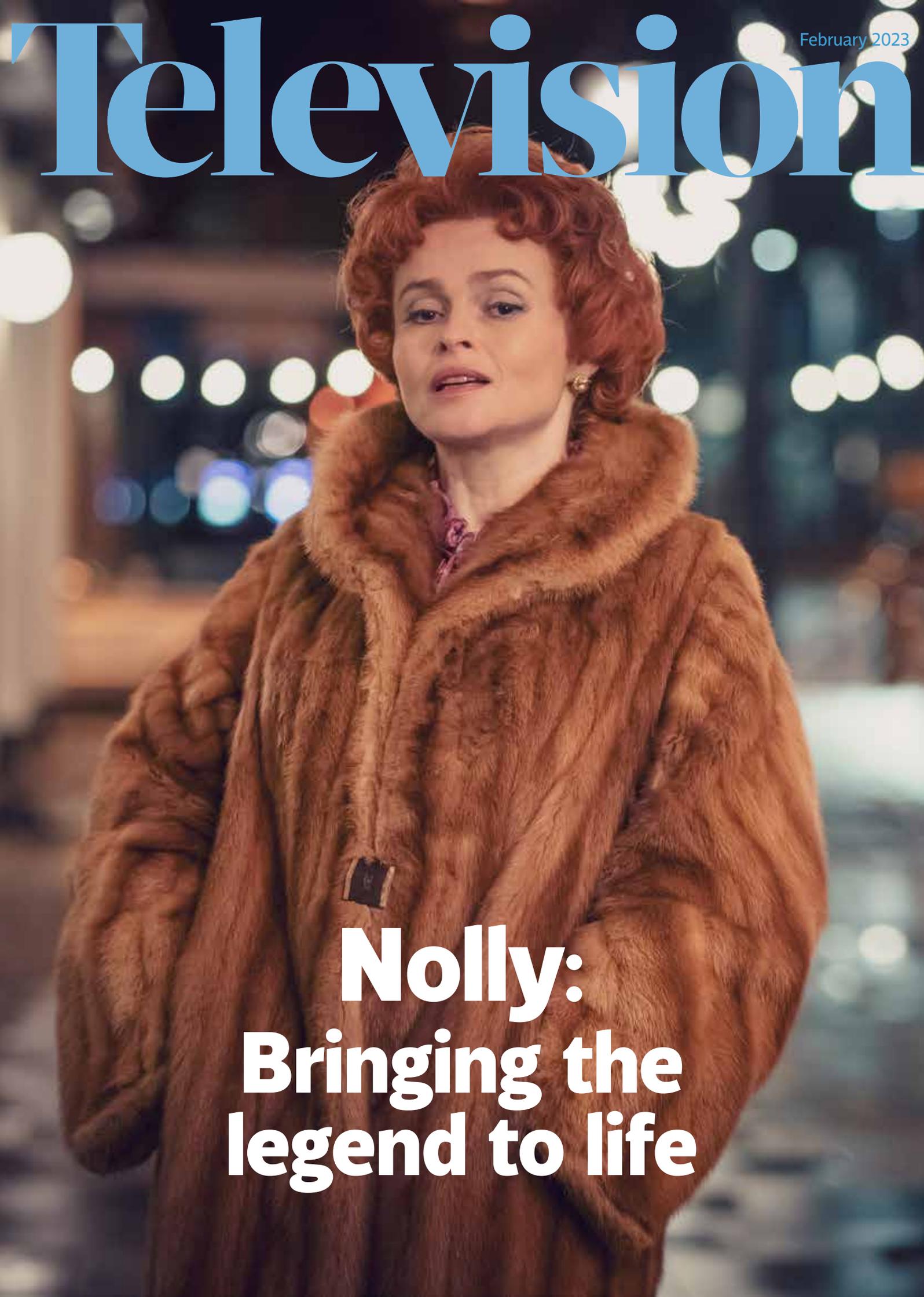


February 2023

# Television



**Nolly:  
Bringing the  
legend to life**

audio network 



● ALYUSHA CHAKRIN (VOCALIST - UK)

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## From the CEO



From *Spitting Image* to *Peaky Blinders*, the Midlands has long been responsible for producing some of British television's very best shows.

This month's cover story focuses on ITV's *Nolly*, a fresh take on Noele Gordon, the star of the long-running Birmingham soap *Crossroads*. I can't wait to see Helena Bonham Carter playing the *Crossroads* actor.

Last month, RTS Midlands presented a premiere of *Nolly*, followed by a panel discussion. At the event, writer Russell T Davies explained why he had been determined to tell the story of someone who has been largely forgotten, but whose reputation as a genuine TV

icon needs to be restored. Don't miss Roz Laws' report of the evening.

Talking of soaps, Carole Solazzo looks at what members of minority groups in her local community think of how they are depicted in them. It's a powerful piece.

Sky continues to invest heavily in British content. Inside, Shilpa Ganatra examines the launch of Sky Kids.

Also in this issue, RTS Midlands Chair Kully Khaila reminds us of the region's important role in training screen talent.

Elsewhere, we report on an enlightening RTS event that explored the ever-growing podcast phenomenon.

Our TV Diarist is the brilliant Frank Cottrell-Boyce, winner of the Judges' Award at the RTS North West Awards

2022. Not surprisingly, Frank's diary is a must-read.

Don't miss our Working Lives column, an interview with Sky News foreign correspondent Stuart Ramsay. Without the bravery and resourcefulness of people like Stuart, our knowledge of global catastrophes such as the war in Ukraine would be so much poorer.

Finally, I hope to see many of you at the RTS Television Journalism Awards on 1 March. I can promise you a great evening.

Theresa Wise

# Contents

Cover: *Nolly* (ITV)

- 5 Frank Cottrell-Boyce's TV Diary**  
The screenwriter and novelist tries to find that story he always wanted to write...
- 6 Comfort Classic: *Detectorists***  
Steve Clarke celebrates a tender, humane comedy that really cares about its characters and their imperfect lives
- 7 Ear Candy: *Obsessed with... Happy Valley***  
Harry Bennett gets obsessed as Amy Gledhill and Isy Suttie dissect the drama episode by episode
- 8 Working Lives: Chief correspondent**  
Stuart Ramsay tells Matthew Bell what he has learned on the frontline of 18 wars and a pandemic
- 10 Bringing a TV legend to life**  
Russell T Davies tells the RTS how he set out to rescue the reputation of one of the giants of British TV, Noele Gordon, with his tribute *Nolly*
- 13 Our Friend in the Midlands**  
Kully Khaila hails local training initiatives but urges all concerned to keep investing in tomorrow's talent
- 14 Do soaps wash too white?**  
Carole Solazzo asks people in her local community if shows such as *Corrie* and *EastEnders* are doing enough to represent the complexity of UK society
- 18 Four's new freedoms**  
Now that plans to privatise Channel 4 have been ditched, how will it take advantage of its new opportunities? Steve Clarke reports
- 20 Sky Kids goes big on UK content**  
Sky goes head to head with CBeebies by providing an ad-free, linear-TV channel. Shilpa Ganatra investigates
- 22 Too working-class for a career in TV?**  
Ashling O'Connor examines broadcasters' efforts to recruit and retain staff from a wider socio-economic base
- 24 New ways to learn your craft**  
*Television* distils a day of expert advice from top talent at the RTS Student Masterclasses 2023
- 26 The rise and rise of the podcast**  
An RTS panel explains why the audio format is booming and offers tips to potential podcasters
- 28 Will the tail wag the dog?**  
There is mounting evidence that brand-funded content is finally about to emerge as a force in British TV. An RTS panel explains why
- 30 RTS news and events**  
Reports of the Society's seminars, events and awards ceremonies from around the UK and Ireland



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# TV diary

I've got two films coming out this year so it's going to look as if I'm really busy. In fact, one of them was written in 2006 and the other in 2009. Years of frustration and fiddling are now behind me.

At the end of last year, I was working frantically on a film and my new book. I finished the book, and the film was placed in a medically induced development coma. I know it will be woken from sleep any day but, for now, for the first time ever, I could just, you know, write. I could write that thing that I have always wanted to write. Face the blank page at last.

■ In the office, I root in the drawers for the notes I wrote about that thing that I have always wanted to write. These drawers. The state of them. You'd need to be Howard Carter to uncover any wonderful thing in here. Phone cards. Mini-discs. DVDs. Floppy disks. And, look! My first paid work. A hilarious anecdote about my little sister that I sent to the comic *Sparky* when I was eight.

■ By now, the shades of night are falling. I've cleared two of the six drawers. In bed, I look up at the ceiling wondering if that thing that I always wanted to write is up in the loft. Or maybe in the shed. Beautifully laid out in a piece of outdated technology and utterly ir retrievable.

■ I interviewed the *Waterloo Road* actor Angela Griffin at the new Shakespeare North Playhouse in Prescot. (The auditorium is extraordinarily beautiful. Made entirely of oak, it even smells exciting.)

Angela is the first woman of colour to be a regular character on



ER Photography

## Frank Cottrell-Boyce tries to find that story he always wanted to write...

*Coronation Street*. She's a thrilling presence, talking passionately – but without a trace of anger – about how being working class is now as much of a barrier to working in TV as race is, and what she is going to do about it. She's always working.

We talk about the fact that this is partly because she is terrified of saying no to anything. That's a working-class thing, a kind of devouring gratitude. I definitely suffer from that, too. That's why I haven't yet written that thing I always meant to write.

■ Angela waxes lyrical about the great days of Granada and how the building on Quay Street – now the home of Nicola Shindler's extraordinary production company – really was a buzzing hub of talent, a real-life Northern Powerhouse.

We talk about all the people we knew there, who have gone on to do

mighty deeds – Russell T Davies, Sally Wainwright, Paul Abbott, the late Kay Mellor. I agree that we were highly blessed to have been in such company but, secretly, I'm wondering how they did it when there are so many drawers to tidy.

■ Every term, I lecture to creative writing students at Liverpool Hope University. I've hung out on the sets of huge movies, walked up the red carpet at Cannes, but I have never ever felt impostor syndrome the way I feel it every time I stand in front of these students.

All the time I'm talking, I'm painfully aware that I'm not so much telling them the secret of my success as describing the rocks on which I perished – write the thing you really want to write. Keep your drawers tidy.

For some reason, as I walk in on that snowy morning, I decide not to lecture at all but to gather them all together and try to recreate a studio writing room.

You're on the lot at Pixar. I'm the studio head. We're going to make *Pixar Little Red Riding Hood*. The room lights up. Ideas go back and forth. Best of all, everyone contributes. I feel for the first time in weeks the absolute, ancient yet never-ageing buzz of making up stories.

■ I walk out thinking of a story myself. About a writer who saves the best story of his life to a floppy disc in his youth. He finds the disc, but has to go on a quest to find someone who can retrieve the information it stores. I could call it *Permanent Fatal Error*. ■

*Frank Cottrell-Boyce is a screenwriter and novelist, known particularly for his children's fiction.*

# COMFORT CLASSIC

Odd couple: Mackenzie Crook (left) and Toby Jones in *Detectorists*



## Detectorists

BBC

**F**rom *The Likely Lads* to *Men Behaving Badly*, British comedy has long mined male friendship for its comic potential. In 2014, BBC Four's *Detectorists* delivered a new and unexpected take on the relationship between a couple of blokes. It upended what used to be a pretty macho world to give audiences something completely different.

"It was the relationship between two middle-aged men that I wanted to explore as the basis of everything," the show's creator, Mackenzie Crook, said at the time. As an actor, he had already thrilled audiences playing alongside Mark Rylance in Jez Butterworth's

**Steve Clarke celebrates a tender, humane comedy that really cares about its characters and their imperfect lives**

exhilarating *Jerusalem* at London's Royal Court theatre. He had also been to Hollywood to do *Pirates of the Caribbean* and starred in BBC Two's *The Office*.

Crucially, with their ruminations on a dying England that is forever threatened by "progress" and pollution, *Jerusalem* and *Detectorists* have a lot more

in common than Crook's more famous screen outings.

One of the simple joys of *Detectorists* – and there are many – is its close-ups of the natural world – bees and other threatened species abound.

But I digress. Crook takes up the story: "The first thing I wrote was bits of dialogue about two blokes out in a field, just talking rubbish. It was only then that I came to the idea of hobbies."

In theory, a comedy about two guys metal-detecting in rural Essex sounds about as exciting as Rishi Sunak or Keir Starmer, but don't be deceived. *Detectorists* appears to be filmed in eternal summer, an idealised version of pastoral England. The show is shot

in the quiet, discreetly rolling landscape of East Suffolk, in and around Framlingham, a charming town famous for its ruined medieval castle and a church containing outstanding Tudor tombs.

As for the writing and characters, don't expect to be blown away, at least not at first. Once this slow, subversive show eases its way into your consciousness, there is no turning back.

Our less-than-dynamic duo are Andy (played by Crook) and the lugubrious Lance, performed by the incomparable and highly versatile Toby Jones. Both are oddballs struggling to make their way in the modern world. Their hang-dog, elastic faces suggest comic possibilities that are off limits to more conventionally handsome actors. Hugh Grant or George Clooney they are not.

