

February 2022

Television



ITV's *The Ipcress File*:
**New battles in
an old war**

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From the CEO



Production is booming across the UK. Figures published recently by the BFI showed that, last year, spending on British film and TV production surged by almost £1.3bn on the previous record set in pre-pandemic 2019.

So don't miss Graeme Thompson's report on how the North East is being revived as a place where TV and film helps drive the local economy. High-profile producer Fulwell 73 is opening a base in Sunderland. The hope is that others will follow suit. Graeme himself can take credit for playing a part in

persuading Fulwell 73 to expand its UK operations into the North of England.

With so much production going on, TV's skills shortage remains a challenge. RTS Futures was therefore delighted to hold its annual careers fair earlier this month. We have a report from the record-breaking event, which more than 1,600 people attended.

This month's cover story features ITV's reframing of one of spy fiction's greatest stories, Len Deighton's *The Ipcress File*. I can't wait to see Joe Cole play Harry Palmer, the iconic role inhabited by Michael Caine in one of the defining movies of the 1960s.

ITN reporter Robert Moore's

remarkable coverage of the assault on Washington's Capitol last January provided the starting point for an outstanding RTS debate on the importance of trusted, impartial public service broadcast news. The panellists emphasised the importance of credible, eye-witness reporting.

ITN CEO Deborah Turness is the new head of BBC News. Steve Clarke's profile of this peerless executive is a compelling insight into what we can expect from her in her new role.

Theresa Wise

Cover: *The Ipcress File* (ITV, 2022 and 1965)

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TV diary

It's launch week. It's January. So, no sharing the love and stress of such events with like-minded buddies in the office. Instead, it's a weird dichotomy of a high-speed roller-coaster ride – but from the comfort of my front room/office.

Our talented 50-plus *We Are England* team (as the Ronseal name alludes to) spans the whole of England, from Newcastle to Leeds, Birmingham to Norwich and London to Bristol. Lock-down working practices have been the unanticipated saviours of our schedule and sanity.

Tasked with launching a brand new, 60-part current affairs series for BBC One in a world without Teams chats and virtual whiteboards, in less than nine months, would have been virtually impossible pre-Covid. We naively cheered: "Bring it on!" – back in sunny July 2021.

■ I love nothing more than the "sizzle" stage. We check in with the fabulous BBC England press team. Given our series tag line, "Our Voices. Our Stories", the spoken word is a no-brainer to bring it to life: we engage the super-talented Birmingham Poet Laureate, Casey Bailey.

This should be a breeze, with 60 half-hours (not quite finished) brimming with emotive actuality and stories of uplifting triumph over adversity to get inspired by. Casey, do your stuff. The result was a goosebump-inducing 1'30" trail that squeezed the heart of our new series into one piece of content. I'm bursting with pride.

■ Day two. I have five viewings lined up – all of which will "hold up the edit" on top of the plethora of Teams meets, so I crack straight on with a quick start-up script meeting with one of the new directors to roll out the series style and tone. We have mashed



Sarah Trigg gets emotional as she counts down to the launch of BBC One's regional current affairs show *We Are England*

up reality-TV sensibilities and glossy SVoD documentaries into the world of traditional, issue-based programming. The premise is somewhat simple – give back the mic wholeheartedly to people with a story to tell.

■ Midweek means more launch planning meets, hub meetings and our "ideas rumble", a weekly cheer-up for our country-wide team to get together and bounce about stories for series 2. Audience research are in the house, sharing some brilliant insight into serving the nation. It's never the same in 2D but, with some breakout-room banter and fresh ideas in the ring, we all come away enthused and almost over the hump.

■ Today I'm in tears – in a good way, and more than once. I view a film called *Night Nurses*, which is due to

transmit on 2 February, and is on the BBC iPlayer box set, *The Night Shift*.

It champions those who keep our country going while we sleep. This one chiefly follows three intensive care unit nurses at Heartlands Hospital in Birmingham. It's customary that people are "inspirational", but these Brummie women are bossing it. Heart-wrenching and heart-warming in the same sentence. I'm smiling, crying and laughing through writing my (very few) notes.

Next, a film authored by Leicester-born actor Jassa Ahluwalia, asking "Am I English?". As a parent of mixed-heritage Black-Caribbean/British children, his expression of raw compassion has me going again, it's a beautifully filmed, poignant and revealing watch.

■ Launch day and there's a flurry of emails with the rocks of our production – the production managers. The coverage so far has been strong, so collaborative calls with BBC marketing, press and local news teams has taken up most of the morning.

The onlines are coming thick and fast; I'm annoyingly super scrupulous. The distinctive style and look of the series were instrumental to our approach, so it must be right – our graphics guys, Heavy Object, have triumphed and I feel the rush of seeing something perfect in full HD glory.

■ Finally, a check-in meet with the BBC tech teams pressing the all-important buttons simultaneously at 7:30pm to transmit six episodes in one hit. I can't quite believe we've made it, it's magic. My mum calls to say she's even skipped *Corrie* to watch, so it must be good. I've never been so proud of a team as this lot: what we've achieved together is tremendous.

Sarah Trigg is executive producer of *We Are England*.

COMFORT CLASSIC

Matthew Bell revisits Alan Bleasdale's eloquent masterpiece, which laid bare the price of callous economics

Forty years on, the Britain depicted in *Boys from the Blackstuff* is almost unrecognisable. Liverpool is a wasteland of boarded-up shops, derelict factories and empty streets. Only the dole office is open for business.

In the hands of a lesser writer such a series would be a miseryfest, but this is Alan Bleasdale's masterpiece, with scripts that feel as fresh as the day they were penned.

He rages at the devastation inflicted by spiralling unemployment on the people of his hometown, but there is also humour, humanity and hope to leaven the tragedy. And he is never afraid to subvert expectations, taking pops at windbag Marxists yet giving a street copper sympathetic treatment.

The five-part drama *Boys from the Blackstuff*, which follows the fortunes of a gang of unemployed former tarmac workers, was first broadcast on BBC Two in autumn 1982.

It is a sequel to Bleasdale's television play *The Black Stuff* (slang for tarmac), which had aired a couple of years earlier to strong reviews and featured the same principal actors – Bernard Hill, Michael Angelis, Alan Igbon, Tom Georgeson and Peter Kerrigan.

Between the two, there was a standalone blackly comic drama for the BBC's *Play for Today* strand, *The Muscle Market*, featuring Pete Postlethwaite as a failing building contractor, which was originally intended to be part of the *Blackstuff* series.

Unemployment had topped 3 million during the year *Boys from the Blackstuff* was shown and the series was



Boys from the Blackstuff

Bernard Hill as Yosser Hughes

BBC

widely interpreted as an indictment of the Government of Margaret Thatcher. In fact, Bleasdale, though implacably opposed to Thatcher and her free-market zeal, had written most of the series before she came to power.

In the first episode, *Jobs for the Boys*, the men take a cash-in-hand job on a building site, with “dole sniffers” (undercover social security officers) hot on their trail.

This is our introduction to the drama’s most memorable character, Yosser Hughes, played by Hill with a terrifying intensity. Yosser has lost his job and wife, and is at risk of losing his three children and his sanity. Stripped of all dignity, he veers between a misplaced optimism – his catchphrases, which became ubiquitous at the time, are “Gizza job!” and “I can do that!” – and sudden violence, above all his infamous headbutt.

Subsequent episodes follow Dixie Dean (Georgeson) taking a job as a security guard and being strong-armed into accepting bribes, Chrissie (Angelis) and his wife (Julie Walters) struggling to feed their children, Yosser’s mental disintegration and the death of old socialist George (Kerrigan). It is human tragedy, with a seam of the blackest of humour running through it.

The Liverpool-born Bleasdale had already made his mark before writing the *Blackstuff* dramas. He had been resident playwright at the Liverpool Playhouse and Manchester’s Contact Theatre, and written a short 1975 TV drama, *Early to Bed*, starring Alison Steadman. There had also been a series of radio stories and a 1978 *Play for Today*, *Scully’s New Year’s Eve*, highlighting a fictional Liverpool lad, Scully.

Bleasdale notably went on to write *GBH* – widely seen as an attack on Trotskyite Liverpool politician Derek Hatton – for Channel 4 and the black comedy *No Surrender* for the cinema, which reunited him with Angelis, Georgeson and Hill.

But it is *Boys from the Blackstuff*, for which he won an RTS award, that Bleasdale will always be best known. It was hugely popular with critics and audiences on its initial transmission, winning a second showing on BBC One just a couple of months later. Subsequently, and deservedly, it has been ever-present in polls of Britain’s best-ever television programmes. ■

Boys from the Blackstuff is available on BritBox.

Ear candy

The Always Sunny Podcast

Hosted by



Rob McElhenney

Charlie Day

Glenn Howerton

Simplecast

Sick of failing auditions and studios sitting on their scripts, Rob McElhenney, Glenn Howerton and Charlie Day set about writing, shooting, and starring in their own pilot for a sitcom – despite no film-making know-how or financial backing.

The result was Netflix’s *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, a raw and riotous anti-sitcom about a gang of amoral narcissists who co-own an Irish bar but spend most of their time scheming against one another and seemingly everyone else who crosses their path. FX liked the pilot enough to order a low-budget first series, which premiered in 2005.

Now in its 15th series and the longest-running US live sitcom ever, with a global cult following still lapping it up, a watch-along podcast was long overdue, but *The Always Sunny Podcast* was worth the wait.

McElhenney, Howerton and Day present what is essentially an episodic directors’ commentary, charged with the electric chemistry that comes from writing and performing together for

almost 20 years. They admit to having no structure in mind. The 30- to 45-minute episodes meander, but it’s a lot of fun to hear them find their footing. The insights and anecdotes come thick and fast. Two minutes in and we’ve already learned how personal foibles often inform character traits – with, for instance, Day’s lactose intolerance accounting for his character Charlie’s obsession with cheese.

Having tackled thorny subjects from the start (the first series explored racism, abortion and gun control), it is interesting to hear them discuss which episodes hold up politically. The show is clearly a social satire that aims to expose ignorance of all kinds, but Day, for one, is aware that sometimes even the way they were trying to say, “This is wrong”, is now wrong.

But the main draw is the laughs. Many of their riffs are as hilarious – and as tasteless – as the show itself. So tasteless, in fact, that the catchphrase for the podcast quickly became “cut that” (their order to the podcast’s producer, Megan Ganz). You can see where their characters get it from. ■

Harry Bennett

WORKING LIVES



Live event director

Paul Dugdale recently picked up an RTS Craft & Design Award for shooting *Glastonbury Festival: Live at Worthy Farm*, a decade after his first for *Adele: Live at the Albert Hall*. The specialist live music director travels the world, filming concerts for the likes of the Rolling Stones in Cuba and Coldplay in Jordan.

What does the job involve?

It varies hugely, depending on the film, but, for the majority of projects, I'm required to capture a performance, multi-camera, as it happens, in a single take, without a formal rehearsal.

Sounds exciting but also terrifying.

The atmosphere at a gig is amazing. You can feel the anticipation of the crowd building and you've often only got one chance to capture what they're about to watch. But if you've done your homework, you're ready for it.

How big is your camera team?

It varies from project to project. We

shot two shows for Taylor Swift and in the edit we had 50-plus streams to choose from – there were so many different performance areas in an enormous venue and a lot of choreography to cover. For *Glastonbury Festival: Live at Worthy Farm*, we could be more targeted in our coverage since the stage set-ups were simpler, plus there was an absence of audience. Our biggest set-up for a band was 12 cameras.

Who do you work with closely?

Camera, lighting and sound people, the director of photography, producer and the artists themselves – having a good dialogue with them is crucial. The edit is also really important – a live event can be won or lost in the edit. I work every day with the editors in post-production to work up a cut. The job is about teamwork and I try to surround myself with talented people.

Where do you direct from at a gig?

With the Stones in Cuba, I was on a tiny trestle table beneath the stage, under

Charlie Watts' drums, so all I could hear was the thud of his bass drum. Sometimes I'm in a TV truck outside or in a room at a venue. I've been everywhere from the fanciest technological spaces to a toilet at the back of a pub.

