

May 2024

# Television



**Cumberbatch  
falls apart  
on Netflix**



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## From the CEO



Our cover story this month is the ambitious new six-part Netflix series *Eric*, which showcases some exceptional British talent. Set in 1980s New York, *Eric* is written by RTS Fellow Abi Morgan and stars Oscar nominee Benedict Cumberbatch as a desperate father whose son has gone missing on the way to school.

The show is produced by blue-chip UK drama specialist Sister, whose credits include such gems as *Chernobyl* and *This Is Going to Hurt*. You'll enjoy Matthew Bell's preview. I, for one, can't wait to see *Eric*.

Television drama of a different kind – period adaptations of literary classics such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Great Expectations* – is the subject of an

incisive piece by Mark Lawson. He explains why traditional versions of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens are out of favour with commissioners.

Staying with drama, Carole Solazzo reports on challenging times for those screenwriters seeking to establish their careers. They need the nursery slopes of series such as the recently axed BBC daytime show *Doctors* to hone their craft.

Caroline Frost was given a rare interview with ITV's drama doyenne Polly Hill, who is on a career high thanks to the extraordinary impact of *Mr Bates vs the Post Office*.

Do read May's Working Lives, which this month features creature actor Robert Strange. He appears as the Bogeyman in the new series of *Doctor Who*. Robert thinks nothing of spending hours on end in make-up,

once starting at 2:00am for a role that took eight hours to fit his costume.

Steve Clarke celebrates the extraordinary life and achievements of Sir Paul Fox, one of the pioneers of television's golden age and a former RTS Chair. Remarkably, Sir Paul achieved great things at both the BBC and ITV.

Also inside are reports of the recent RTS West of England Awards and RTS Cymru Wales Awards.

Our TV diarist is Secunder Kermani, the RTS Network Television Journalist of the Year at this year's RTS Television Journalism Awards, and a familiar face on *Channel 4 News* reporting from the war in Gaza.

Theresa Wise

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Benedict Cumberbatch in *Eric* (Netflix)

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

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

### **Application procedure**

Applications are now invited and should be submitted to the Trustees by Friday 31 May 2024 on the official application form. Applicants must read all the conditions

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

**Deadline  
extended  
to 31 May**

# TV diary

**B**reakfast is in Jerusalem. I've spent the previous day filming a report in the Occupied West Bank about a spate of deadly attacks by mobs of Israeli settlers on Palestinian villages. They were triggered by the killing of an Israeli teenage boy by Palestinians, but fit within a wider rise in settler violence, emboldened by the rise of extremist political allies and the atmosphere around the war in Gaza.

■ The dominant story of the week, however, is the fear that the long-running, often shadowy conflict between Israel and Iran could descend into all-out war. Israel killed several Revolutionary Guard commanders in Damascus at the start of April; Iran retaliated with a huge barrage of missiles, though nearly all of them were shot down. It seems neither side wants a war, but Israel has made clear it will respond, and the risk of tit-for-tat strikes escalating is hugely dangerous.

No one's clear when the response, whatever form it takes, will come. One western official told a colleague that it appears "imminent"; but this morning, Israeli and US sources quoted by other outlets are suggesting it will be after the upcoming week-long Passover holiday.

■ In any case, we're leaving Jerusalem for an undisclosed location: the main purpose of our trip is an anonymous interview with an Israeli soldier. He has served during the war in Gaza, but is now a firm opponent of it.

He wants to speak out about what he witnessed but, despite international criticism of the huge number of civilian casualties in Gaza, the vast majority of Israelis remain firmly supportive of the military and he's



Richard Kendal

## Secunder Kermani, RTS Network Television Journalist of the Year, on attempting to understand the claims and counter claims of the war in Gaza

wary of the potential repercussions of the interview.

■ Our conversation lasts more than an hour and contains shocking testimony about the mindset of many Israeli soldiers, including how some openly said of civilians in Gaza: "There are no uninvolved, only unarmed", and that the children "spared" by Israel in the war in 2014 were the ones responsible for 7 October. The Israeli army later responded by saying that it is committed to mitigating civilian harm.

Towards the end of the interview, our source grows emotional. "It's frustrating and despairing," he says, choking up, "It feels like our Government and their Government – Hamas – they're actually on the same team and essentially want to see this piece of land soaked with blood." It's a

powerful statement, though both parties would bristle at any comparison to each other.

■ We spend the evening filming a compilation of gruesome scenes we've collated from the conflict, projected onto a concrete wall to intersperse around the interview.

There's the horrific aftermath of Hamas's 7 October attacks, with dead Israeli partygoers sprawled across a bar, the mass destruction of Gaza by Israel's bombardment and the awful images of bloodied and terrified Palestinian children suffering under it.

There's also videos we've downloaded from social media, filmed by Israeli soldiers in Gaza themselves, larking around amid the devastation or celebrating it.

■ It's a depressing watch. After we finish we head to a hotel in central Tel Aviv. The air is balmy and the streets teeming with young, trendy Israelis dining in al fresco restaurants. There are small posters, calling for the release of Israeli hostages, that act as a reminder of the war, but it's deeply surreal to think how, just around an hour's drive south, in Gaza, for Palestinians facing bombs and starvation, life could not be more different.

■ Foreign journalists are barred by Israel and Egypt from entering Gaza, which is hugely frustrating. Despite the huge risks they face, brave local journalists are working with international outlets to get footage out.

It feels a very calculated, deliberate decision not to allow us to be there ourselves to help bear witness to what's unfolding, and to investigate for ourselves the claims and counter claims surrounding the conflict.

*Secunder Kermani is Foreign Correspondent for Channel 4 News.*



# COMFORT CLASSIC

**Matthew Bell**  
glories in a classic  
1980s gameshow.  
The star prize? The  
legendary speedboat

**E**very good gameshow needs a catchphrase; darts-themed classic *Bullseye* had enough for several. Add a genial host, the legendary Jim Bowen, an animated bull in a striped darts shirt, “Bully”, and, hey presto, ITV had a Sunday afternoon staple attracting up to 20 million viewers in the 1980s.

“Super, smashing, great!”, said Jim, when he wasn’t saying, “You can’t beat a bit of Bully!” or explaining the rules of the gameshow: “Stay out of the black and into the red, nothing in this game for two in a bed.”

Contestants who gambled and lost got nowt but their “BFH – bus fare home” and “a look at what you could have won”.

Like all the best gameshows, *Bullseye* can be explained on the back of a fag packet: contestants play in pairs – an amateur darts player, the “thrower”, and a quizzier, the “knower”, working together to win pounds and prizes.

The prizes – sheepskin coats, carriage clocks, Scalextric – were cheap out of necessity. Independent Broadcasting Authority rules limited prizes to a total of £6,000 a week – and the money had to stretch to “Bully’s Star Prize”.

Contrary to TV legend, the famed *Bullseye* speedboat was not up for grabs every week (and, while we’re on the subject of telly myths, neither did Captain Pugwash boast characters called Master Bates and Seaman Staines). Prizes did include caravans, holidays, fitted kitchens and the dubious pleasure of a rust-bucket “British-made car” (second prize, two Austin Metros).

*Bullseye* was proudly northern and



*Bullseye* presenter Jim Bowen and Bully

working-class. Jim once claimed: "I still can't believe we had speed-boats as prizes. The only contestants who ever won them lived in top-floor flats in Coventry." A local paper tried to find the lucky winners – unsurprisingly, to no avail.

Jim was a primary school deputy headteacher in Lancashire who moonlighted as a comic on the club circuit. He broke into TV on ITV's *The Comedians*, but *Bullseye* made him famous enough to be sent up on *Spitting Image*.

His presenting was, at best, hap-hazard; Jim frequently put his foot in it. Possibly apocryphal, though entirely believable, was the following exchange. Jim: "What do you do for a living?" Contestant: "I'm unemployed, Jim." Jim: "Super, smashing, great."

He peppered shows with groan-inducing jokes: for Jim, the Sorbonne was not a university but "something you got riding the Tour de France".

Jim was voted the nation's favourite TV gameshow host shortly before his death in 2018. He explained the show's enduring appeal to the *Daily Mirror*: "It was downmarket, but accessible. Joe Public could identify with my fallibilities. Gameshows today are too high-tech with a £1m prize. The nice thing about us was they were excited if they won a toaster."

After 14 series, *Bullseye* bowed out in 1995, returning briefly on gameshow channel Challenge in 2006, with *Phoenix Nights* actor/writer and stand-up Dave Spikey as host. The Jim-era show continues to air multiple times a day on Challenge.

Over three series on ITV from 2020, Alan Carr's *Epic Gameshow* reworked the genre's classics, including *Bullseye*, *The Price Is Right* ("It's Saturday night! So come on down!") and *Play Your Cards Right* ("What do points make? Prizes!").

Bizarrely, a year later, *Bullseye* featured in the key scene of an ITV factual drama about Welsh serial killer John Cooper, played by Keith Allen. *The Pembrokeshire Murders* included a 1989 *Bullseye* episode featuring Cooper as a contestant – with Allen digitally inserted into the episode – in which the killer's resemblance to a police sketch of a suspect led to his capture.

The final word, though, must go to uber-fan Peter Kay, who lovingly lampooned the gameshow in his stand-up: "It were weird, *Bullseye* – 'cos it were shit and it were good." Nailed it. ■

**Bullseye is on Freeview channel Challenge.**

# Ear candy

## Helen Lewis Has Left the Chat

I still remember, aged 12, rushing home from school and plonking myself down at the family desktop, just to log into MSN Messenger to talk to the people I'd spent all day with.

In part, it was the sheer novelty of it all, communicating with anyone from anywhere at any time, plus the visceral excitement of all the dings, window-shaking "nudges" and gaudy emoticons. Perhaps most importantly, though, it could all take place away from my parents' prying ears.

Bar an embarrassing rejection that I'd rather not go into, I emerged from the days of MSN relatively unscathed. Relative, that is, to some of the horror stories in Helen Lewis's new podcast on the rise of instant messaging, *Helen Lewis Has Left the Chat*.

Her thesis is that MSN and its descendants – the WhatsApps, Slacks and Telegrams – are far from benign tools that speed up our communication. Their very efficiency, combined with the impersonality and ill-defined dynamics of the platforms (are they personal and private, or public and professional?), leads directly to the kind of "chaos, confusion and comedy" she discusses across the podcast's six parts.

The first, *WhatsApp Mishaps*, leans more towards the comedy, though some of it is less laugh-out-loud than painful cringing. I'm thinking of poor Gary at No 16, who accidentally posted an X-rated proposition to his neighbourhood WhatsApp group, while the other members were complaining about local pavements being dug up.

It is not all petty scandals; a later story hits profoundly close to home.

I'm sure I'm not the only one with a relative who fell for some of the Covid conspiracy theories forwarded via WhatsApp. It is not exactly news that private messaging apps are also hotbeds of misinformation, in some ways more effective than public social media, due largely to the complete lack of moderation of posts.

But Lewis discovers a surprisingly simple and non-malicious motive for

the spread of misinformation: love, and a selfless desire to keep loved ones informed.

For all the drama, she draws out fascinating lessons. In episode 2, *Fax Machines and Foxy Natashas*, she explains how group chats can even have severe political reper-

ussions, helping to topple three Tory Prime Ministers in succession – Theresa May, Boris Johnson and Liz Truss.

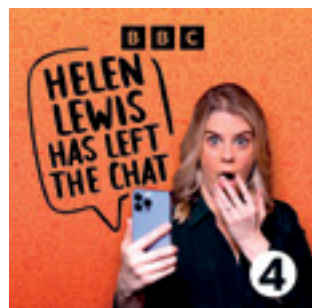
The jury is out as to whether this is official communication, open to public scrutiny. Dominic Cummings, Johnson's former Rasputin, certainly hoped it wasn't.

Here, Lewis rightfully grills him on some of his abusive messages about colleagues, which came to light during the Covid Inquiry. It will come as no surprise that Cummings shifts the blame to Johnson.

Following its spiritual predecessor, the also excellent *The New Gurus*, Lewis's latest podcast continues to provide proof that she is one of the most perceptive journalists exploring digital technology and human behaviour.

