

November 2021

Television



**The greening of
TV production**



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From the CEO



With COP26 dominating the news, our cover story reflects TV's determination to introduce more sustainable ways of working. Caroline Frost

examines BBC Studios' commitment to have all its productions Albert-certified from January, and we report on a recent RTS Cymru Wales event, "COP a load of this". We also get a unique perspective on what it was like to be at the conference, from Simon Pitts, CEO of Scottish Television, in his TV Diary.

Don't miss Steve Clarke's profile of

the new culture secretary, Nadine Dorries, who has some big decisions to make in the coming months.

Shilpa Ganatra's timely feature on the practical steps, often quite small things, that producers can take to accommodate disabled people who work in TV is a compelling read.

I'm thrilled that we were able to welcome so many of our future talents to the first of this year's RTS Student Masterclasses. I don't think I've ever seen this occasion so well attended. Huge thanks to all the practitioners who gave up their valuable time to speak to the students.

Finally, we will shortly be hosting our first national, in-person awards ceremony since the start of the pandemic, the RTS Craft & Design Awards 2021. It is a particular pleasure to celebrate the amazing people behind our screens. Thanks for "keeping the lights on" in television over the past two years! I look forward to seeing as many of you as possible at the Hilton Park Lane on 22 November.

Theresa
Theresa Wise

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TV diary

Day one of COP26 in my adopted city of Glasgow. I moved to Scotland nearly four years ago to join producer-broadcaster STV and I've grown to love it here.

One of the big plusses is that I get to commute to work by bike, not tube, and I'm certainly glad of it today because COP has closed all the roads.

The only downside to cycling is that you invariably get soaked. Even by Glasgow's standards, today's rainfall is biblical. Some would say it's highly symbolic for the start of a global climate conference.

■ When I arrive, our office looks like Alcatraz – 2.5m-high perimeter fencing and extra security staff on patrol. Our building is on the edge of the COP blue zone.

We've been preparing for this for months. COP is simultaneously a huge news story, an opportunity as a broadcaster to demonstrate our commitment to climate action, and a massive security headache.

Right on cue, a chap from Ocean Rebellion sets fire to his boat outside our office. Fortunately, there's no danger. It's also perfect for our news crew, who barely need to leave their desks to get some great shots. This is going to be a busy week.

■ It's hard to get your head around 120 world leaders flying into Glasgow. Certainly, it's good news for the WH Smith in Glasgow airport arrivals. Joe Biden chooses Edinburgh to jet in on Air Force One.

We spot Marine One hovering over our office. Once inside the COP auditorium, Biden announces that it's fantastic to be in "Glass-cow".



Torrential rain, protesters outside STV's HQ and even Obama fluffs his lines. Simon Pitts experiences COP26 from the inside

■ Day two sees the start of a series of broadcaster events in partnership with the Albert consortium.

Throughout the week, there are, among many others, panel sessions on whether the soaps can help spread the word on climate action; how weather presenters can help inform audiences via their bulletins; and how brands are stepping up in the climate fight.

The Yorkshire Tea 100% carbon neutral campaign is voted the best green ad.

■ The next day, I join the CEOs from Sky, BBC, ITV and Channel 4 on a COP stage to launch the Climate Pledge, a commitment to work together to bring climate action to life on-screen

for our viewers. Unprecedented levels of harmony are on display.

That night, we launch STV's first on-air green promo campaign, highlighting little changes that can make a big difference, such as taking a shorter shower or not over-filling the kettle.

This comes under the banner of our sustainability plan, STV Zero, which was launched at the turn of the year and will see us become a net zero carbon business by 2030.

■ On day four, I attend the CBI dinner at COP. Eight hundred people in a room together feels very un-2021.

US climate envoy John Kerry tells us this is the COP where big business has finally come to the party. I think he's right. Playing our full part is now a moral and a commercial imperative.

New Zealand PM Jacinda Ardern gives one of the keynotes, virtually, but tells us she'd much rather be with us in "Glaze-go". It could just be the accent, of course.

Even Obama, with all his oratorical skill, isn't immune to the odd gaffe.

He's also in "Glass-cow", by the way, but he thinks it's in the "Emerald Isles".

■ My faith in the power of COP to bring us all together is restored by a conversation I overhear in a conference cafeteria at the end of the week.

Two foreign delegates are at the chiller cabinet; one picks up a can of Irn-Bru and asks: "Do you know what's actually in this?"

"No idea," says the other, "but it's goooooo!"

Scotland has definitely made its mark on the world this week.

Simon Pitts is CEO of Scottish Television.

COMFORT CLASSIC



Edge of Darkness

Little, it seems, has changed in the 36 years since *Edge of Darkness* was first shown. Conspiracy and cover-up, environmental devastation and the threat of nuclear destruction were stitched into the fabric of the 1980s and are no less relevant now.

If this were all that *Edge of Darkness* had offered, however, it wouldn't be so fondly remembered or, indeed, recognised by many critics as British TV drama's finest moment.

Television has excelled at the political thriller, from Alan Plater's *A Very British Coup* to Paul Abbott's *State of Play* to, most recently, Jed Mercurio's *Bodyguard*. But *Edge of Darkness* transcends the genre. The six-part series is hugely ambitious, by turns grandiose and intensely personal. It says more about love and heart-rending loss than almost anything I have seen.

It starts with a horrifying murder

Matthew Bell celebrates a poetic, gripping and harrowing political thriller that is, sadly, just as relevant today

when Emma (Joanne Whalley), the daughter of policeman Ronnie Craven (Bob Peck), is gunned down in front of him. Was Craven the real target of the killer, perhaps a criminal with a grudge? Or was Emma's involvement in an anti-nuclear group called Gaia the motive?

Peck, a virtual newcomer to TV but a Royal Shakespeare Company regular, gives a towering performance as a man consumed by grief. He is haunted by Emma's death, constantly hearing and seeing her as he tries to find the killer. Craven's quest takes him into a world of double-dealing, peopled by cynical MI5 and CIA spooks. This is the 1980s of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, the escalation of the Cold War and much sabre rattling, but with nuclear missiles as politicians' weapons of choice.

Conspiracy dramas are normally naturalistic in style and *Edge of Darkness* can be, usually when the plot needs to move forwards or when one

Ear candy

of the real-life people and places that pepper the drama appear on screen.

But what makes the series magnificent is its strangeness, whether it's Emma's ghost or the ecological mysticism that pervades the series. Students of environmental theory will immediately relate the name of Emma's group of activists to the Gaia hypothesis of scientist James Lovelock, which sees the Earth as a self-regulating organism. Lovelock is still writing about the environment at the age of 102.

Edge of Darkness premiered on BBC Two in November 1985 to immediate critical acclaim and strong audiences, winning a repeat showing on BBC One within days of the final episode airing, and doubling its audience.

When the TV awards were divvied up the following year, the series took more than its share. Its six Baftas included Drama Series, Actor (Peck) and Music for the atmospheric score of Eric Clapton and Michael Kamen.

Its huge success shouldn't have come as any surprise, given the talent involved in the series. Writer Troy Kennedy Martin co-created TV's first modern cop series, *Z Cars*, and wrote *The Italian Job*, that most iconic of British movies. Michael Wearing had already produced *Boys from the Blackstuff* and went on to executive produce *Our Friends in the North*, giving him a hat-trick of involvement in, arguably, British television's three greatest dramas.

Director Martin Campbell shot *Edge of Darkness* like a feature film and then went on to direct movies, including Daniel Craig's 2006 Bond debut in *Casino Royale*, one of the franchise's best.

Twenty-five years later, Wearing and Campbell moved the story to the US and remade *Edge of Darkness* as a movie, with Mel Gibson in the Peck role and Ray Winstone's British spook replacing Joe Don Baker's CIA agent. "A moderate feature film," reckoned Peter Bradshaw in his *Guardian* review.

Viewers are advised to stick with the original – British TV has never made a better, or stranger, political thriller. ■

***Edge of Darkness* is available to stream on Virgin TV Go or as a download on Amazon Video and Sky Store.**



Earwolf

In a "podcastsphere" oversaturated with samey celebrity interviews, *Storytime with Seth Rogen* is a breath of fresh air.

The concept sounds standard enough: actor and comedian Seth Rogen asks famous friends to tell a personal story. But Rogen transforms the stories into breezy "audio documentaries" that are, by turns, wholesome, funny and surprisingly revelatory.

The first episode, *Glorious Bastards*, is a definitive rejection of that old adage, "never meet your heroes", as comedian Quinta Brunson recalls her chance encounter with Paul Rudd at a matinee of *Inglourious Bastards*, where he inspired her to leave the Jehovah's Witnesses to pursue freely a career in comedy.

Rogen being Rogen, he's able to follow up on any name drops but, when he calls Rudd to confirm the story, the actor says he has no recollection of it. Taking that as evidence of

his routine niceness, Rogen asks where he gets it from, and his answer leads to the discovery of a chain reaction of acts of kindness.

True to his friendly stoner persona, Rogen proves an affable and curious host who knows when to dig deeper. In episode 2, David Crosby's reminiscence of his friendship with the "quiet Beatle", George Harrison, leads to some deep dives into how music works – as well as the differences between US and European joint-rolling habits.

But where *Storytime* shines is in the way it enlivens a conversational format that's long grown stale. Trimming the chit-chat, each episode locks in at about 30 minutes. And, to hilarious effect, the producers go big and whimsical with the sound design – not least the echoes and other effects that underscore the major story beats.

I can still hear the church choir singing Rudd's name. ■

Harry Bennett

WORKING LIVES

Colourist

Netflix

Jateen Patel is a senior colourist at renowned Soho post-production facility Molinare. His work straddles the worlds of TV and film, and includes *The Last Kingdom*, *Starstruck*, *Rocks*, *Ali & Ava* and *Mission: Impossible – Fallout*.

What does the job involve?

I implement the final visual look of a production, integrating all its elements, including the shot material and visual effects (VFX). Ideally, you shouldn't notice what I do because the idea is to create a connection with the viewers that leads them naturally through a show emotionally.

How long do you get to colour and grade a show?

With a show such as BBC Three's *Starstruck* or Sky One's *Breeders*, I usually get a day or a day and a half to work on it, including sign-off – comedies usually have a quick turnaround.

On a Netflix drama such as *The Last*

Kingdom, I get two-and-a-half days per episode; on a bigger drama, I would get three to four days, possibly five. I've done small-budget films in five days but, for bigger-budget films, it can vary between two weeks and a month, which would include all the different release versions.

Which other people and departments do you work with closely?

Creatively, the director and director of photography (DoP) in particular. Normally, I will read the script beforehand and I'll be sent mood boards and visual references. We then meet in pre-production to discuss the look.

I also work with VFX supervisors, digital imaging technicians, producers, exec producers, post-production supervisors and editors, as well as our internal team of sales and post-production managers, grade assistants and online editors, who are all important in prepping and delivering projects.