How did you become a director?

My father was a cameraman and I spent my childhood listening to his stories about working in TV. When I was 15, I started cable bashing for him – the first thing I ever did was the Brit Awards at Earl's Court in 1996 and I found myself on stage with David Bowie and Michael Jackson.

While I was studying at Central Saint Martin's School of Art, I worked as a runner on a few projects and, later on, *TFI Friday* and a few others as a camera assistant. With that experience I landed work as a camera assistant when I left college.

What was your first directing job?

I'd been working as a camera assistant for four years, working with amazing

directors such as Russell Thomas, Hamish Hamilton, Phil Hayes and Matt Askem, on some incredible music – that was my training, listening to those people on talkback and learning from them.

I'd also filmed some zero-budget videos for friends and then got the opportunity to tour with The Prodigy,

How has the pandemic affected work?

When Covid first hit, and with no concerts happening, I didn't get behind a camera for 10 months, but I was lucky to have some existing projects to finish.

Then artists started doing live-streamed shows, without an audience – *Glastonbury Festival: Live at Worthy Farm*

homework on the event and a style guide for the camera operators.

What are the best and worst parts of the job?

Meeting and collaborating with amazing people, and I'm so fortunate to travel all around the world. I take the work

The Rolling Stones in Cuba



Amazon Prime Video

which was the start of directing for me.

My first big concert directing from a gallery was filming Adele at the Royal Albert Hall in 2011.

And you've continued working with Adele ever since...

Last year, I filmed her at the Griffith Observatory in Hollywood. It's been an amazing journey with Adele, from a tiny show at the Cambridge Corn Exchange to this enormous network TV programme in the US.

What makes a good live event director?

A mix of creativity and organisation. If you're an incredibly creative person but not very organised, you will miss crucial moments in a performance – you need to do your homework.

Is there a balance between technical know-how and artistic flair?

Sometimes it's simply a straight capture of a concert, more akin to a documentary, where you don't really want to leave your fingerprints on it, but other projects allow you to push your film-making through camera tricks, slow-motion or visual overlays – much more like a music-video approach, where the film-making itself becomes part of the presentation.

was one of them. I was very lucky, really, many people were much more affected by Covid than me.

Is it harder shooting without an audience?

An audience makes my job easier, because they're a great barometer of the emotion in the room – you can instantly show how exciting it is to be at an event by filming someone in the front row going bananas. But, without an audience, we are able to get a lot closer physically to the stage and get a really intimate capture of the performance.

What are your career highlights?

Touring South America and Cuba with the Rolling Stones, Glastonbury and going to Amman in Jordan with Coldplay. My dad used to say that being a cameraman got you into secret places – that's the huge thrill of this job.

Whose work do you admire?

David Mallet – he's done so much. He did an amazing concert for Bon Jovi at Wembley, and great work for AC/DC and Tina Turner in the 1980s and 1990s. It still stands up now.

What do you bring to work with you?

Notebook, pencil, laptop, my

incredibly seriously but it's also such fun – it's not brain surgery: we're entertaining people.

The bad parts? Egos and tricky people, although they've not been as common as you might think. The workload can also be pretty intense.

What advice would you give to someone wanting to work as a live event director?

Make stuff – this will lead to other work. The first time I worked with Adele, I got the job off the back of filming a friend at a gig with a little digital video camera.

Your passion should be driving you to make things and, out of that, something will come eventually.

Do you fancy directing in another genre?

I have some ideas for short films and would love to do some scripted work, but at the moment it's all about the music and working with the most brilliant artists. Part of the joy of my job is its unpredictability and spontaneity – you never know what's around the corner. ■

Live event director Paul Dugdale was interviewed by Matthew Bell.

West Berlin, 1963. A young man picks up a familiar-looking pair of glasses from his bedside table to

look at a beautiful woman taking a bath. Soon after, he picks up a newspaper, pausing to draw a moustache on a picture of President de Gaulle. The detail is rich, evocative and clear evidence of ITV's determination that its engrossing new big-budget six-parter, *The Ipcress File* will both pay respectful tribute to the acclaimed 1965 film, but also find a fresh audience on its own merits.

The themes of Len Deighton's famous spy novel are as pertinent today as they were when Michael Caine first appeared on screen as criminal wide boy turned government agent Harry Palmer all those years ago. As showrunner and director James Watkins, who previously co-created *McMafia*, explains, "There's a great sense of social mobility. Harry Palmer is fighting against class, [while CIA agent] Maddox is fighting against racism, and there's a glass ceiling that [Harry's colleague] Jean is looking at. All those things resonate."

For writer John Hodge (*Trainspotting*, *The Beach*, *The Program*), the appeal and also the challenge lay in adapting Deighton's first-person novel and broadening his canvas across six television hours. He wondered: "Where can we take this? How do we broaden it out and look into other characters' lives for more of an ensemble piece?" The answer, it seems, is in Deighton's great wit and warmth. "Spy stories can be grim," says Hodge, "but a feeling of humanity permeates his work. In the small moments, there is human weakness, human strength."

Key to the success of the whole enterprise (produced by Altitude Television in association with ITV Studios) is the casting of Harry Palmer, a man Watkins describes as "a winner who comes across as a loser". He adds: "He's a man aware that the whole world is skewed against him, and he uses humour as a weapon."

From the show's very first scenes, it is clear that producers have struck gold with Joe Cole, previously best known for playing young John Shelby in *Peaky Blinders*. For the "tough exterior, softer inside" he gives to Palmer, Cole reveals: "I wasn't too familiar with Harry, but he's not too far from home for me. It's an amalgamation of me and the character."



ITV's ambitious, all-star, six-part reframing of spy story *The Ipcress File* is a total treat, says **Caroline Frost**

A sixties thriller for today

ITV
Joe Cole as Harry Palmer in *The Ipcress File*

As for the shadow of that 1965 big-screen, era-defining interpretation, Cole did his best to dodge it. "I wanted to put my own spin on it," he explains. "When I watched the movie, I started worrying I'd do a Michael Caine impersonation without realising it. I quickly tried to erase that from my memory and go on instinct."

It seems those famous glasses were not so easy to dodge: "I went to the opticians, tried on every pair in the shop and one pair looked right. It was very important to get those right. It does a certain amount of work for you when you can hide behind a good pair of spectacles."

Alongside Cole in the early scenes where he is introduced to his new

Palmer's antics on the ground, a world away from the drawing rooms where her mother expects her to settle down and make a good match. Playing her as cool as a cucumber is Lucy Boynton, previously seen as Freddie Mercury's love Mary in *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

In a role significantly expanded from Deighton's book, Jean personifies many a smart young woman of 1963, struggling to get ahead in the male-dominated world of international espionage. "It is a fascinating world to explore through Jean's eyes," says Boynton, "this world we continue to be so fascinated by, this so-called era of liberation. But she uses that societal underestimation of young women to her advantage."

Jean also works with Maddox, an

the threat of nuclear annihilation. Lots of things to work with."

Indeed, a whole series suddenly doesn't seem so long, after all. The adaptation also takes the characters abroad to Finland, the US and Lebanon – in contrast to the film, which stayed firmly in London. "The six hours affords these characters journeys where you mark a different place from, say, a James Bond film," says Watkins. "There was a lot of real estate there to open up. But we didn't want a Bond travelogue. Harry Palmer is a real person, he wants to reclaim his expenses. It's all about the elucidation of these characters."

The show is palpably epic, though, both in style and structure, on a par with Watkins' previous projects. As well as *McMafia*, he directed *The Woman in Black* for the big screen and an episode of *Black Mirror*. He waxes lyrical about the production design of *The Ipcress File*, everything from the bleached colour palette to the roughness of the woollen clothes. "We were trying to keep a dirtiness to it," he says. "You're looking at everything askew, the horizon line is always shifting. The off-kilter angles have a *Third Man* influence. It's all contributing to a sense of things not being quite as they should be."

For Kevin Lygo, ITV's Managing Director of media and entertainment, Hodge's adaptation, plus the idea of Joe Cole in the lead role, made *Ipcress* a very attractive proposition. "The script was so good, it leapt off the page," he says. "It was a terribly easy commission. The budget was going to be an issue because it had such ambition – we are not Netflix, so that was where other partners came in."

In addition to ITV Studios, other backers include the Liverpool Film Office, Lipsync, Filmgate and the Finnish national and regional film funds.

This begs the question of how best to market a show that looks so much bigger than your average ITV drama. Lygo accepts that he has a big task ahead: "It's incumbent on us to market it slightly differently. It's not a standard ITV show. It needs a special event."

He groans at the inevitable comment that *The Ipcress File* looks so good that it must surely be the next big-budget offering from a deep-pocketed streamer. "People say it looks like a big Netflix thing, which is incredibly annoying," he admits. "But I do know what they mean." ■

The Ipcress File will air on ITV in March.



Lucy Boynton as Jean and Ashley Thomas as Maddox

ITV

world of espionage, is Tom Hollander, on enigmatic form as section head Major Dalby. The pair's chemistry is electric, bringing out the unlikely similarity of two such characters, despite their utterly different backgrounds. Hollander reflects: "They each have an ironic relationship to their own predicament. They're class enemies but they're actually dancing on the same pinhead, both restricted by their job and the world they're in."

It seems the double-guessing extended off-screen during the shoot, including the very first scene the pair played together. Cole remembers: "I had a preconception of how I was going to play it, but then I got in the room with Tom, who's such a heavyweight. I thought, 'Tom will see through anything I try and do here.'"

Fighting her own battles is Jean Courtney, tasked with managing

African-American young man who has already climbed up through several ranks of the CIA. Ashley Thomas, who plays him, delights in Maddox's very first line, "Yes, that's right. I'm black," as it sets the tone for exactly who Maddox is. Thomas reflects: "He's a very capable man, at a time when, because of the state of society, black men weren't given those opportunities. He's in a position of power, and he's going to have to be very good if not better than his counterparts."

With so many battles, both personal and political, taking place, Hodge has much to feast on. "It's a fascinating era," the writer agrees. "A time of social mobility; sex had just been invented in Britain, according to Philip Larkin, and we were about to enter an era of four prime ministers who had all been to state schools. There was a sense of society opening up, but there was also



Tim Davie's success in poaching **Deborah Turness** from ITN signals big changes for one of the world's most trusted news brands, reports Steve Clarke

Deborah Turness ITN

A new era for BBC News

You could almost feel jaws dropping when it was announced last month that the pioneering Deborah Turness had been appointed the new head of BBC News. Turness, 54, had only recently got her feet under the table as ITN's third CEO in as many years. Why would she give up this plum position – ideally suited to her skills at the company where she originally made her name – to take on the multiple challenges of running BBC News?

“The job is a poisoned chalice,” says one UK news chief. “But she survived and thrived at NBC, so I suspect she feels she can take in her stride everything that the BBC can throw at her.”

Certainly, Turness brings an extraordinary level of experience across the editorial, strategy and commercial

fields to a job that many people thought would go to an insider. “She’s very talented. You can see the attraction for [Director-General] Tim Davie in that she doesn’t have the baggage that the internal candidates had,” observes a senior broadcaster.

Turness began her career as a freelancer at ITN after studying journalism at the University of Bordeaux – her French is impeccable and is said to have landed her several scoops at ITN.

“This is a very Tim Davie appointment,” suggests a former colleague of Turness. “She’s been hired to shake up BBC News, which, despite its deserved global reputation for being accurate and impartial, is at times guilty of being a bit dull.”

It is understood that she was initially reluctant to be considered a candidate for leading BBC News. And only after Davie expanded the role to embrace

“the vision stuff”, and changed the job title to CEO, did she become interested in the role.

The thinking appears to be that, under Turness’s leadership, the BBC’s news operation will run below her, leaving her free to focus more on business, development, product, commercial, consumer and innovation. Intriguingly, there is speculation inside the corporation about how Davie wants to strengthen its international reputation for trusted, impartial news and perhaps even make some money from it – which would, admittedly, be a difficult task.