But, as much as I enjoyed this one, it did have me longing for the slow days of the homing pigeon. ■

**Harrison Bennett**



BBC



# WORKING LIVES

Robert Strange plays one of the Wrath Warriors in *Doctor Who*



## Creature actor

**Robert Strange** has played creatures in three of TV and film's classic sci-fi and fantasy franchises, *Doctor Who*, *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings*, marrying the skills of a trained actor with his physicality and build. He appears as the Bogeyman in the new series of *Doctor Who* this month.

### What is a creature actor?

A creature actor plays roles that are usually very physical, with a fantastical, non-human form. At one extreme, I am unrecognisable in costume and prosthetics, being beastly and monstrous.

But Emma Stone's Oscar-winning performance in *Poor Things* is also a kind of creature performance; it's a take on the *Frankenstein* character, embodying something that is not the regular human experience.

### What attributes does a creature actor need?

It can be a very physical performance with lots of movement – as Sergeant Zogroth in *Doctor Who* I was performing on stilts. When you look around at my colleagues, everyone appears to be incredibly tall and spindly.

It's not essential but, usually, actors who play creatures are larger than the average human silhouette. It also helps the special effects team because they can build on your shape.

You need patience and serenity as you can be sitting in the make-up chair for hours on end.

### How long does it take to get you into costume?

On average four to five hours; a full prosthetic can take longer. My longest

ever was the Irish horror comedy film *Boys from County Hell*, which involved eight hours of make-up.

I started around 2:00am, was ready for set by 10:00am and then we filmed all the way through to 6:00pm or 7:00pm. And then it would take two hours to take the make-up off. You need stamina in my job.

### Does it help being a trained actor?

Yes, I bring my background in theatre to every job I do because I don't know how to do otherwise. I went to the Oxford School of Drama after university and we did a lot of work on movement, mask work and clowning, as well as Shakespeare and straight theatre.

I also learnt how to scream and cry, which I often use when playing creatures. With regular dialogue,



I approach it just like I would any kind of dialogue.

#### Do you usually voice your characters?

Yes, but productions can add something to the voice in post-production: for example, they can lower it or add more snarls.

#### What was your first role?

John Logan's brilliant Sky Atlantic show *Penny Dreadful* in 2014, which combined characters such as Dracula, Dorian Gray and Frankenstein in one story. I answered an ad asking for someone who was tall and skinny with stunt experience, which I said I had, but I didn't, apart from a bit of stage combat. It gave me six months' work.

I realised my height – I'm six foot five – was an advantage and found I loved the process of transformation into a creature. However, over the years, I've looked back and wondered if my creature roles began earlier.

#### What do you mean?

At Oxford University, where I did a degree in biochemistry – although I probably did more student theatre than studying – I played a young man who had been raised by pigs in one play; I was fully human but I'd never worn clothes or sat in a chair or held a glass.

For my GCSE performance, I did a piece from *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka and turned into a beetle. Recently, my mother reminded me that my very first performance was in kindergarten, aged three or four, when I played a thorn in *Sleeping Beauty*.

#### How has your career developed?

I met Paul Kasey, a former creature actor, on *Penny Dreadful*. When he became the creature movement director on the *Star Wars* films, he called me and I found myself in *Star Wars VII: The Force Awakens*; I ended up doing five *Star Wars* movies. Paul now works on *Doctor Who* – he's been with me my whole career.

**Tell me about playing Sergeant Zogroth, one of the Wrath Warriors, in the Doctor Who 60th anniversary special, The Star Beast. You came to capture the Meep, but died in the arms of Donna Noble.**

*Doctor Who* had always been top of my wish list – it has unlimited monsters and they're so creative; they combine amazing creative design with these beautiful characters and stories. I'm in the first



Robert Strange in 2017 short film *Biopunk*

Liam Garvo and team

episode of the new series this month, too; this time, playing the Bogeyman.

#### What do you bring to work with you?

I have a little creature kit that includes a stylus so I can type on my phone and a gadget that sits around my neck to hold it – often in make-up you're in costume or covered in prosthetics and aren't able to use your phone. I also take rehydration tablets because you sweat so much under costumes.

#### What are the best and worst parts of the job?

The people I get to work with are just the most talented artists – and I get to wear their incredible creations and show off their work.

The worst is the discomfort, at times, of wearing costumes. They can be

heavy and bulky, so you can't sit down, go to the toilet, see, hear or even breathe easily.

#### You have other strings to your bow – you are also a straight actor and had a role in The Crown...

I love my creature roles to bits, but I also like to have dialogue. I have been blessed in the past couple of years to

be able to combine the two worlds in *The Lord of the Rings* and *Doctor Who*, playing these fantastical creatures but also having loads of dialogue.

A creature still has motivation and a character. I have more of these roles coming up, but I'm also keen to do things that are creature-free.

#### What's next for you in TV and film?

I'm in the horror film *Return to Silent Hill*, which comes out later this year. Then I've got a creature-free role in a film in the US, *Medora*, playing the Marquis de Morès, a French duellist who went to the Badlands of North Dakota in the 1880s and revolutionised ranching.

#### Are there any characters or creatures you yearn to play?

I would love to return to my Shakespearean roots, and there are some fantastic creature/physical parts such as Ariel and Caliban in *The Tempest*. He also wrote human monsters, probably better than anyone – Iago in *Othello* and Angelo in *Measure for Measure*.

In terms of creatures, I have two dream roles: a live action Jack Skellington from Tim Burton's animated film *The Nightmare Before Christmas* – maybe because I look like him already! Since I was really young, it's always been my favourite film. The second would be Hades in *Hercules*. I've also always been fascinated by the artist Aubrey Beardsley, so I'd love to play him, too. ■

**Robert Strange was interviewed by Matthew Bell.**



**Benedict Cumberbatch** loses his son and sanity in an authentically created 1980s New York. **Matthew Bell** reports

# The monster within

**A**t face value, *Eric* is another cop show, albeit one that features a giant walking puppet. But from the pen of RTS Fellow Abi Morgan – whose award-winning dramas include *The Iron Lady*, *Sex Traffic* and *The Hour* – the six-part Netflix series, which revolves around a missing child, is something entirely different, taking in addiction, childhood trauma, homelessness, Aids, homophobia and racism.

“The missing boy is a Trojan horse,” Morgan tells *Television*. “We’ve got a cop trying to find him, we’ve got devastated parents.... But, actually, it’s an emotional, domestic story about how a family survives the worst, about a period of cultural change and about a man trying to face the monster in himself.”

That man, played by Benedict Cumberbatch, is Vincent, creator of a once-popular children’s puppet show, *Good Day Sunshine*, now looking a tad old fashioned. It needs to be more “street”, say the suits at the TV company.

When Vincent’s nine-year-old son, Edgar, disappears, his response alienates his wife and colleagues. He makes a puppet for *Good Day Sunshine*, based on his son’s drawings, which he hopes will help Edgar come home. As his delusions worsen, the seven-foot puppet, Eric, comes to life, but only to Vincent.

“This puppet is a homage to the child he’s lost,” explains Morgan. “In the making of it, and in his desire to get the puppet on the TV show, Vincent starts to realise the monster is himself. I was dealing with really simple metaphors.”

“The minute Abi started pitching it to me, I was hooked,” Cumberbatch says. “She’s an incredible storyteller and she enticed me into this complex, multifaceted and troubled character’s journey.”

Eric, whom Cumberbatch voices in a deep New York rumble, an exaggeration of Vincent’s timbre, adds a touch of magical realism to what is a resolutely naturalistic drama. “Eric

is a mood-shifting entity. He can be everything from the foul-mouth buddy to the thing that can say the things we can’t,” says Cumberbatch.

It is a tribute to the writing, direction and Cumberbatch’s performance that Eric’s appearance doesn’t jar; within a few minutes, it feels entirely normal that Vincent is bickering and sparring with a puppet monster.

“Everything had to be grounded in naturalism because, otherwise, when Eric turns up, it would be ridiculous – he had to belong in this environment,” explains the director, Lucy Forbes, who won an RTS award for the BBC medical drama *This Is Going to Hurt*.

Forbes, like Morgan and Cumberbatch, is an executive producer on the show, which is made by Jane Featherstone’s production company, Sister.

As you would expect from a stellar British actor, Cumberbatch’s accent as the tormented and self-loathing New Yorker is spot on, and his performance is nuanced. Yes, Vincent has his demons – drink, drugs, toxic



relationships and a terrible childhood – but his decency is still discernible, even at his most loathsome and self-destructive.

While Vincent rages, the other principal actors – wife Cassie (Gaby Hoffmann) and Ledroit (McKinley Belcher III), the black, gay cop looking for Edgar – offer restrained but equally intense performances. Both are grieving; Cassie for her missing son and dying marriage; Ledroit for his lover who is dying from Aids, a secret that he keeps from his homophobic police colleagues.

“For me, Gaby Hoffman is the quintessential New York actress – she grew up in the Chelsea Hotel,” says Forbes. “She is also one of my favourite actors in the whole world,” she adds, and raves about Hoffman’s performance with Joaquin Phoenix in *C’mon, C’mon*.

Morgan says Belcher was an “amazing find... I didn’t know his work because he’d come through theatre primarily; there is a real stillness and command to his performance.”

She adds: “It’s all about actors and getting the alchemy right – the three of them were such an amazing triptych of actors.”

Newcomer Ivan Howe plays the missing nine-year-old Edgar. “Ivan had never auditioned for anything before. He has no stage school tics and has talent beyond his years,” says Forbes.

Morgan is a north Londoner who spent time working as a nanny in New York in the 1980s. She has always been drawn to American culture – *Good Day Sunshine* is, in part, a homage to *Sesame Street*, a beloved show from her youth.

“I was fascinated walking through the streets of New York with this kid and seeing the city through the kid’s eyes,” she recalls.

But, as well as the money of Wall Street, smart apartment blocks, diners and glitzy nightclubs, New York also has an “underbelly”, the desperate lives of the homeless or “mole people” living underground.

“I tend to draw on a lot of photographic imagery,” says Morgan, who looked at reams of street photography while writing *Eric*. “It really chimed with my memories of being in 1980s New York – there was the dirt and the grime and yet also this weird compelling, captivating, tantalising glamour.” ■

***Eric* launches on Netflix on 30 May.**



Netflix

## Making Eric and his metropolis

*Eric* is as New York as pastrami on rye, but it was largely shot in Budapest on a New York backlot built for Guillermo del Toro’s 2008 movie *Hellboy II*.

“There are lots of beautiful, retro-feeling buildings, which we completely overhauled – the backlot was a crumbling mess when we arrived and had barely been touched for 16 years,” says director Lucy Forbes, talking to *Television* from Belgrade, where she is shooting an ad campaign.

The drama’s key locations – the Lux nightclub, *Good Day Sunshine* studio and the underground world of New York’s homeless ‘mole people’ – were all in Budapest, with the latter recreated in the city’s extensive beer tunnels.

A month’s filming in New York, after four in Budapest, allowed the production to add the missing Big Apple locations.

*Eric* is set in the mid-1980s, but the look is as much *Taxi Driver*, the quintessential 1970s New York film. ‘Sometimes, people can go too 1980s. When you go from 1979 to 1980, that 1970s influence doesn’t just go – it doesn’t become all neon and big hair overnight,’ says Forbes, who wanted to ‘bleed the 1970s and 1980s together’ in the series.

Her research focused on photos and documentaries, rather than films, *Taxi Driver* aside.

‘I feel like I’ve looked at every single photograph taken in 1980s New York,’ she says. A key documentary was Marc Singer’s multi-award-winning *Dark Days* from 2000, about homeless people living in the city’s train tunnels.

The subterranean hell of the homeless is at one extreme of *Eric*; the feelgood puppet world of *Good Day Sunshine* at the other. ‘There was one photograph I found of a subway platform with a big rusty train, covered in graffiti. Inside, there’s a man with these brightly coloured balloons – for me, that was the show. Inside that subway train was *Good Day Sunshine* and New York is rotting around it,’ says Forbes.