Don't be misled – while they may not be everyone's idea of a pin-up, the army-surplus fatigue-wearing pair can be as sharp-witted as any Shakespearian fools.

In an episode in series 3 (which kicks off by parodying *The Apprentice*), they are seen chewing the fat in one of their favourite places, under an oak tree. They discuss who they would like to invite to a fantasy dinner party. Jesus and Stephen Fry are ruled out because they are ubiquitous fantasy dinner guests. The jury is out on the Dalai Lama and Kurt Cobain.

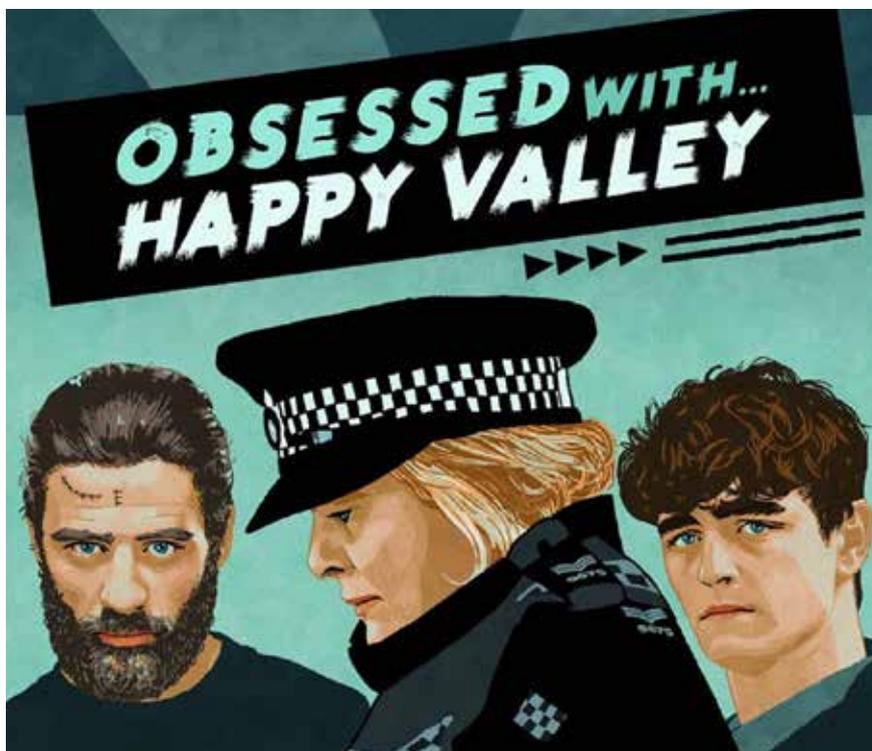
If their professional lives are disappointing (Andy is variously an agency worker, an archaeologist and unemployed, and Lance works as a forklift driver at a vegetable-packing company), back home things aren't exactly a bowl of cherries. Andy's partner may be the rather lovely Becky (Rachael Stirling) but, for much of the time, Andy prefers metal-detecting to matrimony.

Put-upon Lance's home life is a disaster area: at first, he is tormented by his ex-wife, Maggie (who runs a crystal shop with her conspicuously handsome new partner), and later, by his untidy daughter, who moves back into his flat.

Throughout, the tone is tender and bittersweet. The recent Christmas special was one of 2022's television highlights and a reminder of what a singularly rare treat *Detectorists* is. And I haven't even mentioned the haunting music written and performed by Johnny Flynn, itself redolent of a bucolic England. ■

**Detectorists is available on BBC iPlayer.**

# Ear candy



**E**ven though I would devour *Happy Valley* in one go if I could, I'm glad it's airing weekly. As Sally Wainwright's masterful Yorkshire noir approaches the end of its third and final series – and Sarah Lancashire's heroic Sergeant Catherine Cawood her long overdue retirement – it's worth savouring every episode.

*Obsessed with... Happy Valley* is the BBC's companion podcast, in which comedians Amy Gledhill and Isy Suttie discuss the drama episode by episode. From the start, Wainwright begins to weave several narrative strands, so there is plenty to pore over.

Catherine's teenage grandson, Ryan, is squabbling with his PE teacher, who, in turn, is abusing his wife, while a pharmacist-turned drug dealer is in over his head. Meanwhile, a body in a barrel leads Catherine right back to her nemesis, Tommy Lee Royce (Ryan's biological father), who has recently transferred to a prison close to home.

As Gledhill and Suttie repeatedly remind us, Wainwright's writing is all

killer, no filler. While the same can't be said of the podcast, they do make some worthy observations.

Tommy's new mane and Spanish lessons hint at an escape plan, while the double mention of the necessity for double-declutching in the truck Catherine borrows from Alison to stalk Clare, Neil and Ryan on their secretive visit to Tommy could very well be a case of "Chekhov's clutch" – like the writer's principle of "Chekhov's gun".

As comedians, Gledhill and Suttie are well equipped to find comedy in the tragedy. When they bring up the devastating phone call Catherine makes to Clare, having caught her sister red-handed on the aforementioned visit, they take note of the triangular sandwich Clare is eating: "You couldn't go and have a three-course meal while you were betraying your sister like that, could you?"

The laughs are much needed, given that *Happy Valley* is anything but happy, and you find yourself needing a breather from its overwhelming bleakness. However brilliantly bleak it is. ■

**Harry Bennett**

# WORKING LIVES



Stuart Ramsay reporting from Ukraine, 2022

## Chief correspondent

Sky

**Stuart Ramsay** has crisscrossed the globe, covering major events, including 18 wars, over a three-decade career. Last year, the RTS award-winning Sky News journalist was wounded when his team were ambushed by Russian troops outside Kyiv, but his enthusiasm for frontline reporting is undimmed.

### What does the job involve?

A mix of covering breaking large events – a lot of which in recent years have been wars – and self-starter pieces. As a team, we do long-form stories, too. The withdrawal of British forces from Afghanistan was not just a news story for us, it also became an hour-long programme.

### Why is it important?

Britain has a great tradition of covering foreign news. In the modern era, journalists have to offset the plethora of fake news and national leaders who

are happy to lie. It has given a new lease of life to foreign eyewitness reporting, which Sky really focuses on. There's an old saying, "If you don't go, nobody knows."

### What was your route into news journalism?

I went to university and read history, and then started on a local newspaper in South Wales, passing the National Council for the Training of Journalists proficiency test. I moved to London to work for PA, the national news agency, which mainly did court reporting, and, luckily, I got shifts at TV-am.

When it lost its ITV franchise [to GMTV in 1991], TV-am's news service during its last few months was provided by Sky News. I was sent to Sky to oversee the output and was fortunate enough to be kept on.

That was more than 30 years ago and I've never left. I'd wanted to be a foreign correspondent for a long time

and I worked my way up to get there. I went to Ireland and then to Moscow, Washington, Johannesburg and Delhi.

### It sounds like a nomadic life?

I was based abroad and my three children were born in Ireland, South Africa and Russia. One of the advantages for foreign correspondents is that your family are with you. Now, as Sky's chief correspondent, I'm what you call the "fireman" and I spend a lot of time away from my family; recently I've been in Brazil, Pakistan and Ukraine.

### Is the job becoming more dangerous?

It dramatically changed with reporting from the Middle East. Prior to that, when I was doing stories in Chechnya and lots of countries in Africa, journalists were observed, but we might as well have come from planet Zog – we were left to get on with it.

During the Gulf wars, in Afghanistan and later in Syria, journalists became

a target and of value in their own right. Colleagues were taken hostage.

### **It can't have helped when journalists became attached to military units?**

The advent of embedding with the British and Americans [in Iraq] meant we were effectively part of their militaries, even though journalists were reporting independently.

We had no choice, because we couldn't get to the frontline without accompanying the forces. None of us liked it. I've read lots of things about my embedding experiences where it's assured that I was influenced no end. But, actually, nobody told me I couldn't do or write what I did.

More recently, now that embedding [with the military] has effectively stopped, there is a lot more scope for journalists to work on their own. It has almost gone back to how it used to be.

### **What makes a good foreign correspondent?**

An inquisitive mind and an enjoyment of foreign places – meeting and liking people of different cultures. If you're prepared to go out and get stuck in for long periods, it's very rewarding.

You also need a strong constitution... television reporting is really physical. You're working all day, there's a lot of driving and then you get out at 3:00am and have to do a report. It's certainly not a nine-to-five job.

### **How do you prepare to work in a war zone?**

There's a huge amount of planning and a lot of risk assessment. But things go wrong. When I was shot in Ukraine last year we were actually leaving a situation because we deemed it too dangerous. What we didn't know was that the Russians were ahead of us. We did do everything right, but you can't know about ambushes.

It was an attempt to kill everyone in the car [Ramsay, producers Dominique van Heerden and Martin Vowles, cameraman Richie Mockler and local producer Andrii Lytvynenko].

The police and war crime investigators are now involved. Usually, the danger is from an explosion or a random round that's being fired, not necessarily at you, but near you.

### **How hard was it returning to the field after you had been shot?**

The shrink said to me that it was a good

idea to go back. Dominique rang me and told me to check my kit... I got out my body armour and found six more rounds that I never felt – I thought I'd been hit once. That was a real shock.

We were not 100% ourselves when we first got back to Ukraine but, over a period of time, we got back on the horse, as it were. That first trip back was fine, but we went back a second time and our hotel in Donetsk was



targeted by four missiles, and we had to withdraw.

### **Do you keep in shape?**

Keeping fit and sleeping and eating well are incredibly important but quite hard to achieve when you're working in dangerous situations. So, by the time I get to wherever we're going, I've at least had a run-up where I've been looking after myself and kept in good shape.

### **So, the old image of the foreign correspondent as booze-soaked adventurer is out of date?**

There's still a feeling of adventure. I'll go into a hotel bar and know a lot of the faces and there's always a chance that a few drinks will go down.

But the idea that a [correspondent] would be wandering about waiting to see how it turns out has long since gone. We have risk assessments, quite often travel with security and, in Ukraine, we are in armoured cars.

### **Is there a risk that, as adrenaline kicks in, judgement can become impaired?**

It is something that everyone needs to be wary of. I'm risk averse... and I work out what is doable. We call it the "risk for reward formula" and I am balancing risk almost constantly.

I'm not an adrenaline junkie, but I am attracted to the chaos, danger and freedom that comes with working [in a war zone]. That can be intoxicating.

### **Which stories are you most proud of?**

The most important story I will ever do was getting into the Bergamo hospital [in Italy] when Covid came to Europe.

The heartfelt thanks from medical practitioners around the world has been astounding, and I know from talking to Sky's political editor, Beth Rigby, that the government changed its attitude because of the pictures we sent back.

### **Has it been a good life?**

There have been loads of ups and downs, but it has been an absolute dream, a privilege, actually.

That is something I try to instil in the youngsters who are coming up behind. Do not underestimate how fortunate you are to witness world-changing events for a living. ■

*Stuart Ramsay is chief correspondent for Sky News. He was interviewed by Matthew Bell.*

# Bringing a TV legend to life



Helena Bonham Carter as Noele Gordon in *Nolly*

ITV

**I**TVX drama *Nolly* is Russell T Davies's love letter to a soap that became a national institution. *Crossroads*, which originally ran from 1964 to 1988, was ridiculed for its cheap production values and slightly wooden acting yet was adored by up to 15 million loyal viewers – and it almost gave Davies his first writing job.

He was unemployed when he applied to work on the drama and was invited to Birmingham to be shown around his first TV set. Davies was asked to write a trial script. Just five days after he submitted it, *Crossroads*, set in a Midlands motel, was axed.

"This is writing as an act of revenge!" Davies joked to a packed RTS Midlands premiere. Actually, he doesn't hold a grudge and *Nolly* is a wonderfully affectionate and funny celebration of the drama, both on- and off-screen, that has fascinated him for 40 years.

He wanted to solve the mystery of why Noele Gordon, played in *Nolly* by Helena Bonham Carter, was suddenly

**Russell T Davies tells the RTS how he set out to rescue the reputation of one of the giants of British TV, Noele Gordon, with his tribute *Nolly***

and brutally sacked in 1981 with no explanation, and how such a famous woman came to be so forgotten.

Gordon was the holder of many television firsts. She was the first woman to be seen on colour TV sets, the host of the first popular ITV chat show (*Tea with Noele Gordon*), the first woman to interview a British Prime Minister (Harold Macmillan) and the first woman to host the Royal Variety Performance.

More than 10,000 fans turned up to watch her marry and become Mrs Meg Mortimer (the character she played in *Crossroads* was originally called Meg

Richardson) at Birmingham Cathedral, an occasion that is celebrated in the opening scenes of *Nolly*.

But now the Queen of the Midlands, who died in 1985, has been consigned to history. "Nobody under 40 remembers her," Davies told the rapt Birmingham audience. "When I was pitching to ITV, someone said 'Who's she?'. She just vanished.

"Our producer, Nicola Shindler, said something interesting. I said, 'But there are names that live on, like Diana Dors', and she replied, 'If they're not a sex symbol, they don't'. It shows how much men are in control of the legacy.