In a digital era driven by social media, rolling news channels are looking less than cutting-edge. And, with the BBC facing a black hole in its finances due to the two-year freeze in the licence fee, any new sources of revenue are likely to be seized upon.

In this respect, Turness's international experience and commercial expertise – she was in charge of her own department's ad revenue when she was President of NBC News – could prove hugely useful to Davie's modernisation strategy.

She was the first woman and first non-American to run NBC News when she was hired in 2013, after spending the best part of 25 years at ITN. There, she was the first female editor of *ITV News*, which won three consecutive Baftas and an International Emmy on her watch.

Those who have worked alongside her praise her dynamism. "Deborah Turness was my boss when I first joined ITN in 2006. A fireball of energy and creativity, she would come to the morning newsroom meeting to discuss the day's agenda armed with newspaper clippings and full of ideas about how to make ITV's news coverage stand out," recalls Charlotte Grant, now a consultant after working at *ITV News*, Channel 5 and Sky News.

She continues: "Deborah was always driving home the message that ITN may be up against much bigger news beasts with more resources, but, as a smaller operation, we could succeed by being nimble, thinking outside the box and, ultimately, telling the day's stories in the most compelling and engaging way for viewers."

Her success at ITN caught the eye of NBC. At ITN, she was on the team that launched the mould-breaking *Channel 5 News*, presented by Kirsty Young. The show did away with the traditional desk, leaving news anchors free to roam the studio floor, and Turness nurtured the careers of *ITV News* presenters such as Mark Austin and Julie Etchingham.

At NBC, the news division was embroiled in several high-profile scandals, including that of nightly news anchor Brian Williams, who was revealed to have exaggerated his Iraq war reporting.

Meanwhile, many old hands at NBC News resented this charismatic Brit, who was determined to turn around ailing shows such as *Today* and *Meet the Press*. "From the moment she arrived, people were looking for her to fail," says a

senior broadcaster. A former colleague recalls: "Deborah was a ball of energy, and there were parts of NBC that had an allergic reaction to it. The Brian Williams crisis didn't help, although it was nothing to do with her."

She did, however, make the decision to suspend the nightly news anchor rather than fire him – a move that angered NBC News staffers.

Of her experience running NBC

'SHE'S A FIREBALL OF ENERGY AND CREATIVITY'

News, she told *Television* in 2019: "I was brought in as someone to look and see what needed to be done to put things right. And everything was number one before I left. I was extremely happy and proud of what I had achieved. I'd always seen it as a project."

Stewart Purvis, who was Turness's boss at ITN, emphasises that her legacy at NBC was an impressive one: "I think you will find that every show she was responsible for was regularly top of the ratings in its class."

When Turness was moved sideways at the company, relocating from New York to Lyons and overseeing the revamping of Euronews as President of NBC International, she spent several months preparing to launch an NBC Sky World News channel.

She had hired a full team and the idea was to be the world's most transparent news brand and disrupt traditional news models by showing how journalists go about their work. But three months out from launch, the pandemic hit and Comcast, worried by advertising falling off a cliff, pulled the plug.

Expect this keenness to show the workings of news – evident in Ros Atkins's *Outside Source* programme on the BBC News Channel and in his "explainer videos" – to become more commonplace in mainstream BBC news outlets under Turness's leadership. His reports contain a lot of context and background, elements not always to the fore in, say, *BBC News at Ten*.

They have gone viral and been

labelled "assertive impartiality" for their more colloquial approach to reporting the news. If adopted in prime time, this experimental and innovative approach could well encourage more young people to get the BBC News habit.

Turness has also told friends of her admiration for the BBC disinformation correspondent, Marianna Spring, who made such an impression at the RTS's Cambridge Convention last September.

Turness has spoken publicly of her liking for the *BBC Africa Eye* open source reports, praised for their transparent approach to their investigations and popular on social media.

However, for many, the BBC's flagship news broadcasts and programmes, such as *Today* and *Newsnight*, remain the acid test of the corporation's journalism. One question being asked inside New Broadcasting House is whether *Newsnight* will be axed, especially as some think the programme is losing its mojo after editor Esmé Wren's departure for *Channel 4 News*.

Davie has made much of his desire to ensure that the BBC delivers value to every UK household. How it covers news across the length and breadth of Britain is essential to making good on this promise, especially now that *ITV News* is launching a new, hour-long, early-evening programme determined to provide a greater focus on stories outside London.

Turness is a legendary networker and her people skills are second to none. These are likely to be handy in the BBC's often fraught relations with government and prickly politicians on both sides of the Commons.

It is said that she even managed to strike up something of a rapport with Donald Trump while at NBC.

One thing is clear: in today's chaotic, confusing and disrupted world, where people are bombarded with contradictory information and can find it difficult to access trustworthy news, BBC News's importance as a trusted, impartial service has never been greater.

If Turness's eventual legacy at the BBC is to enhance that trust, Davie's determination to secure her as one of his most important and influential lieutenants will have paid off. ■



UKTV

Annika

UKTV beefs up VoD

After a record-breaking 2021, the BBC Studios-owned platform is prioritising streaming, CEO **Marcus Arthur** tells Steve Clarke

‘It’s the gift that keeps on giving,’ says UKTV CEO Marcus Arthur, a grin spreading across his face. The gift in question is Gold, the network’s flagship channel, whose audience share last year grew by 7%. Highlights included *The Vicar of Dibley: Inside Out*, Gold’s most popular show of the year, watched by 829,000 people, with original drama *Murder, They Hope* in second place, watched by 687,000, and returning scripted series *The Cockfields* (490,000) in third.

‘In these tough times, Gold has helped take people out of themselves. It’s done extremely well during the pandemic and will continue to do so. People ask me if it has been affected by the arrival of BritBox but it hasn’t.’

Showcasing gems from the BBC and ITV archive, Gold has been entertaining audiences since 1992. Arthur has run UKTV since June 2019 and, during his tenure, the platform’s share of

commercial viewing has grown by an impressive 14%.

We are speaking the day after the Government announced its two-year licence-fee freeze but that, of course, has no impact on him since UKTV is wholly owned by the corporation’s commercial arm, BBC Studios. It is funded by advertising and carriage fees – three of its seven channels are free-to-air (Dave, Drama and Yesterday) while *Alibi*, *Gold*, *W* and *Eden* are available only on pay services.

In common with many of his peers, Arthur spent much of the past two years working from home, rather than at UKTV’s recently revamped offices in Hammersmith, west London, and forgoing business travel in the interest of a more sustainable future. BBC Studios has vowed to cut overseas travel by 50%, a move that other distributors should perhaps emulate.

Arthur lives in Surbiton, where he

has kept himself fit by cycling, including regular sessions on his Peloton.

‘Despite the pandemic, it’s been a great time to lead this business. Our results have been incredibly strong,’ he says. Indeed, the past 12 months have been a year of record growth for UKTV as its share of commercial impacts (SOC1) increased by 5.7% year-on-year.

Much of the success was driven by original commissions – UKTV Originals accounted for six of the service’s top 10 shows in 2021. Thriller *Annika*, starring Nicola Walker, became *Alibi*’s top-performing title of all time as 1.32 million tuned in. It was joined by *Meet the Richardsons* (on Dave), *Secrets of the London Underground*, *Hornby: A Model World* and *Bangers and Cash* (all on Yesterday) and *Mel Giedroyc: Unforgivable* (Dave).

‘For a business of our size to cope with what the pandemic threw at us and still make great programmes was a considerable achievement,’ he adds.

Overall, UKTV grew its viewing share in 2021 to 4.80% (up from 4.63% in 2020), the highest share to date for its current channel portfolio. Drama registered its best year on record: its adult share was up by 11%, with ABC1s up 14% year-on-year. Gold was up 7% on its 2020 share and Alibi grew its share by 5%.

Dave increased its viewing share for 16- to 34-year-olds by 14% year-on-year, driven by new comedy entertainment shows, which have seen Mel Giedroyc, Richard Ayoade and David Mitchell join Big Zuu on the channel's roster.

Streaming may be booming but Arthur's faith in linear is clear when he says: "I absolutely believe that there is growth in linear yet. If your content is strong, you can grow linear. You only need to look at the year we've just had."

He adds: "We've probably taken a bit of share off everyone who sits above us on the EPG – ITV, Channel 4. Channel 5 is probably the only other UK broadcaster that has done as well as we have over the past 18 months. Growing your share is the most difficult thing to do because everyone is trying to do it."

Nevertheless, the UKTV chief knows that, to sustain momentum, the next stage of UKTV's evolution will be dependent on how the company develops its ad-funded VoD service, UKTV Play. "UKTV has always thought of itself as a linear-plus business but, having grown our linear, we are going to turn all our guns on VoD," he declares.

This may be quite a challenge given the money flowing into streaming services on all fronts. But Arthur sounds bullish: "We are going to massively grow our VoD over the next 18 months... We want to be bigger than My5.... The real number you're trying to grow is 'monetisable views.'" This dictates how much an advertiser-funded VoD service can make via viewers watching its content. In 2021, UKTV Play plus pay platforms grew "monetisable views" by 34%, while the total number of registered UKTV Play users reached 5.5 million, an increase of 1 million on the previous year.

To help further grow this part of the business, 12 extra staff – all of them digital natives – have been hired, doubling the size of the team. Andrea

Amey was poached from My5 just over a year ago as general manager for digital, and the marketing budget has been beefed up. Improved functionality is another way of making UKTV Play more compelling.

Exclusive short-form content is being tested on Dave's new YouTube

drama *The Diplomat* is produced by World Productions and distributed by BBC Studios.

"Studios provides financing for our drama because of its high reputation in international sales. When Studios produces, it keeps the production margin inside the parent company," says the



channel, including a show based on *Big Zuu's Big Eats*, which has the potential to be on UKTV Play. The VoD service has also bought some third-party classic series, including the ITV prison drama *Bad Girls* and US import *The Good Wife*.

The aim is to increase UKTV's share of VoD viewing to the same size as its share of commercial impacts. "The fact is, my VoD share is about a third of the size of my linear share," Arthur explains.

As for the platforms' content strategy, he emphasises the close working relationship UKTV enjoys with BBC Studios, which bought out Discovery's stake in the business in 2019. This enables it to commission exclusive high-end drama series such as *Annika* despite inflationary pressures.