Becky Johnson and Paul Vincett from *Stitches* and *Glue*, which also created creatures for *Stranger Things* and *The Last of Us*, designed and built the puppets and the life-size Eric, who was operated by Olly Taylor.

Raymond Carr, an expert in *Muppet*-style puppetry, taught the actors how to operate the puppets in best 1980s fashion.

‘The puppet side was probably the most creatively challenging thing I’ve ever done, working out what the show was and how it looked,’ says Forbes. ‘And I am a child of the 1980s, so it was wildly exciting – I loved it.’



Bridgerton, 2024

# Roll over Jane Austen and tell Dickens the news!

**H**istory can be measured by recurrent events, such as the Olympics and American presidential elections that come around every four years. Both, as it happens, take place again this year.

Television drama is less regularly repetitive, but adaptations of Dickens's *Great Expectations* were screened by the BBC in 1959, 1967, 1981, 2011 and 2023. The lengthier interval either side of the millennium was filled by major film versions that became fixtures in the TV schedules.

The screen visibility of Dickens's 1861 novel is almost matched by Jane Austen's 1813 *Pride and Prejudice*, televised by the BBC in 1952, 1958, 1967, 1980 and 1995. In the last of these

**Mark Lawson** explains why TV period drama is leaving traditional versions of literary classics on the shelf

adaptations, Colin Firth's Mr Darcy lake-dipped in a shirt that, by now dry, sold for \$32,000 at an auction in March this year. A 2005 big-screen adaptation of the novel has also become familiar in TV listings.

By the previous rhythm, another *Pride and Prejudice* would be due on the BBC about now.

But there is no sign of one. And, while yet another *Great Expectations* turned up on cue last year, it marked

not an historical continuation but a departure.

Abandoning the long tradition of television adaptations of Dickens faithful enough to the text that students of English Literature could safely use them as crammer aids – acted by RSC stalwarts with authentic period bonnets and side-whiskers – the recent *Great Expectations* had scripts by *Peaky Blinders* creator Steven Knight.

These turned Miss Havisham into an opium addict who gets off on conducting blindfold erotic play between Pip and Estella (“Teach him sex!”), while, elsewhere in Gravesend, Sara Gargery snarls, “Summon the beast within me!”, before giving Mr Pumblechook an S&M seeing-to with a strap. Any A-level students who use Knight's six-parter as a *Coles Notes* with



‘CONTEMPORARY  
PERIOD PIECES...  
HAVE THE  
ADVANTAGE  
OF SEEMING  
SIMULTANEOUSLY  
ANCIENT AND  
MODERN’



Great Expectations, 2023

BBC

in 2022; the director has tried to revive the project with streamers but failed.

If the classic literary serial is dead, the autopsy will examine various contributing causes. First, beyond the enjoyment and education they cumulatively gave to hundreds of millions of viewers, these shows served a vital political purpose in British TV. There has been much debate about what “public service broadcasting” means, but for culture ministers and backbenchers across many decades a recognisable definition was exam set texts expensively filmed.

The result was that the BBC and ITV tended to transmit a period classic at times when the BBC licence fee or ITV licences (when commercial networks served a fixed term) were under heavy governmental or regulatory scrutiny.

It feels less than coincidental – and seems strategically very sensible – that the lavish 1980 and 1995 versions of *Pride and Prejudice* landed in the run-ups to the crucial BBC Charter renewals of 1981 and 1997, moments when the corporation suffered extreme prejudice from Conservative politicians about its cause for pride.

Equally, ITV’s high-profile adaptation of *Jeeves and Wooster* by PG Wodehouse (a totemic writer for older male Tories) in 1990 can be seen as insurance against what turned out to be a brutal 1991 round of ITV regional franchise renewals during the transition from Margaret Thatcher to John Major.

While the Wodehouse may have helped Granada stay on air, even an Austen and Dickens at 9:00pm every night would not have balanced out Thatcherite anger at Thames’s 1988 documentary *Death on the Rock*, about an anti-terrorist operation in Gibraltar. The London licensee duly lost its week-day franchise. ▶

convenient fast-forward facility are likely to fail the exam.

Personally, I was sympathetic to Knight’s approach. With so many versions in existence, the BBC’s options were either to not make another *Great Expectations* (my preference) or to aim for originality. But, overall, the series received a critical lashing that made the Pumblechook flagellation look like a pat on the bum.

The pundits queuing to joke that this *Great Expectations* disproved the title for them seems – when combined with the fact that it is now almost 30 years since the BBC made a *Pride and Prejudice* – to suggest a crisis, or at least transition, in the genre of literary costume drama. This sense was confirmed by the fate of a recent planned BBC-HBO remake of Evelyn Waugh’s

*Brideshead Revisited*, which, in its 1981 11-part ITV version, remains a gold standard for televised classics.

Perhaps regretting ITV’s triumph in what had previously been its own arena, BBC Films made a version in 2008 that was co-scripted by Andrew Davies.

Davies, the unofficial national classic adapter laureate, is known for making classic books box-fresh, including George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1994), the wet-top Firth *Pride and Prejudice* and multiple BBC Dickens series, among them *Bleak House* (2005) and *Little Dorrit* (2008).

The third major TV *Brideshead* was hoping to sign Cate Blanchett and Ralph Fiennes. Mooted by BBC Studios in 2020, as part of a “first look” deal with the Waugh estate, it was shelved

► The cost of period drama is punishingly high, because of large casts, fancy clothes and dressing old market towns to remove phone masts and chippies. The projected \$110m budget of the “third” *Brideshead Revisited* was the major reason that BBC-HBO pulled out.

When filmed literature could swing legislators and regulators, the cost was justified as an investment in survival. But, these days, ITV is a permanent service, while it seems unlikely that the Tory right would feel more warmly towards the BBC if, during any of the five Conservative-led administrations in the last decade and a half, it had announced a raft of Dickens, Austen and Anthony Trollope dramas.

Nor would that strategy necessarily have been more effective with Labour or the Lib Dems because of a general political trend towards anti-elitism and social and racial diversity.

The great old books tend to have posh and white (Austen) or broader but equally white (Dickens) characters. A solution, which I support, is to cast the classics diversely, but attempts to do so bring complaints of inauthenticity from traditionalists.



*Sanditon*, 2019

ITV

How much easier, then, to go off-book and create shows such as Netflix’s *Bridgerton*, which, with the approval of the source books’ author, Julia Quinn, racially reimagines Regency England; *Mary & George*, Sky Atlantic’s 17th century Royal romp, based on a non-fiction book and exploring gay interstices of British



*Mary & George*, 2024

Sky

history; or Prime Video’s *Saltburn*, which feels like a sexy modernisation of *Brideshead Revisited*.

Strikingly, Davies’s most recent TV classic was *Sanditon*, which started partially free-standing – based on Austen’s unfinished 1817 novel – and became entirely so, with Davies storylining 19 of the 20 episodes across three series.

turbing the earth above their graves.

Another reason for the reduction in the flow of “boxed” books is the rise of the TV box set, especially, in this case, of streamed back-catalogue material. The 1995 *Pride and Prejudice* was made because the 1980 version looked technically dated. Had the BBC simply shown it again, there would have been newspaper bleats about repeats.

Now, though, the concept of repeating has blurred, through the vast available digital archive, into re-running or rediscovering. *Death Comes to Pemberley*, a 2013 BBC adaptation of PD James’s crime fiction continuation of *Pride and Prejudice*, has found a second audience this year on Amazon Prime. When reshowed last year, the then-28-year-old “wet shirt” *Pride and Prejudice* made the streamer’s UK drama top 10.

Reviewers and consumers of the 1989 ITV and 2011 BBC *Great Expectations* measured them against a memory of their predecessors. Last year, Knight’s detractors were able to watch the earlier versions on iPlayer or elsewhere for ammunition against the new show.

Period TV drama is changing because TV drama no longer stays in its period and politicians are less enchanted by the cultural past. *Bridgerton* and others suggest that writing new classics is the sense and, indeed, sensibility of the future. ■

**Mark Lawson is a writer and broadcaster who covers culture for The Guardian and Radio Times.**





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A close-up portrait of Polly Hill, a woman with short, dark, wavy hair and blue eyes. She is wearing a dark blue button-down shirt and a necklace with a large white circular pendant. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with greenery.

# The woman with the Midas touch

**‘M**y dad always told me you can change the world with drama, particularly new writing, and I would reply: ‘You can’t.’”

Polly Hill speaks fondly of her father, the veteran actor Dave Hill, whose long list of stage, film and TV credits testifies to his half-century in the business, and who used to take his teenage daughter weekly to the theatre for inspiration. “Then *Mr Bates* came along. My dad’s nearly 80 now, and he took delight in saying: ‘See, I told you.’”

He wasn’t wrong. As ITV’s Head of Drama, Hill steered *Mr Bates vs the Post Office* to become one of the highest-rated and most powerful dramas of the decade. The series, including the documentary, was watched by more than 14.8 million people. The programme finally brought the scandal of the faulty

## Caroline Frost talks to ITV Head of Drama Polly Hill, whose career hit a new high with the success of *Mr Bates vs the Post Office*

Horizon software to the attention of the public and will reinforce demands to compensate the hundreds of sub-postmasters unjustly accused of theft – and punish those responsible.

“*Mr Bates* is one of the most incredible, emotional moments of my career,” Hill says, beaming. “What has been so moving is not just that it has created so much proper change, but also the response of everyone in this industry. People have emailed me to say: ‘We’re

all so proud, and we stand with you.’”

“The power of drama is that it can put you in someone else’s shoes and tell this David and Goliath story of taking on powerful institutions. But you couldn’t have predicted it would be this huge. It has been a career highlight I am sure I will never see again.”

Hill has lived in a world of drama for as long as she can remember, hovering up TV as a child and “just consuming stories”. She says she learned a lot more on those weekly theatre trips than she did studying for a drama degree, and realised she wanted to immerse herself in scripts, just not as a writer.

After knocking on doors, she got her first break as a script reader for the veteran producer Verity Lambert – “an amazing woman” – and soon became a script editor on *EastEnders*.

Hill credits writer Tony Jordan with





showing her the value of dialogue and respecting her input even then on how young people really talk.

What was the biggest lesson from those days? “My job is to commission shows I think the audience will want to watch and to ask the questions that I think will make a difference from the audience’s point of view.”

After brief stints at ITV and Channel 4 – “there was no plan, I was just going wherever the script editor jobs were taking me” – in 2005, Hill found herself back at the BBC in her first proper commissioning role. Initially, she looked after independent drama, later replacing Ben Stephenson as the Controller of Drama Commissioning.

“If you’re going to be a commissioner, you need to have script-edited, produced and worked across lots of places,” she reflects. “You can’t be much help to people if you don’t

understand the process of making a drama.”

Her titles from that era – including *The Night Manager*, *Poldark*, *The Missing*, *Death in Paradise* and *The Last Kingdom* – are proof of her sure hand. While she credits such writing talents as Hugo Blick on *The Honourable Woman* and Peter Straughan on *Wolf Hall*, she also recognises: “It doesn’t happen by chance. You open doors for a channel and you talk to writers, producers and directors about where you want to go, but without being prescriptive.

“It’s hard when you have two channels and such a huge range of drama to distil it into one perfect thing. At the BBC, everyone pays for it, therefore everyone should be watching it – but, if it’s all about big hits, then what’s unique about the BBC? It couldn’t just be one thing.”

Hill surprised industry observers

when, in 2016, only a year after getting the top drama job at the BBC, she was poached by ITV content supremo Kevin Lygo. She says she was ready for the commercial challenge: “Looking at ITV, it felt a bit lost at the time. I’d grown up on those great ITV dramas such as *Hillsborough* and *Cracker* so, when Kevin came to me, I recognised there was a job to do that I knew, and it excited me.

“People were asking, ‘Can you turn that round again?’ and I thought: ‘Well, yes.’ I was also interested to do the job away from the BBC to see if there was a difference.”

What’s the answer? “There both is, and there isn’t.” The main thrust of ITV, she explains, is trying to entertain the nation: “You are trying to bring content that people want to watch in big numbers. I didn’t realise when I moved just how the landscape and audiences ▶



Archie  
ITV

► would change, and how hard that was going to be.”

