power and his narcissism was a combination of ignorance and a growing feeling of irrelevance – his being out of touch – and a huge amount of insecurity."

In the second series of *Intelligence*, due later this year, audiences will learn more of Jerry's past, promised Schwimmer, and why he is so damaged.

Make no mistake, however, the show isn't about to deviate from its inherent silliness and gag-driven style or its physical comedy, at which

both Mohammed and Schwimmer excel.

Mohammed said: "Of late, there's been a fashion for

comedy drama. I enjoy a lot of those shows. But there was never any question that *Intelligence* would be an outwardly, bare-chested comedy in its gag rate and its joyous silliness."

He added: "There aren't too many recent examples of shows that put comedy first, above emotion, drama and storytelling.

"I wanted to make a show that has lots of proper laughs over a short space of time.

That's because of the influence of shows such as *Friends*, which had a huge gag rate. Even [with] a show as nuanced as *The Office*, you can count the gags."

Schwimmer added: "I'm a fan of all kinds of comedy. I love dark comedy when it's done well. I am not so sure I am a fan of shows that are kind of dramatic comedies.

"I thought the situation of the comedy was inherently original and really funny. Equally important, was the opportunity to be able to work with Nick.

"I thought we'd have a lot of fun improvising on set. I feel incredibly grateful to have a job where you go to work and have fun and try to make people laugh. It's very humbling." ■

'Get the intel on *Intelligence*' was an RTS London event held on 21 January. It was hosted by journalist Boyd Hilton.

'HE IS INSPIRED NOT ONLY BY TRUMP BUT BY THE WHITE MEN IN POWER WHO HAVE BEEN ENABLING HIM'

Asa Butterfield, who plays gauche teenager Otis Milburn in the Netflix comedy *Sex Education*, has described how he was blown away by the show's remarkable success. "I don't think any of us realised the scope that Netflix brings – being on the platform and being available around the world immediately for anyone to watch on their phone or their TV," he told the RTS last month.

"It's insane. I'd worked in film, where there's a build-up to the release date, but to have it all there at the touch of your fingers was quite surreal. Then, to have it amplified by social media. I'd experienced some of that in my [previous film] work, but, for some of the cast, going from very little public exposure to being on one of the most watched shows on Netflix was insane."

In *Sex Education* Butterfield, who is 23, is cast as the son of sex therapist Jean Milburn, played by Gillian Anderson. He said: "It was a privilege to have Gillian Anderson play my mum.

"Funnily enough, my actual mum is a psychologist – not a sex therapist – but [has] a similar vein of questioning and [is] quite cerebral. Me and Gillian have a lot of fun.

"We found this really nice rhythm to the mother and son relationship, which sometimes is quite mature and civilised, but, at other times, they can both be so immature.

"It's quite a volatile relationship. There are some very touching scenes and very funny scenes."

When he accepted the part of Otis, who, as the story progresses, becomes a reluctant sex therapist at his school, Butterfield wasn't sure *Sex Education* would be a hit "because of the way it pushes at boundaries" by



Asa Butterfield

Vice/Fumi Homma

Growing up in movies

Film star **Asa Butterfield** recounts the whirlwind impact of working on Netflix's *Sex Education*. Steve Clarke listens in

virtue of its sexual content. "For me, as someone who's not done much comedy, not much sexual comedy, to push myself on screen was fun," he explained. "I'm always looking for projects that are going to test me."

Regarding the sex in *Sex Education*, Butterfield noted: "I feel that, these days, young people are growing up quicker and exposed to a lot.

"It makes sense to treat them with maturity because of the knowledge that everyone has at their fingertips. You don't need to shy away from it."

Butterfield, now putting the finishing touches to series 3 of *Sex Education*, started acting aged seven. He revealed that he did not consider acting as a career

until he starred in Martin Scorsese's 2011 film *Hugo*.

The director told him about cinema history, giving him films to watch at the weekend. He recalled: "It was the ultimate education. That captured my imagination and made me think, 'Maybe I could do this as an adult'."

One reason Butterfield was attracted to *Sex Education* was that he wanted to be involved in a returning TV series that could expand his acting ability.

Another factor was the end of the classic film and TV divide, with US cable channels, and then streaming services, pouring millions of dollars into scripted shows.

Apart from *Hugo*, Butterfield's film roles have included *Greed*, starring Steve Coogan,

and the Holocaust movie *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*.

Butterfield was a child when he made *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. How much was he aware of the darkness of the subject matter?

"It was almost 15 years ago. I remember reading the book before we started shooting, so I did have some understanding of the Second World War and some of the things that went on, but when we made it, they did try and preserve my innocence.