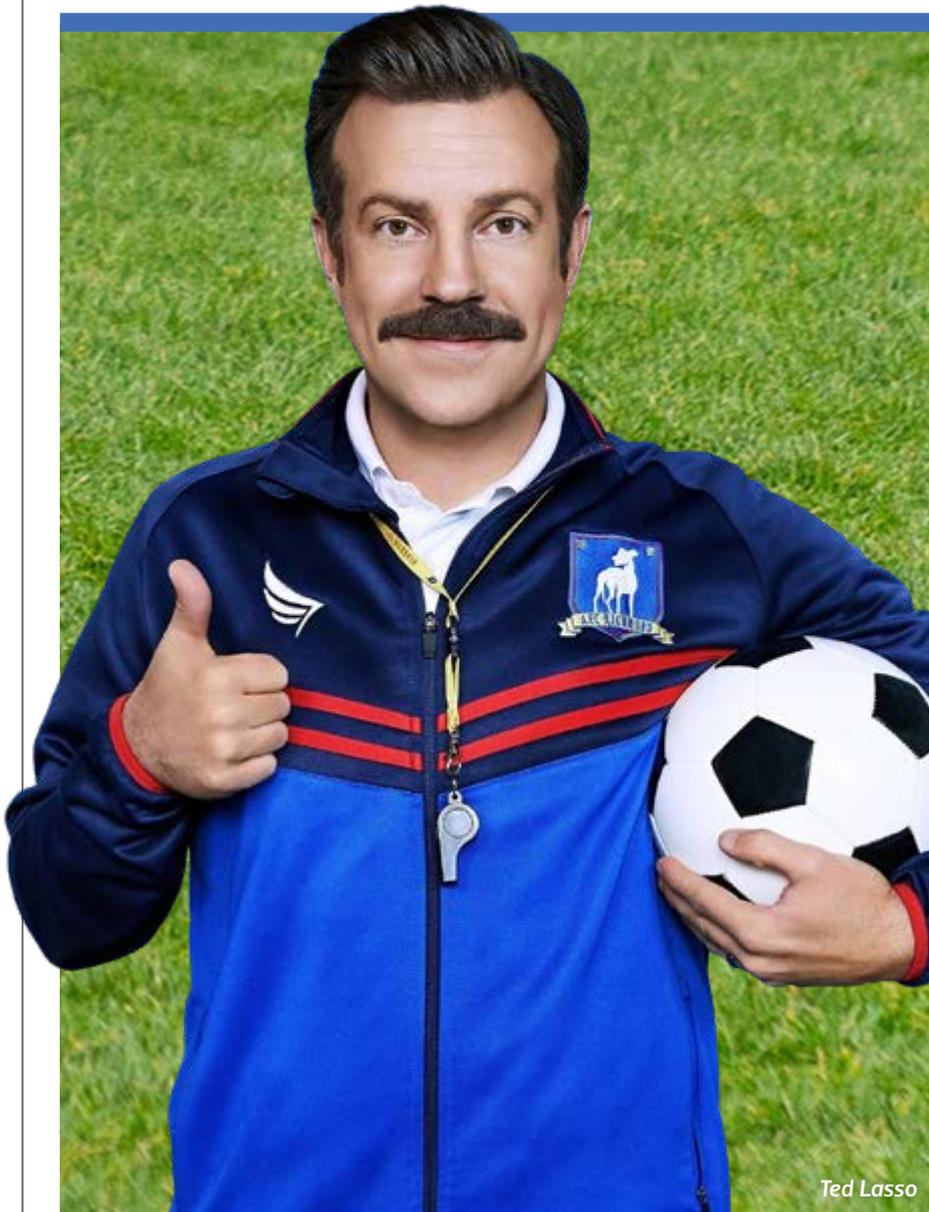
Traces (UKTV's first original drama commissioned by Alibi) was made by Red but distributed by BBC Studios, while *We Hunt Together* is produced and distributed by Studios. Upcoming

UKTV boss. "Also, BBC Studios' relationships are global. BBC America is owned by AMC, so Studios can approach it. We got a deal with AMC for *Ragdoll*, one of our most expensive dramas ever. We've also had co-productions with Pop, Brit-Box International and Showtime."

Finally, what of UKTV's channel line-up – is it set in stone or are new channel launches on the horizon? "We decided during Covid that we would focus on what we had and grow it, but we still have ambitions to launch more channels," says Arthur. "For new channels, you need two or three things to come together – the content, the EPG slot and the distribution.

"If there is an opportunity to do more linear channels and it works for UKTV, we wouldn't be shy of doing more."

Watch this space. Already 2022 feels like another year of achievement for UKTV. ■



Ted Lasso

Apple TV+

How does heart-warming breakout hit *Ted Lasso* fit into Apple TV+'s content strategy? **Shilpa Ganatra** reports

Fútbol is life

It's odd to think now but, before kicking off on Apple TV+, you may not have bet on football comedy drama *Ted Lasso* as a winner.

Originally, Jason Sudeikis's loveable Mr Nice Guy character fronted a US advertising campaign. As an American football coach turned "head coach of Tottenham Spurs" [sic], his cheerful cluelessness about the

beautiful game made him ideal to bring soccer to American culture and thus promote NBC's Premier League coverage back in 2013.

The mockumentary-style TV and digital skits – packed with gags for newcomers and underlaid with humour for those in the know – paid off for NBC as viewership of its games increased by a remarkable 91%.

Still, when soon-to-be-launched

Apple TV+ announced a series of *Ted Lasso* in October 2019, it wasn't easy to see how a snackable ad character could translate to a 10-part show.

"They were sketches, and didn't have depth to them, so when you went into the show you were expecting something throwaway and silly," says Ben Allen, culture journalist at *GQ*. "It was only when you watched it that it became clear that they had fleshed it out a huge amount. They put a lot of work into making the main character, Ted Lasso, sympathetic, and they built the cast out nicely as well."

The audience agreed. *Ted Lasso* quickly became the streaming service's flagship show, earning cult acclaim and providing a feel-good destination in lockdown. The show racked up seven of the 11 awards Apple TV+ won at September's Emmys. The anticipation ahead of its upcoming third series is palpable.

To reboot the premise for TV, Sudeikis and co-creator Brendan Hunt – who plays his pauciloquent sidekick Coach Beard – joined forces with Bill Lawrence, the mastermind behind *Scrubs*. Lasso and Beard were brought to the fictional AFC Richmond by its owner, Rebecca Welton (Hannah Waddingham), in a secret bid to sabotage the club and take revenge on her football-loving ex-husband. But it doesn't go as smoothly when Lasso – a likeable, football-loving version of *The Simpsons*' Ned Flanders – charms Welton and befriends the team.

They include star player Jamie Tartt (Phil Dunster) and the growly elder statesman Roy Kent (Brett Goldstein, also a writer and producer), plus the WAG with a difference, Keeley Jones (Juno Temple).

The "fish out of water" premise is the crux of its comedy value. "*Ted Lasso* can take the piss out of tea and call it garbage water, and that's funny in the US, and even in Britain, where we enjoy self-deprecating humour a bit more than they do over there," says Allen.

Yet there's far more to it. The gags come fast and relentlessly, and are highbrow and lowbrow, subtle and slapstick, with moments lobbed in for one side of its transatlantic audience

or the other. For the Brits, there's Philip Schofield and Holly Willoughby's cameos, for the Americans, the constant (and apparently hilarious) use of the word "wanker".

It has heart too, though at times it is "overly sentimental in a way that's cringe-inducing", says Allen.

The football itself is less important than the themes around it, such as the camaraderie and devastation that's ingrained in sport, problematic sponsors, the pressure to perform, and the players' mental health.

While Apple doesn't release viewing figures, it did reveal that demand for *Ted Lasso's* second season premiere was six times that of the first season. This suggests a word-of-mouth success between seasons that has only grown since.

The series is the platform's first breakthrough hit, with *The Morning Show*, starring Jennifer Aniston and Reese Witherspoon, a close second. Also in its catalogue are coveted releases such as M Night Shyamalan's thriller *Servant*, and *Finch*, Tom Hanks's

towards services (see Sonos as a prime example), Apple One is a key element of Apple's future. It rolls six products – TV+, Music, Arcade, iCloud+, News+ and Fitness+ – into one monthly plan.

The different approach means it is not trying to compete with the likes of Netflix. You won't see mainstream favourites in its library – there are no *Friends* or *Father Teds* to make sure there's always something to watch.

"It would be easy for it to bulk up the catalogue by buying libraries, but I think the strategy of focusing on originals is quite interesting because it means there's always something fresh. And by having only originals, Apple knows that it has got them for ever: it is not going have to do another deal in three years' time," explains McGuire.

Estimates from research firm Digital TV Research commissioned by *The Hollywood Reporter* suggests that Apple TV+ is on course to attract 35.6 million subscribers by 2026, far fewer than its predictions for Netflix (270.7 million) and Disney+ (284.2 million).

In deciding to play its own game of less-is-more, the strategy is in keeping with the Apple brand. "Even from the days of the first Apple computer, it was the upstart alternative to IBM. It was for people who were a bit different, who wanted to expand their horizons," says McGuire. When you apply that to its content, "Apple won't drown you with it, but there'll be enough good stuff that you'll want to keep it.

"And it's early days. It is still learning about what works and what doesn't. For example, they've made some interesting moves in sci-fi with *For All Mankind* and *Foundation*, although they also released *Invasion*, which I'm not sure quite hit the mark. But that's part of learning the game."

Over time, Apple "will spend to a level that it thinks is necessary to keep that catalogue refreshed, and it will increase that budget when it taps into something that becomes almost bigger than the service, such as *Ted Lasso*. I think it will keep to this slightly different, Apple-like trajectory."

And what of *Ted Lasso*? The creative team had planned for the third series to be its last, but it's still to be confirmed whether the final whistle is being blown – its runaway success could take it into extra time. ■



From left: coach Beard (Brendan Hunt), head coach Ted Lasso (Jason Sudeikis) and kit man Nate Shelley (Nick Mohammed)

Apple TV+

Even with guest appearances from football legends Thierry Henry, Gary Lineker and Peter Crouch, among others, the relationships between the main cast (as well as its stellar supporting actors, such as national treasure Annette Badland, who plays the local pub landlady) elevate the show beyond a football comedy.

A case in point: when Welton's sabotage is revealed towards the end of the first series, the momentum doesn't stop – by the second series, it is the players' and managements' tangled love lives and personal stories that drive the narrative.

"You think it's going to be for a specific audience because, on paper, it's about football, but *Ted Lasso* feels more like a traditional workplace comedy," says Allen. "All of the biggest comedies of the past 20 years that I can think of have been workplace comedies, and it's a riff on that."

would-be blockbuster, were it not for the pandemic.

"For me, the most surprising element of *Ted Lasso* is that it became so popular despite being on a pretty under-watched platform," says Allen.

In September 2021, Apple reported fewer than 20 million subscribers, a fraction of Netflix's 200 million. Yet, tellingly, it's the only big streamer yet to release an Android app, suggesting that its primary goal is neither subscriber numbers nor revenue.

Sean McGuire, MD of media strategy consultancy O&O, explains that the service exists "to keep you in the Apple ecosystem, whether that's as part of Apple One or by giving it away for free with a piece of hardware". The latter is how three-quarters of subscribers signed up, according to Antenna, a streaming analytics firm.

As tech companies gear their financial models away from hardware sales

The long walk

With **Jed Mercurio** and **Vicky McClure** reunited for bomb-disposal thriller *Trigger Point*, Matthew Bell laps up the suspense



Trigger Point

ITV

Jed Mercurio is bringing his trademark high-octane thrills to ITV with a new drama set in a bomb disposal squad. Sunday-night viewers are currently being subjected to big bangs and nerve-shredding tension as a bombing campaign terrorises London.

Trigger Point stars Vicky McClure as an “expo”, a bomb disposal officer who takes the “long walk” towards a suspect device before attempting to defuse it.

The six-part thriller began its run late last month and marks the TV debut of writer Daniel Brierley. He has benefitted from a bursary scheme funded by the industry body Screen-Skills, which paired him with an industry mentor.

Jed Mercurio, the creator and writer

of *Line of Duty*, is no ordinary mentor. “Daniel did all the writing – he would generate all the storylines and write the drafts of the script, then I would give my feedback, but I wouldn’t interfere too much,” recalls Mercurio. His production company, HTM Television, which he set up with Hat Trick boss Jimmy Mulville, made *Trigger Point*.

“We talked about the challenges of getting through the story and dealing with the basics of what people expect from a thriller, which is jeopardy, mystery and twists and turns. The art is in making the twists as unexpected as possible,” explains Mercurio, who is also an executive producer on the series.

The inspiration for *Trigger Point* was an “amazing” BBC documentary, *Bomb Squad Men: The Long Walk*, about bomb disposal officers who served in 1970s

Northern Ireland. Brierley came across it one sleepless night and thought; “That is a really interesting jumping-off point for drama – to look at the psychology of people walking towards danger, rather than away from it.”

Mercurio adds, approvingly: “Putting your heroes in harm’s way relentlessly is an incredibly powerful vehicle for putting the audience on the edge of their seats.”

McClure, who plays expo Lana Washington, was drawn to the role by “the subject matter... it was something I knew very little about”, plus the opportunity to support a new writer and work once more with Mercurio, a “good friend” after six series of *Line of Duty*.

“It was fantastic working with Vicky. It always is, and particularly without Martin [Compston] and Adrian

[Dunbar] getting in the way and spoiling it – that was the highlight definitely for me,” jokes Mercurio. “Vicky’s the natural leader and the real talent in that group... for once, she wasn’t being held back – she really blossomed, I thought.”