A string of titles, including *Trigger Point*, *Liar*, *Quiz*, *Manhunt* and *Karen Pirie*, tell the story of Hill’s ITV’s success, and then along came *Mr Bates vs the Post Office*.

Gwyneth Hughes, who wrote the script for the ground-shifting four-parter, first worked with Hill in 2005 on the Grierson Award-winning *Cherished*, and subsequently on *Vanity Fair*, *Tom Jones* and *Honour*.

Hughes says: “She jumped at the *Post Office* story and bit its hand off. It was Polly who suggested that the producer ask me to write it, and she greenlit it very quickly.” Hughes says the fact that it is quite a small team at ITV gives Hill the freedom to make speedy decisions.

Hill sees *Mr Bates* as a natural successor to ITV’s great dramas of the past: “We’ve always been about the real and the rooted. The storytelling needs to put you in a position where you say: ‘What would I do in that situation?’ We’ve also had a long history of brilliant factual drama.”

Jeff Pope, who heads ITV Productions’ Factual Drama, has worked with Hill on projects including *Little Boy Blue* and the recent Cary Grant biopic, *Archie*, but he says all this success counts for nothing when taking her an idea: “The bar is still high. She’ll take my call, but she’s going to ask questions, reserve the right to say it won’t work for the channel. It forces me and others pitching to go to her with our best work. That’s what everyone wants really.”

Nicola Shindler, who now runs Quay Street Productions, is another

frequent collaborator, whose most recent Hill commission was *After the Flood*. She says: “You’re never tried and tested, you always have to work for it. When it’s a no, it’s hard to hear it, but Polly has to make a decision, and she’s not scared of doing that.”

How has their relationship evolved over the years? “We’ve both become more confident in our roles. She’s not afraid of giving notes, but she lets you do your job. She’s really good at

“Money,” says Harries immediately. “She can be caught between wanting us to make something for her, but only having the money for four parts, when I need to make six to satisfy the American co-producer.”

“Prices are astronomical,” says Pope. “Plus people are more likely to watch dramas as box sets now, so it’s difficult to work out how something is doing.”

“[Hill] has to make shows that feel unmissable, not six months later, but right now,” is how Shindler sees it, something Hill is equally aware of. She says her biggest challenge is “getting the audience”.

Hill takes a rare look back: “When I first started, if you made a good show, people gave it a go. And if they choose not to stay, fine. But often, now, you make a really good show and people just miss it, and that’s heartbreaking.”

Not *Mr Bates*, though, the success of which keeps Hill optimistic not just for her own job – “I love it and want to continue doing it” – but for linear broadcasting per se.

“I think a show like that can only have the impact it did if it’s on ITV or BBC. So, having had years and years of the power of streamers, it’s given



The Night Manager  
BBC

knowing when she needs to step in and when she doesn’t. That’s a skill.”

Left Bank Picture’s Andy Harries, who recently produced *Without Sin* for ITV, is similarly appreciative of Hill’s direct approach: “Recently, I emailed her a script on a Monday morning, and she read it on the Tube and called me back two hours later.”

What are Hill’s biggest challenges?

back belief in the power of terrestrial broadcasting.”

After such a colossal hit, but with money tight and competition fierce, can she continue on her winning streak? Everyone I’ve spoken to thinks so, including Harries, who sums up Hill’s formula for success: “There is no exact science. It’s about taste, and she has good taste.” ■



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# OUR FRIEND IN WALES



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## Edward Russell gives an impromptu masterclass in the art of networking

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It doesn't matter where we are in our career, we never stop networking. I was with a colleague at the RTS Programme Awards in March. As we watched Charlotte Moore presenting the Outstanding Achievement Award to Stephen Lambert, we mused how, irrespective of Studio Lambert's run of successes with shows such as *The Traitors*, *Squid Game: The Challenge* and *Boarders*, even someone at that level is still probably having conversations about the next commission or series they're working on.

It's been a tough time all round in our industry. In Wales, despite a strong foothold in drama, sport and, of course, Welsh-language programmes, a lot of people have had to put time into finding their next job.

This struck me forcefully a few weeks after the RTS Programme Awards. I was at our own RTS centre awards event in Cardiff, where we combine industry and student categories (see report on page 30). The event offers great networking opportunities.

I'd spotted one of the students on her own, looking a little lost, so I asked her if she was OK. Her name was Fi and she was from one of the universities in North Wales. She was disappointed not to have won and wasn't sure how she was going to establish a career in television.

I told her that even a nomination from the RTS would be well regarded and she should use this opportunity

to chat with some of the people in the room. "You'll need to get used to it," I said. "Networking, relationship-building – it's as much a part of the job as making the shows themselves."

The idea of this terrified her, she told me. She felt that people were there to have a good time. Well, it's true that there's a bit of a gear shift once the wine starts to flow. I walked her up to the mezzanine, so that we could look at the crowd.

I pointed out a few folk who could be good contacts, but I could see she wasn't convinced that she'd know what to say. "If it's any help, I feel the same. The difference is, I've learned that it's exactly what everyone else in the room is doing right now."

I pointed out an actor (who I'm sure you'd know) chatting with the folk

from *Doctor Who*. As he laughed a little too enthusiastically at one of Russell T Davies's jokes, I smirked. "I bet he's angling to play the next Doctor," I said. "Oh, no," said Fi. "I think he'd be a much better baddie!"

Next, we saw a famous presenter chatting to someone Fi didn't recognise. "He makes sports documentaries," I said, pondering if our frontman – best known for consumer shows – was hoping to move in a new direction.

"Maybe it's the other way round?," said Fi. "Perhaps the producer is suggesting a programme about the cost of replica football jerseys?"

Stressing the importance of not missing out on a good opportunity, and feeling a little like Jacob Marley, I indicated a noisy group of students, laughing and joking and taking selfies holding their newly acquired trophy. "They might have won, but why aren't they making the most of the evening?" I inquired. "That lady in the green dress with her back to them – she's a commissioner in digital. I know she's always looking for new content, especially in the category they won."

"Well, that's the category I missed out in," Fi replied. And then, the penny dropping, she turned to me and whispered a thank you before heading straight over to that commissioner and starting up a conversation. I felt quite proud. I think she'll go a long way. ■

**Edward Russell is Chair of RTS Cymru Wales.**



The Tattooist of Auschwitz

Sky

# They found love in a hopeless place

**T**his is a love story,” says protagonist Lali Sokolov in a scene when he begins to tell writer Heather Morris about his time in Auschwitz, the Nazi concentration camp and extermination centre where he met his future wife, Gita Furman.

Their unlikely romance distinguishes *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, based on Morris’s best-selling novel, itself based on real events, from other recent films inspired by the Holocaust. These are Oscar-winner Jonathan Glazer’s *The Zone of Interest*, also set in Auschwitz, and *One Life*, about Nicholas Winton, who helped Jewish children flee from Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia shortly before the Second World War.

At an RTS screening and Q&A in central London, director Tali Shalom-Ezer (*Princess, My Days of Mercy*) told the host, film critic Jason Solomons, that the team was apprehensive about introducing a joyful element to such a

*Adapting The Tattooist of Auschwitz for TV proved challenging for all concerned, discovers the RTS*

harrowing situation. But “the real Lali and Gita showed bravery by refusing to be dehumanised, so we tried to be brave about portraying their gentle and intimate connection within this context,” she said.

*The Tattooist of Auschwitz* is a six-part series for Sky in the UK (where it is being shown on Sky Atlantic and Now), and Peacock in the US.

It has been produced in association with Sky Studios by Synchronicity Films (*The Cry, Only You*), which bought the TV rights to the book shortly after its publication in 2018.

The book has sold more than

12 million copies. Its popularity provides a much-needed reminder of the Holocaust at this critical time, Synchronicity’s Claire Mundell told the RTS audience. “When we were looking at optioning the book, my research showed that there was almost no awareness of Auschwitz and the Holocaust among young people, particularly in the UK and the US.

“Yet, here was this book that people were reading and buying and sharing – people who wouldn’t usually be drawn to a book about the Holocaust. Hopefully, through the medium of mainstream drama, we can take this story to a wider audience.”

Using the same dramatic technique as *One Life*, Sokolov’s story is told in two timelines. One takes place in Melbourne in 2003, when an older Sokolov (played by the acting legend Harvey Kietel) recounts his memories to Morris (*Yellowjackets*’ Melanie Lynskey). The other timeline is during the Second World War, when the young



Sokolov (Jonah Hauer-King) is sent to Auschwitz and is assigned the job of tattooing his fellow captives with their identification numbers. When he meets new inmate Gita (Anna Próchniak), he instantly falls in love.

“Jacquelin Perske, our head writer and fellow executive producer, was inspired by the foreword in the book, where

learn more about its horrors. Historical and cultural consultant Naomi Gryn came on board to ensure the series was historically accurate.

But screen stories that attempt to convey the horror of the Holocaust can only tell us so much, Mundell told the RTS: “It’s a television drama, so we can never truly portray what hap-

soundtrack to match the onscreen emotional rollercoaster. “As the series develops, it just grows and it’s incredible,” said Mundell. “In every episode, there’s a different take on the themes and there are some amazing musical surprises coming up”

For the lead Auschwitz actors – Próchniak, Hauer-King and Jonas Nay, who portrays Stefan Baretzki, an SS guard – the responsibility of playing these parts weighed heavily.

Hauer-King explained the effect of shaving his head: “I was naive about it. I thought shaving my head would be the easy part of getting into character. But, because it’s about taking someone’s identity and dehumanising them, it was poignant,” he said.

The transformation was particularly difficult for German-born Nay as he put on his SS uniform every day. It “was a weight I sometimes couldn’t bear. It was horrible. The physical reaction was panic.”

He was the only SS guard in a scene full of cold, shivering extras wearing prison uniforms, among them a painfully thin Hauer-King. “Sometimes it was hard for me to get out of the state of panic and to get into acting,” said Nay. “But we all felt a responsibility to tell the story that Lali would have wanted us to tell. Playing SS guard Stefan Baretzki was a necessary part of that.”

Próchniak, who had to lose weight for the role, felt the added pressure of playing a character based on a real person. “It’s very scary, exposing, terrifying for an actor,” she said. “I used to be a dancer, and I believe that our bodies are much smarter than our minds. I cannot imagine what she’s been through, so believing that we can connect to emotions through our bodies was a starting point for me.”

Solomons’ final questions concerned how the show had altered the panellists’ view of love. Shalom-Ezer answered unequivocally: “I believe in love. You will have to watch all the episodes and then tell me if you believe in it or not, but it was certainly my goal to make people believe in love.” ■

**Report by Shilpa Ganatra. ‘Screening and Q&A with the team behind Sky Original The Tattooist of Auschwitz’ was an RTS National Event held on 10 April. The Tattooist of Auschwitz launched on Sky Atlantic and Now on 2 May.**



From left: Jonah Hauer-King, director Tali Shalom-Ezer, producer Claire Mundell, host Jason Solomons, Melanie Lynskey, Anna Próchniak and Jonas Nay

Paul HampartSoumian

Heather Morris speaks very clearly about her memories of meeting Lali for the first time,” said Mundell. “That provided a door through which we could tell the story in two timeframes. It also enables the audience to have an access point: Heather is the everywoman.”

The narrative switches poignantly between the two timelines. Dialogue in the Auschwitz timeline points to a modern-day unreliable narrator who is telling a slightly skewed version of events. In Melbourne, Sokolov is haunted by the figures of the past who appear as if ghosts, revealing darker memories than those he shares with Morris.

“That is a conscious choice to try to express the nature of trauma, memory and shame – because, ultimately, he was carrying misplaced shame as an 86-year-old man,” said Mundell.

The responsibility of telling this important story weighed on the cast and creatives. Once the creative team was assembled, Synchronicity arranged for a visit to Auschwitz to

pened there. All we can do is provide a platform for people to be moved, engaged and, hopefully, motivated to find out more.”

Filmed on the outskirts of Bratislava in a recreated Auschwitz, the production was smooth-running thanks to director Shalom-Ezer’s clear vision, said Lynskey: “She’s like a surgeon. Her notes are so precise and so specific, you can’t not take them. The next take would be what she wanted because her notes are that good.”

