

May 2022

Television

*Conversations
with Friends*

**Love
and
deceit**

THE FIGHT FOR ATTENTION

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From the CEO



Whether it's crime, period or relationship drama, TV's scripted boom continues to thrill audiences. Our cover story this month features the eagerly awaited *Conversations with Friends*, an adaptation of Sally Rooney's book – her first – which she wrote prior to *Normal People*, a huge hit for the BBC. I, for one, can't wait to watch it.

Talking of adaptations, don't miss Simon Shaps's thoughts on the arduous art of the adaptation.

He offers sage advice to those considering rebooting literary works for TV – or, as is the case with Amazon Prime's London-based *Ten Percent*, remodelling a Paris-based hit TV

show for the British and other markets.

In case you hadn't noticed, these are interesting times for those who work in Westminster, either as MPs or journalists. Caroline Frost's profile of the BBC's new political editor, Chris Mason, is a must-read. With 15-hour days and constant scrutiny on social media, this isn't a job for the faint-hearted. We wish him well.

Michael Grade will soon be taking over as the new Chair of Ofcom. Steve Clarke surveys Michael's extraordinary career and considers the challenges he will face in his new role.

His arrival at Ofcom will coincide with a new Media Bill. Inside, we present a summary of the main points of the broadcasting white paper, published last month.

I was pleased to see so many of you at the British Museum for a lively evening with the brilliant Stacey Dooley, who previewed the new series of *Stacey Dooley Sleeps Over*. The occasion was a reminder that unscripted shows are also experiencing a purple patch.

Finally, do please read Graeme Thompson's feature on the Gateshead-based company Signpost, which has proved itself to be a model of diversity and inclusion by employing a high proportion of people who are deaf or have a disability.

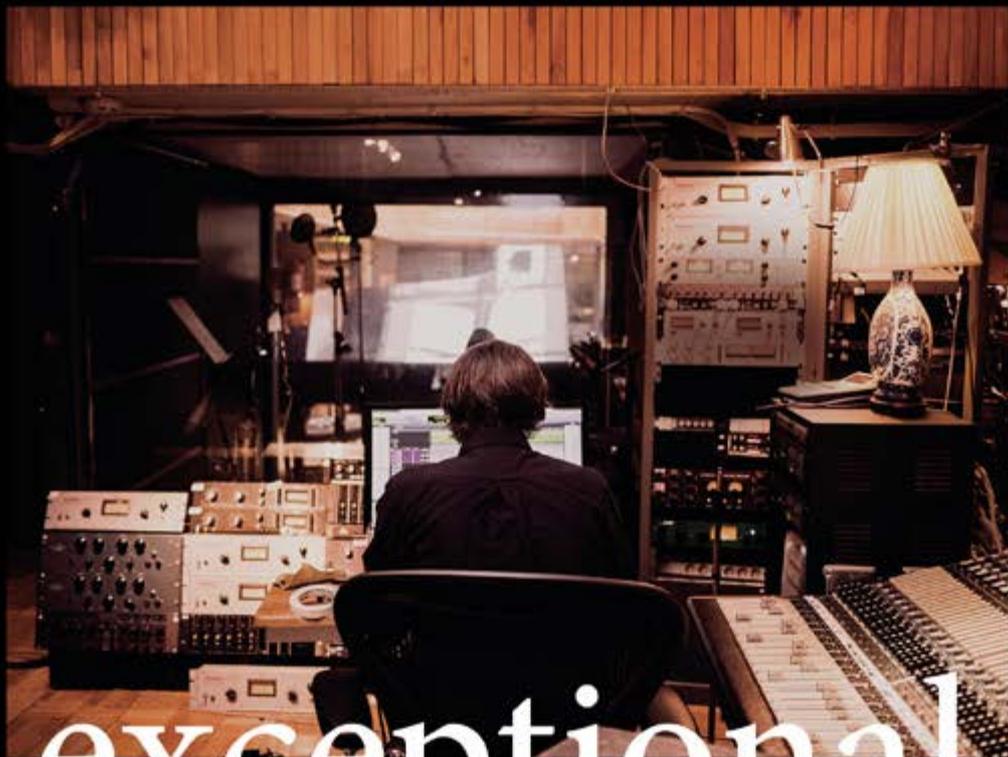
Theresa Wise

Cover: *Conversations with Friends* (BBC)

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TV diary

No one can take their eyes off Olivia Colman, fabulous in a black tuxedo and thick eyeliner. I'm at the Bafta Television Craft Awards with my colleague Ngozi Ubaka. I spot Sophie Willan, and can't resist telling her what a fan I am of the RTS-award-winning *Alma's Not Normal*. Gratifyingly, she says she loves *Grayson's Art Club*.

I catch a word with Jack Thorne, and Ruth Madeley, so brilliant in the recent *Then Barbara Met Alan*. We discuss the exciting project she and I are working on together, which I can't yet reveal.

■ **Director Poppy Begum is nominated for Emerging Talent: Factual. Also with us are Emma Lysaght and James Newton, nominated for, respectively, Editing and Director for our film *Grenfell: The Untold Story*, also an RTS award nominee.**

Accepting his Bafta, James pays tribute to the survivors, saying they still haven't got justice. You can watch the film on All 4. Like me, you probably won't be able to forget it. "There were two really, really long towers," says Mehdi El-Wahabi, then aged about seven, in the documentary. Artist Constantine Gras had filmed him drawing a mural at Grenfell tower two years before the fire.

Mehdi was one of 17 children to die – a quarter of all the children who lived in Grenfell. On the Westway, on our way home in the cab, we pass the tower. I catch my breath.

■ **"Shadows left over after your eye looks away" – these words, by the artist Jamian Juliano-Villani describing moments in film that inspire her, are on a card on the wall next to her paintings at the Venice Biennale.**

I meet her there on a fleeting visit. I'm in a bar in a side street near the



Channel 4

From red carpets to the Venice Biennale, Shaminder Nahal admires exceptionally talented women

Arsenale with art curator Jagdip Jagpal and creative director Jesse Ringham. Jamian, the brilliant New York artist, arrives like a hurricane, in an oversized blazer, and shows us her hair extensions, unpicking them and draping them over the man sitting next to her.

I bump into her again the next night at the Canada party on an island where Detroit DJ Carl Craig is playing. An American artist asks me if I have any Adderall or coke. A Polish curator says his museum has turned into a refugee centre for Ukrainians who have fled across the border.

■ **The Biennale is like an elite art Eurovision without the TV show. This year, the number of female artists represented feels genuinely groundbreaking. Simone Leigh is the first black woman to represent the US, and Sonia Boyce, the first black woman to represent the UK. Both win major prizes.**

■ **Leigh's enormous sculptures of the female form are breathtaking. In the**

evening, at the Navy Officers' Club, an artist is being interviewed live in the courtyard, two men holding microphones and vodka cocktails. "What do you think is the sexiest period in art history? I like Ancient Greece..." "That's a very difficult question... I guess, if I had to pick, it would be New York in the 1970s."

■ **Might it be Birmingham? "I always have a great time in this city and suspect it may be the coolest place in the UK." That's a quote by Grayson Perry on the press release to announce the next *Grayson's Art Club* exhibition, opening at the Midlands Arts Centre in December.**

The exhibitions have been a huge success. The show at Manchester Art Gallery was one of the most popular of 2021, according to *The Art Newspaper*. Bristol City Museum and Manchester Art Gallery attracted 52,000 visitors by the end of March.

■ **Neil Crombie of Swan Films sends me the first cut of *Grayson's Art Club: Queen's Jubilee Special*. Viewing this show is one of the highlights of my week – this episode includes Harry Hill's tribute to the Queen featuring a surprising body part.**

■ **Thursday, the TX of *Where Have All the Lesbians Gone?* Friday, the launch of *Richard Hammond's Crazy Contraptions*. Richard is on *The One Show* with a nerve-racking demo of a chain-reaction machine.**

Meanwhile, at the Diva Awards, Channel 4 wins Broadcaster of the Year, with the brilliant *Lesbians* team in attendance. Later, I'm at a concert of new music by Mica Levi that feels like haunting, twisted church music. We await press for *The Man with a Penis on His Arm*.

Shaminder Nahal is Channel 4's head of specialist factual.

COMFORT CLASSIC

Cracker

Steve Clarke is gripped by a groundbreaking crime show that made a star of Robbie Coltrane

It is hard now to convey the shocking originality of *Cracker*, the 1990s ITV crime series that helped redefine the genre and bring some genuine unpredictability and real edge to Monday-night, peak-time TV.

At a stroke, *Cracker* made a star of man mountain Robbie Coltrane, previously known for his work in lighter fare such as the BBC Two series *Tutti Frutti*, in which he plays the singer in a Scottish rock 'n' roll band alongside Emma Thompson and Richard Wilson.

To see this erstwhile comic actor become the scene-stealing, deeply flawed forensic psychologist, Dr Edward Fitzgerald – Fitz to his friends

– was truly a revelation. Incredibly, *Cracker*'s creator, the brilliant Jimmy McGovern, had originally envisaged his anti-hero as a wiry man like himself. He was overruled by the casting director and vowed never again to be involved in a casting decision.

Cracker, one of Granada's brightest crown jewels, was the antidote to *Miss Marple*, *The Ruth Rendell Mysteries* and all those other genteel Home Counties murder mysteries that provide succour rather than sensation. The series' antecedents perhaps go back to *Z Cars*, another gritty, blue-collar Northern crime show that broke down taboos and stereotypes in relation to the portrayal of fictional law enforcers on TV.

McGovern acknowledged that part of his inspiration for writing *Cracker* was the long-running American police show *Columbo*, whose eponymous central character was, like Fitz, a thoroughgoing slob. In one famous scene, Coltrane impersonates Columbo, who was played by Peter Falk.

From the opening sequence of the first episode, initially broadcast in 1993, we know that Fitz is a gambler and a maverick. Lecturing to a group of psychology undergraduates, he hurls at them a succession of books written by famous western thinkers whose speciality was the human condition.

"Spinoza, Descartes, Hobbes," Fitz snarls as each tome is thrown into the

body of the lecture theatre. “Locke... Freud.” The message is clear; if you really want to learn about human behaviour, then take a close look at the dark heart that beats within us all.

“Go and lock yourself in a room for a couple of days, and study what is here,” advises Fitz, tapping his heart. “The things that you really feel, not all that crap that you’re supposed to feel. And when you’ve studied, when you’ve shed a little light on the dark recesses of your soul, that’s the time to pick up a book.”

The inference is that one reason Fitz is so valuable in helping the Manchester police to solve their most challenging and vile murders is because of his own self-knowledge that “there but for the grace of God go I”. Not for nothing was McGovern raised a Catholic.

“I drink too much, I smoke too much, I gamble too much, I am too much,” Fitz declares, but it’s his thinking approach to solving crimes that deliver results that elude conventional police investigation. Not that Fitz doesn’t make mistakes, too.

“You’re an emotional rapist,” DS Jane Penhaligon (Geraldine Somerville) tells him in one of *Cracker*’s most famous episodes, *To Be a Somebody*, in which their boss, DCI David Bilborough (Christopher Eccleston), is himself murdered.

Fitz is an unlikely sex symbol but, over the course of *Cracker*’s three seasons, Fitz and Penhaligon pursue an unlikely love affair, while his marriage to the very long-suffering Judith (Barbara Flynn) crumbles, partly due to his alcoholism and gambling.

In common with so many other great shows, *Cracker* was something of an academy for future small- and big-screen talent. An early director on the series was Michael Winterbottom. Nicola Shindler worked as a script editor on *Cracker* before setting up Red, one of the 21st century’s most successful independent producers of scripted content.

Granada was thrilled when the US agreed to adapt *Cracker*, but, across the Atlantic, *Cracker* was a commercial and artistic flop. However, in the context of US TV, it is worth noting the verdict of *Den of Geek* on what is unquestionably a groundbreaking British series: “It shows the world that the UK was capable of out-HBOing HBO even before HBO existed.” Too true. ■

***Cracker* is available on ITV Hub and Amazon Prime.**

Ear candy



When *Better Call Saul* was spun off from *Breaking Bad* in 2015, like its predecessor, it became one of the most cinematic series on TV.

As a character study of another anti-hero in the *Bad* universe, crooked lawyer Saul Goodman (played by Bob Odenkirk), *Better Call Saul* is a firm adherent of the “show, don’t tell” philosophy. Every shot brims with meaning and begs for deconstruction.

AMC’s official *Better Call Saul Insider Podcast* does just that, as series editors turned podcast presenters Chris McCaleb and Kelley Dixon consult the heads of the various production departments to find out just how each episode came together. As one reviewer on Apple put it, it’s a film

school of a podcast. Now that the sixth and final series of *Better Call Saul* is underway, so, too, is the podcast. Director Michael Morris and production designer Denise Pizzini join the first episode to share their parts in the building and shooting of several elaborate sequences.

These include that grand opening, laden with Easter eggs, in which we witness the authorities repossessing Saul’s future “ego-house”.