McClure shrugs off comparisons with Mercurio’s hugely successful show. “I’m not concerned... about taking roles that might feel in a similar world,” she says. “I look at Lana and Kate [in *Line of Duty*] and I don’t see them as the same people at all.... They’re both very strong women, for sure, and very brave and

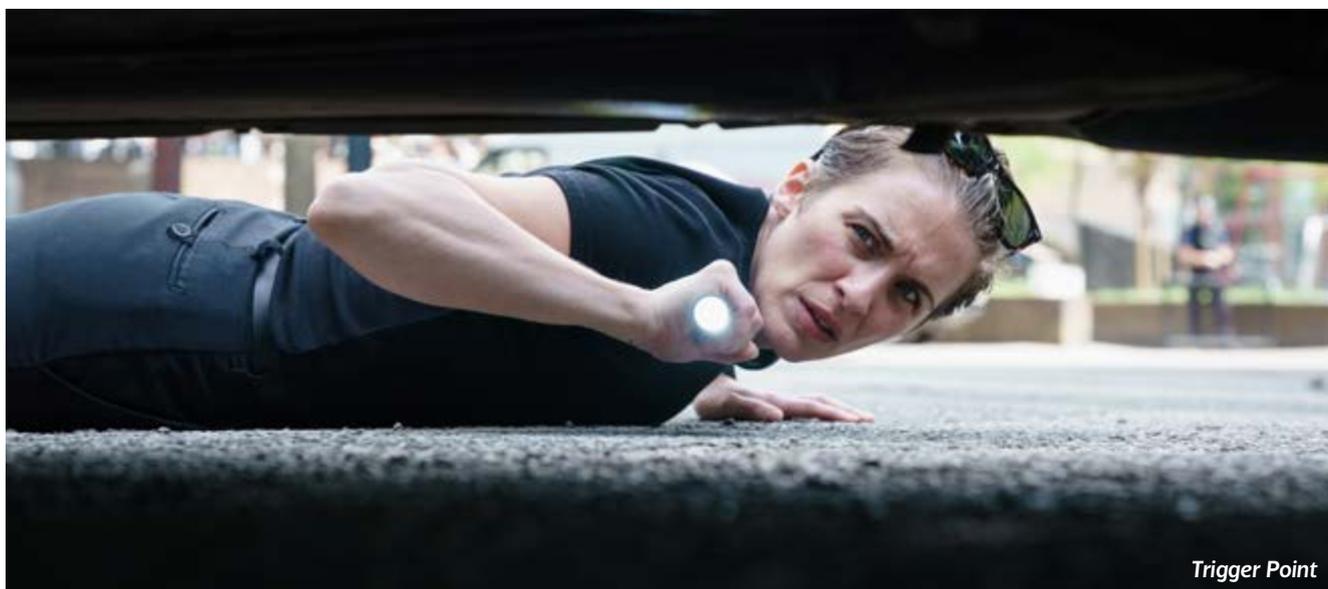
definitely have that feeling that something bad could happen to somebody at some point.” It did.

Trigger Point has been meticulously researched. Mercurio passed on the number of an expo he’d worked with on *Bodyguard*, and Brierley spent time with a squad at a secret base in London, “getting to know what makes them tick” and learning about the technical elements of bomb disposal. “There’s this juxtaposition between extreme boredom and intense action – they have to go from nought to 60 in seconds.... These guys aren’t called out

“Delivering on the scale and the ambition of the piece but with a TV budget was challenging. Audiences have certain expectations, which you have to meet.

“It’s all about deciding where you need to spend the money to make things look good – and working with experts, employing the right special effects people.”

Trigger Point will not be available as a box set on the ITV Hub until the series concludes, forcing audiences to wait for their adrenaline rush as the series plays out weekly. This is old-school telly and Mercurio – whose shows *Line*



Trigger Point ITV

committed, but that’s the kind of role I love to take.”

She adds: “People love *Line of Duty* so, if there is any comparison, it might not be a bad thing.”

Mercurio’s shows are known for the short screen lives of even their biggest stars. Keeley Hawes’ home secretary didn’t last long in *Bodyguard* and Daniel Mays’ troubled copper didn’t make it beyond the second episode of one *Line of Duty* series.

Adrian Lester, who plays Washington’s colleague Joel Nutkins, didn’t make it to the end of the first episode, killed by a terrorist bomb. Lester had been intriguingly non-committal pre-transmission on whether any bomb squad officers were going to be killed off, saying: “Daniel’s script keeps the audience on their toes ... you

of their office unless there is extreme danger,” he says.

A couple of experts were on set to advise the actors. “There was always something we needed to check,” recalls McClure. “That long walk [towards a device] is very personal.... You have to get past the fear and walk towards the device and do your job – the calmer you are, the calmer you can deal with it, in terms of having a steady hand and dealing with a very delicate device.”

Trigger Point, though, is drama, not documentary, which means there is “artistic licence to ramp up [the action]”, adds McClure. Big explosions and a bombing campaign on a capital city are normally the territory of feature films, and that’s a lot to do with budget,” admits producer Julia Stannard.

of Duty and *Bodyguard* were similarly binge-proof – approves.

“There’s still a big section of the audience who love the experience of appointment-to-view TV. If something becomes a talking point and people have lots of theories about what’s going to happen next and who’s behind some kind of mystery... then it all adds to the shared experience of television viewing,” he says.

“It’s almost like we’re turning the clock back to an earlier age of television and there are still plenty of people who appreciate that.

“If this series goes down well with the audience, we’d love to do more. It’s set up to be a returner and we know how much audiences love thrillers – they’re a big part of people’s TV experience now.” ■

Live, eyewitness reporting, typified by Robert Moore's dramatic coverage during the mob assault on the US Capitol, is vital to counter social media lies

Antidote to fake news



Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

One year after the storming of the US Capitol, the RTS invited *ITV News* journalist Robert Moore to reflect on his live report from Washington that day. Moore was the only journalist to gain access to the besieged building, and his coverage brought home the level of threat to politicians, lawmakers and journalists in the home of American democracy. His report has since earned him and his crew several prestigious awards.

Moore described their work on 6 January 2021 as “a brand of eyewitness frontline reporting that helps to deconstruct information and conspiracy theories very effectively”. Adding that *ITV*, the *BBC* and *Sky News* all do this kind of journalism well, he reflected: “My

contribution was a small way of saying, British television is really good at eyewitness reporting, and this is more essential than ever before.”

CNN's Brian Stelter stressed that, by infiltrating the mob, Moore's account provided images no one else, including Americans, had seen that day. He explained: “Most of the reporters there that day were already inside the Capitol, and they took shelter, for very good reasons, considering the violence and threats against the media.”

In an age of police body-cam video and multiple witnesses to events shooting their own amateur footage, he added: “It's critical to have objective third-party video of an act of terror, and also to have that global, or outsider, point of view.”

Damian Collins MP agreed, pointing out that, across the world, places where democracy is in trouble have a common

theme: a weak independent media. “They have media that has been undermined, and legitimate voices have been pushed to the margins.”

Collins said that many of the insurrectionists joining the mob that day had increasingly eschewed these legitimate voices for “social media channels where they get their version of the truth”. It is these channels that continue to pose the biggest threat – alongside what Stelter termed “democratic backsliding”.

Collins went further: “Social media has a role to play in creating an experience for some people where they predominantly see conspiracy theories, they are led to believe that the mainstream media are liars and can't be trusted. People don't really know what to believe any more, so they probably end up believing the thing they see the most.”

Stelter described some of the signs of such erosion – “closed-door meetings, smaller hearing rooms or a council where voting rights are pulled back. That is all erosion that needs to be documented.” He emphasised that, just as an independent media is needed to preserve democracy and to document any assaults on it, a “free press is not possible without a vibrant democracy”.

Stelter described the events at the Capitol last year as “the beginning of something, not the end of something”. He explained: “There are many people in the US who feel left behind for various reasons, and I worry about what they’re consuming, what they’re seeing in their social media feeds.

“A line we have to draw is between news sources trying their best to get it

exchanges between press and government in the UK, saying, “The Prime Minister makes statements and then he’s held to account. It’s right that we have that robust challenge.”

Regarding those hundreds of people surrounding him in the Capitol last year, Robert Moore reminded us: “We don’t protect democracy by ignoring voices, however shrill they might be, even those who want to dismantle democracy, we need to put them on air because the job of journalists is to shine a light on everything that is happening in this incredibly diverse and complicated country.

“With what Brian described as the erosion of democracy, our role is not to call it for one side or the other, but to shine a light on it.”

Channel 4’s remit would be “cast in iron” were it to be privatised.

Shadow culture secretary Lucy Powell was equally quick to make the point that much British journalism of the investigative, impartial kind being described by Moore and Stelter was made possible by the BBC’s unique funding model and public service ethos – and that it had to be paid for and supported, along with local news. She said that she wasn’t quite sure what the Government’s position was, following Dorries’ apparent change of heart on abolishing the licence fee.

She praised Collins’s “brilliant work on strengthening the online safety bill” and added her voice to his concerns about the role of social media platforms in polarising debate and amplifying hate.

“A broad, supportive, political and regulatory framework”, was Moore’s vision for protecting public service journalism. “But, otherwise, just let us get on with it, finding those stories, telling those stories, [which are] best told by people out in the field, not in newsrooms or studios. Plurality of discussion is going to be at the core of all of it, making sure that consumers of news get a broad range of opinions in front of them.”

“I’m not advocating for regulation, I’m advocating for change,” Stelter said. “Governments have to focus on the supply issue – where’s this supply of crazy content coming from? How are platforms held accountable? And why is there a demand for conspiracy theories and disinformation? Focus on what’s going on on the demand side.”

Collins stressed the need for social media platforms to provide transparent reports on the amount of hate speech they actually remove, and how fair the playing field is for different news providers. He reminded the panel that the online safety bill would be presented to Parliament during this session.

Powell wanted fresh emphasis on local news. “People want to know what’s happening in their communities. They’re much less interested in the sort of lobby-based insider way in which we often cover politics here – and in other countries as well.” ■

Report by Caroline Frost. ‘In the eye of the storm: Where next for journalism after the Capitol?’ was an RTS even held on 18 January. It was chaired by Channel 4 News presenter Cathy Newman. The producer was Lisa Campbell, ITN’s director of corporate communications.



ITN's Robert Moore during the assault on the Capitol

right, versus media outlets that are faking it and don’t care what’s right and wrong. That’s incredibly difficult to distinguish when you’re on the Wild West of the world wide web.

“Political violence is on the rise in the US. We see online radicalisation every day, and it clearly starts in people’s social media feeds and algorithms. How do we get to have a better sense of that without choking, without censoring, and without making people feel even more disillusionment? And even more silenced? It is a massive, massive, profound question.”

The big challenge for journalists in the US and elsewhere, Stelter said, was to stand up to those spreading lies – “it’s an important measuring stick”.

What about when it is a political leader accused of spreading the lies? Collins championed the system of live

While he noted the vast range of panel shows and debates on TV news, particularly in the US, Moore instead championed “eyewitness frontline reporting in which we deploy people in the field and listen in real time to the threats to democracy as they organically grow. I think that’s the way that we can best serve our television viewers at home.”

Inevitably, the question of the BBC licence fee arose in the discussion. The day before, culture secretary Nadine Dorries had announced a two-year freeze and had initially said, prior to rowing back, that the licence fee should be abolished when the current Royal Charter expired in 2027.

Damian Collins was quick to emphasise the Government’s focus on protecting the BBC’s resources “to continue its excellent work”, just as

Do you need £5,000 for a history of television project?



Grants will be given to assist in the completion of new or unfinished projects, work or literature specific to the objectives of the Trust. 'Literature' is defined as including audio-visual media such as DVDs and websites. It is essential that applicants read all the conditions and criteria, which can be found online at the address below.

George Shiers, a distinguished US television historian, was a

long-standing member of the RTS. The Shiers Trust grant is in its 21st year.