What is the balance between technical know-how and artistic flair?

The two work in harmony, but it's critical to understand the technical side of the job.

How did you become a colourist?

I did science and creative A-levels and took a degree in graphic/web design, but I had no real idea of what I wanted to do once I graduated.

I enjoyed movies and photography, and then one of my friends started to work in visual effects and thought I might like the idea of colour grading. I'd never heard of it before but all the dots connected, so I became a runner and landed my first job soon after, in a film lab called Todd-AO.

That was a great training ground – I would not change that for anything, as I learnt all my basic grading skills on film dailies (the raw, unedited footage, or rushes) and the importance of procedure.



I then had the opportunity to leave dailies and move into finishing at a company called M2. I joined Molinare in 2011 and have worked my way up to senior colourist.

What was the first TV programme you worked on?

I worked on a few TV projects at Todd-AO, doing film rushes but, as a junior colourist at M2 in the mid-2000s, my first project was the movie version of David Attenborough's *Planet Earth*. That was a real eye-opener for me.

What is a typical working day like?

My day can vary, but I usually start by looking at anything new on any of the shows/films I'm working on. This is before any clients arrive for the main project/booking of the day.

Often, projects overlap, so you're juggling jobs at different stages of post- or pre-production. Now, with Covid-19 protocols, a lot of grade viewings are

done remotely with clients involved in the UK or abroad.

What do you bring to work with you?

Just my phone for emails, notes and calls – all the kit is at Molinare.

What makes a good colourist?

The ability to listen, interpret and implement first what the director and DoP want, then the producers, execs and anyone else involved – it's a collaborative job. It's a good idea to try to bring something different creatively to each project – not every show lends itself to the same set-ups, techniques and style. Experimentation is good: otherwise, you can become stagnant and end up doing the same thing all the time.

Which work are you most proud of?

I put my best into everything I do, so I'm proud of it all. I really enjoyed working on *Mission: Impossible – Fallout* for its technical challenges. I'm also

proud of important films such as Sarah Gavron's *Rocks*, Clio Barnard's *Ali & Ava*, and collaborating with Reggie Yates on his first feature, *Pirates*.

On the TV side, *The Last Kingdom* and *Breeders*, and a couple of shows I'm working on now: *61st Street*, a legal drama set in Chicago, and *Extinction*, an end-of-the-world drama for Sky.

What's the best part of the job?

The best is working with so many different people, all of whom have a common goal – to make great shows and films. Then, of course, the thing I really enjoy is the grading.

Are there any tricks of the trade you can share with us?

Keep it simple and get the foundations right. Once you've got the contrast of a shot right, you'll start to see what really needs doing.

What advice would you give to someone wanting to become a colourist?

There are so many different routes into the industry. I started in film lab rushes/dailies and I also did lots of music videos for friends in the early days, which is a great way of gaining experience.

Practice using just the basic "lift, gamma, gain" controls, which is all we had back then. If you can match grade and create different looks this way, then moving to more complicated tools will seem easier.

If you want to work on TV dramas and films, it's a good idea to work at a finishing post-production facility, starting as a runner, getting to know people, learning from everyone, not just the colourists, and working your way up. Learning on the job is so important – you need the time to make mistakes before you become responsible for bigger productions.

Has the job changed over time?

Since I started in the early 2000s, the grading software has become so advanced – technically, you can do so much more, and there was also the move from film to digital.

Is there a TV series or film genre you'd love to work on?

A South Korean or Hong Kong movie for sure, or a sci-fi, western, *Succession* or *Batman* movie. But there is so much that I have worked on, I'm happy. ■

Senior colourist Jateen Patel was interviewed by Matthew Bell.

From January, all BBC commissions must be certified by the Albert sustainability scheme. **Caroline Frost** explores the implications



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Transport and power are the two big problems for TV production

How green is our telly?

No one takes a taxi without me knowing about it. Every little bit of movement gets tracked. I have a lot of spreadsheets and things are always being added, so I never take my eye off any of it.”

Alison Sill, a freelance production co-ordinator fresh from the set of BBC TV drama *Guilt*, filmed on location in Edinburgh, is bubbling with anecdotal evidence of just how much effort she and her team have put into hitting their sustainability targets.

“Hotels, taxis, trains, planes... we ask everyone if they will take a train. If they really can’t, then we’ll get them on a plane, but we’ll do everything we can to avoid it. What fuel can we generate to power the set? We measure materials – how much wood and paint are being used in construction?

“We track our waste and use companies that report back ‘how many skips you had uplifted, how many bins you had taken away, how much recycling,

how much landfill’. We log how long we are in offices [and] whether they’re open-plan or have air-conditioning to provide [an estimate] of how much power we use. We log... everything.”

Sill’s colleague, producer Eric Coulter, agrees: “We do lots of things electronically now – contracts, schedules. DocuSign has become the norm. I never print scripts any more. My bag’s become a lot lighter.”

Such is the effort involved for the entire cast and crew of a BBC-commissioned production in earning a prized Albert sustainable production certification. But what does that mean exactly, and how does it work?

The 2,500 hours of TV created in a typical year by BBC Studios all fall under the net zero target framework of the wider corporation and fit into the organisation’s strategy to make sustainability central to audiences’ understanding and engagement, which is three-pronged:

■ “On-screen portrayal”, such as the recent collaboration by soap stars

across different channels to discuss climate change;

■ The championing of world-class sustainability experts, such as Greta Thunberg and Sir David Attenborough; and

■ Encouraging productions to take appropriate actions.

The last is where Albert comes in. Ten years ago, the BBC created a digital tool – named after *EastEnders*’ famous square – to measure each production’s carbon footprint. It then made the key decision to give this to Bafta, so that the technology could be adopted by every creative working in the industry.

“That meant that everyone could contribute to making it a more sophisticated tool,” explains Sally Mills, BBC Studios’ head of operations and sustainability lead. “At BBC Studios, we introduced a target in April 2020 for all our productions, BBC and third-party, to be Albert certified and last year an impressive 98% of our productions achieved this. For the BBC, all our commissions from January 2022 will have to

be Albert certified.” The Albert scheme is twofold, encompassing both “the footprint” and “the carbon action plan”.

Carys Taylor, Bafta’s director of the scheme, explains that “the footprint gives the team members a sense of where their impacts are, while the action plan involves filling in a form of 60 or so questions ahead of production. This shows expectations, likely high-impact areas and plans to reduce their carbon footprint, eliminate waste and monitor supply chains.”

To be certified and gain the Albert logo, the production team must then provide evidence, which Taylor assures me “is assessed by a human being, with spot checks to ensure the accuracy of the data”. Only then does Bafta hand over the cherished footprint logo

– it was one of the very few benefits.”

The kind of incentives that might accompany certification, Taylor makes clear, remain up to the broadcasters. It is clear, however, that Albert certification, if not yet universally mandated, is becoming an expectation across the industry. For the 2022 Bafta Awards, entrants will be asked whether they have achieved certification, and Taylor favours the creation of an additional green storytelling award.

For Mills at BBC Studios, sustainability is at the heart of her commercial business. “Not just reputationally, but for talent attraction,” she says. “Like diversity, it should just be embedded in everything we do.”

But, while she applauds the collective mindset in addressing the chal-

people to think differently, both on the operational and creative sides.”

Coulter agrees, and reflects: “Everyone has to buy into it editorially, too. Can we put a recycling bin in the kitchen of a scene? Can a character take public transport instead of driving? Soon, I predict we won’t be showing paper cups on screen, it’ll be as odd as seeing someone smoking.”

Danielle Mulder, the BBC’s first director of sustainability, is charged with leading the corporation to its target of net zero carbon by 2030. She is confident that no stick or carrot is required for the Albert scheme to continue to evolve. She says: “The production teams all want to do this. There isn’t a stick needed. What we want to do is to bring it to life and make it real



Futurikon

– hence Sill’s heroic efforts to log all those taxis.

Bafta supports the scheme with a catalogue of training resources, advice and tips. There are also partnerships with universities and expanding editorial opportunities to explore sustainability in storytelling.

“It’s not just policing,” insists Taylor. “It’s about providing knowledge, resources and guidance plus a wealth of collaborative experience and learning. The calculator can seem quite robotic, but it’s about bringing people on this journey, and enabling creatives within the industry to inspire a sustainable future for all.”

Everyone on this journey agrees that the size and location of a production will massively affect the carbon emissions. However, across the board, the two biggest problems are transport and power. “As technology improves with alternative fuel for generators, we are beginning to see a difference,” reports Taylor. “Plus transport was massively reduced during the pandemic

lenges, she recognises that there are obstacles yet to be overcome: “One challenge is matching that desire with resources, creating the infrastructure to support these initiatives. Everyone wants to use electric vehicles. It might be that you are filming in such a remote place that you can’t plug in, or you can’t source a vehicle because there simply aren’t enough everywhere.

“Equally, fast-turnaround shows can be hectic, crewing up overnight, where people are trying to gather all this evidence on the fly while simultaneously following health and safety protocols and all the other requirements. The [Albert] tool takes into account, that you might have to submit what you can and follow up afterwards.”

On the other hand, she points out the innovation that came to the fore during lockdown, including when *The Big Night In* was sourced mainly through user-generated content on Zoom and *Winterwatch* used local crews and hydrogen generators. She says: “This is an opportunity for

for people. They know what the ask is and what the solutions are. This isn’t going away, so we want everyone to get comfortable with that.”

While signing up to the scheme is free, one of Albert’s biggest tools is its provision for companies to offset their carbon footprint with a financial sum. “Our mantra is: avoid and reduce – but what is left, you can offset,” explains Taylor. “There’s an incentive to get it as low as possible, so the fee is as low as possible. Our scheme costs £9 per tonne, but it isn’t mandatory to use ours to achieve certification.”

Over on the set of *Guilt*, where Sill is monitoring all her log sheets and entering fresh data into her Albert calculations, wherever possible replacing tungsten bulbs with LED lighting, she attests to the deep sense of satisfaction of seeing that offset figure reduce in real time.

“It makes you want to look for new solutions,” she says. “It makes you think: ‘What are we doing already, and how can we keep going?’” ■



SAC

Bang

TV's war on carbon

Many TV producers have been making great efforts to cut their carbon footprint over the past few years. There is still much more to do behind the camera, but more attention is now being given to environmental messages on-screen.

The panel assembled for an RTS Cymru Wales event this month boasted the two winners of the Edinburgh TV Festival Green Award. Roger Williams's bilingual cop series *Bang* won the inaugural award in 2020, while Sky Sports, represented on the panel by its manager for responsible production, Jo Finon, won this year.

Joining them on the panel were Greg Mothersdale, environmental lead at South Wales screen and TV body Clwstwr, and Sally Mills, head of operations and sustainability lead for BBC Studios.