In episode 2, the always affable co-creator Vince Gilligan (also the creator of *Breaking Bad*) holds court. He comes across as a fastidious director, admitting to filming 200 takes of one of the briefest and most subtle of movements to sell a particularly vital shot of a character giving away his presence.

But sometimes that’s what it takes to direct a series that is so quietly eloquent. ■

Harry Bennett



It's a Sin

Editor

WORKING LIVES

Sarah Brewerton took the Editor prize at the RTS Craft & Design Awards 2021 for her work on Russell T Davies's superlative Aids drama, *It's a Sin*. More than a decade earlier, the drama editor bagged the same award for Peter Moffat's hard-hitting *Criminal Justice*.

What does the job involve?

I take all the material the director shoots and figure out how to tell the story in the most compelling and emotionally gripping way. There's this misunderstanding that an editor's job is simply to cut out the bad bits; it's the opposite – you're actually building something.

What editing software do you use?

I started just after the transition from film and I've always used Avid.

Do you regret missing out on film?

There's a lot of nostalgia for editing film; it's the same with photography. I see the magic of film, but it was a slower process. Using Avid allows you to access so much material in far less time.

Can there sometimes be too much material?

On *It's a Sin*, my assistant, Daniel

Gale-Coyne, calculated that we had 135 hours of material, a ratio of 27 to one for the length of the series.

Sometimes, it feels as if you are wading through so much material – you spend as much time watching as editing. It can feel overwhelming and you look forward to the day when a scene has been shot in one take!

How long did it take to edit *It's a Sin*?

I started on the first day of shooting in October 2019 and worked from home in London during the whole show, which wrapped in January 2020. I had rushes sent to me from the shoot in and around Manchester, so I had four months to assemble the footage by myself.

I then went to Manchester for the fine cut, and the first episode took just under four weeks to lock; the remaining four episodes took about three weeks each. In total, it was around eight months.

Which people do you work with closely on a production?

On *It's a Sin*, it was director Peter Hoar, creator/writer Russell T Davies, executive producer Nicola Shindler and producer Phil Collinson. We did a lot of Zooming – we had no choice because

of Covid. On the fine cut, I worked side by side with Peter, whom I've worked with four times now, including on *The Last Kingdom* for BBC Two.

Do you find you often work with the same directors?

Who you work with is almost as important as the show. Building relationships is key and you often work with the same director again and again.

How did you become an editor?

I did fine art, painting and photography at university. I answered an ad in the *Evening Standard* and got a job in a TV marketing company as an office junior.

The people were nice, but I didn't enjoy looking at things from the outside. I didn't want to market it, I wanted to make it!

I had a friend from university who had got a job as a runner at an editing company, Sam Sneade Editing, which was looking for another runner – I got an interview and the job. Sam's an amazing commercial editor and I worked for him for just under a year as a runner and then became a trainee assistant editor.

How did you break into TV?

I moved to Todd-AO in Camden [north London] and became an Avid assistant and, via various generous editors, I learned how to cut programmes. I worked with Jake Bernard, who allowed me to practise on Jim Henson shows *The Hoobs*, *Mopatop's Shop* and *Construction Site*.

What was the first TV drama that you edited?

An episode of Fox comedy drama *Keen Eddie* with Sienna Miller and then the Kudos crime series *Hustle* for BBC One.

What makes a good editor?

Aside from knowledge of Avid, which is essential, patience and perseverance are important. You also have to understand the politics of the cutting room and know when and how loudly to voice your opinions.

What do you take to work with you?

Whether I'm at home or in an edit suite, a computer with Avid software, a phone, a big notebook and a pen – I'm constantly writing notes and reminders.

What are the best and worst parts of the job?

Recently, working on *It's a Sin*, I could see from the script that the story was amazing – it doesn't matter who you are, what age or sexuality, it's really engaging and heartbreaking. It's brought back HIV and Aids into people's consciousness, and the stigma so many people faced. The subsequent increase in HIV testing has been important, too.

The worst parts of the job are the long hours and the intense nature of the work. I really need to wind down after a job.

What are your other favourites?

BBC One's *Life on Mars* is one of the best things I've worked on; I also really enjoyed BBC One's *Criminal Justice* and BBC Three's *Don't Take My Baby*.

What advice would you give to someone wanting to become an editor?

Everyone has a video camera on their phone, so you should really be able to practise editing. For drama, the industry standard software is Avid; for documentary and factual, Premiere is used a lot, and free versions of both are available.

The route into editing drama is to start as a trainee or a second assistant editor (or a third assistant on a really big production). But to even become a trainee, you will usually need industry qualifications, though not necessarily a university degree. Post-production houses, where I started, are a great place to learn and gain experience.

I've talked to lots of female editors, and we all have stories of being patronised or having assumptions made about us – when a male assistant or someone new comes into the editing suite, they have often assumed that I'm the junior. I have been mistaken for cast, not crew, too many times to mention. I also don't think there are



Life on Mars BBC

As a woman of colour, do you think editing is a diverse profession?

I'm afraid not, though it's probably better than some parts of the TV industry. It's an ongoing problem, but one that is being looked at more than in the past. There are more female editors than before, but not much ethnic diversity. I can count on one hand the number of women of colour I've met in editing.

enough people from working-class backgrounds in the industry.

What genre would you love to work in?

I'd love to cut a musical – not that they should ever remake them, but I adore *The Wizard of Oz* and *Bugsy Malone*. ■

Sarah Brewerton was interviewed by Matthew Bell.

Difficult conversations



Conversations with Friends
(from left): Sasha Lane (Bobbi), Joe Alwyn (Nick), Alison Oliver (Frances) and Jemima Kirke (Melissa)

BBC

Normal People was the TV hit of the first Covid lockdown, a comfort blanket of a series that offered respite from what was a new and terrifying virus.

Viewers tuned into Marianne and Connell's love story, adapted from Sally Rooney's second book, in huge numbers. It became BBC Three's biggest-ever series and the iPlayer's most popular show of 2020, racking up more than 60 million streams in just eight months. Worldwide, it won countless awards.

Now, two years later, the same producer that made *Normal People*, Dublin's Element Pictures, is bringing Rooney's debut novel, *Conversations with Friends*, to screen this month. No pressure, then.

The success of *Normal People* was "genuinely a complete surprise", recalls executive producer Ed Guiney. "And it was very nice as well – it was the

A lot is riding on the new Sally Rooney adaptation *Conversations with Friends*. **Matthew Bell** uncovers the project's complex genesis

spring of the first lockdown.... If you remember, at that time, we didn't know the world wasn't coming to an end – it was crazy!" Arguably, times are just as gloomy now, with the world watching appalled at Russia's invasion of Ukraine and fearing where Putin's mania may lead next.

"We'll be here to hold your hands for all future global disasters," chips in Lenny Abrahamson, lead director and executive producer of both *Normal People* and *Conversations with Friends*.

"We knew [*Normal People*] was very good, but I don't think any of us would

have predicted that a mass television audience would become hooked on it in that way."

Guiney admits that hits such as *Normal People* "don't happen very often", although when they do, he says, "they're a complete joy – you [need to] just relish and cherish it. But neither can you expect that everything is going to work [as well], either."

Quite. But has *Normal People's* success raised expectations of *Conversations with Friends* to unrealistic levels? Abrahamson replies: "We learned a lot from doing *Normal People*, a way of working that suits this kind of material... and we know there's an audience that's really open to low-key storytelling in television."

Element Pictures had been developing *Conversations with Friends* as a movie with the then-director of BBC Film, Rose Garnett, but, says Guiney: "Through making *Normal People*, I think we realised the way to adapt *Conversations* was as a series."

Abrahamson continues: “We hadn’t cracked the film script and it just seemed to make sense – those two books [share] an immersive character development and interpersonal relationships that work so well on television. For a film, you have to conflate and concentrate – and then I don’t think you do the characters justice.”

“People [have an] ability to watch [TV] novelistically. If you can pull [them] in and they connect with the characters, you can take them on a very intricate journey [that] holds their attention. That was the thing that most surprised all of us about *Normal People*.”

Guiney adds: “If we’d made *Normal People* in exactly the same way... but made a film, it would have been a festival darling, played some art houses, got some nice reviews – and would have made a much smaller impact, even on its TV broadcast.”

“It’s weird that you can bring all of those sensibilities and instincts of an art-house film-maker to a piece of television and it becomes a mainstream hit.”

As novels, *Normal People* and *Conversations with Friends* share some characteristics: both mine relationships and are replete with dialogue, real and internal. But, explains Abrahamson, *Normal People* “is a love story, pure and simple”. *Conversations with Friends* is a more complex book, set in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis – “what now feels like the quaint, happy time of a global financial crash,” he says, wryly.

You could describe the plot, not entirely inaccurately, as a *ménage à quatre*: Frances and Bobbi, once girlfriends, are now best friends performing at poetry nights in Dublin. Married couple Melissa, a photographer, and Nick, an actor, are a decade older than the two students they befriend. But, while Bobbi and Melissa flirt, Frances and Nick embark on a secret affair.

Frances, the show’s key role, is played by newcomer Alison Oliver, who graduated from The Lir National Academy of Dramatic Art in Dublin in 2020. “We saw Alison early on,” recalls Guiney. “Like Paul [Mescal] from *Normal People*, she just popped [out] from a bunch of tapes. It was a very quiet reading, very confident in its low-keyness – it wasn’t showy at all.”

Abrahamson takes up the story: “We then read her with other people because we were also looking at ensemble [scenes]. We knew we were going to cast her long before she knew, like Paul.”

Joe Alwyn (Nick) was also quickly cast in a process overseen (as with *Normal People*) by casting director Louise Kiely. Alwyn had appeared alongside Olivia Colman in Yorgos Lanthimos’s award-winning film *The Favourite*, and in Joanna Hogg’s acclaimed *The Souvenir Part II*, both co-produced by Guiney.

The principal cast is completed by Texas-born actor Sasha Lane (Star in *American Honey*) playing Bobbi and Jemima Kirke (head teacher Hope

as a director, it was really interesting to be able to mine those relationships.”

Welham is a huge admirer of Abrahamson’s work; in particular, his disturbing coming-of-age film *What Richard Did*. “He brings a nuance and subtlety to what he does, which is in line with the way I approach things,” she says.

She explains why she thinks *Conversations with Friends* will echo with audiences: “When I read this book, I wished I had [been able to] read it



Conversations with Friends

BBC

Haddon in *Sex Education*) as Melissa.

Alice Birch, who worked on *Normal People*, returns with a new team of adapters: Mark O’Halloran, Meadhbh McHugh and Susan Soon He Stanton.

Abrahamson directed the first five and final two episodes of the series, which was largely shot in Belfast and Dublin. Croatia, with a lower incidence of Covid, stood in for France as the book’s holiday destination.

Second director Leanne Welham made the highly regarded 2018 feature *Pili*, about a Tanzanian woman struggling to feed her children, much admired by Abrahamson and Guiney.

“I was very excited as a big fan of Rooney’s novels and I actually preferred *Conversations with Friends* to *Normal People*,” Welham says. “The story, characters and relationships in *Conversations* feel a bit more messy and complicated, which drew me to it. I really like stories that explore those difficult areas between people.”

“There’s a lot going on and, for me

when I was younger. Frances is a character who I really saw myself in, certainly. She doesn’t have all the answers and she makes mistakes.

“It would have been fascinating for me to see – and maybe helpful to understand – that I wasn’t the only person... not knowing what the hell I was doing when I was 21. So, I think these characters will resonate with people.”

“But you don’t have to have been a 21-year-old woman to understand what Frances is going through, [it’s] a very human show about human emotions and anyone can relate to that.”

Will *Conversations with Friends* match *Normal People*’s success? “*Normal People* came out [during lockdown] where, arguably, people wanted more intimacy,” says Abrahamson. “When we come out, God knows what state things are going to be in.” ■

***Conversations with Friends* airs on Sunday 15 May on BBC Three, with all 12 episodes available on BBC iPlayer.**

Blood, sweat and Stacey

TV natural Stacey Dooley gives RTS Futures her account of her current series, *Stacey Dooley Sleeps Over*

Intrepid and armed with a fearsome work ethic, Stacey Dooley seems to be on a one-woman mission to popularise current affairs for a new generation of young viewers.

Dooley made her TV debut in 2008 as a contributor on BBC Three documentary series *Blood, Sweat and T-Shirts*, one of six fashion consumers living and working alongside Indian garment workers making cheap clothes for the UK.

It was obvious she was a TV natural. Within a year, she had her own BBC Three show, *Stacey Dooley Investigates*, which, for more than a decade, has seen her travel the world: to Russia to film an exposé of domestic violence; to Japan to report on the sexualisation of children; and to Nigeria to talk to young women forced to become suicide bombers. She has also reported for *Panorama* and made films on arms dealers and Isis. Fearless doesn't cover the half of it.

There's a softer side too: fronting CBBC shows *Show Me What You're Made of* and *The Pets Factor*, judging *RuPaul's Drag Race UK* and even winning *Strictly Come Dancing*.