"I wanted to give Noele the send-off she deserved, because the way she was treated was disgraceful."

Viewers will find out in the third and final episode why Gordon was sacked, because Davies has discovered the truth.

"It was told to me by someone on a Zoom [call]," revealed Davies. "I was sitting there thinking: 'Oh, my God, this is a goldmine.' Those words were true,



‘I GAVE NOELE  
THE SEND-OFF  
SHE DESERVED,  
BECAUSE THE  
WAY SHE WAS  
TREATED WAS  
DISGRACEFUL’

Russell T Davies

Colin McPherson/Getty Images

although, as far as I know, they were never said to Noele.”

The cast is spot on, thanks to casting director Andy Pryor. Director Peter Hoar remembered: “Russell came into rehearsals and said ‘That’s it! That’s them, they’re here – this is so exciting!’”

Augustus Prew stars as Tony Adams (who played Adam Chance), Nolly’s co-star and devoted friend. Mark Gatiss plays Larry Grayson.

Grayson also made two cameo appearances in *Crossroads*, as a flouncing, difficult customer at the Crossroads Motel and as the chauffeur at the wedding of Meg Richardson.

The cast also includes Con O’Neill, Richard Lintern and comedian Lloyd Griffith as Paul Henry, who played the motel handyman, Benny. They all had three names on the set of *Nolly*, as actors playing actors playing characters.

Birmingham actor Bethany Antonia (*House of the Dragon*) is Poppy Ngomo, who plays Honour, a surprise new member of Noele’s family. She is the only fictional character, although she

is based on actor Cleo Sylvestre, who played Melanie Harper, Meg’s adopted daughter in *Crossroads*.

Antonia told the RTS audience: “*Crossroads* was before my time, but Mum often talked about it, so I knew how much it meant to people, especially in the Midlands. For research, I watched a lot of *Acorn Antiques* (Victoria Wood’s send-up of *Crossroads*, first seen on her BBC *As Seen on TV* series, co-starring Julie Walters).

“Cleo Sylvestre was the first black actress to have a regular role in a soap. The way black women are represented in the media isn’t always accurate, so it was important for me to show natural Afro hair. That was very unusual on screen in the 1980s.”

Prew told the event: “We had a week’s rehearsal... a huge amount for TV. And I was lucky enough to spend two hours talking to Tony Adams.” He said Adams, who is 82, “was a never-ending font of wonderful stories and I wanted to make sure I honoured how special he was.

“*Crossroads* was a bit of a joke and not

to be taken seriously but, in hindsight, it was very progressive. It was among the first to feature women as central characters and disabled people. [Meg’s son, Sandy, was a wheelchair user]. At the time, it was never given its due.”

Davies said: “I wrote with Noele Gordon in mind, not Helena Bonham Carter, because you never know who you’re going to get. But she was my first choice and I was gobsmacked to get her. She said she loved every single word of the script.”

Of his writing process, Davies said: “I find dialogue easy, it just rattles out of me. I’ve thought about it for years, so I’m almost skipping when it comes to the writing.

“Graham Norton told me that watching *Nolly* was like listening to me for three hours. That’s the most incisive criticism of my drama – I think they all sound the same and they all sound like me.

“Don’t be afraid of that. Put yourself into it whether you’re writing for a middle-aged woman or an alien.” ▶



*Crossroads* remade for *Nolly* with (from left): Bethany Antonia, Helena Bonham Carter and Antonia Bernath

► The event was produced by Dorothy Hobson, RTS Midlands Vice-Chair, author and a *Crossroads* expert consulted by Davies while writing *Nolly*. She was in the studio when Gordon was fired. At the time, she was researching a PhD in culture studies and had been allowed on set for two months.

Hobson told the RTS: “Russell has captured brilliantly how it was. On that fateful Friday, they recorded the morning’s episodes and, when they came back after lunch, the mood had changed, it was tense and flat. But no one knew what was happening.

“Noele did her scene and still went through with an interview she had agreed to do with me in her dressing room. I asked her what must have been the most painful questions, but she was so professional and didn’t say anything.

“Russell got things right. He made her compassionate and she wasn’t haughty. The relationship between her and Tony was wonderful. And he got right her relationship with the city. Noele was part of Birmingham.”

*Nolly* is Davies’ 11th collaboration with producer Shindler, and follows

‘EVERYTHING LOOKS BIG AND BOLD... RUSSELL [WANTED US TO SHOOT] “CROSSROADS” LIKE “THE CROWN”’

such classics as *Queer as Folk*, *Bob & Rose*, *Years and Years* and *It’s a Sin*. It’s the inaugural drama from her new Quay Street Productions.

She says of *Nolly*: “What has been really impressive is how beautiful it looks. It’s telling the story of a relatively cheap soap opera, but we went the opposite way. Everything looks big and bold and really beautiful. Russell’s note was ‘*Crossroads* like *The Crown*’, that’s the style of it.

“Helena Bonham Carter has such a presence and such a strength of character and that’s what Noele Gordon had. She had charisma, she

had a brilliant sense of humour, and that’s everything that Helena is. Plus Helena could bring all those darker and more emotional moments, because she’s such a strong actress.”

*Nolly* reunited Davis with *It’s a Sin* director Peter Hoar, a self-confessed “massive TV nerd”. The biggest laugh of the RTS Q&A came when Davies talked about the benefits of his long-term collaborations.

“Working with the same family of creatives is definitely a choice, because there are some fucking idiots out there.

“When you find someone you trust, who makes dramas to such a high standard, you stick with them. It means I have to work harder and harder to make something as good as it can be before I show it to Nicola, because I would rather die than hand in a script she didn’t like.” ■

**Report by Roz Laws. The *Nolly* premiere and panel discussion was held at Midlands Arts Centre, Birmingham, on 25 January. The producer was Dorothy Hobson. *Nolly* is streamed on ITVX from 2 February and will broadcast on ITV1 later in the year. Caitlin Danaher contributed to this report.**

# OUR FRIEND IN THE MIDLANDS

**T**he year 1983 was a year rich in history for British television. It was the year *Blackadder*, *Blockbusters* and *The Bill* began... and there were many shows not beginning with B, too. One television start-up that became a stalwart that year was The Television Workshop, an institution from the Midlands that has been responsible for shaping the careers of so many talents on screen today.

A galaxy of stars, including Samantha Morton, Jack O'Connell, Vicky McClure and Felicity Jones, has exploded from this drama training supernova, which began life as the Central Junior Television Workshop in Nottingham. As it comes to its 40th rotation around the sun, The Television Workshop is marking its progress with a year of celebration and a film festival this summer.

Like its fellow 1983 debutant *The Bill*, the workshop has given many emerging talents their big break. They include Bella Ramsey (now dodging zombies in *The Last of Us*) and Anjali Mohindra (last seen stopping an extinction-level event in *The Lazarus Project*). But, unlike the police drama from Sun Hill, The Television Workshop just kept on going.

The RTS in the Midlands will join those celebrations and assist in bringing more of the region's fledgling talent to our collective attention.

Helping to break new talent has become part of the region's DNA. This summer, Birmingham Repertory Theatre, known as the Rep, is teaming up with Sky Studios for a comedy-writing talent scheme that will see rising stars showcase their work.

From the last cohort, twins and writing duo Mari and Lowri Izzard were commissioned by Sky Studios to write more scripts. Mentors this

**Kully Khaila** hails local training initiatives but urges all concerned to keep investing in tomorrow's talent



Kuljinder Khaila

year include Sanjeev Bhaskar and Morwenna Banks.

Birmingham is the home of the BBC Academy, the learning arm of the BBC, which also delivers industry-focused events such as Production Unlocked to engage new talent.

These three-day events, held across Britain, share skills and support aspiring talent. I will be hosting a session on behalf of the RTS at Production Unlocked in Birmingham this month, partly to speak more about discovering and growing talent.

The BBC has also piloted its first Apprentice Hub in the city to help place 50 young people in relevant apprenticeships. The BBC Academy is providing the training for the scheme.

The RTS also works with Create Central, an industry body that convenes and connects the creative sector. Throughout the year, the team at Create Central delivers bootcamps around drama, scripted, production,

development and researching to help bridge that gap between learning and opportunities.

These immersive camps build on the work of the many new screen schools that have been launched in the region over the past 18 months to address the skills gap highlighted by new studios and facilities opening in the Midlands.

The BOA Stage and Screen Production Academy opened its doors in the city's Jewellery Quarter in 2021, as did the University of Wolverhampton's Screen School. The Screen and Film School opened in Digbeth, Birmingham's emerging creative quarter, joining the BCU School of Games, Film and Animation. The region's future hasn't looked this bright for many decades.

This catalogue of initiatives and enterprise is welcome at a time when ScreenSkills estimates 20,000 new full-time roles will be needed in television by 2025 to keep up with demand. Even with all this investment, it will be challenging to maintain our momentum.

At the RTS Midlands Awards in November, acclaimed actor Adrian Lester was awarded the Baird Medal. In his acceptance speech, he spoke passionately about the places in Birmingham that supported him as he forged his career. Acknowledging the huge strains imposed on organisations by the cost of living crisis, Lester urged us all to "keep the doors open... especially now".

Whether it is prolific on-screen talent being nurtured at The Television Workshop or exciting new writers being showcased by Sky Comedy Rep, we must keep investing in new talent and supporting organisations that do so. Keep those doors open. ■

**Kully Khaila is Chair of RTS Midlands.**

**'I look at them both standing under the lamp. Ingrid... and this plain Jane, with a muddy complexion, a big nose, and a mouth like a crack in a pie.'**

**'... but there's a lovely view of the gasworks, we share a bathroom with the community, and this wallpaper's contemporary. What more do you want?'**\*\*

**A**nyone thinking these lines were spoken by one of the sharp-tongued, backstreet battleaxes from an early episode of *Coronation Street* wouldn't be far wrong. Here's why.

In the late 1950s, Britain was moving on from the class-ridden pre-war society to a more egalitarian country with the NHS, social housing and improved state education.

By early 1960, novels by Northern working-class writers such as Alan Sillitoe and Stan Barstow had been published. *A Taste of Honey*, by Salford writer Shelagh Delaney, had been staged at Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop and then transferred to Wyndham's in London's West End.

And a 23-year-old writer at Granada called Tony Warren, bored of adapting *Biggles*, became part of this great upheaval by creating what was to become the longest-running television drama in the world.

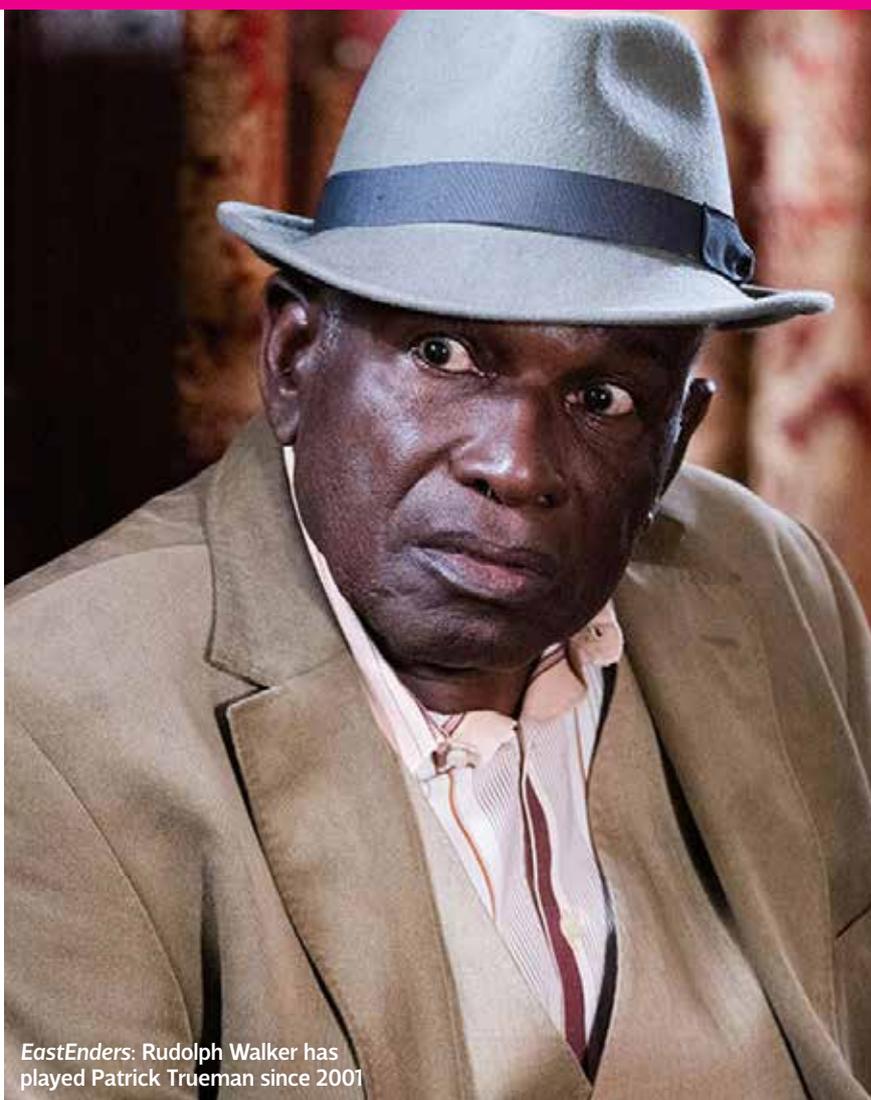
What Warren did with *Coronation Street*, in true social realist style, was to hold up a mirror to society – the white, working-class society he knew and had absorbed as a boy.