Williams, who heads his own indie, Joio TV, said: "I was a writer [and] my carbon footprint personally was very low – I worked at home before most

The RTS in Wales examines how far we've got with sustainable production and on-screen recognition of the environmental crisis

people worked from home.... It was only when I became responsible for the means of production that I realised [how we could be more sustainable].... I would be on set and observe the waste.

"I always had people saying to me: 'We haven't got enough money to make this show.' That was a constant refrain.... I thought I could get people to change their behaviour [and adopt] sustainable thinking.... I realised that it could save us money."

The first series of *Bang* saw the producers take some environmentally correct, albeit obvious, decisions: not driving actors into the central Port Talbot production base, they let the train take the strain; no printed call

sheets; and no wasteful paper cups.

For series 2, sustainability informed the production budget, which, at just £350,000 per hour, was tight. "There was a real effort not to move – that was our key commitment," recalled Williams. "We realised if we went too far from our base, we would pay for that in terms of location fees, moving the unit, caterers.... Because Port Talbot is such a key character to the drama, [we made] a concerted effort to stay within our building or just a stone's throw away.

"A lot of our impact in terms of sustainability was being hyper local.... I'd written the script so I [could ensure] we didn't stray too far from base." The series's three key locations were all within walking distance of the production's main base.

Sky Sports's Finon said: "When I joined the industry 15 years ago, it was incredibly fossil-fuel heavy, a travelling circus essentially."

Internationally, Sky Sports started to roll out remote productions six years ago in golf, tennis, rugby and Formula One. Domestically, remote production has been boosted by the

Covid-19 pandemic, as has the use of regional crews. “We can reduce our footprint, [in terms of] the quantity of people and kit that travel, by 50%, which is massive,” said Finon.

In the past year, Sky Sports has introduced biofuel (hydrotreated vegetable oil) for outside broadcast trucks and generators. “It’s not the end goal but it’s a step towards a greener solution,” she noted.

Sky Sports does about 800 outside broadcasts a year and its various green initiatives, such as remote production or LED lighting, need to work “across the board” to keep costs down. “Everything we have introduced is either flat, cheaper or a tiny incremental cost,” revealed Finon.

Mothersdale described Clwstwr’s role as one of “making greener choices easier... in a sector where it’s hard to make different decisions when you’re still trying to get the content in the can. We’re trying to make the sector move forward collaboratively.”

The BBC, like Sky and the other big UK broadcasters, has set a goal of net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2030. “If you look back 10 years, when [sustainable production scheme] Albert was set up, a lot of the industry came together.... That off-screen journey towards reducing carbon – we’re all aiming for net zero – has developed very well... but there’s still more to do,” said Mills.

Echoing Finon, she said: “I wouldn’t want to belittle the terribleness of the Covid pandemic but... it has forced people to make change and some of that has been for [the benefit of] sustainability.”

Mills revealed that BBC Studios had made *The Year Earth Changed* for Apple TV+ using drones, lots of local crews and not a single international flight – “an extraordinary thing on a massive Natural History Unit show such as that”.

This month, the BBC and 11 other UK broadcasters and streamers signed the Climate Content Pledge, which recognises their responsibility to help audiences understand climate change. “People are recognising the power of our voice,” said Mills.

During the first week of November, and timed to coincide with the COP 26 conference in Glasgow, seven soaps – *Casualty*, *Coronation Street*, *Doctors*, *EastEnders*, *Emmerdale*, *Holby City* and *Hollyoaks* – contained scenes addressing different aspects of climate change.

Finon said that, in the past, Sky Sports



Picturehouse Entertainment

commentators tended not to address climate-change issues editorially: “We would never connect a cricket match being rained off... or air pollution... with climate change. Now we are committed to using our voice more.

“We’re not going to talk about it every match, but, where it’s relevant... where there are solar panels on the roof, or the club or players are doing something brilliant, we want to talk about it because it is so important.”

Williams has now made a Welsh-language eco-horror, set in Snowdonia, *Gwledd (The Feast)*, which screened at last month’s BFI London Film Festival. “I’m interested in how, as creative people and writers, we can

build in sustainability to the narrative [of] our dramas,” he said.

The Feast, Williams explained, has “at the heart of it... a message about the individual’s relationship to the Earth... and how the Earth takes revenge on a family who betray [it].

“It’s a tricky thing to get right, creatively. [Challenging] audiences within the narrative can feel clunky, it can feel added on.” But, ultimately, he suggested, producers and broadcasters “have a responsibility to prompt people”. ■

Report by Matthew Bell. The RTS Cymru Wales event, ‘COP a load of this’ was held on 11 November. It was chaired by Owen Williams.

When Hwang Dong-hyuk's *Squid Game* launched on 17 September, for viewers outside

its algorithmic pull, it was buried deep within Netflix's content offer. But, over the next four weeks, this idiosyncratic show snowballed to reach 142 million households (there's a viewership figure that Netflix didn't mind sharing), overtaking *Bridgerton* to become the streamer's most-watched series launch ever.

By some estimates, this show alone will be worth \$900m (£666m) to Netflix. An eye-watering sum for any producer – and that was before the streamer confirmed in early November that it was ordering a second season. It may seem like an unexpected hit, but could this runaway success have been predicted?

“From an editor's point of view, it is often mystifying which shows become popular,” says Hannah Davies, *The Guardian's* deputy TV editor. “Sports comedies don't always do that well but now people are calling *Ted Lasso* the most joyous show on TV.

“*Maid*, the recent Netflix series that, on first impressions, potentially borders on poverty porn, really captured viewers' imaginations. *Squid Game*, too, seems to have all the elements for a perfect storm.”

While no one could have foretold the extent of *Squid Game's* culture-shifting appeal, the elements that led to this “perfect storm” were gathering from the start.

If content is king, the reason behind *Squid Game's* success is ultimately its compelling story of a disparate and desperate group of down-and-outs in deep financial trouble, who compete to the death in children's games to win a life-changing jackpot.

“It's *Hunger Games* meets *La Casa de Papel* [*Money Heist*] meets *Survivor* meets *Grand Theft Auto* meets *Crackerjack!*,” says Andy Harries, CEO of Left Bank Pictures, which makes *The Crown* for Netflix. “Despite all the familiar tropes from a range of different experiences, it is a very original series in its own right.”

Its themes resonate loudly in 2021. Like *Maid*, it highlights the human cost of a widening class divide. And just when we thought competitive reality



Netflix

The Korean serial killer

Squid Game's huge popularity is boosting Netflix but **Shilpa Ganatra** believes its success should not have come as such a surprise

shows had nowhere left to go, their tropes are given a grotesque twist in *Squid Game* and prove to be just as compelling.

The show's emotional heart is another boon, says Jane Tranter, co-founder of Bad Wolf and executive producer on *Succession*. “What they are going through is so horrendous, and the piece so very firmly places you in it, asking, ‘What would you do?’

“Once you get to this situation, what is the right and wrong? Everyone wants to live. Everyone's frightened of dying. Sometimes, life is so horrendous that

you'll make a bolder stand than you would have done otherwise. It showed great compassion and mercy in a format that was absolutely devoid of that.”

There's no denying that Korea's emerging role as a cultural powerhouse helped the series to gain momentum. K-pop came first, with acts such as Blackpink and BTS becoming some of the biggest names in pop globally. And once Bong Joon-ho's horror movie *Parasite* became the first non-English language film to win Best Picture at the Oscars in February 2020, it became clear that Korea was a

hotbed of talent. Not, of course, forgetting the global phenomenon that was *The Masked Singer*.

But it required deep pockets and far-reaching connections to turn the country's creative potential to success on western screens. Enter Netflix. Alongside such "K-drama" successes as *Sweet Home* and *Kingdom* in 2020 alone, Netflix pumped \$500m into Korean original programming – a staggering figure that was likely to pay dividends at some point.

"This is not a cheap little show that has popped up out of nowhere," says Harries. "It's a bit like *The Crown*. Although we could have made a success of *The Crown* elsewhere, we wouldn't have been able to do it the way we did if we hadn't gone to Netflix.

"Hwang would have said to Netflix that he could do *Squid Game* for two bob, but it wouldn't really work, and Netflix had the guts, I assume, to agree to do it properly. Then, because they've done it properly, it really works."

Subtitled in 37 languages and dubbed in 34, it appeared on our screens primed for a global viewership. The series's \$21.4m budget allowed for a premium production, including the vast swathes of uniformed guards that, as Harries points out, evoke the chilling imagery of fascism. And the money supported a bold set design, striking in its juxtaposition of playground visuals with its twisted premise and gory violence.

"It's such a singular, recognisable proposition and it became very meme-worthy," says Davies. "It has this rich stream of things that took off quickly on TikTok and Instagram. I remember seeing the tracksuits, logo, symbols and honeycomb before I'd even watched it. That's not something that every show on TV can replicate, and it keeps it in the cultural conversation."

That in itself made it easier to build coverage in traditional media. "When something grows organically, it makes a journalist's job more interesting," says Davies. "At *The Guardian*, we could do things like interview the creator who said that he lost six teeth in the process, interview the VIPs and we did a piece on whether the subtitles were actually accurate. Sometimes, letting things just percolate isn't the worst thing in the world."

Squid Game's appeal also relates to

the structure of the series. Tranter says: "I liked not having to wait a week between the episodes, but I got a lot watching it on a Monday, thinking about it, and then watching it the following evening. It had a very cliff-hangery, old-fashioned, highly serialised element to it.

"You don't often talk about formats in this way with a drama, but, because it's a competition reality show, where the stakes are the highest they could be, you know at the end there will be one winner. You know by the amount of screen time who are going to be the

of American shows is being exposed a bit. When American shows are good, they're really good. But, given the amount of American shows that go on Netflix every week, it's interesting that the ones that are cutting through are often non-American shows."

While some may see *Squid Game* as the start of a "death-game drama" resurrection, Davies warns that "people don't necessarily want *Squid Game* copy and paste".

For Tranter, the contained, sparse set that went against the grain of current productions piqued her interest. "It put



Netflix

last ones standing, but you don't know the particular combination of it, or how or why."

While it wasn't perfect – Tranter calls the bluntly drawn depiction of the VIPs "impactfully disappointing" – all in all, *Squid Game* may show us the direction of travel for TV drama. For starters, there seems to be a stronger stomach for gore and violence. Additionally, watching subtitled shows is no longer the reserve of arthouse programmes.

"It doesn't spearhead it, but it confirms the pattern of increasing success with drama shows that aren't from the US," adds Harries. "*Lupin* from France, *Barbarians* from Germany and *The Crown* and *Succession*, which is largely a British show, provide further evidence.

"The mediocrity of a great number

the nature of the human condition under the microscope in a heightened way. If a good trend could come out of it, it would be about simplifying a production, and allowing it to be all about text and performance."