"As a nine-year-old, that made sense for my mental health. I do remember some of the scenes being quite difficult." ■

Asa Butterfield was talking to journalist Caroline Frost at an RTS event on 19 January.

Republic of Ireland

“TV viewing has remained very, very strong” despite the rapid growth in streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime. So said Jill McGrath, CEO of TV Audience Measurement (TAM) Ireland, at the RTS event “What Ireland is watching” in late January.

She noted that “69% of all viewing is to linear-TV... that is viewed either live or within seven days of the original broadcast.

“In 2020, the average person watched 89 hours of linear-TV every month, which is the equivalent of watching the whole of *The Queen’s Gambit* on Netflix 12 and a half times.”

The panellists at the RTS Republic of Ireland event, chaired by the centre’s Dr Helen Doherty, agreed that linear-TV was very much alive. “Even with the wealth of choices on the Sky platform, the number-one [thing] a customer does when they turn on the box is to go to the linear EPG TV guide and choose [a] channel,” said Mark Carpenter, Sky Ireland’s director of regulatory and corporate affairs.

Audrey Clarke, Virgin Media Television’s head of audience knowledge, said:



The Late Late Toy Show

RTÉ

Linear-TV alive and kicking

“Our Virgin Media Player [is] not competition to our linear channel – it is incremental viewing to linear.”

She added: “We are actively targeting Netflix and Amazon paying customers to come back to our free, advertiser-funded content.”

McGrath ascribed the resilience of TV viewing to it being “live and local”, offering “a communal experience” and “easily discoverable” content.

TAM research revealed that, in Ireland during the pandemic, TV was “by far the most trusted medium in

terms of delivering news and information”, said McGrath.

“News was the big star of 2020 – people really wanted information across all broadcasters,” said Paul Loughrey, RTÉ head of audience insights. “The reason for that is trust.”

The most-watched programme on RTÉ, as in most years, was *The Late Late Toy Show*, which enjoyed its higher-ever ratings last year. Homegrown Sally Rooney adaptation *Normal People* was the RTÉ Player’s top show.

Viewing of Sky entertainment programmes was up 10% in 2020, said Carpenter. Sky’s biggest hit, both on linear-TV and on-demand, was *Gangs of London*. Box-set consumption, especially of older titles such as *The Sopranos*, was also high.

“The effect of Covid on viewing was massive,” said Dave Moore, schedule and research manager at Irish-language broadcaster TG4.

Its list of most-watched programmes last year was dominated by coverage of Gaelic football and hurling. “[There’s] no barrier if your Irish language fluency isn’t so good – you can still watch the matches.” News programmes and TG4 soap *Ros na Rún* were also popular.

Matthew Bell

Legal eagles battle coronavirus

RTS London

TV legal teams have responded to the Covid-19 pandemic, keeping production teams on set and shows on air.

When the UK first went into lockdown in March 2020, Fremantle lawyer Damian Kent told an RTS London event last month, “productions had to be suspended or stood down generally, so that meant looking at cast, crew and suppliers’ contracts. It meant going to broadcasters

and producers, and agreeing what payments needed to be made.... It was an additional cost on the budget.”

Katrien Roos, TV, film and theatre associate at law firm Harbottle & Lewis, recalled: “We were seeing producers grappling with new ways of working in compliance with enhanced health and safety measures that had to be put in place.... [They] were working with smaller crews and fewer extras.”

But the pandemic also brought opportunities.

At All3Media’s distribution arm, formats specialist Nick Smith was dealing with broadcasters worldwide: “Massive holes appeared in their schedules.... There was a market for sales of ready-made programmes or formats that could be made during the pandemic.”

Olusoga Adamo, head of business affairs at ITV Studios, added: “We had to look

at our chest of content... [and] make sure that the necessary rights were either there or were subsequently acquired before broadcast took place.”

Producers, though, were able to shoot some formats. *Gogglebox* was kept on air by moving production crews out of homes and into vehicles parked outside. “It’s about being adaptable and creative to make things work during this tough time,” said Smith.

The RTS London session was chaired by ex-Disney lawyer Nana Duodu and produced by Lettija Lee.

Matthew Bell

The final RTS Futures event of 2020 turned the spotlight on motion graphics and visual effects.

Emma Kolasinska, an executive producer at Moonraker VFX, who recently worked on Netflix wildlife series *Night on Earth*, started out as a receptionist at an editing facility, before moving into producing.

The key to getting on, she said, was “working hard, not pretending to know everything but finding out quite quickly”.

Junior composer Michael Vodden said: “Take opportunities and run with them – you never know where [they will lead]... a job can come out of anywhere.”