Hans Zimmer, whose credits include *Dune* and *Gladiator*, co-wrote the score. Unusually, he approached Synchronicity rather than the other way round. An amused Mundell said: “After he’d done an incredible pitch, he said, ‘Guys, let’s be straight here, I really want this show. Can you please trust us to do the music for it?’ I was like: ‘I’ll think about it and call you tomorrow.’”

Zimmer and two of his colleagues at Bleeding Fingers Music, Kara Talve and Russell Emanuel, created a



Channel 4

# Next generation of writers in peril

**C**risis? What crisis?" This was the 1979 tabloid headline that encapsulated the Callaghan Government's apparent blissful ignorance of the proliferating emergencies surging towards it.

Shortly afterwards, James Callaghan was ousted and Margaret Thatcher was elected. Then followed the long and bitter miners' strike. And we all know the consequences of that.

"What's happening now is an existential-level crisis for the industry. Like what happened to the miners in the 1980s." This is writer Phil Ralph (*Doctors*, *Einstein and the Bomb*), following the decision to axe BBC One's daytime mainstay *Doctors*.

Hyperbole? Yet it comes on the back of the cancellation of *Holby City* and the "episodectomy" at *Casualty*, reducing it from a year-round continuing drama to 36 episodes a year. Add in the impact of Channel 4 soap *Hollyoaks*

New TV writers face a bleak future as the number of opportunities falls. **Carole Solazzo** hears some solutions

dropping from five to three episodes a week and the future for many UK writers may, indeed, look bleak.

All this is at a time when, according to Cameron Roach, former Director of Drama at Sky, now executive producer at Rope Ladder Fiction (*Waterloo Road*): "The broadcast landscape is shifting as well."

With its mix of long-running storylines and stories-of-the-day, *Doctors* was developed to train early-career writers. They would then move on to bigger series, some eventually creating their own shows.

We are blessed with some big-name

writers at the top of their game, but Sally Wainwright, Russell T Davies and their like won't go on for ever. If they pack their bags or – heaven forbid – pop their clogs, who will replace them? It is a pressing question, because early to mid-career writers have had the career ladder kicked cleanly out from beneath them.

With BBC Writers, Roach runs shadow schemes "for a number of new writers". His aim, he says, is "to build a careful long-term pathway with the writer". He admits: "That can be frustrating because you're not immediately winning a commission." But "going from no credits to writing for a show is a big jump".

Playwright Stef Smith credits BBC Writers with helping her get a foot on the first rung of the TV ladder. She participated in a scheme in which "you're teamed up with an independent company and mentored through writing an hour's worth of television".

After jumping through more hoops,



she was commissioned by BBC Scotland to write *Float*, a touching sapphic romcom told in six 10-minute chunks, which was followed by a green light for series 2. Although Smith says she has “cheerleaders at BBC Scotland, and I feel like their door is open to conversations about future work”, she is returning to the theatre for now.

Writer and former Chair of the Writers’ Guild of Great Britain Lisa Holdsworth (*Call the Midwife*, upcoming Channel 4 drama *Dance School*) says she was championed early in her career by a great script editor who went on to produce, taking Holdsworth with her.

Schemes have become “the lazy way out”, says Holdsworth, who is also a former Chair of RTS Yorkshire. “We need black writers, we’ll run a scheme; we need women writers, run a scheme.’ Instead of looking around and asking: ‘Who’s a really good black writer whose work we know?’” Although the latter could be interpreted as “cronyism”, she laments the almost universal lack of continuing support for writers following participation in schemes.

And there is another – unacceptable – consequence, she warns: “Writers can be seen as ‘diversity hires’. Not there on their own merit. We’ve had writers feed back to the Guild that they’ve experienced bullying.

“And now seasoned writers who have written 50 episodes of *Doctors* or 10 episodes of *Holby* are expected to join schemes,” she laments. “Despicable. You’ve worked with these writers. They’ve been your colleagues. Now you’re treating them like YTS kids.” (For younger readers, the Youth Training Scheme was notorious in the 1980s as a low-cost ploy for massaging unemployment statistics.)

Both Holdsworth and Ralph agree that the one scheme that was sustainable was the BBC Writers’ Academy, run by soap guru John Yorke. Over months, writers were trained, mentored and properly commissioned to write for all four BBC continuing dramas: *Doctors*, *Casualty*, *Holby City* and *EastEnders*.

From the Academy came writers such as Daisy Coulam, showrunner of *Grantchester*, Tahsin Guner, co-creator of international success *Father Brown*, and Jude Tindall, creator of its spin-off, *Sister Boniface*, in their turn generating opportunities.

In his recent Broadcasting Press Guild Lifetime Achievement Award acceptance speech, Andy Harries, Chief Executive of Left Bank Pictures, sang the praises of Granada, “where groundbreaking shows such as *Prime Suspect*, *Cracker* and *Coronation Street* were created”. It was no accident that Wainwright, Davies and, to some extent, Jimmy McGovern started off there.

McGovern’s *Cracker* provided Paul Abbott with his first notable gig. In turn, Abbott commissioned Danny Brocklehurst (*Brassic*, *Ten Pound Poms*) to write on *Clocking Off*.



While at Granada, Abbott and Kay Mellor (*The Syndicate*) created *Children’s Ward*. Later, Mellor commissioned Holdsworth to write on *Fat Friends*.

However, the old Granada is long-gone, and the BBC, in Ralph’s words, “has been forced to turn its own in-house production into an indie... And if it doesn’t make a profit, the money that comes from the BBC is under threat.”

Roach agrees, and insists: “Talent needs support from entities that aren’t solely driven by profit. That is why we have to value organisations such as the BBC – because funding [to support newer talent] can only come from publicly supported organisations.”

With this yawning gap in opportunities for early and mid-career writers and the contraction in commissioning of the British dramas on which they traditionally hone their skills, will the fears Harries expressed in his speech come to pass? He asked: “Are we in danger of our business ending up as

a first-class, top-end service industry to the US?”

Roach warns: “As an industry, we need to put our collective thinking caps on. We have to remember that *Doctors* is a 30-year-old proposition. People are watching different content in different spaces.”

This is true. The same teens who happily sit in front of the family TV and stream 11 seasons of *The Walking Dead* also scroll through TikTok comedy shorts for 10 minutes while they are waiting for their appointment for the lab-coated torturer to tighten their braces.

Ralph, however, remains positive: “We’re creative people. The audience still wants stories, so we need to get together and do some long-term thinking about investing in the industry and giving some of the power to the creatives.

“Currently, the power is located in the executives and some of the very big-name writers. All these people work incredibly hard, but if they could put some of their energies into creating story-of-the-day shows, that would rebuild the career ladder. Not just for writers, but for crew and actors, too.”

Exactly what McGovern did at LA Productions with the anthology show *Moving On*. Until *Moving On* was axed, as well.

Holdsworth says: “Potentially, we need to put pressure on companies to create new opportunities to bring in writers. Not 18-year-olds,” she emphasises, but “writers coming back to their careers after a break, and fresh voices from across the spectrum. And all achieved by people running their own writers’ rooms.

“So many shows up to now have been wholly authored. These rooms would include writers there to write one episode and have a mix of newer voices and old hands. It’s about nurturing talent, and writers are best nurtured by other writers.”

Back to Harries, who suggested “extending the 40% tax relief introduced in the last budget for British movies to single films and limited TV series that are specifically British”.

Why couldn’t this be extended one step to help fund the kind of initiative Ralph and Holdsworth are talking about? And thereby avert the impending crisis? ■

**Steve Clarke**  
celebrates the life and  
achievements of one  
of the true legends of  
British broadcasting,  
who has died aged 98

**T**o have had one BBC career as distinguished as that of Sir Paul Fox would have been remarkable – Editor of *Grandstand*, Editor of *Panorama* and one of the most successful Controllers of BBC One ever (1967–73), who launched shows such as *Dad’s Army*, *The Generation Game*, *The Two Ronnies* and *Parkinson*. But to have had two – he left Television Centre in 1973 to put Yorkshire Television on the map, but returned in 1988 to become Managing Director of BBC Television – was, by any standards, an extraordinary achievement.

“Few people have had such a broad and lasting impact on the TV landscape, commissioning shows that audiences have loved for decades and still love,” BBC Director-General Tim Davie said. “He was one of the best TV executives from a golden era in television. He will be hugely missed.”

Paul was Chair of the RTS from 1985 to 1992.

That Paul had arrived in England as a refugee from Nazi Germany – having been put on the first Kindertransport as a 13-year-old by his aunt and uncle – and later served in the Second World War as a paratrooper made his life more incredible still.

“He rarely talked about that experience but, in later years, he did a little bit,” recalled Will Wyatt, who worked closely with Paul at the BBC. “He used to say: ‘I left Germany aged 13 as a Kindertransport and returned by parachute over the Rhine when I was 18.’”

Both his parents died before he was 15. His father killed himself when Paul was six; his mother was a victim of the Holocaust. Paul’s son, Jeremy, put it like this: “It always amazed us that he never talked about this but that’s because he never thought of himself as a Holocaust survivor.”

Paul was educated at Bournemouth Grammar School. He left his foster



Sir Paul Fox

# Paul Fox: TV titan

family when he was 16 to go to London to find a job and live in a boys’ hostel.

At 18, he joined the Parachute Regiment and was wounded in action – shot in the arm and leg while making a jump – with the 6th Airborne Division after the 1944 Rhine crossing.

His father had been a doctor but, on being demobbed, Paul went into

journalism; he wrote more than 100 letters to newspapers, and his first job was as a reporter on the *Kentish Times*. He moved to *The People* and then worked in film at Pathé News in 1947.

On a weekend trip to a dance hall in London, he met his future wife, Betty, so he decided to stay in the capital.

He began his career at the BBC in



1950, doing holiday relief as a writer-producer on *Television Newsreel*, working at Alexandra Palace in north London. When, two years later, King George VI died unexpectedly, aged 56, the BBC was unprepared for the monarch's death, so no obituary had been produced.

It was therefore decided to close down the Television Service, ostensibly out of respect for the dead King, but in fact to buy time to produce the obituary. Paul and a colleague worked through the night on an hour-long obituary, duly broadcast when the Television Service reopened the following evening.

"I remember Norman Collins, then Controller of BBC Television, came to look at it and said: 'You have done a splendid job,'" Paul liked to recall. Always highly competitive, he relished the challenge of working against the clock to achieve outstanding results.

At the time, television was in its infancy and broadcast only during the afternoons and evenings to a limited number of homes in London and Birmingham. Paul would be one of its pioneers.

Even then, he used his considerable physical presence to help achieve his professional objectives; it was not unknown for him to bar the door to the editing suite with his body so that no one else could come in until the programme was completed to his satisfaction. Not for nothing was he known as "the rhino".

"He was a tall man with a large head and a commanding presence who let you know what he thought about things," said Wyatt, who added that, in addition to being combative, Paul was capable of great acts of kindness to colleagues and friends.

Sport was a passion, particularly Arsenal Football Club and horse racing. "He once confessed to me that he'd never been horse racing except in a box," remembered Wyatt. In the 1950s, Paul edited TV's first magazine programme, *Sportsview*, and invented Sports Personality of the Year.

Paul's lack of a university education did not hold him back at the BBC, then as now, run largely by Oxbridge graduates. His drive, talent and sheer force of personality stamped itself on an organisation still struggling to come to

terms with the creative opportunities presented by television and the challenge of ITV.

Wyatt recalled: "The BBC was still reeling from the impact of ITV, which launched in 1955. A shock went through the system, which was still being felt years later, because the audience figures went from 100% down to about 25% within a matter of months."

Paul was one of the executives who helped transform the fortunes of BBC



Sir Paul Fox  
invented  
Television  
Sports  
Personality  
of the Year

Television. He was fortunate to work alongside the visionary Director-General Hugh Greene. "It is worth saying that, when Hugh Greene arrived as DG, the figures were 28% BBC, 72% ITV. That was in 1961," Paul told the RTS in 2012. "A year later, they were 52% to 48%. In other words, the BBC got the majority."