Does the expansion of global competition mean that British dramatists should be worried? Not according to Harries. "Any competition is healthy," he says. "In terms of coming up with original ideas, we've got to remain fresh and up to the challenge because there's no doubt that you're seeing shows from all over the world pop up with great success.

"But we've got some of the best people in the world making television here, so we're always going to produce strong work." ■

Why the small things matter



Climate Change: Ade on the Frontline

BBC

“One of my first TV shows was about endangered animals around the world,” recalls presenter Ade Adepitan. “When I met with the producer and director, they told me: ‘This show is going to involve scuba diving in the Great Barrier Reef, trekking through the jungle in South Africa and Namibia, and hiking up mountains in Romania. We don’t want you to feel under any pressure, but is this something you think you can do?’ I said: ‘When do we start?’ I’m the sort of person who takes things on and then finds the solution as we go along.”

“When a disability becomes frustrating is when decisions are made for you and before you’ve had a chance to have any input. Often, if you sit down with that disabled person, you can find solutions. If we can send someone to the moon, we can make TV sets accessible.”

As an intrepid presenter and wheelchair user, Adepitan has seen the agility and creativity of the TV industry

Shilpa Ganatra discovers how, for disabled people working in TV, even minor adjustments can pay big dividends

applied to uncover these solutions. One example he cites is a camera operator on location during another production who, rather than film Adepitan from above or crouch in a way that would be bad for his back, asked to borrow a spare wheelchair to film from.

The result was “completely different and far more immersive” footage, says Adepitan. “It wasn’t a big adjustment. We didn’t have to call in Elon Musk to come up with a groundbreaking idea. It was just thinking outside of the box and using simple ideas to make life easier for all of us.”

Diversity is increasing in other areas, too. The stunning performances of the deaf contestant, *EastEnders* actor Rose

Ayling-Ellis, in the current series of *Strictly Come Dancing* has raised the issue of deafness with huge audiences and has been inspirational for deaf people, demonstrating that deafness can have no limits.

The show has also been praised by deaf charities for incorporating sign language and gestures, including the Makaton sign for thank you. And, in one unforgettable moment, as her tribute to the deaf community, the music was stopped midway through the routine while Ayling-Ellis and her partner continued the dance in silence.

However, across the industry, deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people face a daunting range of practical challenges. A recent survey by The Sir Lenny Henry Centre for Media Diversity found that long, irregular hours were a consideration for 65% of disabled people working in TV. Issues such as being unable to drive or physically use equipment was a consideration for 51%, while 14% needed assistance from other people, such as support workers

or British Sign Language interpreters.

As the social model of disability emphasises, it's not the impairment that's the problem but the lack of adjustments available on, say, the studio floor or location. "Everyone has things they can and can't do," says director, producer and presenter Richard Butchins, director of BBC Two's *Targeted: The Truth About Disability Hate Crime*. "No one thinks someone who wears glasses is disabled – because the adaptation is effective. But imagine a world without glasses...."

He adds: "I self-shoot, and I shoot well, and tech helps me with that because it means you're less reliant on physical factors."

Technologies such as screen readers, live captioning and well-designed hardware have become much more sophisticated in recent years. These help deal with some of the issues disabled people face regularly.

Actor and writer Genevieve Barr, who starred in BBC One crime drama *The Silence*, agrees: "As a deaf screenwriter who is oral [ie, who uses verbal communication], I prefer video calls employing live automated captions. The adjustments in environments during Covid have been a really positive change – people are more willing to communicate this way, and there have been rapid improvements in technology to enable automated captions."

Though the pandemic has seen the overall employment gap between disabled and non-disabled people widen, one positive aspect has been that home working is now more accepted – a move embraced by many disabled (and non-disabled) people.

It demonstrates, says Sam Tatlow, a creative diversity partner at ITV, that the industry is capable of significant change: "Two years ago, when working on a production, the very thought of doing so from home was an alien concept.

"For a long time, there has been resistance to changing how we do things because of the fast turnarounds.... There's never enough money and enough time to deliver what we're producing at the quality that we want to deliver. But the past 18 months has proved that there is some flexibility."

The 2010 Equality Act created a legal obligation for an employer to make reasonable adjustments to overcome barriers for disabled employees. "But what is and isn't considered reasonable is a grey area," says Tatlow. "Ultimately, it's about enabling disabled

people to do the job that they've been hired to do."

Butchins suggests that budgets should have room in them for supportive measures to help disabled staff. "I always argue that the tariffs broadcasters pay are predicated on [shows] being made by able-bodied people," he says. "There is still some implicit reluctance to use disabled people as decision-makers think it will make the production more difficult or more expensive.

"But if it costs you a little more to use



'DISABILITY BECOMES FRUSTRATING WHEN DECISIONS ARE MADE FOR YOU'

someone who's disabled, do it. You'll easily get your money back, because disabled people have something to prove, so they'll work hard. And you'll find that different point of view that production companies are looking for."

Tatlow adds: "Often, it doesn't cost a lot. The practicality of it might involve doing things slightly differently, such as adjusted working hours so that rests can be taken throughout the day.

"When things do cost money, it's often not very much. I'm a wheelchair user and I make use of the Access to Work scheme [a state-funded initiative to support any special requirements

for disabled people]. It pays for my taxi from the train station to the office. But, in the gap between me starting at ITV and having the scheme in place, ITV paid for it."

The biggest consideration for disabled people is one that costs nothing to adjust: the attitudes of their colleagues.

Seventy-one per cent of disabled people surveyed say they think about it when they consider their work options. Of course, budgeted training and information provision do help, but a shift in the mindset of co-workers alone could lead to a better working environment.

With only 5.8% of off-screen workers in the UK TV sector being disabled, compared with about 20% of the working-age population, broadcasters say they are keen to redress this balance. ITV aims to have 12% of its workforce made up of disabled people by 2022; Sky's target is 10% of off-screen production by 2023, while Channel 4's entry-level trainee scheme says that it particularly welcomes disabled people.

The BBC's Elevate scheme concentrates on the issue of disabled people leaving the industry after working for a few years.

And a recently announced joint Netflix and BBC scheme is directed at raising the number of shows that are written, created or co-created by deaf, disabled or neurodivergent people over the next five years.

But far more can be done. The Creative Diversity Network is pushing for changes to the Access to Work scheme to make the funding more practical for an industry reliant on speed and short-term contracts.

In his MacTaggart Lecture at the 2021 Edinburgh TV Festival, dramatist Jack Thorne announced that he, Barr and production manager Katie Player had founded Underlying Health Condition, a pressure group to tackle the lack of representation and accessibility for disabled people in British TV.

This month, they begin their activities with a survey and report on studio spaces and facilities companies. "The accessibility issue is profound and – as pointed out by the survey and real case studies – deeply troubling," says Barr. "There's plenty of motivation out there for change, but there is a need for something more substantive.

"Disability is a complicated nut to crack, and intent is not enough. Change is happening at a glacial pace, and we are asking for something better." ■



Rt Hon Nadine Dorries MP,
Secretary of State, DCMS

Roger Stone/News UK

Enter Nadine Dorries

If you like your politicians colourful and outspoken, look no further than Nadine Dorries, the 13th Secretary of State for the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport in the past 14 years. As an *Observer* profile recently noted, most people agree that she is “a character”.

Unusually for a serving MP, she famously appeared in the 2012 season of ITV’s *I’m a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!*, where she was the first contestant to be voted out. This was despite winning a Bushtucker Trial by consuming a lamb’s testicle and an ostrich’s anus. Some of her fellow MPs – she entered Parliament in 2005 – were not amused. She was punished for abandoning her constituents by having the Conservative Party whip temporarily withdrawn.

In the interim, her political star has risen, thanks, in part, to her devoted loyalty to one Boris Johnson. Surprise

Steve Clarke profiles the new culture secretary, ex-reality TV star and bestselling author, who holds the future of the BBC and Channel 4 in her hands

and even incredulity were two common reactions to her ministerial promotion in mid-September, one of the results of a particularly brutal cull at what was once known as the Ministry of Fun. “Not only was John Whittingdale, who understood broadcasting deeply, sacked, most of the other ministers at DCMS were also got rid of,” notes one interested observer. “This has meant a steep learning curve for Nadine Dorries.”

Her elevation comes at a crucial time for the UK broadcasting sector. A new media bill is promised in the new year, and the Online Safety Bill continues its slow progress through Parliament.

Born in Liverpool, part of her childhood was spent on a council estate in Runcorn. She has described times when her family used to hide from the rent man when they had no money to pay him, and how, “on some days, there would be no food”.

Her father was a bus driver, who died early in her nursing career (she trained as a nurse at Warrington General Hospital). She left the region when she met her partner, Paul Dorries, a mining engineer who became a financial adviser. The couple spent a year in Zambia in the mid-1980s, where he ran a copper mine and she headed what she has described as a community school.

On her return to the UK, she founded Company Kids Ltd, a child day-care

service for working parents. Dorries sold the business to Bupa, the private healthcare company, in 1998, and it was then that she set her sights on politics, becoming an MP in 2005.

The arts and media community's reaction to her appointment has been, to put it mildly, sceptical. Playwright and screenwriter James Graham, an acute witness of British politicians and their aides, said: "I never want to be an artist who rolls their eyes every time there's a new culture secretary. Nevertheless, it's a bit worrying that it feels like an appointment deliberately designed to needle and provoke. That might be unfair, and I hope it's not."

He spoke for many when he added: "I'd prefer rhetoric from a minister who is supportive and wants to amplify and champion the sector."

Opinion in political circles on Dorries' abilities is divided. Her critics regard her as an eccentric, unpredictable figure who might be better off sticking to writing bestsellers than serving as a Cabinet minister.

Others, however, insist that she is a super-bright Parliamentarian who has risen to every political challenge presented to her (she was appointed Minister of State at the Department of Health and Social Care in May 2020).

For them, her maverick behaviour is driven by a desire to show the male Tory establishment that, despite being brought up on a Liverpool council estate, she is in every sense their equal. "This explains why Nadine can be spikey and even chippy," says someone who has watched her way of operating.

Stewart Purvis, a former CEO of ITN and Ofcom board member and now a non-executive director of Brentford FC, inclines towards the latter view, having seen how quickly she grasped a complex brief concerning the ownership of football clubs during her first day in the Commons as Secretary of State.

"The day after she was appointed, it



Nadine Dorries on *I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!* 2012

ITV

was her turn to do departmental questions and she was asked a question about the Brentford Golden Share. This is a fairly esoteric issue, where fans can choose a director and hold a golden share in the club, and might be used as a model in the Government's new football policy.

"She was right across this and knew all the detail. You may have laughed at her when she appeared on *I'm a Celebrity...* but, to me, this showed she was very quick to master her brief."

Her populist credentials are strong. As well as appearing on *I'm a Celebrity...* and writing Mills & Boon-style novels, she is a devoted fan of *Coronation Street*, something that was clear when she recently visited the soap's set.