He recently graduated from Escape Studios in London with a first-class degree in the art of visual effects and worked on last year’s *CBeebies Christmas show*.

Having studied graphic design for his degree and then worked in advertising in his native Colombia, VFX compositor and motion designer Sergio Rincón moved to San Francisco to take a master’s degree in animation and visual effects. “It helped me a lot... it was a mix of artistic, technical and



Night on Earth

Netflix

How to make a splash in TV visual effects

communication skills,” he explained. Rincón is currently working in New York for Conex Digital.

A degree, though, is not essential. Kolasinska stressed that, when recruiting for VFX artists, she looked for “attention to detail in a CV and the

showreel.... If the showreel and work are strong enough, and the person in their own time has learnt their software well, then I might not always look at their [education].”

Rincón said the pandemic had given him the chance to spend time working by himself, improving his software and technical skills: “I’ve created my own projects and tried to network as much as [possible].”

Kolasinska, who leads the global e-mentoring initiative at Access: VFX, the industry-led body that aims to improve diversity in visual effects, advised aspirants to look beyond the large, London-based visual-effects companies.

“There are a lot of smaller companies popping up regionally,” she said. Kolasinska usually fills jobs with “artists that I’ve used previously, or by word-of-mouth [recommendations].... I might

[also] take a look at LinkedIn.”

Vodden added: “Every job I’ve had so far has been through my network, whether that be from Escape Studios... or friends I’ve made while working on productions. LinkedIn has been a huge help – that’s where I’ve been contacted a lot.”

Summing up the appeal of working in VFX, Vodden said: “It’s really cool... you get to take stuff that is not real and, as a compositor, to put that on the other side of the lens and make it look like it really happened – there’s something magical about that.”

The RTS Futures event “Kick-start your career in motion graphics and VFX” was held in collaboration with Access: VFX on 14 December. It was chaired by Nutoxia head of talent Natalie Spanier and produced by Spanier and Alex Wootten.

Matthew Bell

The internet ticking clock

RTS Thames Valley discussed how the broadcast industry is implementing new standards with respect to time harmonisation at its first event of 2021.

Bruce Devlin, standards vice-president of the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers (SMPTE), led the session, which featured the expert knowledge of

Richard Hoptroff, founder of Hoptroff – a tech company that helps to synchronise time in the virtual world – and Gerard Phillips, a systems engineer at Arista Networks.

The 2018 launch of the SMPTE ST 2110 standards suite was significant for live TV as it defined how we now send digital media over IP (internet protocol) networks.

Mark Couto, who won RTS Thames Valley’s Young Technologist prize at its 2019 awards, introduced the event “As time goes by... Precision time protocol in the emerging broadcast networks”.

Fine-tuning a choral classic

Thames Valley

Shortly before Christmas, RTS Thames Valley went behind the scenes of the BBC's annual choral treat from King's College, Cambridge, in the company of director Ian Russell, production engineering manager Peter Taylor and lighting director Bernie Davis.

Carols from King's, which was first televised in 1954, is a well-oiled machine in normal years, but this time the production team had to work under Covid-19 restrictions. "It became very clear early on that we would not have a congregation," recalled Taylor, who was talking to RTS Thames Valley Chair Tim Marshall, a former BBC head of events.

The challenge, he continued, was "to reflect the congregational style and make it still feel like a church service, rather than a Christmassy *Songs of Praise*".

The production considered using a "virtual congregation", but this was rejected. "It would have jarred, I think, no matter how we had done it," said Taylor, who has worked on *Carols from King's* for a decade and a half. "We also looked at putting in screens, with people joining in with the congregational hymns. In the end... it was decided that would be such a television artifice."

Russell was brought on board in early December after the original director, Pamela Hossick, became indisposed. "The viewing public expects big occasions to look... as filmic as those productions on Netflix and other such channels. So *King's*, being one of those jewels in the BBC crown, has to measure up... To have any chance of achieving that, it has to be planned down to the last crotchet."

The Covid-19 restrictions



Carols from King's BBC

brought advantages, too. "Normally, when we do *King's*, I have to fade out the congregation for most of it because they are sitting fidgeting in their Christmas jumpers and can be a distraction behind shots," said Davis. The lack of a congregation, said Russell, made the sound simpler. "There [wasn't] that noise of people in the chapel echoing around... they didn't have coughing to remove... But what they did have was a very clean sound so, if there

was a little noise, it was much more apparent than it would have been with a congregation there."

Without a congregation, the production was able to use a jib for the first time, which improved camera coverage. "Having a jib and a moving camera is something that will probably remain a part of *King's* for years to come," said Russell.