Her current project is *Stacey Dooley Sleeps Over*, now in its third series. At an RTS Futures event at the British Museum, Dooley spoke about the programme and her career. "I remember the guy who gave me my first gig – he was so generous because I obviously wasn't an established journo; I was this sort of mouthy, opinionated girl from Luton Airport.

"It was such sound advice. He said: 'Look, there'll be a temptation to conform and feel like you need to sound the same as everyone else and dress the same as everyone else. There are thousands of jourmos [like that] – if that's what I wanted, I would have gone to them. I like that you are inquisitive and have something to say.'"

A little over a decade later and Dooley has her own production company, Little Dooley. "I'm now talking about risk assessments and on the phone to Blackpool council about drone shots, which is really dull, but it's a good learning curve for me," she said.

In *Mum Fighting the Clock* – episode 3 of the current series of *Stacey Dooley Sleeps Over*, which was premiered at the RTS event – Dooley spends time with Jemma McGowan and her family. McGowan, an almost impossibly upbeat mum from County Tyrone, is living with a terminal diagnosis of ovarian cancer.

UKTV



Stacey Dooley Sleeps Over: Mum Fighting the Clock

Dooley doesn't shy away from asking difficult questions about death and McGowan's belief in alternative medicine, but there are also moments of joy.

"A lazy approach would be to spend the entire time in an earnest manner, talking about death," said Dooley.

"While those conversations are necessary, she is [a woman] in her twenties with lots to say. Instinctively, I think her natural default is that she's an optimist, so I'm delighted we showed that."

Stacey Dooley Sleeps Over first aired on W in 2019 and runs to 16 episodes, all available on VoD service UKTV Play.

Dooley's personal favourites include weekends spent with a Mormon family in Greater Manchester, and, most of all, Rabbi Mordechai Wollenberg and his ultra-orthodox family. "I've got such a soft spot for Mordechai... [he] was such a gent," said Dooley.

She described *Stacey Dooley Sleeps Over* as a "unique format", adding: "I think it's healthy and necessary to hang out with people who you don't always understand or agree with because, increasingly, we surround ourselves with people who nod along at the same time as us."

The series is shot over a long weekend. "As film-makers, sometimes we can [think we're] tortured artists, [wanting] weeks and weeks and weeks [to film]. Actually, we get there on a Friday, we leave on the Monday and we've never made a duff film yet," said Dooley.

"It's a good discipline, making a film in 72 hours," added executive producer Alice Bowden, who has worked on the series since day one – first as series producer, now as executive producer.

She is one of a production crew of five, which includes two camera operators, in what must be a crowded house.

Offering proof – such as Dooley brushing her teeth or getting into bed – that the presenter is actually sleeping over is "critical", said UKTV's head of factual and factual entertainment, Hilary Rosen, who commissions the series for the W channel.

"I always worry that there's a large degree of cynicism among the audience and that [they] will assume that these things have been manufactured to suit the people making the programme and that corners have been cut. So, I always think it's important that it's very, very clear visually to the audience that [Stacey is] there for those 72 hours."

Dooley added: "I get that cynicism because we've heard before that

presenters have alluded to the idea that they're staying, and [in fact] they go and stay in a five-star hotel."

Dooley is hugely grateful that families open themselves up for TV. "They're such good sports," she said. "If the telly called me and said, 'Stacey, we'd like to come and stay around your house.

There'll be five of us, there'll be two cameras and we'll be asking you deeply personal questions – are you up for it?' I'd be like, 'absolutely not', so I never, ever, ever take it for granted... It's never a given that [people] are going to allow us in."

Nevertheless, there is sometimes what Dooley refers to as "rub"; occa-

will ask you the difficult questions', so they are aware that there isn't going to be a subject that's off limits," explained Bowden. The families also see their episode pre-broadcast, in the company of Bowden. "People are generally happy with the [final] programme," she said.

A member of the RTS Futures audience wondered whether meeting Jemma McGowan while filming *Mum Fighting the Clock* had provoked any changes in Dooley's own life. She replied: "For the last couple of years, I've been having this weird existential crisis where I'm terrified of dying... I don't know why because, to my knowledge, everything is fine."



sionally, "quite a lot of rub". Two episodes stand out: *The British Lion King*, in which she stayed with a family that kept two lions and a puma in their back garden and probed them about animal welfare; and *The Family Without Rules*, whose aversion to modern medicine ran up against Dooley's personal experience of seeing children die from malaria.

"It's my job and I hate the idea of getting in the car [to go home] and thinking, 'You should have asked that'. So, I always bite the bullet. The worst they can do is kick you out," said Dooley. So far, they haven't.

The families can't say they haven't been warned. "We always say, 'Stacey

In fact, she added, personally and professionally, "things couldn't be going better. So, spending time with Jemma reminded me, and I don't want to sound too much of a cliché, that

every single day, you've got to go for it. When I came home, I was due a smear test; I made sure I had the smear test and asked them to check everything else while I was there. It's a bit of a predictable answer, but that's what

[Jemma] will do for lots of people." ■

'Stacey Dooley Sleeps Over screening and Q&A' was held at the British Museum on 21 April. The producer was Kelly Phelps, senior publicist at UKTV.

■ See the full video at: bit.ly/RTS-Dooley.

The people's political editor

Caroline Frost finds out how **Chris Mason** is likely to approach one of the toughest jobs in news journalism

In 2018, Chris Mason stood outside the Houses of Parliament to give his opinion on the never-ending Brexit negotiations. He told the *BBC Breakfast* audience: “To be quite honest, looking at things right now, I haven’t got the foggiest idea what is going to happen in the coming weeks. Is the Prime Minister going to get a deal with the EU? Dunno. Is she going to be able to get it through the Commons? Don’t know about that either.

“I think you might as well get Mr Blobby back on to offer his analysis, because, frankly, I suspect his is now as good as mine.”

For veteran political journalist and broadcaster Iain Dale, that moment represented the best of Mason; it was “a refreshing change to hear someone admitting they don’t have the answer. It’s that honesty people will admire and relate to in his new job.”

That new job is, of course, arguably the country’s biggest in news journalism. Twenty years after this self-professed “political geek” gained his first BBC job in Newcastle, and with more than a decade at Westminster, including stints for BBC Radio 5 Live and Radio 4’s *Westminster Hour*, plus reporting from Brussels and recently hosting *Any Questions?*, Mason this month steps into Laura Kuenssberg’s shoes as the BBC’s political editor.

His appointment follows a quagmire of a recruitment process, which saw two external, female candidates short-listed before the job was readvertised and finally given to the popular BBC staffer. One BBC senior political



ANL/Shutterstock

journalist believes Mason missed out initially due to his radio and podcasting skills. “That means there are some people at Westminster far more interested in TV, for whom he would never have been first, second or third choice,” he says. “He goes into this job knowing that he has to work on some key relationships internally.”

Former director of BBC News Richard Sambrook, takes a more positive view: “We know what we read about him being invited back into the process, but that indicates how careful they were about getting the right person for the job.”

Sky News’s political editor, Beth Rigby, points out that Mason’s appointment provides continuity at a time of change for the BBC: “There is a lot of change going on, people leaving, a new boss [Deborah Turness] coming in. Chris has been there for two decades, he knows how the BBC works, he’s a brand and a name. That is quite reassuring for an organisation that’s gone through a lot of change.”

She adds: “He’s a great journalist, a brilliant communicator. In that role, your first and foremost job is to distil for the nation what’s going on in Westminster and why it matters.... These sorts of

jobs, and I include mine, have changed in the past decade – from someone almost detached from the viewer, operating in an ivory tower in this rarefied world – to being much more about how politics relates to people.

“Chris is very good at that. He’s down to earth, he’s relatable, he prides himself on being a very real Yorkshireman, and that’s what the BBC needs.”

Simon Bucks, Chair of the RTS Television Journalism Awards, formerly of ITN and Sky and now CEO at BFBS, agrees: “He is incredibly user-friendly, a perceptive and fluent analyst. Will he bring in stories? Don’t know. His predecessors have all had a stable of contacts to inform their reporting and analysis. It depends what Tim Davie and Deborah Turness want from the role in the new era.”

According to a BBC colleague, this audience-facing warmth is the genuine article. “He’s collaborative, not competitive, extremely down to earth, and hardworking. His strength is good political judgement and a warm and original style, a way of looking at stories and connecting them to the public. And he has a great turn of phrase that brings these stories to life.”

Dale remembers meeting Mason on the latter’s first day at Millbank, more than a decade ago. “He was very self-deprecating and friendly, and I’m pleased to say he hasn’t changed remotely.”

Much of Mason’s unique style lies in his accent, unmistakably that of a man brought up in Grassington in the Yorkshire Dales. Although he told Dale, in a podcast in 2020, that his early bosses had warned him his voice would prohibit a career in broadcasting, Mason now joins those who believe it is a cracking asset, for him and for the BBC in its aim to reach audiences beyond the southern bubble. He told Dale: “Radio stations needs a sound like the audience we’re broadcasting to. You need that range. I’m a middle-aged, middle-class white bloke who went to Oxbridge. But I just happen to have a Yorkshire accent. Whenever I go back, I get ribbed the whole time: ‘You sound like a posh southerner.’”

A BBC colleague agrees that it will serve employer and employee: “It fits in with the Director-General’s vision to have much of the BBC based out of London. It won’t be why he got the role but, if he does the job well, he can capitalise on the fact he’s from Yorkshire to present an everyman who’s

on the side of viewers and listeners.”

Mason told Dale that he has never had a long-term plan for his career. Instead, he likes to grab opportunities when they arise. Of late, this proactive attitude has served him well. Not least, in 2019, when he succeeded the long-serving Jonathan Dimbleby as the chair of Radio 4’s *Any Questions?*. And in 2017, with the surprise triumph of the podcast *Brexitcast*, the brainchild of Mason and his colleague Adam Flem-

a mouthpiece for the Government. He’ll have to pull in stories from all around Westminster – with more focus on what Labour are doing, because they could be in power in two years’ time,” says a BBC News insider.

Sambrook agrees that keeping to an independent, middle ground has become increasingly hard for political journalists. “It’s very difficult to survey neutral, central positions because no one accepts the legitimacy of that,” he says.



Chris Mason with his predecessor as BBC political editor, Laura Kuenssberg

BBC

ing. It started out small and is now the unmissable *Newscast*. “For awhile BBC management weren’t interested because it hadn’t been dreamed up by suits,” says a colleague.

“But what they did was a clever way of presenting an accessible but deep dive into the political minefield... that didn’t talk down to the listener. They showed management how you could do good podcasting.”

Observers agree that the challenges that lie ahead for Mason are plentiful: political, with an ever-more polarised landscape; physical, with 15-hour days the norm, and an increased scrutiny, no small thanks to social media, that Rigby says knocked her off guard initially.

Mason describes himself as “never particularly political, and the longer I’ve done the job, the more detached I’ve become from even thinking about it”. This will be tested in a job that involves being almost umbilically attached to Number 10. “It’s very tribal, and the trickiest part is to avoid sounding like

Rigby doesn’t think this is as hard as people maintain: “As long as you know you’re being impartial and balanced, that’s the bread and butter. If you’re getting it from both sides, you’re probably doing something right.”

“The bigger task is calling the stories, making sure in this cacophony of noise to pick the things that matter to your audience, and asking the right question when you get the chance.”

So how does Mason see the job? “The thing I’m most looking forward to, the thing that makes the job a colossal privilege – and huge responsibility – is the essence of what it is all about: being a trusted guide to what is going on and what matters. I can’t wait.”

Nobody doubts that Mason’s hunger for those stories remains unabated. As Bucks says: “He undoubtedly has the personality for the role. He’s a warm, come-hither sort of person and if he can use that to develop the contacts he needs, he will be a very effective political editor.” ■

At a time when producers and broadcasters are working hard to ensure diversity in their workforce as well as on screen, the team at Signpost Productions in the North East of England can claim to be ahead of the curve. Eleven of the company's 23 full-time staff are deaf or have another disability – physical, chronic or hidden. Between them, they produce more than 1,000 hours of signed British Sign Language (BSL) translations a year for programming on three major broadcasters, including ITV.

The company also makes original content, such as *Robson and Jim's Icelandic Fly Fishing Adventure* (ITV4) and *Dare Master* (CITV), at Signpost's studios in Gateshead, next door to the ITV Tyne Tees newsroom. *Dare Master* is signed-presented by a deaf presenter and uses a predominantly deaf crew – but sits in the schedule without being tagged as such. It is a fully accessible programme made for, and watched by, a mainstream audience.

Increasingly, the company is also working for commercial non-broadcast clients and is much in demand to deliver diversity training to programme teams across the UK.

Managing Director Kenny Toal is proud of his team: "Signpost has been breaking down barriers for years and, at the same time, flying the flag for the North East. Diversity is in our DNA. We really do stand for production without prejudice. It's a privilege for all of us working here to be the custodians of such a unique working environment.