"Unlike most other culture secretaries, it was obvious that she was a regular viewer of the *Street*," notes a witness to her visit. "It was also clear that she was very keen on opportunities for

people who are under-represented in TV. She spent more time talking to young, diverse apprentices on the set than to anyone else."

This desire to encourage people like herself to thrive in a sector still regarded as being too posh for its own good squares with her recent attack on what she regards as the BBC's tendency towards nepotism, when she accused the organisation of group-think. "We're having a discussion about how the BBC can become more representative of the people... who pay the licence fee, and how it can be more accessible to people from all backgrounds, not just people whose mum and dad work there, and how it can become, once again, that beacon for everyone," she told a journalist from the *Daily Telegraph*.

Dorries added: "I want the arts and culture, and the BBC and other organisations, and journalism, [to create] a ▶

‘SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES: TAKE NOTE NOW. WHEN HARM IS CAUSED, WE’RE COMING AFTER IT’

› pathway from my background, from my working-class roots, into that sector, because that pathway has completely disappeared. To me, that’s what levelling up is about.”

Is she about to inflict financial pain on the BBC by, in effect, cutting the licence fee? The speculation is that the new level of the fee, negotiated as part of the mid-term Charter review, will be a setback for Director-General Tim Davie and his Chair, Richard Sharp.

If, as reports suggest, the fee is frozen at its present level for two years before rising in line with the Consumer Price Index measure of inflation, the BBC’s ability to compete effectively with its rivals looks, to put it mildly, constrained, given the high rate of inflation in the content sector.

“Nadine needs a win over the BBC,” says a senior broadcaster, who predicts more tough decisions for Davie as the corporation decides how to deal with what will constitute a financial crisis if the fee is frozen.

“A two-year freeze would be awful for the BBC,” says Colin Browne, Chair of the Voice of the Listener and Viewer. “One year would be bad. Either way, the cuts that would need to be made would be visible and audible to viewers and listeners.”

Adding to Broadcasting House’s fears is the prospect that the ex-*Daily Mail* editor, BBC-basher-in-chief Paul Dacre, could be appointed Chair of Ofcom, despite him failing the initial interview process.

Away from the licence fee, another broadcasting minefield Dorries needs to negotiate is whether Channel 4 should remain in public ownership. Those who oppose selling the broadcaster might be forgiven for thinking that, with Oliver Dowden and John Whittingdale – both cheerleaders for privatisation – removed from the DCMS, privatising Channel 4 is no longer a priority for the Government.

On the contrary, say people who believe the policy comes straight from Downing Street. They think that Dorries will be only too eager and willing to deliver it. Compared with

the complex and politically treacherous task of wrestling with regulating the internet, making Channel 4 a private company could present an easy win for Dorries. And one that



would look good from a legacy perspective, as she contemplates a future, and bigger, Cabinet role in Johnson’s administration.

“The combination of No 10 and Nadine Dorries makes it more likely that Channel 4 will be privatised. She’s tough, so I think she will be quite fearless about it,” says a senior broadcaster.

From the perspective of a culture warrior, what could provide a more appropriate scalp than Channel 4? The station is still seen by those on the right of the political spectrum as synonymous with the well-heeled, liberal metropolitan elite, who, not so long ago, ridiculed the Johnson Government’s approach to climate change in the 2019 general election campaign.

Moreover, the prospect of

Channel 4 being owned by an existing UK broadcaster or foreign media giant may appeal to Dorries’ instincts as a successful businessperson.

“There is an argument for the consolidation of UK broadcasters and, if Dorries understands that, she is more likely to privatise Channel 4,” adds the broadcaster.

The required legislation could easily be included in the much-heralded media white paper, now delayed from December to January.

Equally pressing is the Online Safety Bill, where Dorries has already issued a typically uncompromising clarion call. In a recent tweet, she warned, “Social media companies: take note now. When harm is caused, we’re coming after it.”

“The world is watching to see how we legislate to deal with online abuse, harm and disinformation. We will lead the way and we will not disappoint.”

However, it is action not rhetoric that will determine Dorries’ success, or otherwise, as culture secretary. And no one needs reminding that DCMS Secretaries of State are more ephemeral than a TikTok video. ■

OUR FRIEND IN THE MIDLANDS

Proud Brummie
Ed Shedd
celebrates
his region's
renaissance

The West Midlands sits at the heart of the country. It's not just a geographical crossroads, where the nation's canals, railways and roads meet, it's a cultural crossroads, too.

The historic home of Shakespeare and Tolkien, it is also the birthplace of *Peaky Blinders* and creative tour de force Sir Lenny Henry, backdrop to *Great British Menu* and *The Archers*, and Leamington Spa (or Silicon Spa) is a centre of global video games production. Oh, and Coventry is UK City of Culture 2021.

One of the youngest, most diverse regions in Europe, the West Midlands is a cultural smorgasbord, where more than 100 languages are spoken. It is full of talented people with stories to tell and a desire to explore all forms of content creation to tell them – from TV to film, VR to AR, theatre to video games. At Create Central, we are determined to make sure they get the chance.

Create Central was set up in late 2019 by the creative community in the West Midlands to promote the region as the “Home of Original Storytelling”. Business-led and backed by key local creatives such as Steven Knight, Debbie Isitt and Kit de Waal (and many, many more), we are on a mission to turbocharge the region's creative content sector.

As a first step, in February of this year, Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership announced a £3m investment in an £18m creative content hub in the



Create Central

heart of Birmingham. An early brain-child of Create Central's founding members, this campus-style hub will act as a magnet for new talent and creative companies across the region, as well as existing indies, such as North One and Optomen.

Recognising the importance of the public service broadcasters investing much more in the region than at present, this announcement was swiftly followed in March by the signing of a major partnership agreement with the BBC.

Backed by the Mayor of the West Midlands, Andy Street, as well as Create Central, this includes specific commitments to the region – three prime-time factual shows will move to Birmingham; there will be a new network drama series and a new

network entertainment show; and BBC Asian Network will return to Brum and be joined by BBC Radio 1 *Newsbeat*.

But the importance of the agreement goes far beyond the specifics. Tim Davie and his team have been enthusiastic partners and share our desire to ensure that the BBC's investment in the region generates a wider creative evolution, with the licence fee acting as venture capital for our local creative economy.

Of course, it's not just about the BBC. We are actively talking to other major broadcasters in the UK, including Channel 4, which remains for us a crucial partner if we are to achieve our ambitions for the local indie sector.

We are also focusing on the international market. Investment in film and high-end TV in the UK is at near record levels, and 80% of this is inward investment, so we absolutely want to build partnerships with the likes of YouTube and Netflix, too.

There will be lots more to come – not least the Birmingham Commonwealth Games and Festival in 2022 and Steven Knight's Mercian Studios. The journey ahead will doubtless be long and arduous, but it will also be fun. To echo Samwise Gamage in JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, “It's the job that's never started as takes longest to finish.” So, we've decided that we better get on with it. ■

Ed Shedd is Chair of Create Central and runs Deloitte's north and south Europe Technology, Media & Telecoms Practice.

Our obsession with Succession

Series 3 of the HBO hit is breaking audience records. **Caitlin Danaher** explores why the despicable Roys are so popular



Succession season 3

Sky

In August 2020, as the pandemic raged in the US, a tweet by LA-based writer Julia Claire went viral: “Do people understand that if they don’t wear their masks and physically distance, we’re never going to get a third season of *Succession*???”

Now, after a two-year delay, HBO’s

hit show has finally returned with all the familial backstabbing, billion-dollar machinations and poetic profanity we have come to love from the media magnate Logan Roy and his squabbling, super-rich children.

If some thought the proliferation of warm, big-hearted shows over lockdown, such as *Schitt’s Creek* and *Ted Lasso*,

signalled a cultural shift towards kindness and sincerity, then the record-breaking viewing figures for *Succession*’s third series offer a swift refutation.

Malice and megalomania are back on the menu, as Waystar’s doom-mongering CFO Karl says: “the full Baskin-Robbins 31 flavours of fuck”.

One only has to look at the rock-concert reception the series 3 premiere received at the London Film Festival to see that *Succession*, created by British writer Jesse Armstrong (co-writer of *Peep Show*), has developed into a cultural phenomenon. So, as the TV juggernaut hurtles towards its series mid-point, why are we still so enamoured by these despicably entitled people doing terrible things to each other?

“[Armstrong] has these enormous titans who rule the world and then he makes them fucked up, hopeless, fallible human beings like the rest of us,” says Jane Tranter, co-founder of Bad Wolf, who is an executive producer and a self-described “chief cheerleader” for the show. “It’s sort of Shakespearean; you learn about the nature of the human condition from characters who are way, way above where most of us live our lives. That combination of enormous power and enormous weakness makes for great viewing.”

She adds: “Not only do you have these headline, iconic television moments, you just have such nuance and bravura and daring and delicacy to the way these characters are put on screen.”

Dubbed a “super-producer” in the industry, Tranter has been in countless writers rooms over the years, but she has never witnessed one as well run as Armstrong’s. “To be clear,” she says, “it is not a democracy, but every voice is heard, and Jesse is a brilliant listener, which lots of people who run writers rooms aren’t!”

Worlds away from the outrageous

flash and scale of the Roys' lifestyles, with their superyachts, Hampton palaces and Manhattan skyscrapers, *Succession* was created in an unassuming office space in south London, described by Jeremy Strong (Kendall Roy) as a "squalid little room in Brixton".

The writing team is a near 50/50 split of British and American writers, hand-picked by Armstrong. They come from the worlds of theatre and comedy, and include playwrights Lucy Prebble and Susan Soon He Stanton, comedy writers Tony Roche and Georgia Pritchett

is a source of toe-curling horror and humiliation akin to torture, yet huge events such as rocket explosions and Senate testimonies are reduced to the ridiculous.

The series undoubtedly has a particular worldview but *Succession* is a rare example of a show that truthfully looks at characters without placing any judgement on them. As Tom Wambsgans tells his hapless sidekick Cousin Greg: "This is not fucking Charles Dickens' world. You don't go around talking about principles."

routes that, on reflection, go nowhere, but they're just part of the process," Carragher admits.

From prison consultants for white-collar criminals to cruise-line health and safety policy, all the writers are given different assignments to become mini experts in a specific area. No stone is left unturned. "We end up reading a lot of either dry or bizarre business autobiographies and mine them for stories," says Carragher.

As much as *Succession's* dark world resonates with today's socio-political currents, the writers avoid overtly specific correlations with our fast-changing reality.

"We're not in the game of predicting what America is going to look like in 12 months' time when we start writing. I think there's almost more chance of *Succession* saying something about the world we live in if the team *doesn't* try and stay ahead of the times," says Carragher. "We talk about the long-established patterns in history and politics of what people do with power. So, as much as *Succession* is a show about now, it's also very much about a larger scale of history."