Wyatt said: "Paul was a decisive and competitive scheduler and commissioner. There were only two channels and he wanted to win."

As well as entertainment hits such as *The Generation Game*, presented by Bruce Forsyth and now transmitted in colour, BBC One broadcast *Match of the Day* football, tennis from Wimbledon and extensive coverage of the 1972 Olympics from Munich. However, the Apollo 11 moon landing of 1969 was

only broadcast in black and white.

In 1973, Paul jumped ship to join Yorkshire Television as Director of Programmes, doubling his BBC salary overnight. He thought the BBC would never appoint a Jewish man Director-General. "There are only three jobs worth having in the BBC: Editor of *Panorama*, Controller of BBC One and Director-General. I have had the first two and I would never have got the third," he said not long after joining Yorkshire.

He would remain at the Leeds-based ITV company until 1988, rising to become Managing Director and turning the station into one of the ITV network's powerhouses. "Paul ensured that Yorkshire punched above its weight, whether it was in current affairs, science programmes or comedy and drama," recalled David Lowen, the RTS's former Honorary Secretary, who worked with Paul as a news executive at YTV. "Because of Paul's presence, we had a bigger say in the ITV network than we were entitled to because of our share of ITV advertising revenue.

"He could win battles around the network controllers' table due to the force of his personality and the bulk of his bearing. Paul ensured that Yorkshire had to be taken seriously."

The award-winning *First Tuesday* current affairs series and the comedies *Rising Damp* and *A Bit of a Do* were all network shows commissioned by YTV.

In 1988, Paul, aged 63, surprised the industry by accepting BBC DG Michael Checkland's offer to return to the corporation as Managing Director of BBC Television, where he would serve as a counterweight to Deputy Director-General John Birt and provide valuable support to the relatively new controllers of BBC One and Two, Jonathan Powell and Alan Yentob, respectively.

As Chair of the RTS, Paul was a key figure in modernising the Society, shifting its focus from engineering to programme and policy issues. Well into his mid-eighties, he continued to contribute to RTS discussions. ■

**Sir Paul Fox, born 27 October 1925, is survived by two sons, Jeremy and Jonathan. His wife, Betty, died in 2009.**

# A step change in TV's depiction of autism?

Steve Clarke reports on innovations in how TV engages with autistic and neurodiverse people

Chris Packham  
in *Inside Our Autistic Minds*

**F**ew recent TV documentaries have made as much impact as *Inside Our Autistic Minds*, the two-part BBC Studios film presented by Chris Packham and made in partnership with the Open University. It picked up its third major award – for Presenter of the Year – at the RTS Programme Awards in March. Previously it had won at the Griersons (taking the Science prize) and the Broadcast Awards (Specialist Factual).

For what was probably the first time ever, TV viewers were given an idea of what it is like to be autistic. In the programme, Packham gently encouraged four neurodiverse people to make a short film that aimed to show how they perceive the world.

These were brave and moving insights into a condition that Packham has dealt with all his life – his 2017 film, *Asperger's and Me*, was a bold autobiographical insight into his experience – and one which autistic people were delighted to see.

Caroline Stevens, CEO of the National Autistic Society, says: “We’ve received an overwhelming response on our social media channels from autistic people and their families who saw their experiences reflected in the programme, but also from viewers who have learnt more about autism through watching it.

“This is why autistic representation on our TV screens is so important to increase understanding of autism.”

The impact of *Inside Our Autistic Minds*

has been considerable – healthcare professionals are using it as part of their teaching and Packham says he can no longer take the train without someone approaching and congratulating him on it.

What is less well known is that the programme employed new production protocols designed to make it easier for autistic people to work in TV. The hope is that these will be shared across the TV industry and encourage others to adopt similar practices.

At the beginning of the production process the crew were trained by Access All Areas, a theatre company that specialises in shows featuring learning-disabled and autistic performers. From talking to two autistic performers at the training, Shiva





Christine McGuinness  
in *Pilgrimage: The Road  
Through North Wales*

we're doing ADHD and dyslexia is because, unfortunately, those neurodiverse conditions haven't yet reached the point of understanding that autism has.

"If you talk to people about ADHD, [they] immediately think of a hyperactive, young male who can't focus on things and has a limited attention span. As for dyslexia, most people will say that it's word blindness. We want to smash those stereotypes and show there is a lot more to it than that. And show what it's like to live with these conditions."

A "What to expect" document was created for *Inside Our Autistic Minds*. This provided clear information on what to expect during filming, including information on the paperwork that contributors need to deal with and advice on what to wear for filming. Talwar says: "We felt this helped to build relationships with our contributors and crew members. We had an assistant producer (AP) who was autistic. We wanted to ensure that we represented autism behind the screen as well as in front of it."

"Hearing from our contributors about what could be triggering for them was a massive learning curve for us," he adds. "It resonated with our autistic AP. Sometimes we just accept our existing practices because that's the way we've always done it."

"The AP gave us space to talk and ask us why we weren't changing our processes. It made us think about what plausible changes we could make. We created a safe space, with 'Wellbeing Wednesdays', when we could check in on each other's mental health."

One key takeaway is that "making adjustments on the production of a TV show isn't a sign of weakness, it's a sign of power", says Talwar. "Adjusting is empowering."

He says the show was a wake-up call: "As a production manager, I've accepted practices from previous productions. *Inside Our Autistic Minds* made us ask ourselves about how we do things. We've launched this protocol because we know it works."

"We saw people coming to work and being empowered. Sometimes, people don't want to do things differently because they are afraid it will cause a fuss and they won't thrive in their jobs."

*Inside Our Autistic Minds* is a landmark show and may be the first TV documentary account that films a range of authentic autistic experiences, from masking to someone who is ▶

Talwar, production manager on *Inside Our Autistic Minds*, discovered that, for people on the autistic spectrum, leaving things to the last minute may provoke bouts of anxiety.

Generally, call sheets are sent out only the day before a shoot. "Sometimes this can't be helped, because you are in the hands of talent," Talwar says. "Autistic people find this difficult to deal with because it does not give them enough time to prepare."

Several simple changes to the production process were introduced. Call sheets were sent out no later than 48 hours in advance, something hitherto unheard of in TV or, come to that, film. Also, key decisions such as locations were made early on and stuck to.

"The contributors were the heart of

this show, and we wanted them to be looked after, so we could get the best out of them," says Talwar. "We wanted to avoid them being overwhelmed."

Easy Read documents were devised and were tailored to be read by autistic people, providing simple and clear instructions. These are being adapted for the follow-up to *Inside Our Autistic Minds*, another two-part series, this time looking at people with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and dyslexia. "We have learnt that there is no one size fits all," says Talwar. Packham will again present, and the programme is likely to be ready by the autumn.

The aim is to convey what the experience is like – and to subvert any stereotypes. Packham says: "The reason



Ashley Storrie (Nina) in *Dinosaur*

BBC

► non-verbal and highly intelligent. “We had a neurodivergent crew, an AP who was autistic and the contributors telling us what it is like to truly experience the world from the perspective of an autistic person,” says Talwar, who adds: “I think *Inside Our Autistic Minds* encouraged some people to get a diagnosis and find out if they are on the spectrum.”

On the broader question of representation of autistic people on TV, it does seem that a corner may have been turned. The groundbreaking drama *The A Word* set the bar high for a fictional account of a family coping with an autistic child. Scandi Noir thriller *The Bridge* presented viewers with a female lead, Saga Norén, whom audiences perceived as someone with autism. She was socially gauche but brilliant at her job as a homicide detective.

Packham wants more positive female role models on TV for those who are on the autistic spectrum. He says: “I’d like to see the normalisation of a young woman coming to terms with autism [on TV].... Young women could then advance their diagnoses.

“Very sadly, as we saw in *Inside Our Autistic Minds*, fewer women are diagnosed younger; by the time they are diagnosed, they are older and they’ve had some quite significant struggles.”

Recently, we’ve watched an autistic woman, TV personality and former model Christine McGuinness, take part in BBC Two’s *Pilgrimage: The Road Through North Wales*. Packham says:

“I watched Christine, who spent more time articulating the problems rather than the benefits [of being autistic]. That could be because of the edits and is not a criticism of her. I am ferociously against [negative portrayals of autism].”

The well-received new BBC Three comedy *Dinosaur* features a lead character, Nina, who is an autistic woman in her early thirties, confident and



*A Kind of Spark*

BBC

self-possessed. Nina is played by Ashley Storrie, who says: “For a show called *Dinosaur* about a girl with autism – and I’m on the autism spectrum – that was really cool, as there’s not a lot of opportunities for that to be showcased or for me to be me, so I just auditioned for it, got the part and then they asked, ‘Would you like to help

with the writing and the creating?’ And that’s amazing – so I said: ‘Yes please!’ and now here we are.”

The BBC’s children’s commissioners continue to do outstanding work in this area: *A Kind of Spark*, a drama about an autistic girl who wants a memorial for the witches of her village, won the Children’s Programme category at the recent RTS Programme Awards.

Stevens says: “Many people learn about what life is like for autistic people through films and TV shows. It’s important that these depictions of autism are realistic, so people really understand the challenges autistic people face, as well as the huge contributions autistic people make to our society.

“It’s vital that TV and film companies working on stories about autism always consult with autistic people to reflect their experiences accurately.”

She adds: “We’ve seen an increase in portrayals of autistic people in TV and film over the past 10 years but, with more than 700,000 autistic people in the UK, we still need to see greater representation, especially from communities that are under-represented.”

Packham agrees that representation on TV of people with autism is unrecognisable to what it was 30 years ago.

“We’ve come a long way and made enormous strides in recent years,” he says. “Let’s remember when autism wasn’t apparent. I’m 63, so I grew up in the 1960s and 1970s, when nothing was known about autism in a broader public context. I didn’t know about it, and it led to immense difficulties in my earlier life.” ■



# RTS NEWS

**D**avid Olusoga scored a double win at the RTS West of England Awards, taking home the On-Screen Talent and Factual prizes for *Union with David Olusoga*. In the BBC Two series, the historian investigates the origins and development of modern Great Britain.

Bristol wildlife specialist Silverback Films won five awards, including the Natural History category for Netflix's *Life on Our Planet*, which is narrated by Morgan Freeman. The series was praised by the judges as "amazing, gripping and epic. This programme should be shown in every classroom across the country to inspire the next generation of film-makers." *Life on Our Planet* also picked up the Editing award.

*Wild Isles*, Silverback's series for BBC One, which was presented by Sir David Attenborough, won in two categories: Director and Composer – for George Fenton's extraordinary score. The company's researcher Ellie Jo Hilton won the Flying Futures award, which recognises exceptional behind-the-camera emerging talent.

The BBC's Natural History Unit won three awards, with *Planet Earth III* taking home the Cinematography and



David Olusoga

Jon Craig

for her portrayal of working-class single mum Costello. The judges commended her for an "engaging and surprising performance, an unconventional leading lady".

Channel 4 series *The Dog Academy*, made by Five Mile Films, took home the Factual Entertainment and Features award and BBC Three's *Humza: Forgiving the Unforgivable*, produced by Drummer Television, secured the Documentary prize.

The Journalism categories were both won by *BBC Points West*; Fiona Lamdin took the Journalist prize while the Story award went to the regional news programme's report on the safety of Bristol tower block Barton House.

The ceremony at the Bristol Old Vic in late April was hosted by actor and comedian Jayde Adams from the sitcoms *Ruby Speaking* and *Alma's Not Normal*.

RTS West of England Chair Lynn Barlow said it was: "Another outstanding year of winners... leading the way in global production across all genres. The region goes from strength to strength.

"Thank you to all our sponsors and special thanks to Netflix for funding a number of tickets for new talent from under-represented groups across the region." ■

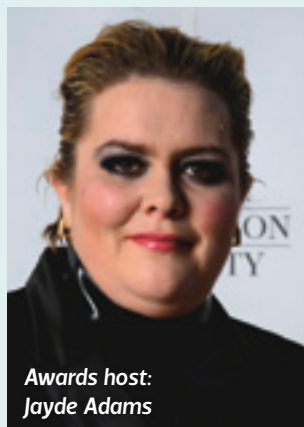
## Olusoga makes history in Bristol

West of England Professionals and students have a lot to celebrate, says **Matthew Bell**

Production Management awards, and *The Prehistoric Planet 2* triumphed in the VFX and Digital Creativity category.