Application procedure

Applications are now invited and should be submitted to the Trustees by 31 March 2022 on the official application form.

[www.rts.org.uk/
shiers-trust-award](http://www.rts.org.uk/shiers-trust-award)

Apply now for the 2022 Shiers Trust Award

The Trust can make a grant of up to £5,000 towards publishing work on any aspect of TV history

How a design archive won the 2021 award



The 2021 Shiers Trust Award went to Mark Craig. The award of £4,000 will allow Craig to continue filming interviews with notable designers for an archive of BBC motion graphic design.

It marks the first time a project has received a Shiers Trust Award twice. In 2019, Craig shared the prize, winning £2,000, with the Made in Yorkshire

documentary film project. Craig is a former BBC and Channel 4 motion graphic designer turned documentary-maker who made the well-received feature film *The Last Man on the Moon*.

Expanding the archive, which contains hundreds of examples of title sequences and idents from the early 1960s onwards, is an ongoing process. Craig said: 'It's a real shot in the arm for the project and we'll be able to get a lot of work done with the award. It's much appreciated.'

'A key part of the archive is to capture interviews with the veterans of graphic design. Their spoken testimonies offer not only insight into their creative process and techniques, but also social and cultural context.'

The interviews with BBC TV graphic designers are edited together with examples of their work and included in an open-access archive hosted

by Ravensbourne University London*.

The archive was started by former BBC graphic designer Michael Graham-Smith, who works closely with another award-winning designer, Liz Friedman, and senior projects and partnerships manager, BBC Archive Content & Partnerships.

Past Shiers Trust Award winners include an oral history of BBC Pebble Mill and a biography of Grace Wyndham Goldie, the first head of BBC TV News and Current Affairs.



Mark Craig

* www.ravensbourne.ac.uk/bbc-motion-graphics-archive

OUR FRIEND IN THE PENNINES

In the spring of 2020 I found myself, like so many other freelance folk, workless and incomeless. A friend kindly sent me details of a role at an organisation called TripleC DANC. I confess I had never heard of TripleC, and – realising they were Manchester-based – I idly wondered if “DANC” might be a reference to the weather.

In fact, TripleC is a disabled-led company that works to strengthen access and inclusion for deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people in the arts and media. The “DANC” bit stands for the Disabled Artists Networking Community, TripleC’s professional strand.

To be brutally honest, this raised in me a terror that I’d somehow say or do the wrong thing. I had very little experience of disability, and what little experience I did have made me think it was all a bit of a minefield.

To cut a long story short, I swallowed my fear and am now a permanent member of TripleC’s senior leadership team. It’s hard, almost two years on, to recall just how nervous I felt about joining a disabled-led organisation.

Fast forward to today and everything feels very different. I’ve learned that there are very few hard and fast rules when it comes to terminology. Some disabled people will use a particular word or phrase to describe themselves. Others will use another.

Taking a step back, I’ve also found that you rarely need to ask someone what their disability is. Instead, the key question to ask is: “What are your access requirements?” So, the key focus is on understanding what reasonable adjustments need to be put in place, not on terminology.

Katy Boulton outlines how an innovative industry body is working to transform the lives of deaf, disabled and neurodivergent creatives



Katy Boulton

That said, I’ve learned that “non-disabled” is more appropriate than “able-bodied”, in the same way that “wheelchair user” is preferred over “wheelchair-bound”.

The test is usually to think about how these terms make you feel inside. When it feels right, it usually is. But, if in doubt, it’s OK to ask the person themselves.

Another thing I’ve discovered is that access put in place to benefit one person can often benefit many others in the team. Examples might include building in proper breaks and providing “easy read” versions of written documents. I’ve also learned that

– within the deaf, disabled and neurodivergent community – there is a whole host of creatives with lived experience who are brilliantly placed to advise and support.

TripleC now works with most of the major broadcasters and with many production companies, providing training, advice, mentoring, webinars, masterclasses and more. We focus on solutions and on taking away fear.

One example is our Talent Finder. Currently in the live testing phase and launching later this year, Talent Finder is an online place where deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people working in TV and in the arts can add their profile and where broadcasters, producers and arts organisations can find disabled talent.

We know that the kind of fears that I felt when I first joined TripleC are replicated in many organisations. TripleC is here to support and to offer solutions that come from the lived experience of deaf, disabled and neurodivergent creatives. TripleC’s creative leads are Cherylee Houston (*Coronation Street*) and Melissa Johns (*Life, Grantchester*), and we are backed by a DANC membership of more than 1,000 creatives.

So, if we don’t know the answer, we usually know someone who does. We’re based in Manchester, but we work with people across the UK to make change by creating a broadcasting and arts environment that is truly inclusive and representative of all our communities. ■

Katy Boulton is the strategic development manager at TripleC DANC (triplec.org.uk). She is also a member of the RTS Yorkshire Centre Committee.



Careers fair panellist Jim Howick (left) in *Pandemonium*

BBC

The right route into TV

Industry pros shared their experience at the UK's biggest online TV careers fair

More than 1,600 people attended the RTS Futures Virtual Careers Fair on the first two days of February – making it the most popular Futures event ever.

The talent jamboree featured sessions covering the length and breadth of television – but all were aimed at new entrants to the industry or those in the early stages of their careers.

An online CV clinic and advice area, staffed by leading industry professionals, was attended by 500-plus people, and interactive exhibitor booths allowed companies to talk to attendees via live chat and video.

One of the standout sessions put a spotlight on reality shows. “From the villa to the jungle” featured execs from Lifted Entertainment and ITV Studios discussing how they make *Love Island* and *I’m a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!*

Casting is critical, insisted Micky Van Praagh, Lifted’s head of on-screen

talent: “We’re only on for three weeks a year, so we want everyone in that camp to be a treat and a surprise.... We have a really broad audience and we have to appeal to every member.”

BBC Radio 1Xtra DJ Snoochie Shy, a contestant on *I’m a Celebrity...* last year, rated the show “the best thing I’ve ever done.... It challenges you.... I’m never again going to be in a coffin with thousands of maggots crawling over me.”

Tom Gould, Lifted creative director, said the production team is “always looking to reinvent” the show: “There are different types of trial that we always return to, trials involving water, height, critters, endurance, eating and drinking, but, within those categories, we’ll try and come up with new ways to confront the celebrities with their fears.

“We’ve got to be able to surprise the viewers and the campmates, and we’re 21 series in, so it gets harder and harder.”

Another careers fair highlight was the session on a new BBC One sitcom, as yet untitled, which features the

dysfunctional Jessop family from pandemic comedy *Pandemonium*.

The new show’s creator, Tom Basden (a writer on *Plebs* and actor in *After Life*), was joined by actor Jim Howick (*Sex Education* and *Ghosts*, which he also pens) and producer Tom Jordan.

“Comedy is brutal because you’re asking the audience for a physical reaction of laughter... within minutes, if not seconds, of watching the show,” argued Jordan.

In response to a question on avoiding offence in comedy, Basden said: “There is so much said and written about this but... it’s not that big a deal. You know where the very sensitive areas are and, if you want to write about them, you make sure you do it in a very considered and thoughtful way.”

On *Ghosts*, said Howick, “we write from a family-friendly angle... but it’s actually not that hard to write comedy and not be offensive.”

Basden added: “I’ve [acted in] three series of *After Life* and that’s got stuff in

it that is definitely more punchy than your average sitcom, but the viewers know the difference between stuff that's wilfully offensive and things that are provocative."

Offering advice to aspiring comedy writers and performers, Howick said: "Keep the sitcom simple and allow room for your characters to grow.... From an acting point of view, you need to showcase your talents, whether that be the fringe theatre, which is usually the best place to be signed by an agent [or] nowadays you can use your phone for that [too]."

Basden advised writers to work on a few scripts at a time: "All the writers I know have been turned down far more than they've been commissioned... it's worth having different plates spinning. Also, you'll find that your writing improves because you're not just constantly honing the same script."

Rachel Lodder, head of early careers talent at Sky, explained how the broadcaster's new Content Academy works. Launched last year and operating across Sky Studios, News, Sports and Content, the first intake is giving 24 people, both school-leavers and graduates, 12 months' work.

Lodder said: "Our aspiration is that people in the programme will stay with Sky for the long term, and we'll look to find permanent homes for [those] who roll off the programme after 12 months."

A couple of the first intake, both in the school-leaver cohort, Amrit Singh Mann and Matty Turner, discussed their experiences. Mann, who is currently based in Sky News, said: "By the end of this year, I will have had experience in every single department... it's giving me an intensive, in-depth learning experience."

Sky is running the Content Academy again this year and Turner advised applicants: "Really put the time in – don't rush it.... Do your research and understand all about Sky – it's a massive company."

Daniell Morrissey, who runs the BBC's early careers schemes and apprenticeships, hosted a session featuring four new entrants who have benefited from such programmes.

Recent graduate and RTS bursary scholar Charly Humphreys has worked as a production secretary on ITV2 smash hit *Love Island* and Sky One show *Dating No Filter*. Discussing the RTS scheme, she emphasised the "confidence" it has given her and the "support, not just from the people who run

the scheme but from my peers – I've met so many like-minded people".

Former BBC journalism apprentice Chanise Evans opted for an apprenticeship, rather than university. "I felt that I was not going to come out with any debt and I was going to learn on the job, which was exactly what I needed – practical experience," she said. Currently,

Andy Hope teaches the diploma in camera, sound and vision mixing at the National Film and Television School. He explained how the school prepares students for work in a TV studio, whether in the gallery as a vision or sound mixer or lighting director, or on the studio floor as a camera or sound operator.



she is a digital journalist at the BBC Young Reporter project, producing content for 11- to 18-year-olds.

The "Getting started in drama" session featured two recent entrants to the industry, *Hollyoaks* continuity editor Sarah Mclean and ITV Studios development editor Daniel Brown. Mclean described her role as being "responsible for making sure all the little details are correct across the scripts – who's been sleeping with whom and who knows about it!".

Script reading is a common route into the drama genre, as it was for Brown. "The amount of stuff that we get sent at ITV Studios is ridiculous – every company needs readers," he revealed.

"Opinions are very important – everyone is very opinionated in drama," he added, although Mclean cautioned: "It's important to be tactful with writers. They say they want constructive criticism but they also want to know their script is wonderful."

Jude Winstanley, a TV line producer and MD of theunitlist.com, ran a couple of informative sessions. The first offered a guide to entry-level roles and getting started in the industry; the second was aimed at TV's vast army of freelancers and covered the vital issues of managing finances, remaining resilient between jobs and negotiating pay rates.

"Production management: Have you got what it takes?" opened the lid on this in-demand industry role. Finally, "Have you thought about your transferable skills?" featured Jade Gordon, founder of Creative Train, who explained that TV also values people from outside the industry with the right experience. ■

Report by Matthew Bell. The RTS Futures Virtual Careers Fair was held on 1 and 2 February. It was sponsored by the National Film and Television School and IMG Studios. The sessions can be watched at: rts.org.uk/video/careersfair22.

It is a dream come true for Leo Pearlman and his cousins Gabe and Ben Turner to be opening a production base in Sunderland. After all, they named their company in memory of the Fulwell stand at the old Roker Park, where they first fell in love with Sunderland AFC. The 73 reference is a homage to their team's glorious FA Cup win against Leeds almost half a century ago.

Pearlman's family had a business in the North East coastal city. His cousins' parents also hailed from the area. There was much excitement in the clan in 2018, when Netflix aired *Sunderland 'Til I Die*, a labour of love for Fulwell 73.

The production was widely regarded as a near-perfect example of behind-the-scenes sports documentary, thanks to its focus on the impact of a football club's mixed fortunes on fans. Local viewers loved it because, unlike most TV and media depictions of Sunderland, the series showcased the city in all its glory, rather than picking out the more run-down areas, which play into stereotypical Grim Up North narratives.