Carols from King's aired on Christmas Eve on BBC Two. **Matthew Bell**

The UPSIDE

Nose that launched a thousand sighs

It might not have been Beatlemania but, for some female fans of the mild-mannered Martin Freeman, the actor's appearance last month on an RTS panel was close to it.

The social media reaction to seeing the star on Zoom, discussing how he helped to create the fast-paced Sky 1 comedy *Breeders*, was too much for

some of his many admirers. One admitted to 'hyperventilating' at the prospect of 'seeing that perfect nose live'. Another swooned over his recent 'buzzcut'.

For the fan who was distraught that the session coincided with her maths class, she'll be relieved to know that a recording is available on the RTS website.

Logie Baird coins it for television

The Upside was delighted to hear that the 75th anniversary of the death of John Logie Baird is commemorated in a new 50p coin. The prolific Scottish inventor is, of course, one of the

founders of television. In January 1926, at his workshop in Soho's Frith Street, Baird famously demonstrated how moving pictures could be transmitted and received.

He was one of a group of engineers who formed the Television Society, the forerunner of the Royal Television Society and which first founded this magazine.

Bees' dream sets all Brentford abuzz

As we all look for silver linings in Lockdown III, former ITN chief Stewart Purvis, a director of Brentford FC since 2019, will be

much cheered by his team's recent mauling of Wycombe Wanderers. The result, you may recall, was a truly remarkable 7-2. The Bees' promotion push to the Premier League is looking more and more credible.

Micah Richards wields the red card

Talking of the beautiful game, if you haven't yet seen Sky Documentaries' *Micah Richards: Tackling Racism in Football*, this timely, heartfelt film presented by the erstwhile Manchester City and England defender is a must-watch – and its message can't be repeated too often.



RTS PATRONS

RTS Principal Patrons	BBC	Channel 4	ITV	Sky
RTS International Patrons	A+E Networks International Discovery Networks Facebook Liberty Global NBCUniversal International		Netflix The Walt Disney Company Viacom International Media Networks WarnerMedia YouTube	
RTS Major Patrons	Accenture All3Media Amazon Video Audio Network Avid Banijay UK Boston Consulting Group BT Channel 5	Deloitte Enders Analysis Entertainment One Finecast Freeview Fremantle Gravity Media IBM IMG Studios ITN	KPMG netgem.tv NTT Data OC&C Pinewood TV Studios S4C Sargent-Disc Spencer Stuart STV Group	The Journalists' Charity The Trade Desk UKTV Vice Virgin Media YouView
RTS Patrons	Autocue Digital Television Group	Grass Valley Isle of Media	Lumina Search Mission Bay	PricewaterhouseCoopers Raidió Teilifís Éireann
Who's who at the RTS	<p>Patron HRH The Prince of Wales</p> <p>Vice-Presidents David Abraham Dawn Airey Sir David Attenborough OM CH CVO CBE FRS Baroness Floella Benjamin OBE Mike Darcey Gary Davey Greg Dyke Lord Hall of Birkenhead Lorraine Heggessey Armando Iannucci OBE Ian Jones Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon OBE David Lynn Sir Trevor McDonald OBE Ken MacQuarrie Gavin Patterson Trevor Phillips OBE Stewart Purvis CBE Sir Howard Stringer</p>	<p>Chair of RTS Trustees Jane Turton</p> <p>Honorary Secretary David Lowen</p> <p>Honorary Treasurer Mike Green</p> <p>BOARD OF TRUSTEES Lynn Barlow Julian Bellamy Mike Green Yasmina Hadded David Lowen Jane Millichip Simon Pitts Sarah Rose Jane Turton Rob Woodward</p> <p>EXECUTIVE Chief Executive Theresa Wise</p> <p>Bursaries Manager Anne Dawson</p>	<p>CENTRES COUNCIL Lynn Barlow Phil Barnes Tony Campbell Agnes Cogan Stephanie Farmer Richard Frediani Rick Horne Kully Khaila Tim Marshall Will Nicholson Stephen O'Donnell Jon Quayle Edward Russell Vikki Taggart Fiona Thompson</p> <p>SPECIALIST GROUP CHAIRS Archives Dale Grayson</p> <p>Diversity Angela Ferreira</p> <p>Early Evening Events Heather Jones</p>	<p>Education Graeme Thompson</p> <p>RTS Futures Alex Wootten</p> <p>RTS Technology Bursaries Simon Pitts</p> <p>AWARDS COMMITTEE CHAIRS Awards & Fellowship Policy David Lowen</p> <p>Craft & Design Awards Anne Mensah</p> <p>Programme Awards Kenton Allen</p> <p>Student Television Awards Siobhan Greene</p> <p>Television Journalism Awards Simon Bucks</p>

P40

This page is
intentionally blank