"Accessibility is at the heart of the production office and studios – you can work effectively here whether you're using a wheelchair or have hearing or visual impairments. Deaf directors, such as Seb Cunliffe, work alongside interpreters while wheelchair users, such as technician Stu Coulson, operate specially adapted equipment. Coulson's success in the role has resulted in him being appointed Co-chair



ITV Signing ITV News

Breaking down barriers

Signpost Productions' employment of deaf and disabled people is a model of diversity. **Graeme Thompson** explains its success

of ITV's disability network, ITV Able.

Gillian Harrison is another staffer who readily shares her experience and insights with others in the sector. Until eight years ago she worked for a local council but, after retraining, she is now one of three on-screen presenters and is the diversity lead with Signpost.

Alongside her production duties, Harrison, who is deaf, has helped a host of broadcasters and producers

with deaf awareness training. She recently worked as an advisor to the *Coronation Street* production team, helping it develop a BSL storyline and providing deaf awareness training to the cast and crew.

"Everyone here at Signpost has talent and we make sure we put in the right support to allow that talent to be seen," she says. "When we're out filming, nobody questions if the



Dare Master tackles industrial window cleaning

started coming back to the studio after lockdown, the hearing staff were a bit rusty when it came to their own use of BSL to converse with deaf colleagues. “People were forgetting because they hadn’t been using it so much,” she recalls. “So we had to put on refresher sessions.”

Gareth Deighan, creative director at Signpost, believes the innovations and workarounds achieved by the team during the pandemic are a good illustration of the company’s commitment to access for all. “We’re surrounded by incredibly talented people,” he says. “Some of them require different kinds of support to enable them to do their job. But that’s OK because they’re really good at what they do.”

“It can take more thought at the pre-production stage about transport, interpreters and access issues. But the quality on screen speaks for itself.”

Recruitment is largely from the North East and managers ensure they reach under-represented communities when advertising vacancies. The result is a multi-skilled, multi-ethnic group of programme-makers.

“We give new starters the training, mentoring and experience they need to succeed,” says Deighan. “We’re trying to level the playing field for people who may not otherwise get the chance.”

Signpost, which is wholly owned by ITV, grew out of an access service in the days when signed and subtitled programmes were buried in the schedule. Now, the company sees itself as a mainstream commercial producer with ambitions to play a key role in the expansion of the North East screen sector.

“We’re very excited about the buzz in the area right now,” says Deighan. “We know the BBC and other broadcasters are investing heavily in content from here and there are plans for new film studios. We want to be part of that.” ■

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

director is deaf and using an interpreter. Everyone is treated equally. I’ve always felt included.” Being an in-vision signer isn’t without its challenges. She says: “Quiz shows can be tricky. The most difficult one for me was *Winning Combination* on ITV. The questions and answers come very fast!”

There are also issues when the signer has to interpret very dramatic, intimate or emotional content. “I’m a mother and I am very emotional by nature,” says Harrison. “Some programme content is difficult. I’ve had to stop recording on several occasions because I realise I am crying. It happened to me with *Long Lost Family* and a documentary about conjoined twins.”

The team faced one of its most daunting challenges in lockdown in 2020. Unable to use their usual studios, the signers improvised from home to produce a daily news digest for the BSL Broadcasting Trust – which can be accessed on several platforms, includ-

ing online and in the daytime on Film4.

“Not all deaf people can read English,” explains Harrison. “BSL is their first language. So, without BSL translation, they were finding it difficult to keep up with the rules and restrictions during the pandemic. The briefings from Downing Street didn’t have signers. When so many people at that time were wearing masks, you couldn’t even lip-read.”

“The bulletins were about three minutes long and brought viewers up to date with what was happening. It was a worrying and confusing time for people. We were shocked at how many were accessing these bulletins. The numbers were eye-popping.”

Another hurdle in working from home was downloading the programmes ready for signing. Harrison relied on rural broadband, so had to wait up to 10 hours to access longer shows such as the *Emmerdale Omnibus*.

She remembers that, after the team

A+E's fresh twist on true crime

Novelists **Mark Billingham** and **Douglas Skelton** offer their take on the UK's most notorious crimes



From left: Dan Korn, Mark Billingham, Douglas Skelton and Caroline Frost

Paul Hampartsoumian

At an intimate RTS event in London's British Library, members gathered to enjoy an illuminating discussion between bestselling crime novelists Mark Billingham and Douglas Skelton and A+E Networks executive Dan Korn. Attendees were also treated to exclusive excerpts from Crime+Investigation's documentary series *Once Upon a True Crime*.

Hailed as a fresh approach to true-crime programming, the new four-part show features notorious crimes that shocked the UK: the 1960s Moors murders; the killings committed by Peter Manuel in Glasgow in the 1950s; the so-called "babes in the wood" murders in Brighton in 1986; and the unsolved case of Glasgow's notorious "ice-cream wars" in the 1980s.

The twist on traditional true-crime shows is that each episode is delivered and presented by a popular writer of

crime fiction, who brings their own personality and take on the crimes that have inspired their most famous novels. Billingham, Skelton, Denise Mina and Peter James are the featured bestselling authors.

"True-crime audiences are spoiled for choice at the moment," said Korn, who is executive producer and vice-president for programming at A+E Networks UK, and commissioned the show from the Glasgow and London-based factual TV production powerhouse IWC Media. "What viewers will get is a unique take, very much an author's take."

Korn noted that he had A+E Networks' Polish team to thank for the *Once Upon a True Crime* format; it was originally produced with Polish authors talking about the true crimes that inspired their fiction. He said all four British authors had delivered on a promise to "tell viewers about them from a unique place".

"We are always seeking a new way into crime, we always need to find new angles because there is a risk of things becoming repetitive and sensationalist," Korn told the chair of the RTS event, the journalist, broadcaster and author Caroline Frost.

The conversation ranged from why true crime fascinates and horrifies in equal measure to the conviction that, for the past 60 years, crime fiction has been less about whodunnit than why the crime was committed.

Billingham's episode tackles the enduring mysteries of the grotesque couple Ian Brady and Myra Hindley, and the Yorkshire Moors murders of several children, which helped inspire his bestseller *Their Little Secret*.

"I wanted to look at what happened after the pair were caught and convicted, rather than just a rehash of their terrible crimes," said Billingham.

Skelton's episode examines the infamous 1980s gangland turf war

known as the “ice-cream wars”, which terrorised Glasgow’s East End and culminated in the murders of six members of one family in a horrifying arson attack. In 1984, two men were convicted of the murders and sentenced to life while constantly protesting their innocence. After a 20-year battle, their convictions were overturned. No one subsequently has been brought to justice for the murders. The background to the case influenced Skelton’s novel *Blood City*.

In her film, Mina examines the story of Manuel, who, in 1958, became the second-to-last man to be hanged in Glasgow, after killing at least seven people during a campaign of terror across Lanarkshire between 1956 and 1958. The spree included the murder of Marion Watt, her 16-year-old daughter and Watt’s sister. Manuel’s intriguing relationship with Marion’s husband, William Watt, provides the backdrop for Mina’s novel *The Long Drop*.

“He [Manuel] was the bogey man,” Skelton told the RTS. “For years afterwards, mothers would say to their children: get to your bed or Peter Manuel will come. He was a serial killer before they called them serial killers.”

Peter James’s film recalls the tragedy of the “babes in the wood” murders. The Brighton-born writer revisits his home city to detail a crime that has stuck with him like no other, and the gruelling, decade-long fight for justice.

James focuses on the killer, Russell Bishop, who originally escaped conviction for the murder of two nine-year-old girls found strangled in woods on the outskirts of Brighton because his girlfriend gave him an alibi.

Korn noted that James got very close to the case and to the investigating police officers and was devastated that they had not been able to bring Bishop to justice, despite knowing he was guilty. It took 10 years before Bishop was convicted.

“There is a hook to crime – they are the best stories, that’s why people come to them,” suggested Korn. “They also provide a gripping social commentary.”

All the episodes contain a revelation or two that surprised the authors and will, no doubt, provide viewers with never-before-known nuggets.

So, how do Billingham and Skelton feel about being a part of the big media circus that still follows these true crimes and feeds people’s appetite for such grisly content?



Mark Billingham

Paul Hampartsoumian

‘CRIME FICTION HAS BEEN ABOUT THE WHY-DUNNIT RATHER THAN WHODUNNIT’

“I certainly say somewhere in my film that they’ve had their moment in the spotlight,” said Billingham. “At the same time, I’m aware that I am now part of that spotlight. So it’s a line you have to walk and you have to use your best judgement.”

For Skelton, it is because he still has questions: “The only thing I know for certain that happened in 1984 was that someone lied. I would like to find out who it was and that’s why I keep hammering away at this idea that the authorities get up off their backsides and look into this case again to try and find out what happened.” What drives men and women to commit dreadful acts is the essential question most crime authors are wrestling with, he said.

“For the past 60-odd years, crime fiction has been about the why-dunnit rather than whodunnit,” Billingham said. “I think it’s something we’re always going to be fascinated by. Always.” After all, losing yourself in a book or disappearing into a documentary is a safe way to encounter crime. “Some people want escapism, some people want something else. There are a whole variety of reasons why people like crime drama and crime fiction,” added Billingham.

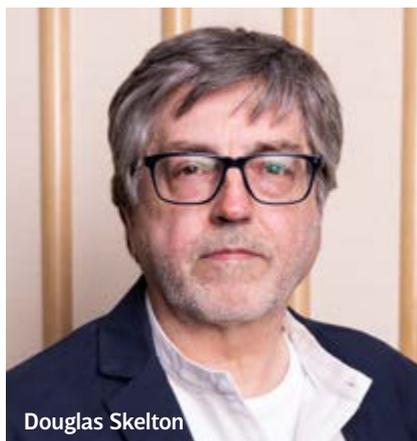
While the show was six months in the making, IWC Media was able to move swiftly because each novelist’s unique perspective provided a clear narrative way in to each episode.

Korn said that each film had its own kind of complexity. “A lot of the time, I thought I would love this to run longer, like at 66 minutes for a 90-minute slot, but you do have to compress it and bring it down to time for 45 minutes, which, sometimes, is a shame. With these films, they all had more to give.”

Once Upon a True Crime began airing on Crime+Investigation in the UK on 25 April on pay platforms and is also available on streaming services Amazon Prime Video and Apple TV+.

A good consolidated audience for the show would be around the 200,000 mark, remarked Korn after the event. And, of course, lead to the commissioning of more crime – at least on TV. ■

Report by Stuart Kemp. The RTS members event ‘Once Upon a True Crime’ was held on 20 April at the British Library, London. It was hosted by journalist, broadcaster and author Caroline Frost and produced by Barbara Pianca, senior communications manager, A+E Networks UK.



Douglas Skelton

Paul Hampartsoumian

‘MOTHERS WOULD SAY TO THEIR CHILDREN: GET TO YOUR BED OR PETER MANUEL WILL COME’



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OUR FRIEND IN THE NORTH

Head down, develop, produce... and repeat. It's the rhythm of life for most indies in the North of England. And somehow, somewhere, the next commission will arrive.

But the industry in Leeds, Manchester and elsewhere in the UK needs to lift its head. The year began with confidence, with a fading pandemic, healthy order books, larger London companies putting boots on the ground, and the freelance community awash with offers of work.

All this was backed by hard commitments to factual production in the regions from Channel 4 and the BBC, with specific initiatives aimed at growing and sustaining talent. Channel 5 continued to back its long-held assertion that quality and value are best achieved beyond the M25.

Then, beneath our feet, the plates began shifting. First, the news about the BBC licence fee and then the renewed effort to privatise Channel 4.

Not too long ago, we often felt that the BBC viewed "the North" as a mythical place just beyond "the Wall" in *Game of Thrones*. However, with new commissioners based in Newcastle and Leeds, and welcome tenders/invitations to pitch aimed at helping companies put down roots in under-served places, things have improved.

Nadine Dorries' announcement on freezing the licence fee commits the nation's broadcaster to a generation of cost-cutting introspection. It will likely result in small indies in the North and elsewhere having reduced tariffs and fewer opportunities.

And now, despite the vast majority of people in the industry being firmly opposed to it, Channel 4 is up for

Andrew Sheldon warns that the Government's broadcasting reforms are not what indies based outside of London wanted



True North

grabs again. The broadcaster's commitment to Leeds, Bristol, Manchester, Cardiff, Glasgow and Belfast is critical to the ambitions of indies based in the nations and regions. It's a practical example of the much vaunted "levelling up".

Talent is brought in from all backgrounds, regardless of their birthplace or their accent and becomes a part of the global success story that is British television.

The Government says privatisation is about protecting this unique role. How does a likely sale to a US corporation, with commissioners in LA and New York who think that Gateshead or Blackburn are just outside London, deliver that?

ITV might win the race and at least keep Channel 4 in UK ownership for now. However, what are the odds against it also being in the arms of one

of the US giants within five years?