Warren grew up in the 1940s "in a matriarchal society. All the men were at war and I was surrounded by strong women," he told Melvyn Bragg in a 1995 interview. "I used to listen, under the kitchen table at my grandma's... and I used to think, 'that's what men say, and that's what women say'."

However, the reflection was a small, selective slice of life. There had been a significant black presence in the North West since at least the 18th century, the first record of Jews in Manchester is from 1798, and there was even a group of Sioux Nation Native Ameri-

\*From *A Kind of Loving*, by Stan Barstow

\*\*From *A Taste of Honey*, by Shelagh Delaney



EastEnders: Rudolph Walker has played Patrick Trueman since 2001

BBC

# Do soaps wash too white?

**Carole Solazzo** asks people in her local community if shows such as *Corrie* and *EastEnders* are doing enough to represent the complexity of UK society

cans who settled in Salford in 1887.

Even before the partial legalisation of homosexuality in 1967, Warren was an out gay man living in Manchester, where drag shows had taken place since the 1800s, and there had been a lively LGBT+ scene around Deansgate and Albert Square since the 1950s.

Yet it was *EastEnders*, created in 1985 by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, that

screened the first gay character in 1986, and aired the first gay kiss on the lips in 1989. Not until 1994 did *Brookside*, created by Phil Redmond, give us the kiss shared by characters Beth Jordache and Margaret Clemence.

Almost 20 years on, how does the soaps' representation of minorities measure up? "Soaps tend to dwell on the problems connected with being

gay,” says Vanessa Whitburn, who is lesbian. The former *Brookside* producer and series editor of the world’s longest running soap, *The Archers*, says: “I understand why, but isn’t it about time we had a simple, gorgeous and sexy lesbian romance in a soap?”

Nawal and Dee, a lesbian couple in their late sixties who are members of my local community, tell me: “We don’t recognise ourselves in soaps at all.” Although Nawal cites the recent arrival of Mary Goskirk in *Emmerdale* as a possible exception, she thinks this is because “most lesbian couples I know lead ordinary, stable lives – hardly catnip for television producers.... But interesting stories can still wrap themselves around lesbian couples: two women I know have a lovely son through a sperm donor. One of them was... certain she didn’t want a child, but now worships him.”

Rachel Fox was a camera assistant on *Coronation Street* and now works in the anthropology department at the University of Manchester. She identifies as non-binary. Fox believes that, “because soaps are often written by a certain type of person, we only see a certain type of gay represented.... Gay people are often represented as like heterosexuals, just same-sex attracted. Queer culture, or our history, is rarely touched upon.”

Fox goes on: “HIV and Aids are still very much at the front of the minds of the gay community but seen by straight people as a 1980s thing. [Drag star] Cheddar Gorgeous... promotes things such as PrEP, the preventative drug, available on the NHS, that can reduce a person’s chances of contracting HIV.

“There are so many things that people don’t know about each other, so quite often people stay in their own lane.... As a queer person, I knew nothing about the trans community until I started doing social media for the Manchester Lesbian and Gay Chorus.... Until you’re given a moment to understand why someone is banging a drum about something... you won’t get their perspective. That’s why [representation] is so important.”

*Coronation Street* was the first British soap to include a trans character, although nowadays the role would rightly go to a trans actor.

However, Chair of the TV Committee of the Writers’ Guild of Great Britain Sukey Venables-Fisher, who has a trans history, believes that, with the emphasis on “at the time”, it was a good move: “I thought a trans character who was



*Coronation Street: The affair between Kate Connor (played by Faye Brookes) and Rana Nazir (Bhavna Limbanchia) began in 2018)*

also emotionally complex and a good member of a community, not a freak show, damaged, or overly glammed, was important and positive.”

Venables-Fisher is also disabled and adds: “[What minorities add to a show] is the real world. When, sometimes, I’m described as a writer who champions disability, my response is: ‘No, not really. I just don’t edit it out.’”

The “real world” of the South Asian women of the Oldham women’s Care, Help and Inspire (CHAI) group just isn’t on screen, they say. They certainly don’t identify with the stereotypical woman who wears the hijab. “Usually, men are more dominant, but the scenario is changing. Women are gaining strength and power within the family,” Yasmin tells me. “Why don’t they show that?”

“I think that, where the man is the main breadwinner, he might not give the woman her full authority,” agrees Azeema. “That conflict would be interesting to include in a soap.”

Homera adds: “And we are trying to

bring up our children by cultivating both things in them – modernism and Islam. It’s really tough. [Producers] should come and ask us for these stories.”

Group facilitator Yasmin Toor, who became Oldham’s first female Asian councillor in 2010 and Mayoress in 2015, remembers when her mother first came to the town: “She preferred to watch the English soaps, even though she didn’t understand them at the time, to learn about English life.”

For Najma Khalid MBE, founder of the CHAI women’s group, “representation of different communities is important for community cohesion.... Representation promotes not only understanding but acceptance, too.”

Khalid praises *EastEnders* for covering gay issues and domestic abuse within a Muslim family, but asks, “When Bobby Beale converted to Islam, why couldn’t that story have been given to a Muslim who had lost their faith and then reverted back to Islam?”

Khalid asks, “Where are the positive stories? How about covering South ▶



Hollyoaks: Amy Conachan played Courtney Campbell 2013–21

Channel 4

► Asian women in professional life? In civic life?” She concludes: “There need to be more South Asian decision-makers in television.”

There have always been Jewish decision-makers behind the “big desks” in television. Yet the only Jewish characters in soaps that Ric Michael, former head of development at Baby Cow, can remember are the world-weary but wise Dr Legg in *EastEnders* and Nicola Rubinstein in *Coronation Street*.

It’s complicated,” he tells me. “[Producers] don’t know what to do with Jews because we aren’t necessarily a different colour. Ninety-nine per cent of Jews don’t wear a yarmulke [skullcap]... Also, we are probably two or three generations more assimilated.”

He continues: “Dr Legg was a believable character because he was a doctor who happened to be Jewish, not an East End stereotype.... In the past, there’s been a propensity to caricature Jews, and now perhaps to leave them out for fear of caricaturing us.... But [representation] could be done subtly.”

Soberingly, the issue of Jewish representation also differs because of Jewish history. “My dad only felt at home in Israel,” says Michael. “There’s that thing of, ‘Make sure nobody sees you’... or, ‘It’s better if we’re not characters because then we’re not the focus for anybody’.... We’ve all got that virtual suitcase in the hall in case we need to make a quick exit.”

Lornah, Audrey and India, volunteers at Levenshulme community

## ‘I DON’T CHAMPION DISABILITY... I JUST DON’T EDIT IT OUT’

radio station ALL FM and from Manchester’s black Caribbean community, say that while the soaps often get it right, sometimes they get it wrong.

Lornah says she was disappointed recently: “I felt like [the *Emmerdale* character] Naomi was feeding into the ‘angry black girl’ stereotype – and did she have to come from a gang as well?... But I’m glad there’s a black family in *Emmerdale*, and a black family in *Coronation Street*.”

“*EastEnders* feels more current, and it’s the soap that reflects myself, my family and my neighbourhood the closest,” India says. “The different generations living together... It’s the only soap where the characters just exist, as part of the dynamic, like the Truemans and the Foxes. [They are] key parts of *EastEnders*, unlike soaps where characters are brought in with an agenda and feel like an ‘add-on.’”

Audrey, too, worries about black stereotyping: “I don’t know anyone who is a drug dealer or has murdered someone. I don’t know anyone who owns a gun. If it’s supposed to be a reflection of society, then it’s a reflection of the seedier aspects.”

She also calls for more sensitivity,

citing a get-together in the Vic, where “they’ve taken a black song and made it a white song by changing ‘We’re going to Barbados’ to ‘Ibiza.’”

*Hollyoaks* writer Thabo Mhlathswa was conscious of both sensitivity and stereotyping when he pitched a storyline about black boys and knife crime. “There were two things [I considered]: first, I live in Croydon and I grew up in Peckham and there’s a lot of knife crime in those areas with people the same age as DeMarcus [the *Hollyoaks* character]. When you write a soap, you have a social responsibility to tell those stories. [Second,] when you are a black boy and you get caught with a knife, even if you have the best reason for having it, you’re judged ‘guilty’ straight away.

“At its heart is a father-and-son story, not a knife story. And, if you have black talent not only in front of the camera but also behind it – writers, directors, and producers – and there’s a great shortage of black producers in the industry... what feels like it could be a stereotypical story won’t be played as such.”

In 1959, Delaney wrote *A Taste of Honey*, which included a black character and a gay character, yet almost 65 years later it seems there is still work to be done. ■

**Carole Solazzo has worked as a scriptwriter, story producer and story associate on soaps including *The Archers*, *Doctors*, *Coronation Street* and *Hollyoaks*.**

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

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George Shiers, a distinguished US television historian, was a long-standing member of the RTS. The Shiers Trust grant is in its 22nd year.

## **Application procedure**

Applications are now invited and should be submitted to the Trustees by 30 April 2023 on the official application form. Applicants must read all the conditions

**[www.rts.org.uk/  
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**W**hen, at the beginning of November last year, Channel 4 celebrated its 40th anniversary with a lavish party, complete with a sit-down dinner, at London's Victoria & Albert Museum, many of those attending wondered if they were witnessing the end of an era.

For decades, the idea of privatising what many considered to be one of the jewels of British broadcasting had been considered by politicians. But successive leadership teams from Michael Grade's to David Abraham's had, in the end, always persuaded policymakers that a commercial Channel 4 would jeopardise its programmes and ruin its unique contribution to the UK creative economy. It would undermine the future of those small to medium-sized independent producers whose lifeblood flows from Channel 4's unusual publisher-broadcaster model.

This time, the Government's determination to privatise Channel 4 felt different, propelled as it was by Boris Johnson and his arch loyalist Nadine Dorries. Yet, despite a new Prime Minister in Rishi Sunak, and Michelle Donelan replacing Dorries as culture secretary, it seemed the die was cast to upend the broadcaster's business model and transform it into a private operator, possibly owned by Paramount, ITV or Discovery Time Warner.

Spool forward two months. On 5 January, Donelan confirmed the rumours that had been circulating for several weeks – Channel 4 would remain in public ownership, albeit with a few modest reforms.

The culture secretary declared that "Channel 4 is a British success story and a linchpin of our booming creative industries" and, therefore, should not be sold. Instead, there would be a series of tweaks to its operating model, including the ability to make more of its own content (something for which the broadcaster had not asked), to increase its borrowing limit and to move still more of its activities outside London. Another U-turn from an administration that seemed to specialise in them: just months earlier, the message from Whitehall had been that only a privatised Channel 4 could compete effectively against the US streaming giants.

Significantly, Channel 4 would be allowed to remain in its Richard



Channel 4 CEO  
Alex Mahon

Channel 4

# Four's new freedoms

Now that privatisation plans have been ditched, how will Channel 4 take advantage of its new opportunities? **Steve Clarke** reports

Rogers-designed Horseferry Road HQ in London, a building that perhaps encapsulates Channel 4's unique ethos to provide an alternative to the BBC, ITV and Channel 5. And which, to certain people, including former culture secretary John Whittingdale, a consistent advocate of privatisation, reflects what they regard as Channel 4's leftward-leaning, metropolitan elitism.

"One reason Channel 4 wasn't privatised was the loyalty of the independent sector. Some indies were pretty half-hearted about their support but,

by and large, they stuck by Channel 4," observes Stewart Purvis, the former ITN CEO who served on the broadcaster's board between 2013 and 2021.

In return for maintaining the status quo, Channel 4 has promised to invest an extra £5m in skills training and increase regional spending at its bases in Leeds, Bristol and Glasgow. The broadcaster said it will also double the number of staff based outside London, to 600. In other words, about half its staff will eventually be housed outside the capital.

However, by far the most significant of what most observers regard as “modest reforms” to Channel 4’s modus operandi will enable the operator to produce more of its programmes and allow it to borrow more money – in theory, opening the door for Channel 4 to take stakes in independent producers.

“It has got something it never asked for and this will have to be handled with extreme care on the business front,” says Purvis. “The independent production sector is still so much the cause of Channel 4’s success. It won’t want to jeopardise that.”

Pact has already raised serious concerns about the principle of Channel 4 setting up in-house production, but there seems little doubt that a deal will eventually be negotiated. “It will take a while for Pact and Channel 4 to reach an agreement, but all these things can be worked out,” predicts Tom Harrington, head of television at Enders Analysis.