BBC One and HBO comedy

drama *Rain Dogs* won two awards on the night – in the Scripted category and for its star, Daisy May Cooper, who took home the On-Screen Talent: Performance award



Awards host: Jayde Adams

Jon Craig

### RTS West of England Television Awards winners

**Scripted** - *Rain Dogs* - Sid Gentle Films for BBC One and HBO

**Natural History** - *Life on Our Planet* - Silverback Films for Netflix

**Documentary** - *Humza: Forgiving the Unforgivable* - Drummer TV for BBC Three

**Factual** - *Union with David Olusoga* - Uplands TV/Wall to Wall Media for BBC Two

**Factual Entertainment and Features** - *The Dog Academy* - Five Mile Films for Channel 4

**On-screen Talent** - *David Olusoga, Union with David Olusoga* - Uplands TV/Wall to Wall Media for BBC Two

**On-screen Talent: Performance** - *Daisy May Cooper, Rain Dogs* - Sid Gentle Films for BBC One and HBO

**Flying Futures** - *Ellie Jo Hilton* - Silverback Films

**News or Current Affairs Story** - *BBC West News Team, Barton House* - BBC Points West

**News or Current Affairs Journalist** - *Fiona Lamdin, BBC Points West*

**Animation** - *The Sound Collector* - Eagle Vs Bat for ITVX

**Children's** - *The Very Small Creatures* - Aardman for Sky Kids

**Director** - *Hilary Jeffkins, Alastair Fothergill, Nicholas Gates and Chris Howard, Wild Isles* - Silverback Films for BBC One

**Composer** - *George Fenton, Wild Isles* - Silverback Films for BBC One

**VFX and Digital Creativity** - *VFX Team The Prehistoric Planet 2* - BBC Studios Natural History Unit for Apple TV+

**Cinematography** - *Cinematography Team, Planet Earth III* - BBC Studios Natural History Unit, co-produced by BBC America, ZDF, FTV and The Open University for BBC One

**Editing** - *Edit Team, Life on Our Planet* - Silverback Films for Netflix

**Grading** - *Christian Short* - Super/Natural, Films at 59 for Plimsoll Productions for National Geographic and Disney+

**Sound** - *Sound Team, Animals Up Close with Bertie Gregory* - Evolutions for Wildstar Films for National Geographic and Disney+

**Production Management** - *Production Management Team, Planet Earth III* - BBC Studios Natural History Unit, co-produced by BBC America, ZDF, FTV and The Open University for BBC One

**P**obol Y Cwm, which celebrates a half-century on air this October, was honoured at the RTS Cymru Wales Awards last month.

The soap, which is set in the fictional Welsh-speaking village of Cwmderi, was recognised by the RTS with a Lifetime Achievement award, as were Lis Miles, who plays Megan Harries and appeared in the first episode in 1974, and long-serving director/producer Robin Davies-Rollinson.

*Pobol Y Cwm*, which airs on S4C three times a week, is filmed at the BBC's drama studios in Cardiff Bay.

*Men Up*, the story of the world's first trial for the drug that would become Viagra in Swansea 30 years ago, took home the Drama prize. The TV film, which was written by Matthew Barry and directed by Ashley Way, was made for BBC One by Quay Street Productions and Boom.

The award for Drama Performance went to Di Botcher, who has played paramedic Jan Jenning in the BBC One drama *Casualty* since 2018.

*Rhod Gilbert: A Pain in the Neck*, a Channel 4 series that follows the comedian's treatment for a rare form of head and neck cancer, secured the Factual award. The powerful and



## Soap scores a hat-trick and half century

Lis Miles in *Pobol Y Cwm*

S4C

**Cymru Wales** The stars were out for the centre's awards at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, says **Matthew Bell**

life-affirming series was produced by Kailash Films.

Sarra Elgan took home the Presenter of the Year award for her coverage of last autumn's Rugby World Cup on S4C.

Cardiff actor Mared Jarman (S4C drama *Yr Amgueddfa* and BBC Two comedy *How This Blind Girl...*) was recognised

with the Rising Star award.

Aberystwyth University and the University of South Wales shared the prizes in the Student Undergraduate categories, while Cardiff University and the University of South Wales dominated the Postgraduate awards.

The ceremony was hosted by ITV Wales weather

presenter Ruth Dodsworth and actor, singer and comedian Carys Eleri at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama in Cardiff.

Many leading lights of the Welsh TV industry were in the audience, including actors Raki Ayola (*The Pact*) and *Doctor Who* showrunner Russell T Davies. ■

### RTS Cymru Wales Television Awards winners

#### Industry Awards

**Lifetime Awards** - *Pobol Y Cwm*, Lis Miles and Robin Davies-Rollinson

**Drama** - *Men Up* - Quay Street Productions and Boom for BBC One

**Drama Performance** - Di Botcher, *Casualty* - BBC Cymru Wales/BBC Studios for BBC One

**Comedy or Entertainment** - *A Special School* - Slam Media for BBC Wales/BBC Two

**Factual** - *Rhod Gilbert: A Pain in the Neck* - Kailash Films for Channel 4

**Children's** - *My Life: I was Bullied* - Yeti Television for CBBC

**News (Short)** - *Argyfwng Twrci a Syria* - S4C

**Sports Documentary** - *Ifan Phillips*

*Whisper* Cymru for S4C

**Presenter of the Year** - Sarra Elgan, *Cwpan Rygbi'r Byd* - S4C

**Rising Star** - Mared Jarman

**Digital** - *Bwmp* - Octagon Content for S4C

**Location Manager** - Iwan Roberts, *Doctor Who: The Church on Ruby Road* - BBC Studios and Bad Wolf for BBC One and Disney+

**Multiskilled Journalism or Production** - Lydia Griffith and Siôn Jenkins, *Y Byd ar Bedwar: Ymchwilad Ian Wyn-Jones* - S4C

**Production Manager (Factual)** - Francesca Barbieri, *One Tribe TV*

**Production Manager (Drama)** - Mair Vining, *The Winter King* - Bad Wolf and Sony Pictures for ITVX

#### Student Undergraduate Awards

**Animation** - *The Closet* - University of South Wales

**Comedy and Entertainment** - *The Struggles for Creative Consistency* - Aberystwyth University

**Drama** - *Woe* - Aberystwyth University

**Factual Short-form** - *Holm Sweet Home* - University of South Wales

**Saving the Planet** - *Fibres: The Roots of Industrial Hemp* - Aberystwyth University

**Craft Skills: Camera** - *Penguin* - University of South Wales

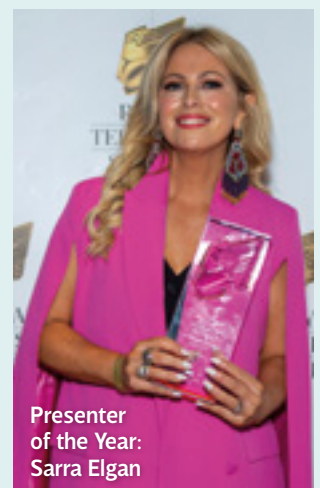
#### Student Postgraduate Awards

**Drama** - *Black Veil* - University of South Wales

**Factual Long-form** - *A Bridge to Mundania* - Cardiff University

**Factual Short-form** - *Portraying Islam* - Cardiff University

**Craft Skills: Sound** - *Amygdala* - University of South Wales



Presenter of the Year: Sarra Elgan

Rahim Mastafa



RTS Technology Centre brought together the restored MCR21 mobile control room – used for the 1966 World Cup Final and Winston Churchill’s funeral – with some of outside broadcasting provider NEP’s state-of-the-art IP-enabled trucks at an event in late March at the NEP base in Bracknell, Berkshire.

Special guest for the evening was Harry Coventry, a former BBC cameraman who worked on MCR21 at Wembley when Geoff Hurst’s hat-trick won England the World Cup and at Churchill’s funeral. He recalled the excitement and emotion of the 1966 final, and operating a camera on top of St Paul’s overlooking the funeral procession.

The restored truck now has a significant educational role for young people, said Nick Gilbey and Brian Summers of the Broadcast



Stephen Stewart

## Hurst, 1966 and all that

Television Technology Trust. Summers also discussed the restoration of the truck, including finding an original Marconi camera at the Science Museum, which turned out to be from the MCR21.

Dafydd Rees, Head of Technical Solution Architecture at NEP, said Venus, one of its latest trucks, dwarfs the MCR21. With its Tardis-like interior, Venus can accommodate 35 people and has

numerous video and audio channels to meet the needs of major international operations.

In autumn, the RTS centre plans to explore OB technology over the next 10 years.

**Tim Marshall**

## David Attwood 1952–2024

David Attwood, director of such TV series as Granada’s 1996 adaptation of *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of Moll Flanders* starring Daniel Craig and Alex Kingston, has died aged 71.

Benedict Cumberbatch hailed him as “a great first audience and builder of confidence and worlds”.

He was born into a working-class family in Sheffield in 1952. David’s first job in TV was as an assistant floor manager at BBC Glasgow. He moved to BBC Birmingham, then a drama powerhouse, where his approach to work was influenced by the likes of Stephen Frears, David Hare and Philip Saville.

From 1989, he spent five

years as a director on the ITV cop show *The Bill*, a nursery slope for budding talent. His break came helming *Moll Flanders*, adapted by Andrew Davies. David directed the 1998 HBO TV film *Shot Through the Heart* and the 2000 BBC Two crime drama *Summer in the Suburbs*.

He first worked with the then largely unknown Cumberbatch in 2005, on an adaptation of William Golding’s *To the Ends of the Earth*, also for BBC Two, then in 2007 on *Stuart: a Life Backwards* for HBO and the BBC.

“David really knew what he was doing with actors. He sat next to the camera and was so lost in the scene.... He was brilliant and fun and kind and



BBC

trusting, a friend as much as a director,” said Cumberbatch.

The producer Hilary Bevan Jones said: “I was lucky to work with David more than once. When we were filming... *To the Ends of the Earth* we could only afford a few days on a real boat. Our line producer suggested constructing a marquee/studio over a dock in Richards Bay, South Africa, and then

building floating sets inside.

“David embraced this totally unorthodox proposal and we sped forward, with David achieving a lavish production through creativity, determination and courage.”

David is survived by his children Jo and Maddy, his former wife, Jane Tranter, the founder of Bad Wolf, and his brother Philip Attwood.

**Steve Clarke**



Peter Sandground

STV News entertainment reporter Laura Boyd (in green dress) with the student winners

## RTS Scotland Student Television Awards winners

**Animation - To a Mouse** - Gregor Forbes, University of Stirling

**Drama - Care** - Jagoda Tlok, Jess Kelly, Euan Farmer and Juno Glover, Screen Academy Scotland (Edinburgh Napier University)

**Entertainment and Comedy Drama - Worst Thing** - Jayme Bartlett, Bobby Donaldson, Hayley Louise McGuire, Petra Crace and team, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

**Factual: Short-form - Strongwoman** - Kyla Miller, Jodie McMail, Ewan Patrick, Remi Peron and Katrina McEwan, University of Stirling

**Journalism - Bruised** - Carla Basu, Lauren Fitzpatrick and Adam Millar, University of the West of Scotland

**Craft Skills: Camerawork - Infinidades** - Ruby Craig, Edinburgh College of Art

**Craft Skills: Editing - Kick Mental Health** - George Donaldson, University of the West of Scotland

**Craft Skills: Production Design - Worst Thing** - Petra Crace, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

**Craft Skills: Sound - Strongwoman** - Remi Patrol, University of Stirling

**Craft Skills: Writing - The Interests of Others** - Abbie Maclaughlan, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

# Stirling and Conservatoire score

RTS Scotland

*Worst Thing* picked up two awards for a team of students from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland at the RTS Scotland Student Television Awards in March: Entertainment and Comedy Drama and the Production Design craft category for Petra Crace.