In fact, it's entirely possible that, before too long, all the SVoDs, AVoDs and the key UK indies will have consolidated into the hands of six or seven mainly US-based corporations. In that scenario, the last man standing for PSB values and the grassroots of the industry will be an underfunded BBC.

Those US companies will ultimately decide what British audiences watch. You can predict that their decisions will be based on P and L, and not portrayal, representation, or opportunity, or long-term support for the independent sector.

Much will be said about legally binding commitments for the new owners, but expect a steady erosion of any licence conditions, especially since the plan is for Channel 4 to have a significant in-house production arm. At that point, smaller indies – maybe 200 of them across the UK – will see their prospects tumble.

Already, Channel 4 has apparently attracted expressions of interest from 24 different buyers. This suggests that there will be competitive tension fuelling a speculative price tag of up to £2bn. That's the one moment when the DCMS will have genuine leverage. It must use it.

If it is serious about protecting the industry in a wider sense, it should go beyond the existing remit and ask for long-term guarantees of specific support for indies with a turnover of less than £10m, extended quotas for out-of-London hours, and Channel 4 to have its HQ beyond the M25.

Do that and some of the 96% of people who objected to the sale might take a more pragmatic approach... though I'm not betting on it. ■

Andrew Sheldon is creative director and co-founder of True North.

The art of adaptation



As Amazon Prime's *Ten Percent* debuts, **Simon Shaps** offers some home truths to those seeking to remake a hit show for another market

In the world of book-to-screen adaptation, where I now ply my trade, I have developed an allergic reaction to producers who tell an author, hand on heart, with pained expression, that the drama series they make will “honour” their book, whether novel or non-fiction.

If “honouring” is at the expense of making a hit series, very few authors

I know would trade the chance of popular success on screen for a faithful rendition of their immortal prose. It is no accident that the Emmy-nominated HBO series *The Undoing* – to take just one example – junked a good deal of the original book on which it was based, invented entirely new storylines after the opening episode and dispensed with the original title, *You Should Have Known*.

As Susanne Bier, the director of the *The Undoing*, argued at the time, “The best you can do with a good book, if you want to dramatise it on screen, is to do something else with it.” In the hands of Bier and writer/creator David E Kelley the “something else” was open-heart surgery on the original novel.

That is often what it takes to transfer material from one medium to another.

It is how the great Andrew Davies boiled down *War and Peace* to six episodes, or reimagined *Bleak House*, all 800 or so pages of it, as half-hour episodes for a television audience brought up on the soaps.

In the globalised world of contemporary television, this argument is even stronger when a scripted series is remade in another language. Especially if the show has already made the leap from its original domestic broadcaster – France 2 in the case of *Dix Pour Cent/Call My Agent!* – to Netflix, or another multi-market streamer. In this unintentionally hilarious situation, the new UK-based adaptation, *Ten Percent*, ends

in your circle of friends and colleagues not raving about that wicked French comedy (no, not *Emily in Paris*), with all that lying and cheating, and all-round bullshitting, and those brave French actors who were seemingly only too happy to send themselves up, Juliette Binoche included?

If that is you, and you are indeed the only person alive who didn't see the French original, by all means watch Jack Davenport and Lydia Leonard as the Mathias and Andréa knockoffs. It is terrifically entertaining... er, just like the original version. It has even enticed an A-list cast to play themselves, Binoche-style: Helena Bonham Carter, Kelly

This is what has happened over the years with the great UK to US transfers, as *Till Death Do Us Part* turned into *All in the Family* and *The Office* starring Ricky Gervais became *The Office* starring Steve Carell. That was certainly the process the makers of the Israeli series *Prisoners of War* went through to create the international juggernaut *Homeland*.

Of course, there are good reasons why adaptation – whether of books or pre-existing television series – is in fashion. Fear of failure is such a significant part of commissioners' make-up that someone else's material, together with a package of on-screen and off-screen talent, provides reassurance; how much easier that is than buying a completely original idea.

The producers of another hit French series, *The Bureau*, as well of the Israeli series *Fauda* are, it seems, intent on following in the wake of *Ten Percent* with English-language adaptations. The experience of remaking *Call My Agent!* should prove a cautionary tale.

There is a hint of what *Ten Percent* might have been and that is in those brief moments when the voice of writer John Morton breaks through and we hear again the rhythms and savage comedy of his hit series *WIA* and *Twenty Twelve*. Both series arose out of acute observation of worlds and characters close to home: the world of BBC apparatchiks and the rickety organisation bringing the Olympics to London. Neither was a homage to someone else's creation.

One final quibble. Ten per cent may well be the going rate for agents on the continent, but it most definitely won't cut the mustard here in the UK. Otherwise, what was Brexit all about?

Here, self-respecting agents expect 15%, which, admittedly, is less catchy as a title for a series. That is certainly the commission we charge at the agency for which I work. For that, you can expect the unalloyed truth in all circumstances. And none of us use mopeds. Ever. After all, multiple Soho Houses are just a short walk away.

Talking of Soho, we expect to receive a facility fee for the lingering shots of what looks like the narrow alley just off Wardour Street where we are based, which features prominently in the opening sequence of the first episode. For that, 10% will be just fine. ■

Simon Shaps is a former director of television at ITV and now consults for the literary agency Georgina Capel Associates.



up in direct competition with itself – with the original series on which it is based. This could be a storyline for series 2 of *Ten Percent* if it makes it that far.

Because viewers no longer balk at the idea of watching a subtitled drama, foreign-language television is no longer synonymous with “art house”, minority viewing: it is now part of the mainstream for TV audiences.

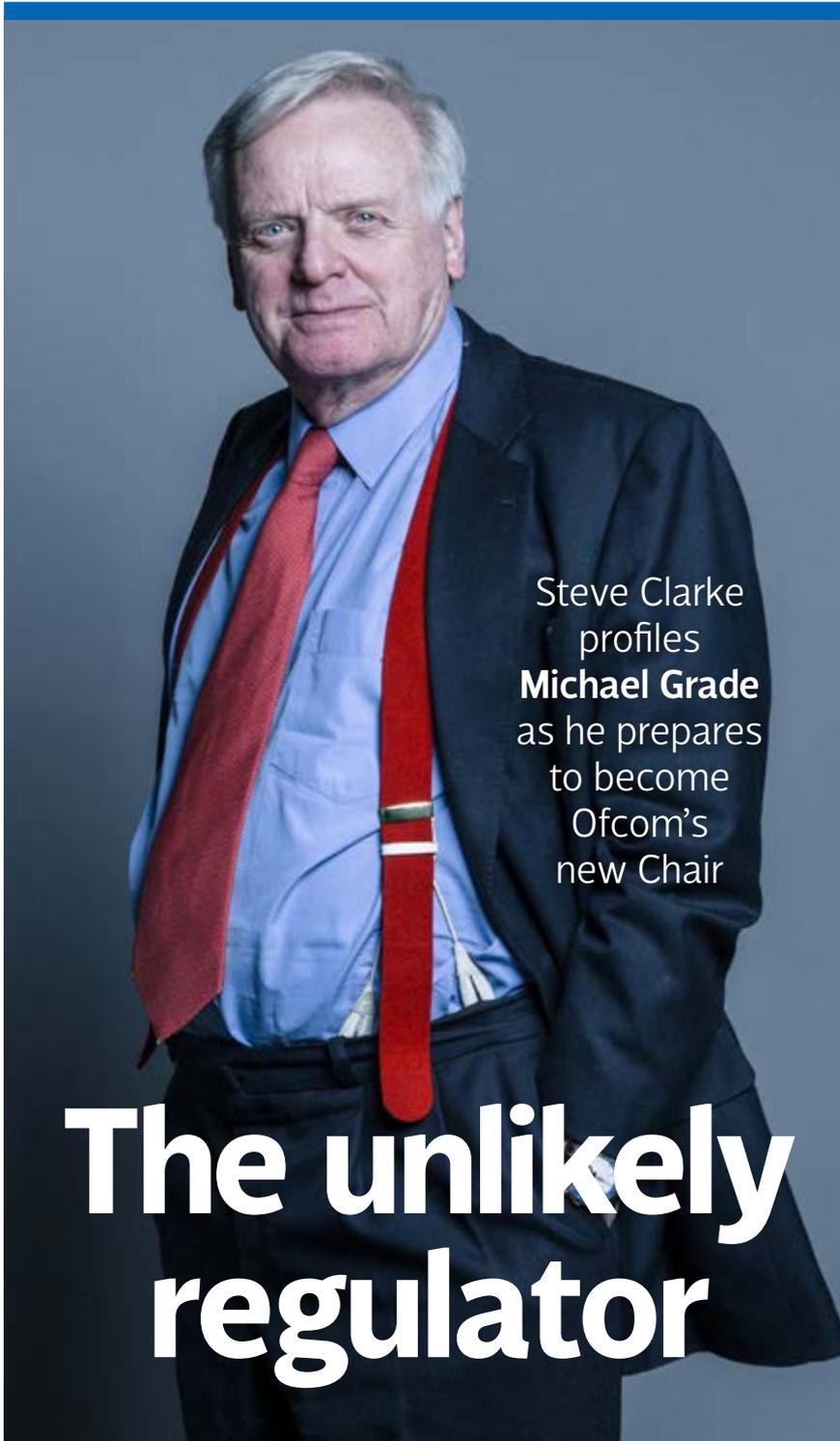
I am afraid to say that, 10 minutes into Amazon Prime's *Ten Percent*, you are simply overwhelmed by a sense of déjà vu, as they might say in *Dix Pour Cent*. So you really didn't catch France's *Call My Agent!*? Not a single episode?

What were you watching? What non-TV richness did your life contain to fill those endless days and nights of lockdown? Hands up for a Zoom pub quiz anyone? Perhaps you finally started that much postponed novel? (I can give you the names of some other agencies to send that one to.)

Once lockdown came to an end, how did it feel to be the only one

Macdonald, Olivia Williams, David Harewood, Dominic West. As for the regulars, so good is the lookalike casting and wardrobe that, for a moment, you actually believe that Camille Cottin has turned up to reprise the role of Andréa in the Amazon series. But no, it's just that Leonard, fine actor though she is, is her doppelgänger; thin as a rake, dressed in black, with Cottin's same unmistakable aquiline features.

None of this is to say that “format” sales in scripted are a dead duck. Quite the opposite. One of the triumphs of the golden age of the streamers is that we can watch terrific drama from France, Germany, Israel, South Korea, Croatia, Italy, Turkey, Belgium, Sweden and many other countries, where, previously, we had just BBC Four to bring us *The Killing* and *Borgen*. But when those shows are adapted and translated for another platform or market, there is far greater pressure to reinvent them for a different culture.



Steve Clarke profiles
Michael Grade
as he prepares
to become
Ofcom's
new Chair

The unlikely regulator

Chris McAndrew/Creative Commons-BY-SA

If, five years ago, anyone had said that Michael Grade, aka Baron Grade of Yarmouth, would be appointed to chair media regulator Ofcom, the shrieks of incredulity would have been deafening.

In his remarkable TV career at ITV, the BBC and especially Channel 4, Grade had been the scourge of regulators.

But these are extraordinary times, and Grade, who was elevated to the House of Lords as a Conservative peer, being hired to run Ofcom seems much less surprising that it once would

– especially given the tortuous and protracted nature of the appointment process. Ofcom has been without a Chair since ex-Treasury official Terry Burns stood down in 2020.

Even so, quite how he will adapt to the unique challenges of the three-day-a-week gig is anyone's guess. "The range of the subject matter is so vast and so detailed, there's no point in trying to get across the detail because you won't understand most of it anyway. So you need a Chair who's going to be realistic about how involved they

can be," said a former Ofcom insider. "I think Michael will get incredibly bored with the essential bits of the job."

Much of Ofcom's work is predicated on economic and legal matters. His main expertise is as a broadcaster, albeit an outstanding one. Grade, who was 79 in March, will face a steep learning curve at Ofcom when dealing with non-TV and content-related issues, of which there will be many. Consider the sheer breadth of the regulator's responsibilities: telecommunications, the digital infrastructure, economic regulation, postal services, even the frequencies used by M15 and M16, let alone the watchdog's new responsibility for the internet.

Moreover, the recent broadcasting white paper adds to Ofcom's responsibilities. It includes overseeing the new prominence regime, the new VoD code and regulating internet-delivered services.

As a UK broadcaster, Grade's experience is unmatched, and he can be a highly effective speaker. "His recent performance in the Commons was masterful," said a TV veteran. A frequent contributor and star turn at RTS events for more than four decades, the nephew of Lew Grade – one of the founders of ITV – began his career in television in 1973 at London Weekend Television. The company was an incubator for a generation of executives who went on to dominate so much of UK TV.

A decade earlier, he had worked as a sports columnist on the *Daily Mirror*, famously being driven to work on his first day at the office in his father's Rolls-Royce. The chauffeur dropped him off round the corner from the *Mirror's* office so as not to embarrass the young would-be hack with the blood of showbiz royalty running in his veins.