Channel 4’s CEO, Alex Mahon, is widely regarded as a pragmatist, who, from the start of the Johnson Government’s drive to privatise the broadcaster – seen by many as politically motivated – played her cards very cleverly. Her 17 years of experience in the television business at Fremantle, Talkback Thames and Shine TV, working alongside Elisabeth Murdoch, had left her well equipped to fight Channel 4’s corner.

“Some of her predecessors have said, ‘Privatisation – over my dead body,’” notes a senior broadcaster. “Alex was much smarter than that. You never quite knew what she was thinking. We also should not forget the role of Deputy Chair and Acting Chair Dawn Airey, whose negotiations with civil servants at DCMS were critical.”

Airey is, of course, a former Channel 4 executive, who worked under Michael Grade. Like Mahon, she knows television inside out.

Tory MP and father of the house Peter Bottomley – who opposed privatisation – told Donelan he hoped Channel 4 would not be “forced” to make too many of its own programmes, as this would be to the detriment of the indie sector.

Donelan has said she plans to raise Channel 4’s production quota from qualifying indies, currently 25%, in order to protect indies, and to introduce safeguards for smaller indies. “The package of measures announced is about giving Channel 4 the tools to be viable in the long term. Of course, it



Channel 4

is up to Channel 4 what it does with those tools – nobody is forcing it to do anything,” she explained.

“It helps [Channel 4] to have a little bit more control over its content,” notes Harrington. “It has been very proactive online. In the past, [the only rights] it worried about were the traditional broadcast and the repeat, so it didn’t really matter where [a show] ended up. Now, the expectation is that *It’s a Sin* is going to be on All 4 for ever.”

Strictly speaking, the “purity” of the publisher-broadcaster model has evolved, with short online content having been produced in Leeds for some time; 4Studio was set up there in 2020 to produce content for social media platforms.

One consequence of not privatising Channel 4 is that the Government can now get on with its Media Bill without the distraction of privatising Channel 4. “Even those of us who could see there were reasons for privatising Channel 4 regarded it as a massive distraction because of the delays surrounding the Media Bill,” notes one broadcasting executive.

So, is the notion of privatising Channel 4 finally dead and buried? It seems

**‘THE IDEA OF PRIVATISING WILL ALWAYS COME BACK – EVEN IF IT DOESN’T MAKE ANY SENSE’**

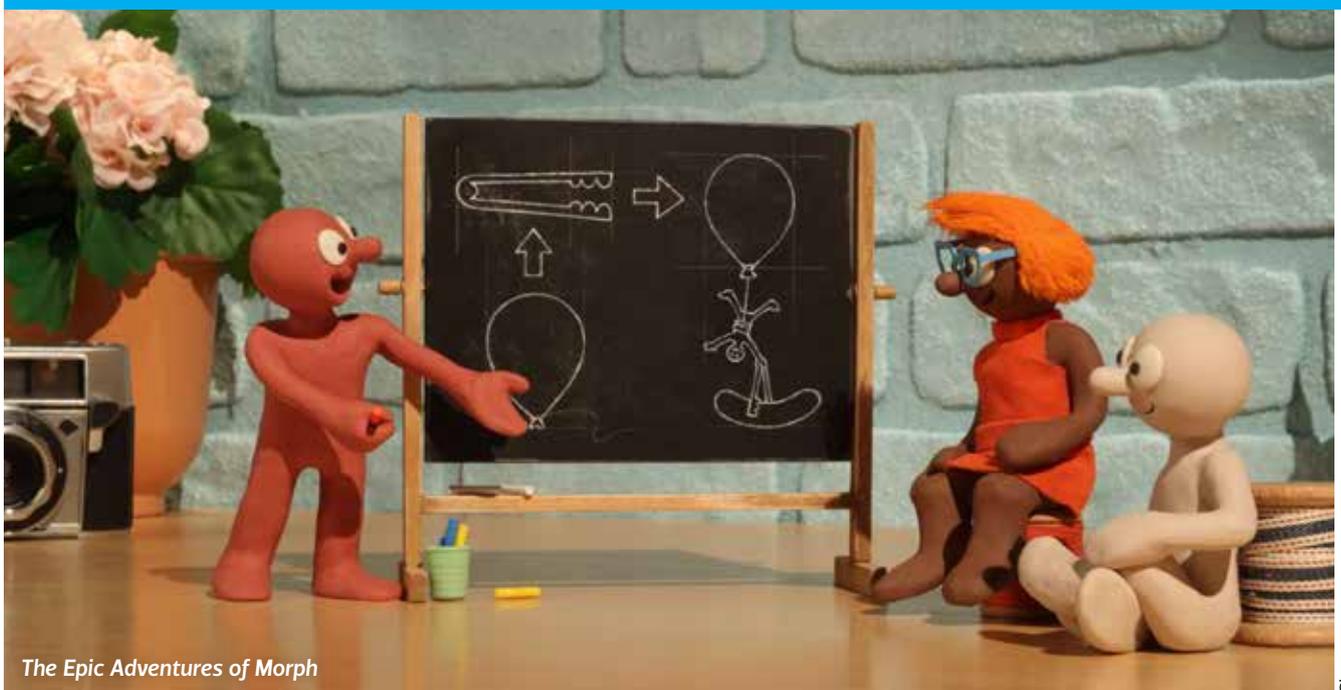
not. “Depending on who is in government, it will come back,” forecasts Harrington. He adds: “As a subject, Channel 4 isn’t as divisive as the BBC. Overall, people have very good feelings towards Channel 4 but, if you want to distract attention from something else, the idea of privatising will always come back – even if it doesn’t make any sense.

“Channel 4 doesn’t really cost anything to anyone. It provides all these jobs and all this content, so arguing that it should be sold is always going to be very difficult.”

As for Channel 4’s future, despite the success of All 4, the threat from Netflix et al hasn’t gone away. For many, having four UK public service broadcasters in such a rapidly changing market makes little sense. Don’t be surprised if the argument for consolidating the PSB’s streaming services gains traction in the coming months.

Some also forecast pushback on the decision to allow Channel 4 to remain at Horseferry Road, a building said to be worth at least £100m. “At one point in the debate over privatisation, Channel 4 said it was prepared to move out of London. The economic case for becoming still less London-centric is compelling,” reckons a senior broadcaster. And Purvis says: “I think it ought to look at premises in a fresh light. That would be the right thing to do.”

Regarding Mahon’s career, rule nothing out. However long she stays at Channel 4 her legacy is secure. Several observers predict that Deborah Turness, CEO of BBC news and current affairs, has a credible rival to succeed Tim Davie and become the BBC’s first female Director-General. ■



The Epic Adventures of Morph

Sky

# Sky Kids goes big on UK content

**P**arents, rejoice! From 13 February, there will be another televisual offering to help keep the little ones occupied. Sky Kids is a 24-hour, ad-free, linear-TV channel aimed at the under-sevens. Going head-to-head with CBeebies with shows that it promises will be entertaining and educational, the channel will be available automatically to those who subscribe to the £9.99 a month Now Entertainment package or the £6 a month Sky Kids package.

Tune in, and you'll find established favourites such as *The Epic Adventures of Morph* and *The Very Small Creatures* alongside new commissions, including *Ready, Eddie, Go!*, narrated by Jodie Whittaker, and *Ama's Story*, a one-off special based on a British Ghanaian and Nigerian family.

For such a playful channel, Sky means serious business. While the budget remains under wraps, the media giant is beefing up the 10,000 episodes of children's content already available with newly commissioned,

Sky goes head to head with CBeebies by providing an ad-free linear-TV channel.  
**Shilpa Ganatra** investigates

British-skewed shows. Doing so is "a business priority," says Zai Bennett, Sky's Managing Director of content.

"In terms of the Sky channel portfolio, we've got a documentaries brand, a nature brand, a crime brand, a comedy brand, Sky Atlantic is a grown-up, chewy drama brand, Sky Max is a narrative and entertainment show brand," he says. "We had Sky Kids as an entity that commissioned and acquired shows, and we put them on-demand, but this is the final piece in that puzzle."

The scale of investment in the channel is visible in its launch-week schedule: a third of the shows will be new to Sky, and about half will be Sky

Originals. Forty two per cent of all titles available in launch week – both acquisitions and originals – are British.

Sky's director of kids' content, Lucy Murphy, adds that the new channel will have an emphasis on live action – one of the more expensive ways to produce children's TV. But, she says, it is much needed: "We've got great channels, such as Boomerang, Nick Jr and Nickelodeon, which have got a lot of animation, so we wanted to balance that out a little bit. It's important for younger kids to see themselves on screen."

To that end, one of the new shows is *My Friend Misty*, executive produced by presenter Fearne Cotton and narrated by *Breeders* star Daisy Haggard. "It follows a bunch of everyday kids as they come up against the big life lessons, which, when you're six, means things like not being invited to a birthday party or falling out with your best mate," says Murphy. "A little animated character called Misty comes in and talks them through strategies for coping."

The channel is exploring new paths in children's TV, too. Aimed at two

years and older, *BooSnoo!* was developed with support from the National Autistic Society to make it engaging for kids with learning difficulties or who may be autistic. It calmly follows the journey of a red ball as it moves through different landscapes.

Executive producer Julian Bashford of Visionality worked with Sky to bring

differentiator for us in the Sky Kids pack,” says Bennett. “When you think about Nickelodeon or Boomerang and the other linear channels, they’ve all got adverts.”

Staying ad-free provides the service with the same advantage that the BBC and US-based streamers have. Tom Harrington, head of television at Enders

“And it adds that serendipity to the discovery process, where something they may not have planned on watching or thought about watching comes on next. It’s great for helping us launch new shows.”

Linear-TV programming for younger children remains a strong performer at the BBC – CBeebies has more than 8 million viewers monthly, almost twice as many as CBBC, which is aimed at seven- to 12-year-olds.

Anna Taganov, head of children’s content and programming strategy at the BBC, says: “CBeebies is a channel that is going to outlive pretty much every channel on linear-TV.”

Having spent 13 years working for Disney and Disney Junior, she has seen repeatedly that “linear channels provide curation and a programme flow that parents appreciate. Linear channel schedules reflect the flow of children’s lives. They take into account school holidays and the daily routine of a child: early mornings, bedtime.

“Ten years down the line, some Generation Alphas, who are 12 years old now, will have had children. So, probably, by then, linear will have changed entirely.”

Taganov seems to be keeping a close eye on Sky Kids, but her focus will remain “dramas, animation, ambitious edutainment and family shared watching. We still hold our unique position because of established free-TV channels and iPlayer. We understand that this is a very competitive market but we feel confident. The depth of content in this genre that we are producing is like no one else’s,” she says.

“We have our dramas, unscripted and factual entertainment, but we’re also doing things that no one else in the market or, dare I say, in the world, is doing – TV events such as the CBeebies Prom, and a performance in the Globe Theatre. Those are unique things that only we can deliver.”

Bennett is nevertheless confident that Sky Kids can succeed – as measured by subscription levels more than viewership. “This isn’t brand new to us,” he says. “The Sky Kids pack exists, and this is another way of getting it in front of the right people.

“We’re agnostic about how people consume. I don’t mind if someone wants to watch it on-demand or on linear-TV. As long as they’re consuming our stuff, I’m a very happy person.” ■

**Sky Kids launches on 13 February.**



*Ama's Story* SKY

the series to the screen. He says the broadcaster “was so in tune with the idea from the get-go. Communication was fast, positive and creative... It took away weeks of head scratching, waiting and pacing, and allowed us to get on and make the show.”

He adds that the channel’s arrival is a very welcome development for children’s TV producers – and for kids themselves: “Sky is clear that it doesn’t want to overlap with the channels it already has, which encourages producers to up their game and become more inventive. It’s what we’ve done with *BooSnoo!* – it’s certainly not a typical show.”

Regarding future commissions, Murphy has identified specific gaps: “We’re looking for new music-and-movement shows, and we’re always looking for strong stories. Whether that’s a half-hour special or a series, storytelling is at the heart of what we do.”

As parents are often concerned about what their children are exposed to, it is critical that the channel remains ad-free. “That’s a great

Analysis, notes that advertising to kids is “quite a tricky business – it is highly regulated, and it’s getting harder to make money out of it. The big money around kids’ programming is owning the show’s intellectual property and then merchandising off of it. That’s why you want to get into kids’ TV.”

Introducing a new linear-TV channel looks like a bold step at a time when the direction of travel is to on-demand content. Harrington points out that, in the past 12 years, linear viewing for four- to-15-year-olds has fallen by 76%. “We’re seeing the effect of adults who have moved away from linear-TV. When they become parents, they decide what the younger kids watch.”

So why launch a linear channel? “We’ve done lots of research, and this is a very specific benefit that customers want that is missing at the moment,” says Bennett. “Linear-TV can act as a babysitter. A lot of the time, parents don’t want to put on 25 *Peppa Pigs* back-to-back. It’s nice to know that you might get a half hour or 40-minute session where they get a variety of different flavours of content.

Progress? The Frost Report sketch featuring John Cleese, Ronnie Barker and Ronnie Corbett in 1966



# Too working-class for a career in TV?

**L**eadership teams are more diverse than ever, but are they any less elite? While the focus has been on visible diversity – rightly so, as underrepresentation persists – an increasing priority for organisations in terms of diversity, equality and inclusion (DE&I) is the socio-economic background of their employees.