The two seasons of *Sunderland 'Til I Die* made the company realise just how under served the North East of England had become in terms of TV and film production. The region represents less than 2% of the UK's screen sector. And audience appreciation of the BBC is at its lowest in an area where viewers rarely see their distinctive culture and landscape on screen.

Wearing my University of Sunderland hat, I began talking, pre-pandemic, to the Fulwell team about the Catch 22 scenario facing talented students with ambitions to work in the sector: opportunities on local productions such as ITV's *Vera* and MTV's *Geordie Shore* are limited, and they're unable to afford to take up placements in production hot-spots such as London. In too many instances, they end up being lost to more accessible jobs and careers closer to home.

That conversation resulted in site visits by the Fulwell team and the decision in the autumn of 2021 to open a production base in the riverside campus studios of the David Puttnam Media Centre. "We love it," says Pearlman. "It feels like the excitement and endless possibilities of being in a start-up."

But it's not purely sentiment that's brought them back to their roots. The trio had to convince their US-based partners, Ben Winston and James Corden, of the business case. Pearlman

Film and TV production in the North East is on the up, with the likes of **Fulwell 73** opening local centres. **Graeme Thompson** cheers the revival



Netflix

Sunderland 'Til I Die

Rebirth of a creative hub

says the relationship with the university was the catalyst for the decision to open a base in Sunderland alongside their operations in north London and Los Angeles, which currently have about 100 people on the payroll.

“We saw the limitless potential of telling stories from the North East,” he says. “I always had this dream of coming back. The relationship with the university allowed us access to fantastic

and successful production company is so exciting.”

The company – best known for movies such as *Cinderella* for Amazon Prime and the documentaries *I Am Bolt* and *Bros: After the Screaming Stops*, as well as *The Late, Late Show with James Corden* and his *Carpool Karaoke* – has been quick to sign up North East talent.

It is developing several original scripted projects across TV and film,

Industries Partnership. “This is a unique, once in a generation moment for the North East,” she says. “Thanks to recent decisions by the BBC, the university, Fulwell 73, local authorities and others, there is real momentum to make a step change in the region’s screen sector.

“Having an international player such as Fulwell 73 here is transformational. Its energy and ambition goes hand in hand with its commitment to grass-roots engagement with local indies and crews, and its plans to uncover new talent. We’re looking forward to unprecedented growth over the next few years.”

The Fulwell team joins a growing number of production companies that have established a track record in the region. MCC Media, founded by Sunderland graduate Paul McCoy, produces award-winning documentaries. Another graduate media company in the city, New World Designs, specialises in “bullet time/time-slice” photography for productions in Hollywood – as well as closer to home with ITV’s *The Cube*. Also known as *The Matrix* effect, the technique gives the impression of time slowing down or standing still.

New World Designs is currently building a new FX studio in Sunderland and Fulwell has made no secret of its own ambitions to build world-class studios on the banks of the River Wear.

Long-running dramas, including *Vera* for ITV and *The Dumping Ground* for CBBC, provide regular employment for local actors and crew. But most local creatives and production staff make their living working outside the North East. Which means the challenge facing producers over the coming months will be finding the production capacity to meet the ambitions of the BBC and new kids on the block such as Fulwell North and *Angels of the North* producer Twenty Six 03 to make shows in the region.

Alison Gwynn says one of the solutions is to persuade Northerners based in other parts of the UK to return home. “Training and developing an expanded home-grown workforce will take some time,” she says. “My message to those who have the talent and the skills to make great content from the North East is: it’s time to come back home, pet!” ■

Graeme Thompson is Chair of the RTS Education Committee and pro vice-chancellor for external relations at the University of Sunderland.



BBC

Byker Grove: Ant and Dec in 1990

facilities as well as to students, staff and graduate businesses.

“The North East and this city is in our DNA and we want to be part of its rebirth as a creative hub. We are setting up a number of initiatives and programmes to encourage young talent from the region to get involved in the industry. This year, we launch our intern and work-experience programmes.”

Fulwell North has recruited production manager Mel Rainbow and development producer (unscripted) Chris Wake. Both are experienced TV hands who jumped at the opportunity to work in their native North East. Other team members from the London office, including chief operating officer Johnny Moore and head of scripted Saskia Schuster, are regular hot-deskers.

Students, who share the same studios and production resources as their new workmates, are understandably thrilled. “It gives you such a lift having Fulwell 73 based here,” enthuses Mark Stiles, a second-year media production student. “I’m focused on pursuing a career in television, so having access to experienced professionals from a prestigious

ranging from horror to comedy. The team is discussing content ideas with young North East chef Ryan Riley and, with the BBC, talking about a number of access-all-areas factual proposals. And there’s a true crime documentary that’s fully financed and ready to go into production in Sunderland in the coming weeks.

Fulwell is even looking to reboot iconic TV dramas such as *Byker Grove*.

The BBC is another player in the North East renaissance. Director-General Tim Davie has committed to spend a minimum of £25m on new commissions from the region. This has resulted in the 12 local authorities across the North East creating an £11m skills budget and production fund.

It means the regional screen agency, Northern Film + Media, can look forward to a long overdue expansion as it advertises for staff to co-ordinate the funding, and the prospect of more production and location services.

Chief Executive Alison Gwynn has been in constant dialogue for months with Fulwell 73, the BBC and the councils making up the North East Screen

Comedy of the absurd

Humour is hard work but BBC Two's surreal short *The Mind of Herbert Clunkerdunk* takes the painstaking process of raising a laugh to new extremes

The *Mind of Herbert Clunkerdunk* is a weird and wonderful place to be, as the first BBC Two series in 2019 demonstrated to the nation. Each of the 15-minute

episodes saw comedian Spencer Jones's alter ego navigate the basic tasks of adulting while distracted by his own imagination as conveyed through surreal sketches and musical mayhem.

Ahead of its second series, last month, an RTS event gave a preview of the action to come – and insight into the psyche of Jones, a Bafta and Edinburgh Comedy Award nominee.

It quickly became clear that the absurd humour which defines the character comedy wasn't as off-the-cuff as it might appear. "I do a lot of messing around before I've even started to think in a focused way about episodes," Jones explained. "I mess around with music, then there's objects, and then there's the life stuff that happens with the kids – going to the dentist's or the supermarket.

"You start to get these jigsaw pieces, and then they start to form themes and stories. Like there's a problem with a kid at school who's not eating properly. That would give me the idea of putting a bit of broccoli on a remote-control car, so I can drive it into their face."

The "out there" humour sets it far apart from other current comedy shows, which brings an inclusive element to it, said Lucy Pearman, who plays Clunkerdunk's wife, Bobby Kindle, in the series.

"I said to Spencer, I think this show is going to save lives. If only I'd seen this growing up," she said. "There has always been alternative comedy, but it's so relaxing to know you're not the only one [with a runaway imagination]. It's not always going to be for everyone, but I'm so happy for the people it is for."

Described by Jones as "a sketch show disguised as a narrative", he takes on the writing of the series alone before handing the script to director Martin Stirling. "To begin with, they look like ordinary scripts. You read through them and it's an absolute joy," said Stirling. "You get to breaking it down and you realise that this job is a dream. Then it slowly contorts into a nightmare as you start to think, 'how the hell are we going to execute it?'"

"In any ordinary script, you might have a two-minute scene in a kitchen between a man and his wife. In *Clunkerdunk*, when you break it down, you



BBC

The Mind of Herbert Clunkerdunk

think, 'OK, well, this is a prop, and that's a puppet, and that's a costume', and you realise that two pages of a script have things such as visual effects, special effects and multiple costume changes."

In taking an idea-packed series from script to screen, producer Ben Worsfield explained that it was extra critical that the crew understood Jones's vision: "If Spencer wrote down every single detail and exactly how it was meant to be achieved, the script would be hundreds of pages long. So nothing can be taken for granted. In the read-through, there was a line where it said, 'He puts the kettle on', and someone asked, 'Is that a costume?' There are no stupid questions where this show is concerned."

One of its running gags is the ping-pong-ball eyes that give the characters a cartoonish look that's entirely fitting for the show. The joke might seem simple, but the preparation for it is immense. Clunkerdunk's character alone has 50 pairs of eyes that are colour-coded, numbered carefully and mapped to each line.

"We spent several nights in Spencer's hotel room with them all laid out on a table," said Worsfield. "He'd pop them in, do the line in the mirror, turn to me, do the line with eyes in, and if it got a laugh from both of us, we'd put the code into the script."

On set, "for some reason, I became the eye-wrangler," he continued. "They all had to be laid out on a baking tray in the right order, right by the actor, so we didn't lose any time. I was wandering around looking like the weirdest waiter ever..."

While the ping-pong-ball eyes make a welcome return for the second series, new aspects to look forward to include guest stars Felicity Ward and Vic Reeves, as well as Jones's two children. Keeping it in the family, Jones's brother makes cameo appearances in two scenes to play Clunkerdunk's mother and brother. "He looks a bit like me," Jones explained. "So I wanted that second where you think, 'Is that Spencer?'"

The busy days of filming meant that scenes were often rehearsed and workshopped thoroughly before cameras were turned on. However, "the prep was relentless, so sometimes there wasn't really time for that," admitted Jones. "Sometimes, we would get on set, and it was the first chance we had to discuss it.

"Actually, sometimes that's for the

better, because it keeps things fresh and spontaneous."

To add to the challenge, the team incorporated more songs this time around, even though the music video format put extra pressure on each day of filming. "We had this thing called 'the Clunkerdunk 10', which was a fairly regular occurrence at the end of the day, when we would film an entire scene in 10 minutes when we really needed two hours," said Worsfield. "I hated calling it that initially, but figured we had to own it."

Did the team ever have to say no to Jones's ideas? "No, we always found a way," said Stirling. "Chris Fergusson,

'THIS JOB IS A DREAM. THEN IT SLOWLY CONTORTS INTO A NIGHTMARE'



BBC

our DoP, shared a phrase that was adopted as an unofficial motto: "The obstacles are the path. You're constantly hit by all these things that are stopping you from achieving what you want to do, and it's about being able to adapt and find your way around those.

"With *Clunkerdunk*, things are always changing up to the last minute – even in the sound mix, we're adding in ideas or doing something that makes that joke land or creating a whole different joke. Yes, it is a challenge, but we try to do things that we haven't seen before and probably will never see again.

"As Spencer says all the time, it's a leap of faith. With comedy, you've got to take a risk, you've got to be bold. If you're not, it's vanilla and all the same. Hopefully, the risk has paid off." ■

Report by Shilpa Ganatra. 'The Mind of Herbert Clunkerdunk' preview and Q&A' was an RTS event held on 24 January. It was chaired and produced by journalist Emma Bullimore.

From Burbank to Bristol

Gugu Mbatha-Raw tells the RTS why there is more to casting than meets the eye

“I feel like there’s a part of me in every role,” Gugu Mbatha-Raw told the RTS during a wide-ranging Q&A session with the radio and TV presenter Edith Bowman.

The actor discussed her latest role, in the BBC One psychological thriller *The Girl Before*, and looked back on an extraordinary, eclectic career. This has ranged from Shakespeare (playing Ophelia to Jude Law’s Hamlet in the West End and on Broadway) and Hollywood movies (including *Larry Crowne*, co-starring Tom Hanks) to TV series, such as *Bad Girls* and *Doctor Who*, and the title role in *Belle*, for which she won the 2014 British Independent Film Award for Best Actress.

In *The Girl Before*, which was filmed in Bristol and premiered late last year, Mbatha-Raw played PR executive Jane and was an associate producer.

As for more behind-the-camera involvement in other projects, she said she’d like to take it a step at a time: “I hope to continue growing as a producer.... Being part of the casting process made me appreciate that it’s not just about talent. There are so many talented people out there that, so often, it’s about fitting the pieces of the puzzle together.

“Casting is not just about getting one great person for the role. The balance between the actors has to be right.”

Working on *The Girl Before* was a homecoming, as it marked her return to acting in the UK after making *Loki* across the Atlantic. She portrayed Ravonna Renslayer in series 1 of the Disney+ superhero series.