From LWT, Grade, who had adopted his cigar-chomping schtick from Uncle Lew, caused a minor sensation in TV circles when, in 1981, he left Britain to run Embassy Television in Hollywood. Always deeply aware of his own profile, the mogul-in-making drove a pink Cadillac convertible around LA.

Alas, the boulevards of Burbank didn't quite live up to the hype: two years later, he recrossed the pond to work for the BBC, as controller of a then lacklustre BBC One. With typical chutzpah, he told the press he had taken "the biggest pay cut in history – half a million dollars to £34,000 – I might just have to give up eating". In the US, he said, he had missed "public service broadcasting, real drama, news, current affairs".

Revamping the peak-time schedule and promoting a new soap, *EastEnders*, and a high-profile talk show, *Wogan*, Grade quickly made his mark at the Beeb. Within two years, he was promoted to director of programmes and, in 1987, was made Managing Director designate for BBC Television.

Then, to the amazement of many, he jumped ship to become Channel 4's second CEO. This was a highly controversial appointment because Grade was regarded as a populist while Channel 4 shied away from the mainstream.

The populist tag, however, was always an over-simplification. At LWT, he launched *The South Bank Show* and at the BBC championed the brilliant dramatist Dennis Potter.

Arguably, Grade's nine years leading Channel 4 represented the height of his TV career. He successfully fought off privatisation and, by canny scheduling, often relying on US imports such as *Friends* and *Frasier*, grew the broadcaster's audience share from 8.4% to 10.6%. Film4 thrived thanks to movies such as *The Crying Game*.

During his tenure, with attention-grabbing shows such as *The Big Breakfast* and *The Word*, the network was never far away from tabloid headlines. All this boundary-pushing led to the *Daily Mail*'s description of Grade as the country's "pornographer in chief". This description upset him hugely.

When he left Channel 4, he did so to head – and dismantle – the sprawling nightclubs-to-gyms empire, First Leisure, then to lead Pinewood and Shepperton studios, become a director of the Millennium Dome and chair Camelot. To many, it seemed as if his TV days were over. But then, in 2004, Grade was appointed Chair of the BBC, where he oversaw the dissolution of its ruling body, the Board of Governors, and replaced it with the BBC Trust.

Now past his 60th birthday, he could have been forgiven for hanging up his red braces once the Trust was up and running. But no, in late 2006, it was announced that Grade was returning to his roots – as ITV's Executive Chair. BBC staff felt deflated by his lack of loyalty to the organisation. At ITV, however, his return was greeted by applauding employees.

It was not the happiest period of his career: when the global financial crisis hit, ITV's share price collapsed and he battled in vain with Ofcom to reduce the network's commitment to regional news. As ever, the Grade mystique

'I'VE SPENT A LIFETIME RESISTING UNDUE POLITICAL PRESSURE AS A BROADCASTER... IT'S SOMETHING I'M USED TO'

The making of Michael Grade

Michael Ian Grade, Baron Grade of Yarmouth, CBE, Chair of Ofcom

Born 8 March 1943

Education Stowe School, Buckinghamshire, and St Dunstan's College, London

1960 Reporter, then sports columnist, *The Daily Mirror*

1966 Theatrical management at The Grade Organisation and from

1969 London Management & Representation

1973 Deputy controller of programmes (entertainment), LWT

1977 Director of programmes, LWT

1981 President of Embassy Television in the US

1984 Controller, BBC One

1986 Director of programmes, BBC Television

1988 CEO Channel 4

1997 Executive Chair, First Leisure
2000 Chair, Pinewood Shepperton studios (until 2016)

2002 Chair, Camelot (until 2004)

2004 Chair, BBC Board of Governors

2006 Chair, Ocado (until 2013)

2007 Executive Chair, ITV

2011 Made a Conservative Party life peer in the House of Lords

May 2022 Chair, Ofcom

survived the boardroom challenges. In 2010, after leaving ITV, he revealed his membership of the Conservative Party and, the following year, he was made a life peer by David Cameron.

An important part of chairing Ofcom will be ensuring the impartiality of broadcast news (he will continue to sit in the House of Lords as a crossbencher) and the regulator's independence from Downing Street. When he was quizzed in the Commons by the DCMS Committee last month on his political allegiance and how he would deal with any government pressure on the regulator to act in a certain way, he said: "I've spent a lifetime resisting undue political pressure as a broadcaster, not least at the BBC, Channel 4 and ITV. It's something I'm used to doing."

Nevertheless, many will be watching to ensure that he remains politically neutral, given that fears have already been expressed that Ofcom's relationship to the Government is too close. "Michael can be independent," said a senior broadcaster who has negotiated with him. "But is he going to become the Government's poodle? Or will he, at key moments, stand up for broadcasters? As the Chair of Ofcom, he shouldn't follow any party line. He should be doing what's right for the public."

It is understood that he was attracted to the job because of Ofcom's responsibility for implementing what will soon become the Online Harms Act. In Parliament, he said that Ofcom would be bullish about going head-to-head with tech giants such as Meta. "A major priority is to ensure that we are going to be a match for these companies," said Grade, who has been known for bringing a certain swagger to the negotiating table.

He doesn't use social media but rejects the idea that he is ill-equipped to police the online world. "I wouldn't say I have no experience – I have three kids. I have a 23-year-old student son who is never off his screen. I do understand the dynamics. We can't be experts in every single aspect of the turf that Ofcom has to patrol," he told the DCMS Committee.

As for the apparent pending privatisation of Channel 4, something he has recently called for and which Ofcom will have to effect, Grade said: "My opinions are irrelevant." Earlier, he had noted that, as CEO of Channel 4, he had "fought privatisation twice... once with Margaret Thatcher and once with John Major." ■

Football's darkest hour

A new TV film drama, *Floodlights*, pulls no punches in depicting the childhood sexual abuse of Andy Woodward. **Shilpa Ganatra** reports



Floodlights

BBC

It is the dilemma for any hard-hitting drama: how do you tell a horrific story while persuading viewers to keep watching? That was the guiding question of *Floodlights*, the feature-length dramatised version of events surrounding Andy Woodward's sexual abuse as a young footballer.

The game-changing story came to light in 2016, when Woodward, a former player at lower-league Bury, went public in *The Guardian*. He revealed how he was repeatedly abused by former youth coach Barry Bennell between the ages of 11 and 15, playing for Crewe Alexandra in the 1980s.

The revelations had a cataclysmic effect on the national game. At the last count, 800 further victims had been uncovered, with more than 340 football clubs and 300 suspects implicated.

The scandal was laid bare last year in BBC One's three-part documentary *Football's Darkest Secret*. But that occupied a different space in the telling of Woodward's story than a real-life drama, says

Colin Barr, creative director of factual and factual drama at Expectation, who is the executive producer of *Floodlights*.

"A documentary can gather the experiences of 10 or 15 men and build a picture in a way that drama can't, whereas drama has to zero in on a single story and focus on it. That means it can put you right back in that moment in a way that a documentary can't."

The challenging part of putting the audience "in that moment" is that it is inevitably a very uncomfortable place for any viewer. To mitigate this, the project moved from the idea of three episodes charting, in turn, Woodward's experiences as a boy, as a man and as a survivor to a single feature-length film.

Writer Matt Greenhalgh (*Control, Nowhere Boy*) says: "We felt this move would allow the biggest audience for something like this. And you do have to open this out if there are lessons to be learnt.

"It's weird to call it entertainment," he says, "but we are in an industry where we can reach more people.

So we're motivated to get the message out to kids as well as parents and football clubs."

Viewers are spared the recreation of those countless nights that Bennell abused Woodward and others, but the point that it happened is made effectively. Try as you might, it is not possible to unhear Gerard Kearns (*The Last Kingdom, Shameless*) as Woodward, reeling off Bennell's offences in a shaky voice loaded with years of suffering: "It consisted of French kissing and molestation. Forced to receive oral sex. Forced to give oral sex to ejaculation. Forced to watch and read hardcore pornography. And rape. This happened daily for almost three years. And I felt there was nobody I could tell."

Those who have followed Woodward's story in the newspapers and in his book, *Position of Trust*, know it to be one where truth is stranger than fiction. Though not covered in the programme, there was an added twist that Bennell married Woodward's sister. And, later, Woodward came forward

with another near-unbelievable story involving his family's suffering at the hands of the Bennells: in the 1970s, his pregnant aunt was raped and murdered by Bennell's cousin.

While those shocks are loaded with emotional currency, the team agreed that the best way to keep viewers engaged was to focus the story on the aspect that resonated the most: Woodward's survival of the abuse and his uncovering of the truth about the youth football system.

For Barr, Woodward's story held a significance that will be relatable in homes throughout the country. "I'd played football in Glasgow as a teen, and several of the coaches that I'd played for found themselves being convicted of sexual offences against boys. While nothing had happened to me, I'd been struck by that. I understood completely how coaches in that world would be able to do the things that they did, because they were sort of untouchable. I remember how much I wanted the attention of the head coach in the team I played for, and there were no women anywhere to be seen."

Discussions on making a drama began soon after Woodward went to *The Guardian*. Barr and fellow executive producer Sue Horth met Woodward for breakfast in King's Cross, London, where "he just talked and he talked and he talked some more. I thought there was a whole story that hadn't been told in the press about how Bennell had managed to groom the whole family.

"And there was something about the way he described being an 11-year-old boy in the world of football that was so powerful. It felt like the kind of story that only drama could do in a truly visceral way."

Woodward's input continued throughout the production, down to supplying the trophies in his depicted childhood bedroom. "Needing Andy to talk to us about those events again and in great detail asked a tremendous amount of him," says Barr. "We were sensitive to the danger of being another trial for him to get through. But, at the same time, Andy is the kind of guy who, once he commits to something, commits to it completely."

The BBC had already greenlit *Football's Darkest Secret* but then decided the seriousness of serial paedophilia

warranted finding space for both types of storytelling and so commissioned *Floodlights*, too. "Throughout, both productions were in communication with one another. We felt it was better to know what the other was up to, to make sure there was space for both," says Barr.

Though Greenhalgh finished the script in late 2019, the pandemic stalled production until December 2021 – with children involved, it was one of

usual. Joining the cast and crew were intimacy co-ordinators, an on-set welfare officer, counselling support and a consultant clinical psychologist.

"The key in all of this is that you need to be able to talk to someone who doesn't feel that they've got a responsibility to the production, who sits outside of all of that," says Barr. "We're increasingly realising that you need welfare producers on documentaries, as well as intimacy co-ordinators



Floodlights with Antony Byrne (as Neil Warnock) and Gerard Kearns (as Andy Woodward)

BBC

the last paused productions out of the traps. At that point, they had brought on Nick Rowland (*Calm with Horses*, *Hard Sun*) as director. "I could feel the fire in his belly and that's what I need in anyone," says Greenhalgh.

More than just another creative endeavour, the production held a special significance for cast and crew because of its weightiness, says Rowland. It was filmed in and around Manchester and, he says, the subject matter "created this energy on set with the cast, with all the heads of departments, all the way down to the caterers. Everyone came to set every morning with a real purpose.

"We needed that to carry us through because it was a very challenging shoot, it was only 20 days or something. It was tough, but that collective purpose was the best experience I've had in my, admittedly short, career."

The "emotional relentlessness" that Rowland discusses and the sensitive nature of the shoot meant that there were more welfare considerations than

on dramas. More and more, the focus on welfare is changing the shape of how we do the job for the better.

"Of course, it's not just that what we were asking of Max [Fletcher, who plays the young Woodward], was difficult. Asking Jonas [Armstrong] to play the part of Bennell with a boy as young as Max is incredibly hard, and he needed to be supported through that as well."

With the drama to air this month, Greenhalgh reflects on the goal he laid out at the start. "I wanted to tell a hero story," he says. "Andy revealing himself took a massive amount of bravery and courage. And for a lot of men across the board, this environment needs to be talked about and spotlight whenever you can, because that's the only way people will know about it and prevent it from happening again." ■

Floodlights will air on 17 May on BBC Two and BBC iPlayer.

■ **See video interviews with creatives at:** [rts.org.uk/rts-tv/events](https://www.bbc.com/rts/org.uk/rts-tv/events).

AT A GLANCE:

The broadcasting white paper

New legislation will aim to create a level playing field between the UK's public service broadcasters and their global rivals such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video



www.parliament.uk

The BBC

Last month's white paper sets out the Government's vision for the broadcasting sector. It confirmed what the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Nadine Dorries, said in January, that the BBC licence fee will be frozen at £159 for two years. It will then rise in line with inflation for four years, to be replaced by a new funding model by 2027. A review will consider what those alternatives could be.

The white paper states: "We need to consider the most fair and appropriate funding mechanism to be introduced at the end of the current Charter

period." It refers to "clear challenges on the horizon to the sustainability of the licence fee" as more households are "choosing not to hold a TV licence, as fewer people choose to watch live TV".

The BBC must continue to diversify its income streams to become "less reliant" on the fee, it states.

It points out that other countries have changed their PSB funding models, and believes: "We will be able to draw on their experiences."