In media and entertainment, this is a particular challenge. The only professions more socially exclusive than media are medicine and the law. While the appointment of more women and people from ethnic minority backgrounds has increased the diversity of many leadership teams, progress could be curtailed if recruits are drawn from similar social strata and academic institutions.

Ofcom's most recent annual assessment on equality, diversity and inclusion in television and radio, published

**Ashling O'Connor** examines broadcasters' efforts to recruit and retain staff from a wider socio-economic base

in November 2022, concluded that more must be done to attract and retain talent from lower income groups. For example, the report found that 13% of employees in the sector attended private school, compared with the UK benchmark of 7%.

These figures come as no surprise to Marcia Williams, appointed last year as Channel 4's first director of inclusion. She believes that, as an industry, the primary focus on diversity, rather than on inclusivity, can lead to too much concern with appearances.

"The real goal is to persuade the

people we want to attract that we are genuinely serious about it, we have an environment in which they will thrive and their expertise will be valued," she says. "After years of short-term, programmatic initiatives, many no longer believe us as an industry."

A key metric used to track socio-economic diversity is whether, when a person was 14, their parents were in a professional occupation. But, while such data is an important way of understanding what is working and what isn't, metrics are not a silver bullet. For a start, they rely on voluntary disclosure – not something everyone is comfortable providing.

At Channel 4, where regard for diverse audiences is a statutory obligation, non-disclosure of class or social origin is much higher than for protected characteristics, such as race. "There's a lot of complexity associated with feelings about that," says Chief Executive Alex Mahon. "Some might not want to

reference where they came from. People don't necessarily see it as part of their identity that goes with them [through] their whole lives. Sometimes, there is an aspiration to change that."

She believes that changing the culture of an organisation to make it more inclusive should be as important as accelerating the proportion of a workforce defined as socially diverse – because retention is more than half the battle. Having overcome the hurdles to entry, the data suggests that social exclusivity increases with seniority.

"People from lower socio-economic backgrounds end up leaving in far higher numbers because they feel they don't fit," says Mahon. "Television has a culture of sponsorship [involving] people who are socially familiar and have a set of behavioural codes – like wearing the same trainers, going to Soho House, sending their kids to private school. That's perfectly fine but you shouldn't act [as if] that's the correct way, as people who aren't like that feel like they can never belong. They feel they will never overcome that gap between who they really are and who those other people are. To them, this feels impossible – and so they quit."

So, what are broadcasters doing?

The first step is measurement. ITV has published a Diversity Acceleration Plan, which includes a new target to increase the proportion of colleagues from working-class backgrounds to 33% by 2025. ITV was also the first FTSE 100 company to have a dedicated group director of diversity, Ade Rawcliffe, on its executive board, something in which CEO Carolyn McCall takes great pride. "The conversation has definitely broadened and changed as a result of having her on the board," she says.

The publicly funded BBC is under more pressure, as Director-General Tim Davie is all too aware. It is the first UK broadcaster to measure and publish data on the socio-economic diversity of its staff, and is the only media organisation listed in the top 50 of the Social Mobility Employer Index.

The corporation has also increasingly prioritised its MediaCityUK studios in Salford, now home to about 2,700 staff.

## '[IT IS] ABOUT MOVING FROM DIVERSITY AND REPRESENTATION TO INCLUSION'

"Socio-economic diversity is an incredibly powerful resource for talent and leadership," says Davie. "Today's hires are tomorrow's CEOs, and, from entry level to the executive board, socio-economic diversity brings a vital perspective. Only when this is fully reflected throughout organisations can we give everyone the chance to reach their full potential."

Channel 4, meanwhile, opened a national headquarters in Leeds in 2019, followed by regional hubs in Glasgow and Bristol, alongside its existing office in Manchester; 26% of its 1,200-plus staff are now based outside London. As well as banning work placements from family and friends, its 4Skills programme invests £5m a year to create more than 15,000 training, learning and development opportunities annually. The proportion of staff defined as "socially mobile" has risen from 34% in 2016 to 40% in 2022.

Like every diversity metric, social mobility does not stand alone. There are many points of interconnectedness, and this is a key priority at ITV, where its five DE&I groups come together to share and learn. "We don't have a set [single network] for social mobility, because, in each area of diversity, there are elements of social mobility," argues

## 'PEOPLE FROM LOWER SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUNDS END UP LEAVING IN FAR HIGHER NUMBERS'

McCall. Initiatives include matching senior leaders from minority ethnic groups with sponsors on the Management Board and the Board of Directors. In turn, these senior leaders sponsor someone on the government's Kickstart scheme for young people on universal credit (now closed to new applicants). The CEO mentors a senior leader on this programme.

"The big thing for us will be going back five years to monitor how many senior leaders and Kickstarters actually stayed," she says. "A lot of people come into organisations in media and say: 'It's not for us; not my people; I don't feel included.' Inclusion is a big part of retention and we've worked really hard at that."

There is, and will always be, more to do. While leadership teams must look diverse, change must go deeper to make it stick.

"The most cutting-edge work in this sector is about moving from diversity and representation to inclusion," says Mahon. "The big focus now is: what does true inclusion look like in the workplace and as a leadership skill set? How do you draw out all the voices in the room, ensuring recognition of potential in your staff – rather than observation of potential? You don't get the full contribution from each employee if they are not bringing their whole selves to work."

From more meritocratic, entry-level applications to intentional recruitment of senior executives who do not fit the mould, change is happening. The leaders we spoke to know that management teams that better reflect their consumers will be more successful and avoid groupthink.

"People need to see the whole of society represented, not just one aspect. And I think that means working class as well as disability and ethnicity," McCall concludes. "It's the whole range of difference. It is much better for business." ■

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Nima Elbagir

Television distils a day of expert advice from top talent at the RTS Student Masterclasses 2023

writer Geoff Thompson, who went from being a nightclub bouncer to a Bafta-winning film-maker. “He was a big influence,” recalled Arnold, who began his career making short skateboarding videos.

On graduating from the National Film and Television School in 2013, he directed two episodes of Channel 4’s *Misfits*, followed by such shows as Russell T Davies’s *Banana* and ITV breakout hit *Broadchurch*.

“Some film-school graduates are a bit snobbish about working in TV, but I took anything I could get, even if it was earning £100 a day as a first assistant director,” he said.

Later, he co-created *Des* for New Pictures and ITV, starring David Tennant as the serial killer, and Jason Watkins as Brian Masters, the author who wrote a biography of Nilsen. The students were shown a clip featuring Tennant and Watkins. Arnold played down his own role in the production: “When you’ve got two brilliant actors like that, I just get out of the way.”

Asked what makes a good director, he didn’t hesitate: “You surround yourself with brilliant people.”

Paul Hampartsoumian

**N**ima Elbagir is no stranger to RTS events, having been named RTS Television Journalist of the Year in 2020. CNN’s chief international investigative correspondent was interviewed by another high-profile investigative journalist, David Harrison, currently working at Al Jazeera. Elbagir gave the audience a searing insight into her acclaimed reporting of human rights abuses across Africa.

Born in Sudan, she comes from a family of journalists – her father and grandfather were journalists, and her sister works for Sky News – but she said that being a black woman without a British passport didn’t make for the easiest of starts in her chosen profession.

She recalled: “I went to university here but started working in Sudan. If there is one lesson I try and pass on to young journalists, it’s to try and get out of where everyone else is. I was very lucky to go to Sudan, as I was one of the few people who spoke a good standard of English and was available to work for international organisations based there, which allowed me to find a way back to London.”

She worked for Reuters in Sudan, and returned to the UK on its graduate

# New ways to learn your craft

Four of the industry’s leading practitioners talked about their careers and offered first-hand advice on how to make a start in television at the RTS Student Masterclasses in January.

**L**ewis Arnold addressed the first session, devoted to drama. The director-producer told the students that, despite the restricted state-funding of education in today’s harsh economic climate, they had one advantage that he had lacked during his formative years – tech.

“There are ways to learn your craft that didn’t exist when I was starting out, although I did get financial support from the state,” Arnold said. “You all have phones in your pockets. We’re all able to make films on our phones. I don’t use TikTok, but it’s a great tool for aspiring film-makers.”

The award-winning director of such high-profile series as Jimmy McGovern’s *Time*, and *Des*, about the serial killer Denis Nilsen, recalled that he had always wanted to be a director.

An early mentor was Coventry-based

training programme before working for a *Channel 4 News* “subsidiary satellite channel”. Twelve years ago, she joined CNN.

“Our work takes a lot of time and has to be meticulous,” said Elbagir. “Thorough research is essential.”

In three clips, she demonstrated the challenges she faced in the field. One of these, filmed in Libya in 2017, showed undercover footage of a slave auction in which men were sold for \$400. “It was my first long-term investigation,” she said.

However, it was the final clip, *Predator Priest*, that generated the biggest reaction from the students. In the report she confronts a Belgian Catholic priest accused of sexually abusing children. “I was so angry,” Elbagir said. “I hadn’t realised I was slowly losing control.”

**S**ohail Shah was set on journalism as a career before he appeared as a teenage reviewer on the CITV video game show *Bad Influence!*. “I’ve never done it since and I’ve got no wish to appear on camera ever again,” he said. But he had been bitten by the TV bug.

As a student, he worked at Granada in the holidays and then, after university, as a runner and researcher on Channel 4 music show *Planet Pop*. Shah became a series producer, then joined the BBC as an entertainment commissioner, becoming responsible for huge series such as *QI* and *The Graham Norton Show*. Now he is his own boss, as MD of Manchester indie King of Sunshine Productions, where his shows include Channel 4’s *Jon & Lucy’s Odd Couples*.

Looking back over a varied career, Shah said he had always avoided being pigeonholed. “Until I became a commissioner I’d never done a second series,” he said. “I consume lots of different kinds of shows when I’m coming up with ideas.”

He added: “[With] factual, factual entertainment and entertainment programming, the lines are very blurred now... I do ‘jazz hands’ shows, but I do lots of other things as well.”

Shah recommended working in development and producing. “If you can do both, it’s absolutely brilliant. It enriches your skill set and certainly gives you a more rounded career, and probably a longer one,” he said.

On pitching, Shah advised: “You need to have a clear proposition so you [can] say what the programme is in a



line or two, and immediately follow up with why you think it should be on and who’s going to be watching it. Those are the three things a commissioner wants to know.” Attaching talent to a pitch can help too.

Addressing the audience, he concluded: “Don’t wait until you’ve graduated to start contacting people... get a head start.”

**T**anya Stephan’s films address major issues through people’s personal stories. In 2022, she won an RTS Television Journalism Award for her feature-length film *The Missing Children*, about a mother and baby institution run by Catholic nuns.

Stephan started out in radio, with an internship at Radio Scotland. “That was a really good way to go because I learned how to tell stories in five minutes – and only with audio, which has been amazing preparation for making documentaries,” she said. A few years later, she went to the National Film and Television School.

Learning how to self-shoot is a key skill. “Really, that was the only way into TV – if you could film your own stuff,” she said. “The technical stuff is not really the most important thing – that’s the stuff that’s easy to learn. It’s how do you shoot a scene... not only to cover [it] but to make that

scene more interesting and dramatic?”

Casting a documentary, she said, is “probably the most important part of the whole process... You need to find people who have a sort of charisma and communicate well and will help you to tell the story... but [they’re] not always the loudest or most obvious person.”

The majority of Stephan’s work involves directing films initiated by others. “It’s really hard getting your own projects off the ground... and you’re not necessarily going to be paid while you do it,” she revealed.

Currently, she is working on a film about the Ukraine war: “It absolutely wasn’t my idea, but I was brought in so early that I was able to develop it and was part of getting it commissioned within the BBC, which is an ideal sort of situation.”

Stephan concluded: “You might not always be doing the films that you most want to make, but you’ll learn so much from each one. At the same time... keep an eye out for where you really want to be – don’t lose sight of that.” ■

**Reports by Steve Clarke and Matthew Bell. The RTS Student Masterclasses 2023 were held on 26 January and chaired by Matt Pritchard (entertainment session), David Harrison (journalism), Toby Earle (drama) and Helen Scott (documentary). The producers were Helen Scott and Diana Muir.**



Global

The News Agents podcasters  
Jon Soper and Emily Maitlis

# The rise and rise of the podcast

‘T here was literally a moment when everyone was talking about it in the same way they would have talked about something on TV.’ This was the intriguing opening from host Anita Rani, introducing an RTS panel of experts to discuss the dizzying rise of the podcast, how it is affecting the ecosystem of intellectual property (IP), and the best ways to become a podcaster.

That historic moment was *Serial*, the 2014 US podcast that told the story of the murder of Baltimore student Hae Min Lee in 13 episodes that have now been downloaded more than 300 million times. The series exposed the mistakes leading to the wrongful conviction of Adnan Syed; it also kick-started an entertainment revolution.

Nearly a decade on, and the UK has its own vibrant podcast sector, boasting annual ad revenues of £40m in 2021.