Indeed, season 2's explosive finale was steeped in historical literary allusions. As Kendall left Logan's yacht to become his blood sacrifice with a Judas kiss on the cheek, his shock whistleblowing to the press left viewers reeling at the act of patricide.

Having described that finale as "a masterclass on how to end a series" when it aired, Tranter teases that the ending of the third series is even more accomplished.

"The twist feels so authentically credible and kind of obvious that, of course, that would happen. And yet it's really surprising, which is a very, very difficult thing to do but, somehow, [Jesse] does it," she enthuses. "I've read the scripts for Jesse's penultimate episode and finale, and I just sort of look at them and think, 'How the fuck?' So, yes, I said that about season 2 and I believe it. But you know what? Season 3 is even better."

With all the top-secret information that Tranter has about each of the Roy children vying for Logan's throne, does she have a desired successor?

"Listen, as a mother of twins, there's no such thing as having a favourite. I love all the Roy siblings," she says. "But I don't want any of them to win. I want them all to lose big time." ■



Succession season 2 finale

SKY

(who wrote for *Veep* and *The Thick of It*), and Will Tracy, former editor-in-chief of the satirical news website *The Onion*.

This blend of disciplines proved crucial in nailing *Succession's* unique tone, at once a psychological drama and an absurd comedy, which became the blueprint for the series. "An awful lot of work went into finding that tone in editorial on season 1, and that work continued in seasons 2 and 3 in order to ensure that we are keeping what makes *Succession* "succession-y," Tranter says. "That biting humanity to it. Serious things are treated lightly, and light things are treated seriously, and it's all done with a good sloshing of darkness around it."

With characters who have a seemingly clinical aversion to saying what they truly mean, viewers are made to learn *Succession's* distinctive lexicon of unrelenting irony. It's a murky world, where an after-dinner game of "Boar on the Floor" on a corporate away-day

In the absence of a moral centre, the writers can let loose with inventing deliciously acerbic dialogue and depraved psychological character insights that make the show so much fun to watch.

Staff writer Jamie Carragher recalls a particularly hilarious instance where Armstrong's riffing on a conversation between Roman and Gerri reduced him to tears of laughter. "It was pretty hard labour on the ribs. I feel like that's some sort of workplace bullying, having to type down this killer dialogue that you're terrified of losing because it's making you cry," he jokes.

But alongside the hysterics is a huge level of hard graft that goes into building the world of the show. Such is the intensity of the research that each season the writers produce a super-document known as "The Meg", containing up to 300 pages of potential storylines that didn't quite make the cut. "You do end up going down some

Poor, little rich girl or heartless killer? That's the question posed by *Showtrial*, the latest drama from the company behind *Line of Duty* and *Vigil*, World Productions. But BBC One's current Sunday-night series is far more than a whodunit.

Posh, arrogant and, frankly, thoroughly unlikeable, Talitha Campbell (played by Celine Buckens) has been charged with conspiring to murder a fellow university student. She chooses Cleo Roberts (Tracy Ifeachor), the duty solicitor on the night of her arrest, to lead her defence against a prosecution set on using her privilege and sexual behaviour against her.

The 5x60-minute drama, which began its run at the end of last month, escalates from a routine murder investigation to a national talking point, becoming, in effect, a show trial.

The series "uses the DNA of our true-crime obsession to create a gripping fictional murder trial that shines a light on the failings of our justice system", according to World Productions' CEO Simon Heath.

Creator and writer Ben Richards set out to explore how the right to a fair trial and the idea of reasonable doubt can be distorted when a woman's "past and sexuality have been brought into play".

"Many cases have fed into the making of *Showtrial*; it borrows from a lot of different places. Issues of class, race and gender are really important in the show, but they're being revealed by the show; they're not necessarily driving it," explained Richards, who was talking at an RTS event in October.

The writer, whose impressive television CV includes *Spooks*, *The Tunnel* and current Sky One hit drama *Cobra*, added: "It may well be the case that, on balance, you might think Talitha is guilty but that's not enough – you have to prove this case so that people don't have reasonable doubt about it... [*Showtrial*] asks a lot of moral questions about the justice system."

Buckens, who starred in the Netflix series *Free Rein*, was thrilled to get the nod for the role and to play such a "layered and complex character". She said: "She's a character who is clearly very, very privileged but her experience growing up... wasn't solely positive. There's a dark side that's explored

Tracy Ifeachor
as Cleo Roberts
in *Showtrial*



English justice on trial

Showtrial, from the makers of *Line of Duty*, asks big questions about how we judge women who find themselves in the dock

BBC

[in the drama]. The other aspect of Talitha is her sexuality, which people really seize on and make a cornerstone of her identity in a way that is unfair and, I think, gendered.”

Since appearing in *Doctor Who* 12 years ago, Ifeachor has built a successful career in the US, recently starring in action series *Treadstone*. “It’s great to come back to England and do something that really matters, and not just [as a] story, but that matters to my community and everybody who looks like me,” said the British Nigerian actor. “I’ve always had such a love of the legal system and I actually wanted to be a lawyer – it was [a choice] between law and acting.”

To prepare for the role, Ifeachor attended a couple of court cases in Bristol, where *Showtrial* is set and was filmed. She also sat in with two barristers during pre-trial discussions. “It was amazing the way they talked to each other and the way they used the legal system to the advantage of their client, even if they knew their client was guilty,” she said.

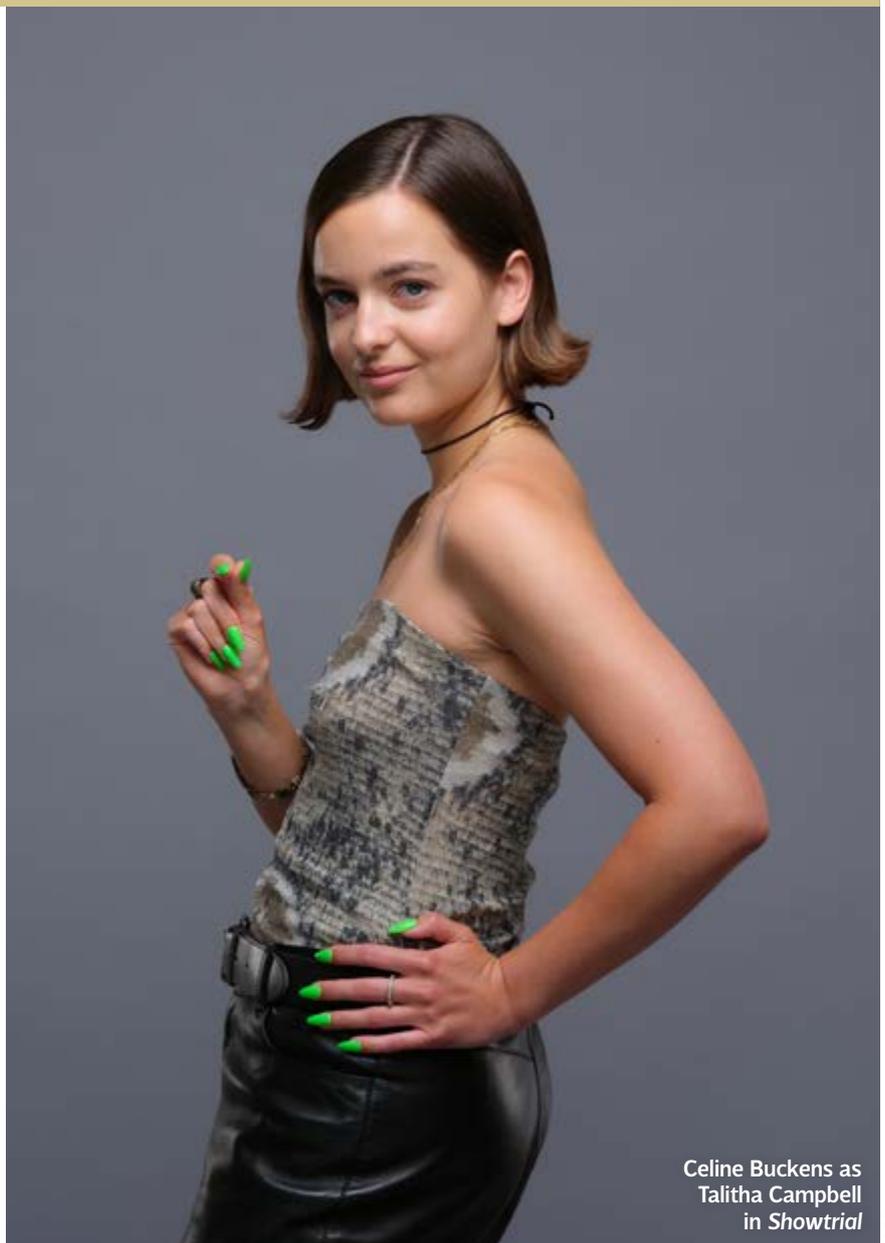
Ifeachor also sought advice from real-life black solicitor advocate Cecilia Goodwin: “I wanted to find someone who looked like Cleo, was about her age and doing what Cleo does.”

Director Zara Hayes is a leading documentary film-maker who has recently turned to drama. Her debut movie, *Poms*, starring acting legend Diana Keaton, was released in 2019.

On the surface, *Showtrial*’s two leads are playing wildly contrasting characters but, said Hayes: “These two women see something in each other from the beginning... they have very different life experiences but they’re not pleasers. So much of the female role from a young age is about pleasing people.

“Something that really drew me to the script and these lead characters, in particular, is to see women who aren’t just immediately trying to put other people at ease, making them laugh or flirting with them or whatever those things are that women are meant to do in [such] situations. There’s a kind of anarchy to both of them, a rebel status, that I love.”

Buckens added: “The fact that Talitha doesn’t please and that she’s unlikeable... doesn’t mean she’s guilty – that was the crux of [*Showtrial*] for me.... The show forces you to go beyond your snap judgements.”



Celine Buckens as Talitha Campbell in *Showtrial*

BBC

Ifeachor concurred: “As a woman, we don’t get to walk into [a room] in the same way as a middle-class man.... Both Cleo and Talitha understand what it’s like to be on the receiving end of a snap judgement.”

Like Ifeachor, Hayes once thought about a career in law and remains fascinated by it: “[We have] the best imperfect system that we could find, yet it’s really flawed.”

Showtrial drew on legal and police advisers throughout the production process. “We had a barrister on set with us,” recalled Hayes. He was able to step in when the script took too many liberties with English law. “We’re all so used to watching American stuff that some of the ideas we had about how we should [shoot] certain scenes were coming from this fictional American system...”

Richards interrupted, joking: “I’d have had them shouting ‘objection’ and a judge with a gavel...”

Hayes continued: “There’s always a line between good drama and storytelling and being true to [the law], but we tried to [tread] the line carefully and be as authentic as we could be.”

Richards added a riposte: “I don’t care, let them go on Twitter and moan about it.”