The BBC's commercial borrowing limit is to be increased from £350m to £750m, it states, "to support [it] in accessing capital".

The paper expresses concern that

the licence fee is currently "enforced by criminal sanctions", which it considers are "increasingly disproportionate and unfair" on women and the elderly.

Channel 4 privatisation

The white paper pledges to find the "right owner" for Channel 4. Private ownership, it says, does not have to be to the detriment of the "public good". It is not a "binary choice" between commercialisation and public ownership.

It goes on: "The right owner will provide more investment, and support

Channel 4's role in delivering public good.... The right owner for Channel 4 will be one who shares our ambition for the business and our belief in what makes it special."

A commercialised Channel 4 will adhere to commitments similar to the present ones, which "will include retaining its remit to provide distinctive, educational, innovative and experimental programming that represents the breadth of society. It will also include equivalent obligations for news and current affairs provision, to show original programmes, and to continue to make programmes outside London and across the UK."

The white paper adds: "In particular, we will expect a Channel 4 under new ownership to continue working with independent production companies right across the UK."

Providing Channel 4 with greater access to capital will enable it to invest in content and technology to "think genuinely big in terms of the next evolution of its business model and strategy to help it lead the way in defining 'what's next' in the global TV market".

The white paper says: "We have the opportunity to make Channel 4 bigger and better without losing what makes it so distinctive. Channel 4 is and will remain a public service broadcaster, just like other successful public service broadcasters – ITV, STV, Channel 5 – that are already privately owned."

In-house production will be allowed to enable Channel 4 to "diversify its revenue streams... and improve its business resilience".

There will be a requirement to commission a minimum volume of programming from indies, in line with the 25% quota placed on the other PSBs; Channel 4's 35% nations and regions quota will be maintained.

The "terms of trade" are to be updated and there will be a review on whether to introduce a revenue cap for "qualifying independent producer" status.

Privatising Channel 4 will lessen the burden on the public purse, it argues. "Easing these constraints within public ownership could lead to increased public sector net debt and risk to the Government and, ultimately, the taxpayer, if Channel 4 could not service additional debt or its financial position deteriorated."

Some of the proceeds of the

broadcaster's sale will be used to set up a "creative dividend" for the sector. The Government "intends to legislate [on Channel 4's privatisation] as soon as the parliamentary timetable allows."

PSB reform

The "complicated and outdated" set of requirements governing the PSBs is to be ended in favour of a simplified set of objectives and greater flexibility to deliver them digitally.

The aim is to help the BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 compete with their global rivals as competition for viewers and revenue intensifies.

The 14 "overlapping" requirements that govern the PSBs and the specific commitments for each broadcaster are to be scrapped.

There will be a new focus on creating distinctive shows that reflect

'FOR THE FIRST TIME, STREAMING SERVICES ARE TO BE REGULATED BY OFCOM'

British culture, supporting domestic production and providing impartial and accurate news.

PSBs will be able to deliver their obligations via platforms such as the BBC iPlayer and ITV Hub, instead of only via their main channels, as is currently the case.

The new remit may also include requirements for the PSBs to commission "distinctively British" programming, following consultation.

The DCMS wants to ensure that the PSBs continue to deliver shows such as *Doctor Who*, *I May Destroy You*, *The Great British Bake Off*, *Top Gear*, *Luther*, *Downton Abbey* and *Planet Earth* – internationally successful shows and ones that reflect modern Britain.

There is increasing concern over the globalisation of broadcasting. A growing number of shows are set in non-specific, or non-UK locations featuring international casts speaking US English. PSB output must be distinguishable from foreign shows. There

must be no reduction in British soft power abroad.

New rules on PSB prominence

PSB content is to be given prominence on connected devices and major online platforms, including smart-TVs and set-top boxes, including BBC iPlayer, ITV Hub, All 4 and My 5. Ofcom will have powers to enforce the prominence environment. Those who don't obey can be fined.

New rules for SVoDs

For the first time, streaming services are to be regulated by Ofcom, bringing them in line with traditional broadcasters. The aim is to protect audiences from harmful material, and for the likes of Netflix and Amazon Prime to adhere to rules on accuracy, fairness and privacy.

The maximum fine for regulated VoD services that break the rules will be £250,000, or an amount up to 5% of an organisation's revenue, whichever is higher.

Ofcom is to draft the new code.

Sports rights

There are plans to change the digital broadcast rights for key sporting events such as the Olympics, men's World Cup finals, the FA Cup final, the Grand National and Wimbledon singles finals.

Broadcasting rules state that events of national interest should be available to view live, and free-to-air, but the current legislation does not cover digital rights so PSBs do not always have catch-up rights for so-called "listed events".

So, for example, if the Olympic men's 100m final took place overnight and a different broadcaster owned the catch-up rights, a wide audience might miss out on watching it free.

The aim appears to be to mitigate the situation that arose at last year's Tokyo Olympics, where there were complaints that the BBC was unable to provide the kind of comprehensive coverage available on the pay channel Eurosport. ■

Report by Steve Clarke.



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RTS NEWS

RTS West of England

Reality shows and quizzes would be nothing without the extraordinary ordinary people who appear on them. Finding contributors and contestants is the job of casting directors and, at an RTS West of England event last month, leading practitioners discussed their work.

“We’re looking for people who are going to surprise us... humour is a huge thing on *First Dates*... especially the teenagers’ [show]. Teenagers are so funny, even when they don’t mean to be,” said Rosie Smith, a casting producer at Twenty Twenty Television who has worked on Channel 4 series *Teen First Dates*.

“Relatability” is also important, as are “layers”, she added. “You want someone’s story to unfold on screen... Finally, [you want] someone who’s keen on your programme.”

Jo Somner from Plimsoll Productions, which makes Channel 4’s *Handmade: Britain’s Best Woodworker*, agreed, adding: “For us, it’s quite specific – they have to be amateurs... good enough at the skill so they’re not going to come on to the competition and look bad – but they can’t be too good.”



The ins and outs of reality casting

Diversity is important, she added: “Are we getting people of colour, LGBT+ people, different ages, accents and social status... and, at the same time, not falling into tokenism and putting someone on just for the sake of it... It’s a massive juggling act.”

Alastair McMullan is now casting for RDF West on *Tipping Point*. His biggest challenge is to sift through huge numbers of applications for the long-running ITV quiz.

“This series... we’ve had about 9,000 applications,

plus another 50,000 from the last series,” he said.

When it comes to selecting contestants for a quiz, McMullan leans “towards personality and people who are nice, because that’s who everyone at home relates to”. He added that auditions involve general knowledge tests to ensure no one is going to struggle unduly.

In contrast, Somner has to go out to find her cast, a process she described as like finding a needle in a haystack. She said about 150 people applied for series 2 of *Handmade*, but most were sixtysomething white men.

“We have to do a lot of outreach, so we are all over social media... posting on every Facebook woodworking group.”

Managing contributors’ expectations is a big part of the job, said Claire Parry, from Five Mile Films, which makes Channel 4’s *The Dog House*.

“We over-shoot so they might not make it on to the telly and... we might not be able to find a dog for them,” she said. “Things can happen that are out of our control – dogs can become poorly.”

Smith revealed that there was a 50% drop-out rate during the last series of *Teen First Dates*, for which she was casting 20 episodes and two Christmas specials.

“Post-lockdown, we found that a lot of teenagers had been through an absolute wealth of challenges, particularly linked to their mental health... we had to cast [the series] twice over. There was no other way forward because the schedule couldn’t change... so we had to cast for 40 episodes instead of 20.”

Series producer Cherry Sandhu (BBC Two’s *All That Glitters: Britain’s Next Jewellery Star*) chaired the RTS event.

Matthew Bell

From the ground to the cloud

RTS Thames Valley

At the beginning of last month, the Society’s specialist technology centre ran a series of three evening virtual events examining the key challenges for streaming media to and from the cloud.

As real-time cloud processing starts to deliver new opportunities for broadcasters, the RTS

technology colloquium ‘From ground to cloud’ featured a presentation on uploading live content by AWS Elemental specialist solutions architect David Walker.

Dr Rob Oldfield, co-founder of Salsa Sound, which has developed an AI engine that automates audio mixing for live sport broadcasts, and

Ethan Kovacs, senior cloud media engineer at Sky, discussed ways of making the cloud work for sport.

The third part of ‘From ground to cloud’ featured a panel of experts addressing subjects that included overcoming current technological and future challenges.

Matthew Bell

Art college triumphs on home turf

RTS Devon & Cornwall

Plymouth College of Art took home three of the four principal prizes from the RTS Devon and Cornwall Student Television Awards, which were held at the Market Hall Immersive Dome, Plymouth, in late April.

Ceri-Louise Prowse won the Animation award with *Joseph*; while the Drama prize went to *Can You Hear the Choir*, which was made by Jacob Saul, Sam Xander, Sonny Layton, Noelia Sansaloni, Hazel Horspool, Cameron McNabb and Jessie Hill.

The Bird Feeder, produced by James Cooper, Megan Sethuraman and Cat Beynon, took home the Factual award.

Joseph triumphed in the Craft Skills: Sound category.

Students from City College Plymouth and Falmouth University were also rewarded at the ceremony.

RTS Devon and Cornwall Student Television Awards winners

Animation - *Joseph* - Ceri-Louise Prowse, Plymouth College of Art

Comedy and Entertainment - *Heart Failure* - Will Wightman, Cleo Yeomans and Will Marchant, Falmouth University

Drama - *Can You Hear The Choir* - Jacob Saul, Sam Xander, Sonny Layton, Noelia Sansaloni, Hazel Horspool, Cameron McNabb and Jessie Hill, Plymouth College of Art

Factual - *The Bird Feeder* - James Cooper, Megan Sethuraman and Cat Beynon, Plymouth College of Art

Craft Skills: Camera - *Our Culture* - Esteban Woods Ferrer, City College Plymouth

Craft Skills: Editing - *Heart Failure* - Will Wightman, Falmouth University

Craft Skills: Production Design - *Heart Failure* - Grace Emily Fortune, Falmouth University

Craft Skills: Sound - *Joseph* - Ceri-Louise Prowse, Stu Hindley and Danny White, Plymouth College of Art

Craft Skills: Writing - *Heart Failure* - Will Wightman, Falmouth University



In My Skin: 2021 Drama award

BBC

BBC dramas rewarded

RTS Cymru Wales

More than 250 guests attended the RTS Cymru Wales Awards in early April at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama in Cardiff.

In both industry and student categories – owing to successive Covid-19 lockdowns – awards were made for programmes shown in 2020 and 2021.

Two BBC series were honoured in the Drama category, Bad Wolf's Philip Pullman adaptation *His Dark Materials* in 2020 and Kayleigh Llewellyn's comedy drama, made by Expectation, *In My Skin* (2021).

In the News and Current Affairs category, *BBC Wales Investigates: Testing Time in Care* triumphed in 2020 and the S4C documentary about the victims of a sexual abuser, *John Owen: Cadw Cyfrinach (Keeping a Secret)*, in 2021.

A special Made in Lockdown award was presented to *The Great House Giveaway*, produced for Channel 4 by Welsh indie Chwarel.

In the student categories, Bangor University scooped six prizes, including Postgraduate Drama for *Between the Headphones* and Postgraduate Factual (*Love of My Landscapes*). Aberystwyth University, the

University of South Wales and Cardiff Metropolitan University also won awards.

Producer and presenter Stifyn Parri hosted the ceremony, which featured a performance by Cardiff electro pop artist Dead Method.

"We couldn't have been more pleased at the huge turnout," said RTS Cymru Wales Chair Edward Russell following the region's first in-person event for two years. "What sets us apart is the fact that we have students and TV execs in the same room – each keen to meet each other and make connections."

Matthew Bell

RTS Cymru Wales Television Awards winners

Industry Categories

■ **Drama 2020** - *His Dark Materials* - Bad Wolf for BBC One/HBO

■ **Drama 2021** - *In My Skin* - Expectation for BBC Cymru Wales

■ **News and Current Affairs 2020** - *BBC Wales Investigates: Testing Time in Care* - BBC Cymru Wales

■ **News and Current Affairs 2021** - *John Owen: Cadw Cyfrinach* - Wildflame for S4C

■ **Breakthrough 2020** - *Rachael Solomon* - Boom Cymru for S4C

■ **Breakthrough 2021** - *Tim Davies* - Rediscover Media for BBC

■ **Made In Lockdown** - *The Great House Giveaway* - Chwarel for Channel 4

■ **Children's 2021** - *My Life: Battle of the Ballroom* - Yeti Television for CBBC

■ **Digital 2021** - *Yn Y Garej: Philip Mills* - Tinopolis for Facebook

Student Categories 2021

■ **Undergraduate Non-Scripted** - *Rameec's Story* - University of South Wales

■ **Undergraduate Scripted** - *White Noise* - Aberystwyth University

■ **Postgraduate Non-Scripted** - *Pontypool RFC: One Game* - Cardiff Metropolitan University

Student Categories 2022

■ **Postgraduate Drama** - *Between the Headphones* - Bangor University

■ **Undergraduate Factual** - *For Reminiscence* - University of South Wales

■ **Postgraduate Factual** - *Love of My Landscapes* - Bangor University

■ **Craft Skills: Camerawork** - *Chitti the Missing Girl* - Bangor University

■ **Craft Skills: Editing** - *Y Lein: Friction Dynamics and Love of My Landscapes* - Both Bangor University

■ **Craft Skills: Production Design** - *Between the Headphones* - Bangor Uni

■ **Craft Skills: Sound** - *Chitti the Missing Girl* - Bangor University

Ireland's leading broadcasters, RTÉ, Virgin Media, TG4 and Sky Ireland, all landed prizes at the RTS Ireland Television Awards in April.