## An RTS panel explains why the audio format is booming and offers tips to potential podcasters

That figure is estimated to rise to £60m by 2025. The content encompasses true crime, comedy and news, as well as Rory Stewart shooting the breeze with Alastair Campbell. Another big podcast hit is *The News Agents*, starring Emily Maitlis and Jon Soper.

Rani also shared an impressive statistic: in the UK, 40% of podcast listeners are aged 26–35, making podcasts the secret sauce craved by advertisers keen to reach this otherwise elusive demographic.

Two things are driving the medium’s success, particularly for this group, but also more generally: technology and

talent, said Darrell Brown, Managing Director of podcast production company What’s the Story?. He explained: “Tech means we can listen in our cars, on our commutes. People can listen at different times.” Talent on podcasts tended to be young people, he said, “often with already established personalities on YouTube or TikTok, and young people want to hear from them”.

But podcasts, it seems, work for everyone. Declan Moore, head of international at podcast studio Wondery, reflected: “We have this audio medium that’s been around for longer even than video. But, in the past 10 years or so, we have been living in this on-demand world, whether it be for video or food. It was only natural that there would be a desire for audio in an on-demand way.”

Brown, who moved from TV production to podcast creation, said creatives liked the flexibility associated with podcasts: “There are restrictions around

TV. What audio enables is the chance to back a story you want to tell – it doesn't have to fit into a box or shape. [Wondery series] *Body of Proof* could have been an hour long, but it became 10 episodes of 30 minutes each. It can be as long as it needs to be."

For Alex Bewley, podcast agent at WME, the format fits perfectly into the increasingly synergistic ecosystem of content IP: "Our literary packaging department was created... to adapt

marking a hit. Louise Kattenhorn, a commissioning editor for podcasts at the BBC, revealed that the corporation has different targets for different projects, whether it be talent engagement with the audience, brand building or, crucially, big numbers for BBC Sounds.

Bewley added that it has become increasingly difficult to break into the podcast charts on Apple and similar platforms. The top 10 slots invariably go to established talent, often with

period, rights will be tied up for a while, that can take a little longer."

Can anyone make a podcast? In theory, yes. In this era of cheap technology, wannabe podcasters can dispense with expensive studios and concentrate on the creative process.

Brown was confident that a quality product could be made for a maximum of £10,000 an episode and often for a fraction of that: "The budgets are a world away from factual television or documentary. It's quite a raw medium – you can one-man-band it with a microphone, and an interview that will be golden."

While Moore questioned Brown's figure of £10,000 – unsurprisingly, for a man with Wondery dollars to spend – he echoed the idea that story and voice is all. His advice to would-be podcasters was: "Find your voice, be authentic, the host is like a trusted friend. Serve the listeners."

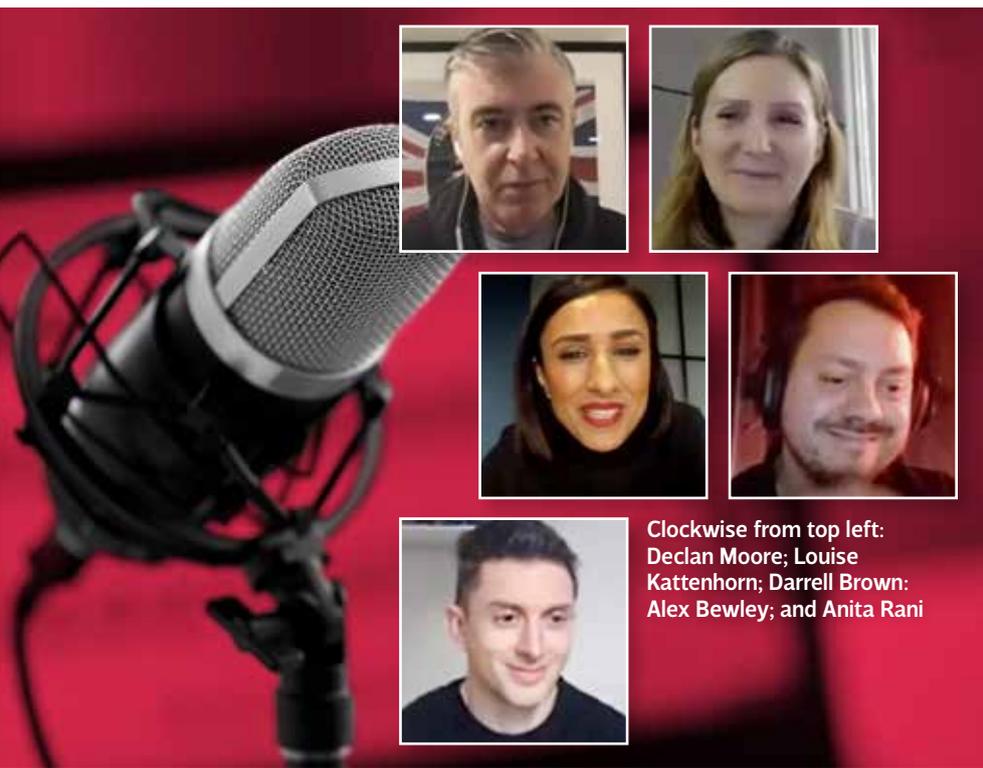
Investing in marketing and social strategy to support the podcast is also key. Moore advised building relationships with services that reach listeners, using available promotional tools, marketing, and cross-hosting with like-minded shows.

Consistency is key, said Bewley. "Conversational works better as 'always on' – being available between 45 and 52 weeks a year. People need to know what they're going to get each week in terms of base format, whether that be a host on their own, regular guests or a co-host."

For a limited-run podcast to be successful, he said it needed access to a story that no one else has, or something that's breaking in the news, or a case that's been reopened. "You need the sense that you're bringing the audience along for the ride."

Finally, the experts were asked for the crucial ingredient for podcast success. Kattenhorn suggested it was: "Personality, something interesting and unusual to say." Bewley's advice was: "Be proactive – half the battle is finding a great story and working out who your audience is." Moore's rule was: "Think creatively, find your voice and be true to that." Brown's advice was simple: "Get out there, have a go and see what you can create." ■

**Report by Caroline Frost. 'Riding the audio wave: How podcasts are taking the TV industry by storm' was an RTS national event held on 23 January. The producer was Sarah Booth at Banijay.**



Clockwise from top left: Declan Moore; Louise Kattenhorn; Darrell Brown; Alex Bewley; and Anita Rani

RTS

books for TV, books for film, but it has been expanded to include podcasts. There are more and more ways we can connect clients within a talent agency, so they can protect their IP earlier."

So what works? Bewley said "true crime but without a dead body" is at the top of his buyers' wish list for 2023. It seems there is no escape from the lure of an engrossing who- and whydunnit.

Moore, who has presided over hits including *Dr Death* (a scamming Texan medic) and *The Shrink Next Door* (a scamming New York psychiatrist), agreed that audiences can't get enough of the close-up profiles of society's malefactors. But it was early days for the format, he said. "We're in the black-and-white era of audio storytelling. There's lots of opportunity for storytelling, and that's creatively exciting."

How is success measured? The panel agreed there was no single way of

daily or twice-weekly shows. But it is not impossible to break through, and he shared the advice he gives his clients: "Social plays a huge part. My clients will put snippets on their social media, they already have this audience and they can migrate them across."

Is there money to be made? Yes, but not directly, was the panel's shared opinion. For Brown, it was about "understanding who your audience is – it could be niche – so you can start bringing brands and making money from advertising, but you're not going to get rich overnight."

The bigger slice of the pie is to be found in IP, it seems, particularly the prospect of adapting podcast content for the screen as we have seen with hit shows such as *Dirty John* on Netflix and *The Dropout* on Hulu. But this, too, comes with a caveat, as Brown explained. "TV doesn't move as quickly as podcasting. There's a green-light period, an option

Changing Rooms is sponsored by Dulux



Channel 4/Dulux

There is mounting evidence that brand-funded content is finally about to emerge as a force in British TV. An RTS panel explains why

# Will the tail wag the dog?

**B**rand-funded content has long been the goal of TV's money-makers; but, although much-promised, it has been frustratingly slow to emerge. The brands, too, are keen to promote their goods and services on TV, where audiences tend to be large and highly engaged. But, if the expert panel assembled for a sold-out RTS national event in mid-January is correct, brand-funded TV is finally going to take off.

Research on the effectiveness of branded entertainment is thin on the ground. However, a Channel 4 study in 2020 found that it can boost brand perceptions by 29% compared with a traditional spot advertisement and that 44% of viewers feel more positive about a brand after seeing it in a programme.

Introducing the RTS event, the chair, Sam Glynne, head of EMEA, entertainment and culture marketing at the United Talent Agency, explained the many forms that branded entertainment can take. She said: "It can be an original piece of intellectual property (IP); it can be Dulux [sponsoring the Channel 4 revival of] *Changing Rooms*, an old piece of IP that's much loved and cherished; it can be a segment of branded content within a bigger piece; it can be a product placement thing that explodes into a bigger piece of content; [or] a co-marketing campaign around a piece of content where the brand is never in the show."

Glynne added: "There are lots of creative and compliance challenges – the UK broadcasting industry is one of the strictest in the world in terms of compliance. [But] if we can get it right here,

then you can get it right anywhere else."

Richard Wilson, CEO of creative production and marketing solutions company Clickon, identified one route. He said that brands were taking the lead and becoming publishers of their own content: "Brands are realising they can create their own content; long-form, short-form... cut up into lots of different formats... we're seeing more brands building in-house studios to try to create content with the frequency they need to create relationships with their customers."

Wilson added that "honest storytelling" was the key to creating effective branded content.

This point was picked up and expanded on by Adam Puchalsky, global head of content at media agency Wavemaker, who had flown in from New York to attend the RTS event.

There is a ton of stories,” he said. “With the right partnership, the right story, the right distribution mechanism, there’s no reason why amazing entertainment can’t be produced from every single brand.”

Puchalsky said that “a story doesn’t necessarily need to involve the brand”. As an example, Puchalsky showed a clip from *Thick Skin*, a four-part AMC Networks documentary series that follows women trying to de-stigmatise obesity. This was funded by a pharmaceutical company that has developed an anti-obesity drug.

He added: “We felt it was an opportunity for a story to be told without the brand being involved, because the more people are comfortable talking about their weight... the more likely

Broadcasters have their own take. “We work with multiple partners on a deal because everyone has their own specialisms,” said Katherine Marlow, Channel 4’s senior linear branded entertainment lead. “At the same time, [content] still needs to feel cohesive: [you need to] constantly think of the audience first, whether you are a brand or [Channel 4]. What does that audience want and how best can you deliver that?”

Wilson sounded a warning, however, about the risks of unsubtle product placement. “If Netflix went down a heavy-handed [promotion] of Perrier and Heineken the way the Bond movies have done, I think their subscriber bases would start dropping at a frightening rate,” he said.

away is the sponsorship of the programme itself.”

She continued: “You can have an alcohol brand funding a programme... or series, but, because alcohol cannot appear within it, it would have to be a zero-alcohol variant if we wanted to integrate [the product].”

From the floor, John Nolan – a widely acknowledged expert in the field of branded content, who used to make hundreds of hours of such material in a previous role at North One Television – played devil’s advocate. He asked: “I’m not short of my choice of watching... Indeed, I’ve got a backlog of series I’ve been told I have to watch, so do we need clients funding content?”

“Eventually,” replied Puchalsky. “How else will we fund it? At some point, it’s



From left: Richard Wilson, David Granger, Sam Glynne, Helle Jabiri Falck, Adam Puchalsky and Katherine Marlow

Paul Hampartsoumian

they are to ask a doctor and talk to their family about a potential solution.”

Branded content can work for charities, too, said Helle Jabiri Falck, founder and Chief Operating Officer of Biites, a Danish-based specialist streaming platform for branded entertainment.

“Are you touched? Do you emotionally engage with the charity’s content? If you do, the likelihood is that you donate right after seeing a very emotional movie or documentary,” she said.

Branded content should be distributed across all possible platforms, said the panel. “The expectation is that it’s not just a TV show,” said David Granger, content director of Cinch, an online marketplace for used cars. “As a brand... you want your consumers to consume content in [different] formats, whether it be linear or non-linear, such as [Instagram] Reels or TikTok.”

Glynne, though, was unconvinced. “I’m not sure. I think there’s a generation of viewers who are so used to seeing digital and social content that they understand the economies of the brand financing content, and it becomes less and less offensive,” she suggested. “Nobody wants something that feels uncomfortable – the brand doesn’t want it, the platform doesn’t want it, the producer doesn’t want it.”

“We need something organically interwoven into the IP but, sometimes, it suits the content to be quite blatant and in your face. In Bond films, we expect that Aston Martin badge to linger.”

“In terms of funding the content,” said Marlow, “we, as a UK broadcaster, are regulated by Ofcom and need to ensure we are making it really clear to viewers that a brand is involved. The biggest amount of value that we give

going to be required... What we need, though, is clients brave enough to realise that you don’t have to force the message of the brand into the content, but actually to figure out an interesting way [of airing] the message surrounding the content.