Showtrial raises some searching questions about the English legal system but, said Richards: “Over and above all else, we want people to be gripped and be talking about, ‘Did she do it?’ – that’s the essence of the show.” ■

Report by Matthew Bell. The RTS event ‘Showtrial preview and Q&A’ was held on 27 October, chaired by Yasmin Evans and produced by the RTS and the BBC.

The channel's revamp of *Married at First Sight* is one of the year's surprise hits. RTS Futures hears how it was done

Critics might argue that the global reality show *Married at First Sight* makes a mockery of marriage. But, perhaps, behind all the make-up, fake tans, glamorous honeymoons and emotional drama sits a programme that, ultimately, provides people with the opportunity to find love and friendship.

An RTS Futures event in October heard how the UK version of the show, launched originally on Channel 4 in 2015, evolved in its latest, sixth series into a beefed-up incarnation on E4, where it has become the channel's most successful show of 2021.

The format, which originated in Denmark, sees strangers matched by a panel of experts and married when they meet for the first time. In their old guise, UK series ran at most to five episodes and featured two to four couples.

The new version was stripped nightly and emulated *Married at First Sight Australia*, which was popular on E4 during lockdown, and had eight couples seeking true love.

Commissioning editor Lee McMurray revealed that he was anxious about whether the revamped show would be able to replicate the emotional impact of the Australian show, given the UK's regulated broadcasting system.

"We can't manipulate footage in the way that other territories can, so would we be able to achieve that level of emotion and drama? But, by God, we did," he said. "I was pleasantly surprised. It was what kept people coming back for more. The cast always surprises you. It's what keeps you on your toes.

"It's great TV, but we've got to be mindful of the contributors' emotions. They're human beings. It's important that we look after them and provide the support they need."

Describing himself as "a conduit and gatekeeper for new ideas", McMurray oversaw the switch of *Married at First Sight* from Channel 4 to E4.



Channel 4

He explained to RTS Futures that it was his job to sign off on the cast and crew, the format, the locations, and the final edit. His work also involved being aware of how the show would be scheduled, marketed and promoted. "My job is multifaceted and exhausting, but it can be a lot of fun as well," he said.

After four series on Channel 4, McMurray and the production company, CPL, turned their attention to refreshing the show. The plan was to extend the run to eight episodes and

revamp it to include a new match-making team. Then the pandemic scuppered these plans.

But the health crisis provided a blessing in disguise for the show, with *Married at First Sight Australia's* lockdown success on E4 inspiring the new, 20-episode show that debuted in the UK this August, with an extra episode in which the couples reflect on their experiences.

As the session host, Radio 1 DJ Sian Eleri, pointed out, finding people to

participate in a series in which they were expected to marry a total stranger looked, on paper, like “madness”. Was it difficult to find willing contributors?

It seems not. “We look for characters,” said Emma Pringle, who is in charge of

To help them psychologically, contributors are allowed to express their feelings in a safe space away from the cameras and, if necessary, they can talk to an in-house psychologist. “It’s important that they feel supported and

demographic. Drones were used to shoot the wedding venues and marriage ceremonies.

Getting the emotional stories required “trust and tenacity”, noted McMurray: “You obviously want them to open up about their feelings.... They don’t just give it up to you on a plate. It requires skill and doggedness from the team.”

Story producer Philip Krstic said it was important to spend a lot of time with the contributors and have fun with them. “Most of the people who take part in the series want to have a good laugh and meet someone nice,” he said.

Casting researcher Izabela Garvan, who started her TV career as a runner at CPL, had the job of weeding out the potential contributors, initially via email and subsequently on Zoom. The process began last November. Further on in the production process, she helped source some of the locations and assisted Pringle in looking after cast members’ welfare.

The series featured the show’s first gay couple, Dan and Matt, who, unlike most *Married at First Sight* newlyweds, were still together at the end of the show.

“Since we first started making *Married at First Sight*, it has been an ambition to include a same-sex partnership and wedding,” said McMurray. “It’s hard to find people who want to go on this crazy journey and want to meet their future husband or wife at the altar. It’s quite a bonkers thing to want to do. When it works, it’s amazing and exciting....”

“We had a gay couple lined up for series 5 but one of them pulled out. It’s baked into Channel 4’s DNA that we champion diversity and inclusion.

“And it was important for us to normalise the validity and beauty of same-sex relationships and not make a song and dance about it....”

“I’m gay. If I’d seen that [the wedding of a same-sex couple] on telly when I was growing up it would have been great. To know that we were doing that for a generation of LGBTQ kids watching at home was important.

“We won’t stop there. We’ll continue to be as diverse and representative as possible.” ■

Report by Steve Clarke. The RTS Futures event ‘Married at First Sight UK: Behind the scenes’ was held on 26 October. The producers were Alex Wootten and Kirsty Whittaker.

The UK show’s first gay couple, Daniel McKee (left) and Matt Jameson



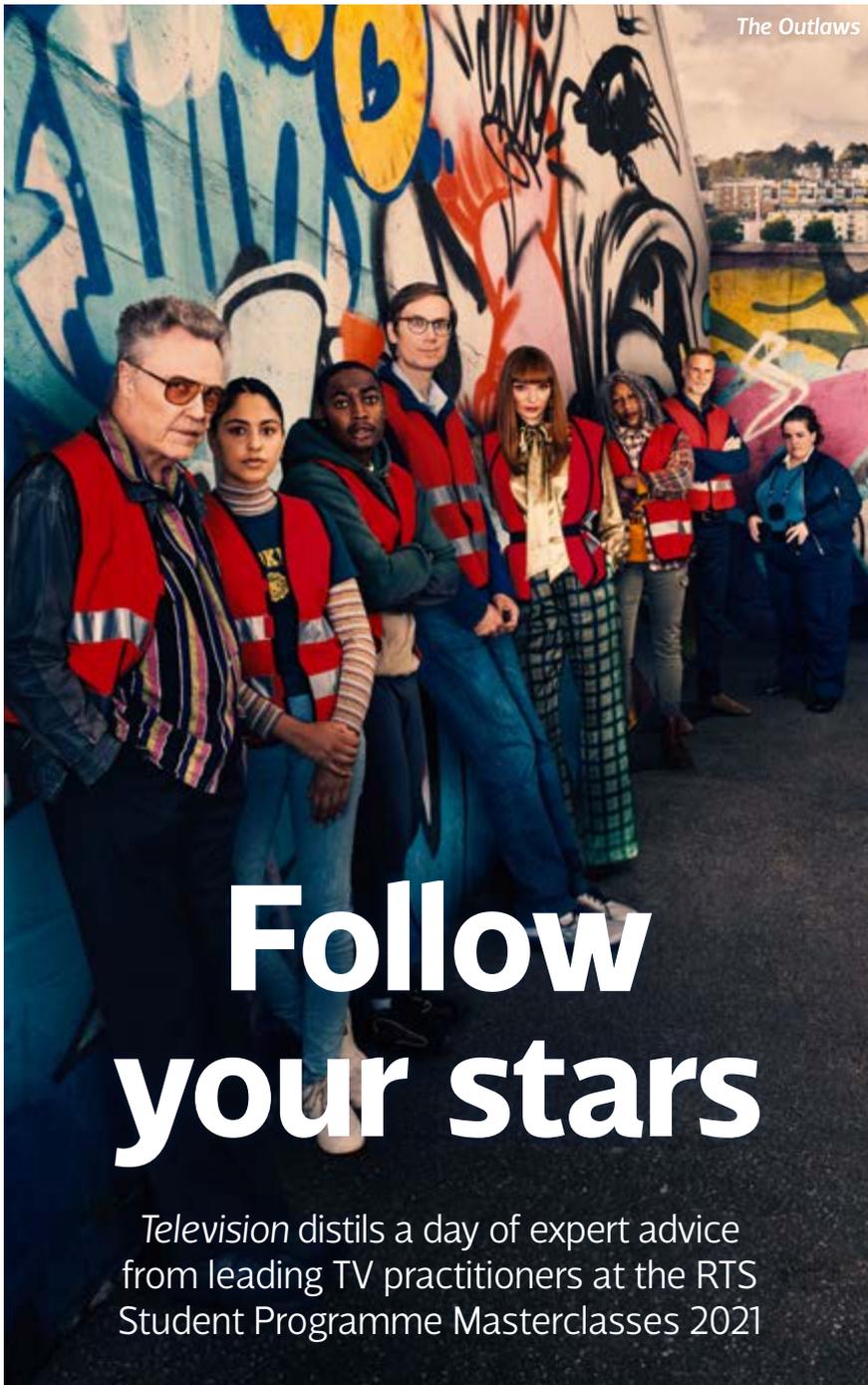
Channel 4

casting and welfare on the show. “We look for people who are open and honest, engaging and articulate, and who can talk about their feelings. They have to be willing to be emotionally vulnerable and put themselves on the line by marrying a stranger.

“They also have to have a story – a reason why they’re there and what has driven them to the point where they want expert help finding love.... There’s a lot of processes they go through before they get to the altar.”

heard,” said Pringle. “Our support doesn’t stop when the cameras stop rolling. If anything, it increases when the show ends. We take the care aspect very seriously.”

Moving the show from Channel 4 to E4 meant introducing a new visual style that was glossier and more cinematic, and less like a documentary, said series director James Kayler. He wanted *Married at First Sight* to look more like *Love Island* and *Too Hot to Handle* and thus appeal to E4’s younger



Follow your stars

Television distils a day of expert advice from leading TV practitioners at the RTS Student Programme Masterclasses 2021

The RTS Student Programme Masterclasses drew a crowd of more than 300 in early November to hear four of the industry's top talents talk about their careers and offer first-hand advice on how to make a start in television.

Kenton Allen, one of the biggest names in British comedy, offered the masterclass in scripted entertainment. The CEO of Big Talk is the producer of countless award-winning shows, including *The Royle Family* and *Friday Night Dinner*.

Allen said a producer is “first in and last out on any show”. He continued: “[You are] the mad person who thinks you can get something on the television.... You raise the money, pull all the crew together, make the show and deal with the problems when things go wrong....

“You’re there right to the bitter end until the show’s on air.... Then you try to get the show recommissioned.... You’re sort of the custodian of other people’s creative endeavours and ambitions.”

Allen began his working life in radio

and was happy to stay there until Jonathan Ross asked him to work on his pioneering Channel 4 chat show.

A change of tack took him to Granada TV in Manchester to make entertainment shows, where he met Caroline Aherne and Craig Cash, the writing team behind the *The Mrs Merton Show* and, subsequently, *The Royle Family*. Allen produced series of both shows.

A key part of the producer’s job is working with writers and Allen has worked with some of the best, including Robert Popper, the creator of *Friday Night Dinner*, and Stephen Merchant on current comedy/drama *The Outlaws*.