RTÉ thriller-come-family drama *Smother*, starring Dervla Kirwan, won the coveted Drama award. One of the stars of the Irish broadcaster's gangster series *Kin*, Yasmin Seky, took the Newcomer prize. In total, RTÉ won seven of the 11 categories.

Finding Jack Charlton, Virgin Media's moving film about the England World Cup winner and former Republic of Ireland manager, won the Sport category.

The Specialist Factual award went to Sky's two-part music and literary documentary series *Voices of Ireland*, while Irish-language broadcaster TG4's *Mo Shaol, Do Shaol* won the Children's Programme category.

TV presenters Blathnaid Treacy and Nuala Carey hosted the ceremony at the concert hall of Dublin's RDS. It was produced by RTÉ and featured guest appearances by indie folk act Villagers and impressionist Oliver Callan in



Smother: Best Drama

RTE

RTÉ enjoys strong night

front of an audience of about 400. "Tonight's winners are testament to an industry at the top of its game creatively," said RTS Ireland Awards Chair Niall Cogley. "We were especially excited to finally gather together again... to pay tribute to the very best Irish TV performers producers and contributors."

Matthew Bell

RTS Republic of Ireland Television Awards winners

- Drama** - *Smother* - Treasure Entertainment/BBC Studios for RTÉ
- Entertainment** - *Ireland's Fittest Family* - Animo TV/Kite Entertainment for RTÉ
- Factual Entertainment** - *Gogglebox Ireland* - Kite Entertainment for Virgin Media Television
- Factual** - *The Killing of Fr Niall Molloy* - Flawless Films for RTÉ
- Factual Single** - *Tomorrow Is Saturday* -

GMarsH TV Productions for RTÉ

- Specialist Factual** - *Voices of Ireland* - Red Shoe for Sky
- News and Current Affairs** - *RTÉ Investigates - Covid 19: The Third Wave* - RTÉ
- Sport** - *Finding Jack Charlton* - Noah Media Group/Virgin Media/BBC for Virgin Media Television
- Animation** - *Dagda's Harp* - Cardel Entertainment for RTÉ
- Children's** - *Mo Shaol, Do Shaol* - Macalla Teo for TG4
- Newcomer** - *Yasmin Seky*

Royal Conservatoire pockets prizes

The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland won four prizes, including the Factual and Drama categories, at the RTS Scotland Student Television Awards.

The Space I Occupy, which explores eating disorders, self-criticism and a woman's relationship with her body, picked up the Factual award and also won its maker, Colleen Bell, the Craft Skills: Writing prize.

Sizzle - about an aspiring actor stuck in a loop of auditions and rejections, and tormented by his roommate,

a purple rabbit called Rocko - took home the Drama prize. The Craft Skills: Production Design was awarded to Royal Conservatoire student Rachael Light.

Elsewhere, the Animation category was taken by *Silvering*, made by a team of students from the University of Edinburgh. This sinister film shows a woman, upon discovering a grey hair, becoming entangled in insecurity and fear for the future.

Nathan Clark, University of the West of Scotland, picked up the Comedy and

RTS Scotland Student Television Awards winners

- Animation** - *Silvering* - Eilidh Nicoll, Carla Sayer and Hervé Girardin, University of Edinburgh
- Comedy and Entertainment** - *YouTube Editing is Like '80s MTV* - Nathan Clark, University of the West of Scotland
- Drama** - *Sizzle* - May-Ann Blanch, Luke Keogh, Anna Burns, Rachael Light and team, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland
- Factual** - *The Space I Occupy* - Colleen Bell, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

Craft Skills: Camerawork - *Norland Winds* - Niall MacRae, City of Glasgow College

Craft Skills: Editing - *Beneath the Ivy* - Samuel Ruddy, University of the West of Scotland

Craft Skills: Production Design - *Sizzle* - Rachael Light, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

Craft Skills: Sound - *Refuweegeee* - Rocco Rossetti, City of Glasgow

Craft Skills: Writing - *The Space I Occupy* - Colleen Bell, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

Entertainment award for *YouTube Editing is Like '80s MTV*, a visual investigation into the development of editing techniques.

STV presenter Laura Boyd hosted the ceremony, which was held at Saint Luke's in Glasgow at the end of April. **Matthew Bell**



Step into the Ring: double award winner

BBC

Wrestling doc lands double

East Centre *ITV News Anglia* took the News Programme prize for its special edition on climate change at the RTS East Awards in April. Accepting the award, head of news Mike Talbot said: "It's been an extraordinary couple of years for regional news and this is a fantastic tribute to the whole team at Anglia."

BBC Look East's Nikki Fox was awarded the Journalist prize, while *ITV News Anglia* reporter Graham Stothard triumphed in the On-screen Personality category.

Norwich-based video production company Eye Film picked up two awards: the Craft Post-production prize went to *Our Lives: Life on the High Wire*, about the leading tightrope walker Chris Bullzini; and a film highlighting the benefits of recycling, *Swap2Save*, took the Digital Content award.

Step into the Ring, which looks at three aspiring young wrestlers and their Norfolk-based trainer Zak Knight, was another two-time winner. The four-part BBC East series secured the Factual Programme award and also the Promotional prize for Matt Wildash.

The awards were announced online by *ITV Anglia* presenter David Whiteley and his wife, *BBC Look East* and *Sunday Politics East* host Amelia Reynolds.

In the student categories, Norwich University of the Arts won six of the eight awards on offer. *Levelling Up: The OLL Story* took home the Factual award, while *The Butterfly* won in the Short Film category.

The Drama prize was awarded to a team of students from the University of Hertfordshire for the horror film *Bury the Hatchet*.

Matthew Bell

RTS East Television Awards winners

Student Categories

■ **Drama** - *Bury the Hatchet* - Jacob Nico-Katz, Matthew Gowton, Kit Taylor and Jordan Spencer, University of Hertfordshire

■ **Factual** - *Levelling Up: The OLL Story* - Luke Syder, Rugile Rozenaite and Sam Lloyd, Norwich University of the Arts

■ **Short Film** - *The Butterfly* - Dhara Wright, Vishal Dhariwal, Kian Bradshaw, Natasha Coleman and Daniel McMahon, Norwich University of the Arts

■ **Craft Skills: Camerawork** - *Fields of Anfield Road* - Nadine Gault, Norwich University of the Arts

■ **Craft Skills: Editing** - *The Butterfly* - Daniel McMahon, Norwich University of the Arts

■ **Craft Skills: Production Design** - *Bury the Hatchet* - Emily Rayner-Airey, University of Hertfordshire

■ **Craft Skills: Writing** - *Fields of Anfield*

Road - Ben Sempey, Norwich University of the Arts

■ **Craft Skills: Sound** - *A-Frayed* - Thomas Hallett, Norwich University of the Arts

Industry Categories

■ **Factual Programme** - *Step into the Ring* - BBC East for BBC England and BBC Three

■ **News Programme** - *ITV News Anglia*

■ **Broadcast Journalist** - Nikki Fox, BBC Look East

■ **On-screen Personality** - Graham Stothard, *ITV News Anglia*

■ **Digital Content** - *Swap2Save* - Eye Film for YouTube

■ **Promotional** - Matt Wildash, *Step into the Ring* - BBC East for BBC England and BBC Three

■ **Craft: Post-production** - *Our Lives: Life on the High Wire* - Eye Film for BBC One East

■ **Craft: Production** - Richard Prendergast, *Sylvia* - SubMotion Productions

John Purvis 1938–2022

■ The politician and banker John Purvis CBE has died at the age of 83. John was made an Honorary RTS Member in 1986 following his appointment as the member for Scotland on the Independent Broadcasting Authority. He served on the IBA from 1985 to 1989.

John was born in St Andrews in 1938, where he also went to university and

met an American student, Louise Durham, who would become his wife of almost 60 years.

Following a career in banking, John was elected as Conservative MEP for Mid Scotland and Fife in June 1979, sitting in the first European Parliament.

He lost his seat in 1984 but stood again successfully in 1999 and remained an MEP



John Purvis

until his retirement in 2009.

John was a fervent European, influenced by the work of his father, Lt-Col Robert Purvis, who had fought in

the Second World War and, during its aftermath, was responsible for securing food and other supplies for starving Germans. In 1946, as an eight-year-old boy, John had played amid the rubble of Hamburg.

In a 2001 speech to the European Parliament, he said: "The European Union and this Parliament are our family's guarantee that the peace and security for which my father has fought and worked in his lifetime will indeed continue for future generations."

During the Brexit referendum, John campaigned for a "Remain" vote.

Matthew Bell

Regent's films reap rewards

RTS London Regent's University London enjoyed a successful evening at the RTS London Student Television Awards in late April.

At a private ceremony for award nominees, hosted by TV presenter and reporter Ria Hebden at the Everyman cinema in King's Cross, the university won four of the nine prizes on offer.

Students from Regent's University won two of the principal awards: Comedy and Entertainment with *Finsta* and drama with *Dilemma*.

There were also wins in two of the craft categories: Sound (*Tentacle Head*) and Writing (*Everybody Needs Some(Dead)Body*).

Kingston University, London Metropolitan University,

London South Bank University, the University of Greenwich and the University of Westminster also bagged prizes at the awards.

"A successful ceremony was held at the Everyman following two years of virtual events. The talent of the students shone through, with a terrific range and diversity of subject matter and high production values across all the categories," said RTS London Chair Philip Barnes. **Matthew Bell**



Dilemma: Drama winner

Regent's University London

RTS London Student Television Awards winners

Animation-Interbeing-Ben Sinclair, Kingston University

Comedy and Entertainment-Finsta-Lucia Debernardini, Anne Sophie Trompert, Felicia Holst and Luis Garcia, Regent's University London

Drama-Dilemma-Dora Martynyuk, Regent's University London

Factual-No Comprendo-Claudia Botton, Bukola Bakinson, Hayden Rountree, Juanita Apanari and team, University of Greenwich

Craft Skills: Camerawork-Sub Rosa-Alfie Lang, London South Bank University

Craft Skills: Editing-Inertia-Sam Harrop, London Metropolitan University

Craft Skills: Production Design-Finding Laredo-Julia Chacinska, University of Westminster

Craft Skills: Sound-Tentacle Head-Nasir Simmons and Lillianna Johnson, Regent's University London

Craft Skills: Writing-Everybody Needs Some(Dead)Body-George Mills and Hannah Seligman, Regent's University London



ITN promotes its own press corp

Congratulations to Rachel Corp, ITN's new CEO – a fitting promotion for the *ITV News* editor, whose leadership has fostered an environment that frequently leaves the opposition standing.

On her watch, *ITV News* led the way on Partygate, as well as a series of reports into substandard conditions in social housing, and the RTS-award-winning report from inside the storming of the US Capitol.

She also oversaw *ITV News London*, *ITV News*-produced episodes of *Tonight*, current affairs series *On Assignment* and live coverage of general elections and royal events – and played a key role in developing diversity and inclusion initiatives.

Shady agents try to gatecrash the RTS

Everyone knows that RTS awards ceremonies are hot tickets, especially in these post-lockdown times.

How hot is confirmed in the opening episode of *Ten Percent*, Amazon Prime's adaptation of *Call My Agent!*.

Much of the plot revolves around how to procure a hard-to-get ticket to an RTS

gongfest, which even top showbiz agents can't get their hands on.

It would never happen in real life – or would it?

Channel 4 scores an end of season goal

Manchester City may have been beaten in extra time by Real Madrid in the Champions League, but all eyes remain on an especially nail-biting end to the football season for TV soccer fans. As the Premier League reaches its climax, it's down to City and Liverpool.

And well done to Channel 4 for winning the rights to show men's England matches for the next two years. Uefa Nations League

games, qualifiers for Euro 2024 and friendlies will all be shown by the channel.

Build Your Own gets super-indie backing

Another feather in the cap for All3Media with the news that it is backing Build Your Own Films, set up by *Line of Duty* star Vicky McClure.

BYOF plans to produce both scripted and unscripted shows. Its slate includes *ITV* drama *Without Sin*, a four-part psychological thriller exploring the relationship between a grieving mother (McClure) and the man she believes murdered her daughter.

The company aims to offer equality of opportunity to people from all backgrounds.



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