It was a departure from many of her previous roles because she played “the bad guy” – though “not your stereotypical villain” or typical superhero chick. Mbatha-Raw explained: “She keeps you guessing, and her moral compass is a little bit greyer, which meant I could bring some



Gugu Mbatha-Raw in *The Girl Before* BBC

nuance to the role.” That Kate Herron directed all six episodes was a big plus. Series 2 is in the pipeline.

When it comes to choosing which parts to accept, Mbatha-Raw said it was very much down to instinct, but there were other considerations: “Is it a director I’m excited to work with, is it a genre I maybe haven’t done before or haven’t done recently?”

“Another big thing is the message of the story. Is it going to bring some positive vibes to the universe? Is it going to create a conversation, uplift people or move them? It’s usually a good sign if I start reading my character out loud.”

She starred in the 2016 *Black Mirror* episode *San Junipero* as Kelly, and was immediately struck by the script, having read it from beginning to end on her phone. “That was very *Black Mirror*,” she recalled. “I started reading it on a London bus. I thought I’d read the first couple of pages and put it down and finish it on my laptop when

I got home, but I couldn’t stop reading because it was so compelling.”

Regarding diversity, she said it was vital that every everyone, “regardless of their sexuality or gender should see themselves represented on screen”. Mbatha-Raw played a gay woman in the Second World War movie *Summerland*. “Whether they identify as queer, bisexual or lesbian, to me, what’s important is that they are portrayed as whole, three-dimensional characters.”

As for the one part she’d like to take on that she hasn’t yet played, the actor said she’d love to play Cleopatra. “Having played small parts in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, I think there is a lot more to her than we’ve seen so far, especially as she’s often depicted from the male gaze. I’d love to find more nuances in Cleopatra.” ■

Report by Steve Clarke. ‘In conversation with Gugu Mbatha-Raw’ was an RTS event held on 25 January. The event was produced by the RTS and Public Eye.

The film-makers behind *The Real “Des”*: *The Dennis Nilsen Story* reunited for another hard-hitting ITV documentary shown last month, but this time with a heroine at its centre. *The Real Anne: Unfinished Business* aired as a companion piece to ITV’s four-part drama *Anne*. The latter starred Maxine Peake as Hillsborough justice campaigner Anne Williams, who lost her son Kevin at the UK’s worst sporting disaster, in 1989.

The film, fronted by Peake, recounts Williams’ battle for justice for the 96 supporters who died at the FA Cup semi-final between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest.

At an RTS Cymru Wales event, the film-makers revealed how they put the film together. “It was a very complicated story to tell – the drama had four hours and we had one hour. Aside from what happened on the day... we had to tell a complicated legal journey,” explained edit producer Claire Savage.

The team also had to bring the story up to date: Anne Williams died in 2013, but it was not until three years later that the coroner ruled that the 96 were unlawfully killed and that football fans were not to blame. “There was much more history to be told about her legacy,” said producer/director Iwan Roberts.

The team sifted vast amounts of archive, from BBC Sport and the police on the day of the disaster, plus a lot of subsequent material on what became a three-decade campaign for justice.

Savage explained: “BBC Sport owned the majority of the footage from inside the stadium that day, so we had to [follow] its editorial policy to make sure it was happy with the shots we were using in the programme... for taste



Anne: the real deal

Cymru Wales Matthew Bell hears from the team behind ITV’s searing documentary on Hillsborough campaigner Anne Williams

and decency, and privacy.

“We were able to show what other documentaries haven’t really done before, which was what happened pre-match and... when the crush happened. That took a lot of research... to make sure all the pictures from that day aligned properly and that we were telling the truth.

“We wanted to show the enormity of what happened... Sara Williams, Kevin’s sister, gave us permission to show Kevin being pulled from the crowd and him lying on the pitch, which was incredibly hard for her... she wanted people to see those pictures.”

The Real Anne was filmed and edited during the pandemic. Director of photography Aled Jenkins had shot *The Real “Des”* during the first lockdown and used similar

methods on *The Real Anne*, working in open spaces.

“The locations had to be in as big a space as possible so that we could shoot with longer lenses.... The sound person was using a boom because we didn’t want to [get close to people and attach] radio mics.... The shooting process was difficult,” recalled Jenkins.

There were also benefits, argued Roberts: “A larger location can be more aesthetically pleasing than someone’s small house, where you haven’t got depth in the shot.”

Rahim Mastafa explained how he edited the documentary from his Cardiff home, while Savage was based in Formby, outside Liverpool: “We were screen sharing, so Claire could always see what I was doing.... We never...

physically sat in the same room during the entire edit.

“I absolutely love working from home... with this kind of documentary and the amount of work that needs to be done, you kind of need all the hours of the day, so I don’t want to spend two hours each day travelling back and forth to work.”

Looking back, Roberts is full of admiration for the campaigners: “Ordinary people against the British Establishment that just wanted Hillsborough to go away. Anne represents many families.... It’s incredible what she achieved, at a huge sacrifice to her and her family.” ■

‘The Real Anne: Q&A’ was an RTS Cymru Wales event held on 21 January. It was chaired by Centre Chair Edward Russell.

Many executives leave their mark on television, but very few are credited with transforming it. Jana Bennett, who died last month from brain cancer aged 66, was one of those who most emphatically did.

Without her enormous influence it is hard to imagine that the specialist factual genre, typified by series such as the groundbreaking *Walking with Dinosaurs* or *The Human Body*, would be in such rude health as it is today.

Her impact extended beyond that, however. As her former colleague ex-BBC Two controller Jane Root said: “The TV we work in today has her DNA right through it: from prime-time science to BBC Three and much, much more. She did all that and was an amazing boss and great friend. Be a little more Jana, television industry! That’s the way to remember her.”

Bennett was the BBC’s first female editor of the *Horizon* strand and head of science, and rose to become the BBC’s director of television during two spells at the organisation. She was crucial in ensuring the BBC was on the front foot of the digital revolution, overseeing not only the launch of BBC Three but also other digital channels and the children’s services CBeebies and CBBC in the early 2000s.

Following her death, many of her peers have paid tribute to her exceptional skills as a leader and manager. Lorraine Heggessey has been a lifelong friend since the two joined the corporation together as news trainees in 1979. The erstwhile BBC One controller said: “Jana always encouraged others to be more ambitious in their thinking, and never sought glory for herself. Her contributions were often invisible, other than to the many people who benefited.”



Jana Bennett

David Sandison/Alamy

Jana Bennett 1955–2022

Among those who worked with and for Bennett were Danny Cohen, Pat Younge, and Jane Tranter.

Younge, whom she hired to run BBC in-house production, said: “Jana believed in public service broadcasting and the importance of in-house. She felt we hadn’t had a fair crack of the whip and did all she could to help us raise our game.

“She was one of the women from our generation who broke the glass ceiling in television, and she was a big supporter of diversity. She knew some of the challenges

I faced coming through as a black man because she had faced similar ones as a woman a few years before. She was kind and funny, and has gone too soon.”

Jana Bennett was born in Cooperstown, New York State, to Elizabeth (née Cushing) and Gordon Bennett (an English professor), the middle of five sisters. When the family moved to the UK, Jana attended a comprehensive school in Bognor Regis, West Sussex, before reading PPE at St Anne’s College, Oxford, and doing postgraduate work at the LSE.

Once inside the BBC, she rose rapidly through the ranks. At only 27 years old, she was an editor on *Newsnight*. Unusually, in 1988, she switched from news and current affairs to the science department.

There Bennett developed and launched *Antenna*, a new science magazine show for BBC Two, applying her journalistic skills and intellectual acumen to make complex scientific stories accessible to a wide audience.

She joined the BBC’s Board of Management in 1997 as director of production, then became director of programmes for the former BBC Production division. Two years later, she left the BBC to join Discovery Communications as general manager of the TLC channel.

Bennett returned to Television Centre in 2002 as director of television. Four years later, she became the corporation’s first director of vision, following reforms by the then Director-General, Mark Thompson.

She often attended RTS events and spoke to the Society, perhaps most significantly in 2007, when she articulated her vision for the BBC in the digital age.

In 2013, she once again crossed the Atlantic, this time to work for A+E Networks in New York, launching the FYI network. She spotted the potential of *Married at First Sight* and commissioned the US version.

In 2015, she was made president of A+E Networks’ History channel.

BBC Director-General Tim Davie said: “Jana Bennett was one of the most talented television producers of her generation and a formidable champion of public service broadcasting.... She was a brilliant and gifted colleague and is a big loss to the television industry.”

Steve Clarke

Games enjoying a 'golden age'

RTS NI Futures

Games is one of the fastest-growing entertainment industries in the UK, with a wide range of entry-level jobs demanding creative and programming skills.

In programming, qualifications help to find work, but they are not a prerequisite, said Thomas Brown. The senior games programmer at TT Games, which develops *Lego Star Wars* games, was talking at an RTS Northern Ireland Futures event: "If you turn up to an interview and you've got a giant portfolio of excellent projects but you never got an official degree, you're not going to get turned down."

Pointing out that there are many free tools to learn from, Brown added: "If you can

demonstrate core principles and good, solid ideas and programming techniques, then... that's all we're really looking for."

The event panel also included two experts from the US: Shaddy Safadi, creative director and founder at One Pixel Brush, who has worked with developers on games such as *Uncharted*; and Jennifer Klasing, a quest designer at Amazon Games.

Klasing, who is based in southern California, explained that quest design is a "weird intersection of... telling stories, writing characters... but also building... game roles... I am putting things in the games that do the storytelling."

Safadi said that technological progress meant that, in the



Lego Star Wars

Lego Group

modern games industry, "it's easier to make something technically look polished, [though] it's still just as hard to know composition, to make a layout or tell a story".

He added that people often think "the big studios know best because they have all the money – it's not true. There's stuff coming out

every day and those giant ships are hard to turn.... It's a golden age, I think, of making your own content."

"Starting out in the games industry" was hosted by RTS NI Futures on 20 January and was part of the BBC Academy's Digital Cities Virtual series of events.

Matthew Bell

The UPSIDE

Eurosport heading for a podium finish

The omens for the Australian Open were poor thanks to the "Novax" Djokovic saga, but victories for home heroine Ash Barty and a record 21st grand slam for Rafael Nadal gave it a glorious finale. Eurosport – the tennis and cycling fan's favourite – covered the tournament with professionalism, vim and verve.

While the specialist sportscaster is knee-deep in snow at the Beijing Winter Olympics, reporting on

everything from alpine skiing to curling, its parent, Discovery, is talking to BT about a 50/50 joint venture, which would add Premier and Champions League football to its already impressive sporting roster. Happy days.

Recognition for don of misdirection

Congratulations to showrunner Jed Mercurio, awarded an OBE in 2021's New Year honours list. And a big thank you to the Royal Household for mentioning Jed's RTS Fellowship, awarded back in 2017, in a recent Twitter post.

The man behind *Line of Duty* received his OBE at a recent ceremony conducted at Windsor Castle by the

Princess Royal. To say the award was much deserved is something of an understatement. Beginning with the searing *Cardiac Arrest* in 1994, Mercurio has redefined British TV drama.

From lockdown to sunny escapism

Staying with drama, one man who used the various lockdowns to achieve his long-held ambition to write a TV drama is ex-hack turned spin doctor Matt Baker.

He is the creator of BritBox's glamorous period drama *Hotel Portofino*, set on the Italian Riviera during the roaring 20s, a kind of sun-soaked *Downton Abbey*. "It's escapist entertainment," says

Matt. "If you're writing entertainment, you want it to reach an audience because that's what defines it and brings it to life." Well said, Matt.

ITV News cuts its carbon tyreprint

Good to see ITV delivering on its pledge to cut carbon emissions by launching a fleet of eco-friendly news-gathering vehicles. The plug-in hybrid vans each provide more than 50km of emission-free driving.

They will cover live breaking regional and national news across the UK and are being built and supplied by NEP Connect as part of a five-year deal with *ITV News*.

A win, win for all of us.



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