The goal, joked Glynne, would be a Cannes Cannes: “It’s not a dance but a double award-winning process, whereby the ultimate holy grail for branded entertainment is – can it be at the Cannes Film Festival and win and then go to Cannes Lions [the International Festival of Creativity ad fest] and win?” ■

**Report by Matthew Bell. The RTS national event ‘Brand-funded entertainment: Is this the next generation of TV?’ was held at the Cavendish Conference Centre in central London on 18 January, and produced by Victoria Fairclough.**

RTS Cymru  
Wales

The BBC's New Broadcasting House in Cardiff was the venue for a January panel discussion presented by ScreenSkills and RTS Cymru Wales on freelance working in TV. It was part of an afternoon of sessions produced by the BBC Academy's Production Unlocked initiative.

Rebecca Meredith, ScreenSkills training liaison manager for Wales, was joined by freelancers Ella Stockton, an assistant director, and two members of the RTS Cymru Wales Committee: script editor Edward Russell (Chair) and Joe Towns, a media lecturer at Cardiff Metropolitan University, who is also a freelance sports documentary producer.

Stockton described how, after training with Screen Alliance Cymru, she worked as a freelance assistant director on *Casualty*, which she described as a generally positive experience – “I liked the freedom and the chance to develop other interests” – such as, in her case, working on Season 2 of the Netflix youth comedy *Heartstopper*, during a summer break.

A sports TV production career appealed to Towns



From left: Ella Stockton, Edward Russell, Joe Towns and Rebecca Meredith

Hywel Wiliam

## Making freelancing work

but, while he felt the uncertainty of full-time freelancing was not for him, he recognised that, “being too long in a staff job can make you complacent – working as an outsider makes you... look for new opportunities”.

After working for many years in the BBC, initially for *Top of the Pops* and later as a brand manager for *Doctor Who*,

the pandemic inspired a change of direction for Russell. He trained as a script editor, which allows him to enjoy being an “on-set pedant”. He added that freelance work can lead to other opportunities – Russell recently edited a TV commercial and subsequently wrote the music for it.

All agreed that, currently, there were numerous

lucrative freelance opportunities in the rapidly expanding high-end drama production scene in South Wales. “Being smart and based near studios is a good idea,” said Stockton.

Towns added: “There’s no need to be based in London any more”; while all agreed with Russell’s advice to “get an accountant”.

**Hywel Wiliam**

## How to build a career in telly

RTS West  
of England

The West of England centre teamed up with BBC Academy to deliver a session during the latter’s Production Unlocked series in Bristol in mid-January, aimed at an RTS Futures audience and looking at career strategy, tactics and career routes into television.

In an informative and lively discussion, Keo Films creative director Matt Cole quizzed a panel working across

production management, editorial and post-production about their experiences.

Aishah Masood, a researcher at Offspring Films and fine art graduate, was worried that her lack of a science degree would hold her back in her quest to work in natural history.

Brendan Coles, a junior online editor at post-production company Gorilla, said: “Most people are willing to teach you – sit with them

and learn; be open to changing how you do things.” He said he was determined to move from the technical side of post-production to the creative, suggesting: “You can sometimes be pigeonholed.”

Ben Cheetham, a producer at Five Mile Films, currently directing a *First Cut* (Channel 4’s first-time directors strand), found rejection difficult but added: “People in the industry understand how

hard it is.” He first got a job in casting for Channel 4’s *The Dog House* at Five Mile Films and, though he knew he wanted to direct, “made sure I got a lot out of each job”.

Monique Tedeschi, now a production co-ordinator at Wildstar Films, started her career in sport, working on outside broadcasts and in studios, but knew she loved natural history. The move meant the role “was a lot more unpredictable, needing a fast reaction to changing situations”, but she said all her skills were transferable.

**Suzy Lambert**

Sky Atlantic's *This England*, which aired last autumn, was television's most ambitious attempt to tell the story of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Made by Michael Winterbottom, one of the UK's premier film directors, the six-part docu-drama was meticulously researched and featured a note-perfect performance from Kenneth Branagh as the then Prime Minister, Boris Johnson.

At the end of last year, Winterbottom discussed *This England* with the journalist Stephen Armstrong at a special online RTS event.

Winterbottom, known for films such as *Welcome to Sarajevo*, *24 Hour Party People* and *Greed*, co-wrote and directed *This England*, which explores the impact on the country of the first wave of the Covid pandemic, while at the same time focusing on the tumultuous life of Johnson.

"I don't think I would have thought of that idea," admitted Winterbottom, "but, once I was asked, it seemed to me that during that first wave there had been a lot of talk about a sense that we were all in it together... a lot of people made a lot of sacrifices for other people.

"There was a lot of talk about the parallels between that and, say, the Second World War, the experience of the Blitz or the Dunkirk spirit, which are clichés, but I think there's an element of truth in that. This was a once in a generation, once in a century experience."

He recalled: "It was an incredibly intense experience. When we began the process of doing research it was ongoing – we'd just got through the first wave, but it was clear that there was going to be a second wave.

"My starting point was that,



## The chronicling of Covid

**National RTS event** Film-maker Michael Winterbottom tells the RTS how he made Sky Atlantic's *This England*, reports **Matthew Bell**

with Covid, everyone was trying to do their best; no one was thinking, 'I wonder if there's a way that I can get more people to die from Covid.' Obviously, big mistakes were made." These included delaying the lockdown, he said, which it is widely accepted cost thousands of lives.

"It's incredibly impressive

inside the Department of Health to inside a care home to inside a hospital. Piecing all that together, you could see the thing we'd just experienced in a different way."

Johnson, though, is *This England*'s central character. "Not only was Boris the Prime Minister and therefore ultimately responsible for how the Government

"Because Boris is such a famous figure you just had to have the best possible actor to play him... and so we picked Kenneth Branagh... fortunately, he wanted to play Boris.

"It's hugely difficult when you've got someone who's not only famous and current, but also has such a big, clearly defined image himself... the real Boris has almost a cartoon projection of Boris; he's almost acting Boris himself. That makes him a very difficult person to impersonate and I thought Ken did a great job."

Winterbottom added: "You couldn't do a story which included Boris without trying to engage with his personal life – his personal life was as turbulent as his political life at that time." ■

**'In conversation with Michael Winterbottom' is at [www.rts.org.uk/event/conversation-michael-winterbottom](http://www.rts.org.uk/event/conversation-michael-winterbottom)**

**'WITH COVID, EVERYONE WAS TRYING TO DO THEIR BEST'**

what the scientists did. The Chinese put out the genetic code of the virus incredibly quickly and, over a weekend in Oxford, they worked out the structure of their vaccine – it's just incredible."

Winterbottom described *This England* as a "mosaic". He said: "We could hop from inside the Jenner Institute to

responded, but he also got Covid himself... he was in intensive care and close to dying," he said. Subsequently, of course, Johnson became embroiled in the Partygate scandal and resigned as Prime Minister – events that the Sky Atlantic drama could not include, with the film already in the can.

RTS Cymru  
Wales

At a screening of the new ITV1 series *Cold Case Forensics*, made by ITV Cymru Wales, leading forensic scientist Dr Angela Gallop revealed that, in a crime scene, “every contact leaves a trace. It’s just whether or not we’re clever enough to find it.”

She was discussing her role in the three-part series at its January premiere, which was organised by ITV Cymru Wales in partnership with RTS Cymru Wales.

Interviewed by *Wales at Six* anchor Jonathan Hill, Gallop explained how, in the series, she used DNA profiling to solve three high-profile murder cases, focusing on the horrifying deaths of Rachel Nickell, Stephen Lawrence and, in the premiered episode, the murder of Lynette White in Cardiff in 1988.

The last case had resulted in one of the UK’s worst miscarriages of justice in which five men, “the Cardiff Five”, were wrongly imprisoned but later released on appeal, two years later.

Gallop’s career started after



Dr Angela Gallop with John Actie, one of the Cardiff Five

Huw John

## ITV1 unpicks DNA secrets

she studied sea slugs at university – “they’re totally gripping”, she insisted. Her flair for detail led her into forensic

science, which she discovered was a field “totally dominated by men”. Her experience allowed her to present

forensic details in such a way that “lawyers could understand the evidence properly”.

The programme showed how she recreated White’s flat in the lab, which eventually gave clues to where blood DNA evidence could be found, more than a decade after the police investigation had originally drawn a blank.

She described herself as an optimist but, looking to the future, she is concerned that, when money is tight, the police struggle to fund detailed forensic investigations, and this could result in misleading evidence.

One of the Cardiff Five, John Actie, interviewed in the programme, was also in the audience, and he spoke about the lingering perception in the local community that, despite his successful appeal, there was “no smoke without fire”. But finding the real killer via DNA evidence cleared him once and for all.

He said: “Angela saved my life – I was completely finished until she came along.”  
**Hywel Wiliam**

## Society sets trio of tough TV trivia tests

RTS Nations  
and Regions

December saw a trio of quizzes, testing the TV trivia craft of RTS members around the country. The RTS Nations and Regions Big Christmas Telly Quiz, broadcast on the RTS YouTube Channel, was hosted by impressionist Darren Altman and celebrated 100 years of the BBC.

All questions were about the Beeb and, reflecting its Reithian origins, were in three categories: educate, inform and entertain. STV presenter Chris Harvey was one of a number of question masters.

The RTS North East and

the Border quiz was hosted by TV presenter Chris Jackson amid the Art Deco surroundings of the Tyneside Cinema in Newcastle.

Devilishly difficult rounds included one on theme tunes, which tested the ears of the teams to recognise classics from across the decades, such as *Peaky Blinders* and *Tales of the Unexpected*. The winning team was Planet North.

Cymru Wales Chair Ed Russell hosted his centre’s quiz at Tramshed Tech in Cardiff. “It was an absolute blast. We had questions for all generations, originating from the dark depths of my



Planet North: Jonna Cox, Lesley Duncanson and David Scott

own knowledge, which is quite geeky,” he said.

“No one remembered the original telephone number for *Swap Shop*, but we did have quite a few correct answers about British sitcoms over the

years. I was particularly impressed by the person who remembered that the perfumery department was on the ground floor of Grace Brothers in *Are You Being Served?*”

**Matthew Bell**



## Warning: it would be a crime to miss this

Just one month into 2023 and already the BBC has scored a massive hit with *Happy Valley*.

Despite being absent from our screens for six years, Sally Wainwright's gripping saga inspired by the deceptively genteel West Yorkshire town of Hebden Bridge has become a national talking point.

There is both suspense and humour; Sarah Lancashire's performance as Catherine Cawood is mesmerising.

No wonder that, before the opening credits of episode 5, a BBC announcer said: "Lock the door, silence the phone, and nobody speak to me. I've

been waiting all week. Now, on BBC One, with strong language and scenes which some viewers may find upsetting, the penultimate ever episode."

*Happy Valley* will go down as one of the truly great British TV crime shows, alongside such classics as *Cracker*, *Broadchurch* and *Line of Duty*.

## Warts-and-all way to recall a rock icon

Music fans will need no reminding that the New Year has not been kind to ageing rock stars. Jeff Beck, David Crosby and Television's Tom Verlaine are no longer with us.

Sky Art's excellent feature-length documentary on Crosby, *Remember My Name*, made by AJ Eaton, is essential viewing for anyone interested in the ex-Byrds and Crosby, Stills & Nash singer-songwriter.

Hagiography it isn't, as this warts-and-all film pulls no punches, but it contains some wonderful archive footage and rare access to one of rock's most complex characters.

## UKTV takes wing with original shows

UKTV continues its upward trajectory under the leadership of CEO Marcus Arthur.

In results announced in January, it was revealed that streaming service UKTV Play grew by 27% last year, adding more than 1 million registered users. Its highest rated show, period crime series *Sister Boniface Mysteries* (shown on the Drama channel), was seen by 1.3 million viewers.

Across five of UKTV's services, original commissions – *Traces* (Alibi), *Bangers & Cash* (Yesterday), *Meet the Richardsons* (Dave), *Newark, Newark*

(Gold) and *Emma Willis: Delivering Babies* (W) – were the top performing shows.

## A quarter century not out of the news

Another milestone at ITN, as editorial director and RTS Award-winner Chris Shaw prepares to leave in March, after a quarter of a century at the news operator.

He joined ITN in 1985 and has worked in senior roles on *ITV News* and *Channel 4 News* and was pivotal in turning ITN Productions into a much-admired business. Chris left ITN briefly to help launch Sky News in 1989. Later, he masterminded Channel 5's seminal news service.

The UpSide wishes him further success in a career that most recently saw him oversee Tom Bradby's extraordinary encounter with Prince Harry. ■

# Operation Lion: Broadcasting a once in a nation's lifetime event

**Anila Dhami**

Presenter and journalist (chair)

**Tami Hoffman**

Head of news productions and archive, ITN Productions

**Kiko Itasaka**

Producer, NBC

**Jon Whitney**

Deployment editor, UK Newsgathering, BBC



Public Domain CCO 1.0

## 23 February

6:00pm

Regent Street Cinema, 307 Regent Street, London W1B 2HW

Free for RTS members; £10 for non-members.

Tickets include a complimentary glass of wine

Registration: [rts.org.uk](https://rts.org.uk)



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