Abbie Maclaughlan from the Royal Conservatoire won the Writing award for *The Interests of Others*.

The University of Stirling also took home three prizes: *To a Mouse* by Gregor Forbes won the Animation category and *Strongwoman* bagged the Factual: Short-form prize

and the Sound award for Remi Patrol.

RTS Scotland Chair Stephen O'Donnell said: "Once again, Scotland's students have set a very high bar, with a fantastic range of high-quality, entertaining, thought-provoking and exceptional entries. The future of our industry appears

to be in very good hands."

The ceremony was hosted by STV News entertainment reporter Laura Boyd at St Luke's in Glasgow.

All the nominated films and highlights from the ceremony are available to watch on STV Player.

**Matthew Bell**

# Queen's University chalks up two wins

Northern Ireland

Queen's University Belfast students won two of the principal prizes at the Northern Ireland Student Television Awards in late March.

*Spring Is Sure to Follow* – "a beautiful story of acceptance with great casting and performances"; said the judges – triumphed in the Drama category. The "funny, whimsical and well-acted" *Mantis Shrimp* won the Entertainment and Comedy prize.

The Animation category was won by Ulster University, Belfast student Patrick Faulkner with *Unseen: Alone in Space*, and Ulster University,

Coleraine's Nathan Edgar took home the Factual Short-form award with *On the Edge*.

The awards, held in partnership with Northern Ireland Screen, were held at the Black Box, Belfast, and hosted by UTV journalist Nathan Hanna.

Fiona Campbell, Controller, Youth Audience, BBC iPlayer and BBC Three and a former Chair of RTS Northern Ireland, delivered the Joe McKinney Memorial Keynote Speech. She said: "I believe it is our natural ability for storytelling that ensures Northern Ireland always punches way above its weight on the global stage."

**Matthew Bell**



Justin Kernaghan

The winning students

## RTS Northern Ireland Student Television Awards winners

**Animation - Unseen: Alone in Space** - Patrick Faulkner, Ulster University, Belfast

**Drama - Spring Is Sure to Follow** - Andrew McAllister, Lucy Johnston, Lucy Maxwell, Jon-Marc Maguire, William Penney and Dominic Small, Queen's University Belfast

**Entertainment and Comedy - Mantis Shrimp** - Stella Skiadopoulou,

Jiale Rui, Amy Lonergan, Harry Thompson and Dai Qingyongcua, Queen's University Belfast

**Factual: Short-form - On The Edge** - Nathan Edgar, Ulster University, Coleraine

**Craft Skills: Camerawork - Saoirse** - Karl Castles, Queen's University Belfast

**Craft Skills: Production - Above Par** - Harry Thompson, Olivia Peden, Luke Darby, Owen Hogg and Emma Harrison, Queen's University Belfast



The audience at this year's RTS Midlands Student Television Awards left knowing much more about the current state of the TV industry, how to get started – and, especially, the importance of networking.

The top piece of advice from the awards host, young actor and director Theo Johnson, was to “network your socks off”.

He added: “You’re always one step away from the person who can change your life, trust me. It’s been the most important thing for me. But be polite, don’t be scary or stalkery.”

*Doctors* actor Elisabeth Dermot Walsh, an awards judge who had suggested the feedback session for the students, addressed “the elephant in the room” – that the Birmingham-made daytime soap has been cancelled after 24 years.

“It’s like a factory has closed,” she said. “There are dark times here in Birmingham, but judging the Student Awards I was reassured, uplifted and filled with positivity about the future of the industry.”

“Be very proud that you are here. You have something that you should be flaunting and



RTS Midlands student winners

Vivienne Bailey

## ‘Network your socks off’

**RTS Midlands** Roz Laws and Matthew Bell (below) report on student masterclasses and awards at the IET in Birmingham

sending to people. The RTS is so respected in the industry, so you shouldn’t be waiting.”

During the “Learning the landscape” panel session, one of a number of masterclasses, the advice of Martin Simms, from Create Central, was to “attend industry events, utilise social media to connect, sign up to newsletters to

know about opportunities and, above all, be proactive”.

Sam Rifkin, from Filming in England, talked about the opportunities in the industry across many departments: “If you’re not sure what you want to do, ask yourself three key questions: what are you good at, what do you enjoy and how can your

qualifications and experience help you at this point?”

She added that, because of national skills shortages, trainees were urgently needed in accounts and art departments, on location and as grips, as well as script supervisors, edit assistants, production secretaries and first assistant directors. ■

## Never Die wins top Lenny Henry award

**RTS Midlands** Staffordshire University students took home six of the 10 awards from the RTS Midlands Student Television Awards, including the Sir Lenny Henry Award for *Never Die* by Darcy Wootton-Davies, Callum Martin and Thomas Ellison.

*Never Die* scored a hat-trick, also winning the Factual Short-form and Craft Skills:

Camera awards. Sir Lenny Henry said of the winners and his pick: “What a glorious plethora of talent, some lovely heartfelt and careful work. I was really moved by *Never Die*. You guys are incredibly talented and should keep going”

A team of Staffordshire University students took home the Drama award for *Night Light*, while Leo Wright

### RTS Midlands Student Television Awards winners

**Animation** - *You Are Not Made of Flesh* - Harry Lenton and Jack Steel, Nottingham Trent University

**Drama** - *Night Light* - Oscar Bell, Thomas Ellison and Madeleine Reddy, Staffordshire University

**Entertainment and Comedy Drama** - *Will Smith's Wicked Band* - Tom Harper, Josh Fenner, Sam Greenhill and Jacek Ubych, Nottingham Trent University

**Factual** - *Short-form* - *Never Die* - Darcy

Wootton-Davies, Callum Martin and Thomas Ellison, Staffordshire University

**Craft Skills: Camera** - *Never Die* - Darcy Wootton-Davies, Callum Martin and Thomas Ellison, Staffordshire University

**Craft Skills: Editing** - *Scratch* - Levi Lajtai, University of Worcester

**Craft Skills: Production Design** - *No Man's Land* - Leo Wright, Staffordshire University

**Craft Skills: Sound** - *Voices* - Robyn Hargreaves, Nottingham Trent University

**Craft Skills: Writing** - *No Man's Land* - Leo Wright, Staffordshire University

picked up two Craft Skills prizes, Production Design and Writing, for *No Man's Land*.

Nottingham Trent University students took three prizes: Animation for *You Are Not Made of Flesh*; Entertainment and

Comedy Drama for *Will Smith's Wicked Band*; and the Craft Sound award for Robyn Hargreaves with *Voices*.

The University of Worcester's Levi Lajtai won the Craft Editing award for *Scratch*.

# Middlesex Uni doubles up

**RTS London** The prizes were shared around the capital's universities at the RTS London Student Television Awards in late March, which were held at the Magic Circle and hosted by magician Harry de Cruz – who also demonstrated some nifty tricks during the evening.

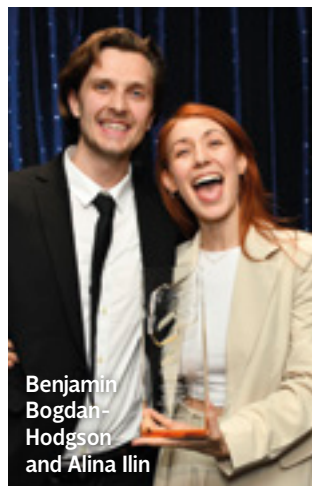
Middlesex University students took home the Factual Short-form and Entertainment and Comedy Drama awards. Factual winner *The Turning Point* by Sanaa Hamdoun told the story of a young Lebanese woman's determination to break into the film industry, and was "well told and crisply edited", said the judges.

Alina Ilin and Benjamin

Bogdan-Hodgson's rom-com *The Other Half*, set in a "gorgeous chocolate box European village" was "very witty".

The Factual Long-form prize went to London South Bank University's Romina Osterling, Luke Reid, Lucy Gidley and Alison Bevon for *Some Hairs Never Fall*, a report on domestic violence, fuelled by alcohol, among a community of wig-makers in Peru.

London Metropolitan University students Will Hextall,



Benjamin Bogdan-Hodgson and Alina Ilin



Sanaa Hamdoun

RTS London/John Stone

Harry Norton and Ellie Wallwork took home the Drama award for the Lake District-set *Picturesque*, which had "strong performances" from the women playing two troubled

lovers, one of whom is blind.

Illirian Camaj from the University of Westminster won the Animation category with the "very atmospheric" *Mind*. **Matthew Bell**

### RTS London Student Television Awards winners

**Animation-Mind**-*Illirian Camaj*, University of Westminster

**Drama-Picturesque**-*Will Hextall, Harry Norton and Ellie Wallwork*, London Metropolitan University

**Entertainment and Comedy Drama**-*The Other Half*-*Alina Ilin and Benjamin Bogdan-Hodgson*, Middlesex University

**Factual: Long-form-Some Hairs Never Fall**-*Romina Osterling, Luke Reid, Lucy Gidley and Alison Bevon*, London South Bank University

**Factual: Short-form-The Turning Point**-*Sanaa Hamdoun*, Middlesex University

**Craft Skills: Camerawork-Simme Tutt'uno**-*Freddie Logan*, University of Westminster

**Craft Skills: Editing-4 Soldiers**-*Nikita Listopad*, London South Bank University

**Craft Skills: Production Design-Fortune Favours the Fantabulous**-*Phoebe Baker and David Kmet*, University of Westminster

**Craft Skills: Sound Design-Crush**-*Ruozhang Liao*, London College of Communication (University of the Arts London)

**Craft Skills: Writing-Sola**-*Claudia Orriols*, Ravensbourne University London



## Palin on the bright side of 3,000 volts

TV's most intrepid of travelers is back on the road. Yes, the Upside is talking about national treasure Michael Palin and his trip to Nigeria, undertaken for Channel 5.

After recent journeys to North Korea and Iraq, the eternally youthful *Monty Python* star is at his very best navigating the challenges of a country famous for its vibrancy, including its music.

"Lagos is not for the faint-hearted," he declares with typical understatement. "It's

like having 3,000 volts put through you. People are very welcoming, but you can tell things aren't working perhaps as well as they should."

The BBC's loss is Channel 5's gain. Maybe the UN should employ the charming and non-judgemental actor and writer as a global ambassador: his instinctive empathy is much needed in these times of international peril.

## A summer of sport summons sofa fans

A gripping end to the Premier League season at both ends of the table, while the tussle for promotion and relegation is being hotly contested in the Championship. Meanwhile, an epic TV summer of sport beckons, with the Euros and the Paris Olympics to follow.

Hopefully, the Euros will help provide a much-needed lift to ITV's ad revenues – and finally give Gareth Southgate that trophy he so desperately wants.

All this, Wimbledon and the Tour de France to look forward to.

## Sir David recalls the competitive Sir Paul

Congratulations to Bristol wildlife specialist Silverback Films, winner of five prizes at the recent RTS West of England awards.

Inevitably, two of these were for the wonderful series presented by Sir David Attenborough, *Wild Isles*, focusing on the UK's natural history.

Talking of Sir David, it was fascinating to hear him recall his memories of Sir Paul Fox,

who was BBC One Controller when the great naturalist ran BBC Two in the late 1960s. Interviewed on Radio 4's *Last Word*, Sir David said Sir Paul "loved competition and loved winning".

## Promoted from hot priest to scam artist

Let's hear it for Andrew Scott, not so long ago *Fleabag*'s hot priest. Nowadays, he is a global star gracing our screens in Netflix's eight-part *Ripley* reboot.

Even those who consider the streamer's monochrome rendering of the Patricia Highsmith classic a tad long have plenty of praise for his spellbinding performance.

Also, check him out in the multi-award-winning movie *All of Us Strangers*. ■





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▶ The Next Episode

# Keeping our creative edge.

RTS LONDON CONVENTION

Chaired by:

**Anna Mallett**

Vice President, Production,  
EMEA/UK, Netflix

Speakers include:

**Ted Sarandos**

Co-CEO, Netflix

**Tim Davie**

Director-General, BBC

**Carolyn McCall**

CEO, ITV

**Alex Mahon**

CEO, Channel 4



**NETFLIX**

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