Discussing the producer’s relationship with writers, Allen said: “Fundamentally, you believe in the writer and the story. They’ve got [to have] something to say about something – it’s not just jokes. The ultimate judge is the audience.... You can just do your best guess of what is funny based on experience and taste.”

Comedy, Allen concluded, should “punch up, if you’re going to use comedy as a device to shine light on hypocrisy or whatever you think is wrong with the world... do not punch down on people who don’t need to have any more shit sent their way.”

Marianna Spring, the BBC’s first specialist disinformation and social media reporter, offered the masterclass in journalism. At just 25, she has reported on conspiracy theories and online abuse for the BBC’s news programmes *Newsnight* and *Panorama*.

“I was one of those slightly weird kids that, aged eight, [watched] BBC World News on holiday because it was the only channel in English,” Spring recalled. At school, university (Oxford, studying French and Russian) and during a year of study abroad, she wrote for local and student papers, and, post-university, worked shifts at *The Guardian*.

Yet, she was rejected by the BBC’s graduate training scheme. Encouraged by *Guardian* journalist Alexandra Topping, Spring wrote to people she admired at the corporation. *Newsnight* anchor Emily Maitlis replied and she was offered some shifts on the programme, giving her a foothold at the BBC.

“It’s really good to find something you care about and you can offer in a way that didn’t exist before then. The

BBC

BBC was getting to grips with social media investigations at that time.”

The student audience watched Spring’s *Newsnight* report on the return of Woolworths to the high street – fake news that spread quickly from Twitter to gullible national newspapers. The Twitter account, she said, had been created by a 17-year-old “who wanted to test how much brand recognition counts and how people who are nostalgic for something will share it online, and he very much proved his case”.

Spring covered social media disinformation during the UK 2019 and US 2020 elections – and has suffered online abuse, often on account of her youth, from conspiracy theorists and misogynists. “Social media has been a part of [my] life growing up... Investigating and understanding it is intuitive,” she said.

Furquan Akhtar is a young writer who has moved rapidly from storylining episodes of *Coronation Street* to penning children’s dramas *The Dumping Ground* and *Wolfblood*, to writing episodes for ITV crime series *The Bay* and Paul Abbott’s Sky show *Wolfe*.

“Soap is a brilliant training ground but it’s also a place to tell prime-time stories in the most powerful way,” he said during his drama masterclass.

Akhtar, though, was determined to write his own scripts. His first effort, a radio play, won the BBC’s Alfred Bradley Bursary Award for new Northern writers. He went on to write three afternoon plays for Radio 4.

“I realised early on in my career that all the different parts of my identity – being Northern, working-class, Pakistani and Muslim – are an asset, because other people aren’t telling those stories,” he said.

“I love *Fleabag*, it’s one of the best things ever, but I’m not a posh, white woman from west London. I understand heartbreak and grief, those things are universal, so I tell those stories from my part of the world.”

Children’s TV, he said, was “a good place to get your first TV credit”. But to make the next move, Akhtar wrote a “spec” or sample script.

This script, which has “unlocked all the doors for me in the last couple of years”, tells the story of three British Asian siblings without “trauma, arranged marriages or terrorism... It’s about joy... [The script] is still in



Furquan Akhtar (right), interviewed by Boyd Hilton

Paul Hampartsoumian

development and, hopefully, one day it will get made.”

Offering advice to the student writers in the audience, Akhtar said: “Write a script and send it – there are so many competitions that, it sounds awful to say, legitimise you and set you apart from other people.

“Until you have written a script that is complete and you’re proud of, you can’t really put yourself out there.”

Sanjay Singhal, who gave the documentary masterclass, was previously a BBC journalist, and worked as the corporation’s Washington producer for a decade. The 9/11 attacks happened during his final week and were a “traumatic and colossal story”, he said. “After that, I sort of felt I’d done it all – where else would you go in the world of news?”

Over the following 20 years, first at Dragonfly Film and TV, where he became MD, and then at his own indie, Voltage TV, Singhal has made high-profile documentaries. In *The Plane Crash*, which became a worldwide hit, a Boeing 727 was deliberately crashed into the Mexican desert.

Last year, Voltage’s series *The British Tribe Next Door*, in which *Gogglebox* star Scarlett Moffatt and her family moved to a Namibian village, took home an RTS award.

Many documentary-makers have a

background in news, which can be hugely helpful. “You’ve got to be objective, truthful, sensitive and balanced – those are all the things you learn as a journalist,” said Singhal. “Then you add to those the documentary [elements] of character, emotion... and story arc.”

The audience watched a clip from *Ant & Dec’s DNA Journey*, in which the presenters travel to Ireland to follow their bloodlines. “I’m obsessed with making programmes that are mainstream, that reach as many people as possible,” he said. “There’s got to be room for auteurs... [with] subject matter that’s off-piste... but 95% of television isn’t like that.”

Offering tips to would-be documentary-makers, Singhal said: “The television industry is much bigger than it was; there are many more opportunities, companies and commissioners – the levels of production are unbelievable at the moment.”

He advised TV hopefuls to watch loads of telly (and other media) and, crucially, to critically analyse it – “I’m interested in people who... are inspired by creative ideas.” He added: “Shoot something, cut something... learn.” ■

Report by Matthew Bell. The RTS Student Programme Masterclasses were held on 4 November and chaired by Helen Scott (entertainment session), Steve Anderson (journalism), Boyd Hilton (drama) and Fozia Khan (documentary).

Republic of Ireland

Since the first episode aired in September, crime drama *Kin* has given RTÉ a huge ratings hit. The series follows the fortunes of a fictional Dublin crime family, the Kinsellas, which is waging a bloody gangland war with a local cartel, the Cunninghams.

The lead director of the eight-part series, Diarmuid Goggins, spoke to RTS Republic of Ireland Chair Agnes Cogan at a Society event in late October about his work on the US-Irish co-production.

Goggins revealed that it wasn't the thrills and spills of the gangster genre that drew him to the series: "First and foremost, *Kin* is about family – so the gangster elements, to me, were always a kind of wallpaper... I was just about to become a father for the second time and I connected with the script in a very emotional way."

In *Kin*, characters frequently address the camera directly, breaking the so-called "fourth wall". The director explained: "When I read the script it felt to me, that at very key,



Kin: Charlie Cox (left) and Ciaran Hinds

RTÉ

RTÉ scores with gangs of Dublin

emotional moments, the actors should engage directly with the lens, thus engaging directly with the audience."

Goggins admitted to feeling nervous at working with

actors of the status of Ciaran Hinds (Eamon Cunningham) and Aidan Gillen (Frank Kinsella), who play the heads of the two crime families.

He recalled one pre-shoot

chat with Hinds: "I was a huge fan of Ciaran Hinds... [He] has worked with some of the great directors and actors. We went on a Zoom and he was one of the nicest men ever, so accommodating and welcoming of our direction."

Much of *Kin* was shot during a period of Covid-19 lockdown in Ireland. "We managed, with great difficulty and more expense than would have been imagined," said Goggins.

"[But] it helped us... in terms of locations. Dublin became a little bit of a ghost town... so we got to use certain locations that maybe we wouldn't have got, and [better] access... We [could] shoot without people on the street or passers-by and... certain buildings and hotels, which had been shut down, were very welcoming."

With thorough protocols in place, the production didn't record a single case of Covid-19. "We were very careful and felt very privileged to be working when so many people were not able to," said the director.

Matthew Bell

TG4 boss rings the alarm bell

Republic of Ireland

The growth in global streaming 'means the Irish-language media, already marginal, risks irrelevance if it is not resourced properly in the coming years'.

This warning was given by TG4 Ard-Stiúrthóir (Director-General) Alan Esslemont, who was in conversation with RTS Republic of Ireland Chair Agnes Cogan at an event early this month.

TG4, Ireland's Irish-language channel, celebrated its 25th birthday at the end of October.

Esslemont, who has been Director-General since 2016, said: 'Despite the significant number of major global media services and intense competition, we believe that TG4 is needed more now than ever... We are a vital part of modern Ireland.'

He argued that viewing habits had changed radically during the pandemic: 'Since Covid especially, people are taking two, three, four subscriptions [to streamers] and they're seeing a really wide variety of

very high-quality programming. That's the biggest challenge to broadcasters in Ireland.

'If we don't tell Irish stories... then [audiences] will be very happy to listen to English and American stories. The [Irish] state has to realise that this is a crossroads and investment is needed.'

Ireland's level of public service media funding is one of the lowest in western Europe, he said. 'Irish media consumers clearly behave very much like UK media consumers

and would seem as likely to subscribe to see *The Crown* or *Bridgerton* as their British counterparts. It seems a sensible commercial decision for Netflix, Amazon Prime or Disney+ to invest in British stories and trust the Irish will want to pay to watch them.'

But, he warned: 'The Irish state needs to be very aware of the impact of US and UK soft power on the culture and democracy of Ireland.'

He continued: 'Minority linguistic groups will be underserved in this new media order. 'Irish-language media lacks scale and is at risk.'

Matthew Bell

RTS Fellowships for TV's leading lights

■ The Society has awarded new Fellowships to six industry luminaries for their exceptional contributions to TV.

This year, Fellowships have been presented to figures at two leading indies: Simon Heath, CEO of World Productions, which makes *Line of Duty* and Danielle Lux, MD of CPL Productions, the maker of *Married at First Sight*.

The other recipients are: BBC journalist and new

Mastermind host Clive Myrie; YouTube UK & Ireland MD Ben McOwen Wilson; Screen Yorkshire boss Sally Joynson; and John Whiston, MD of continuing drama at ITV.

"All the new Fellows for 2021 are leaders in their fields, paving the way and utilising their extensive expertise to guide others through what has been another exceptional year for UK television," said RTS CEO Theresa Wise.



From left: Clive Myrie, Danielle Lux, Sally Joynson and John Whiston

Paul Hampartsoumian

RTS London "A beautifully crafted, taut and incredibly sophisticated piece of Scandi noir," is how Walter Iuzzolino, the man behind Channel 4's foreign-language streaming service Walter Presents, described its new drama, *Witch Hunt*.

Iuzzolino, who introduced an RTS London event last month, said: "It is one of the very few shows I've bought off-script." In *Witch Hunt*, an accountant (Ida Waage, played by *Westworld* actor Ingrid Bolsø Berdal) blows the whistle on corruption, but finds herself subjected to harassment and false accusations.

Series creators and writers Anna Bache-Wiig and Siv Rajendram Eliassen were inspired by the true story of a whistleblower in Norway.

Bache-Wiig explained: "What kind of people have the courage to blow the whistle on wrongdoing? It's a very brave thing to do... you have to step out of the herd and speak up against everyone.... You are a true hero but also, depending on who's looking at you, a snitch."

Berdal added: "It's difficult



Ingrid Bolsø Berdal in *Witch Hunt*

Channel 4

C4 drama blows whistle on crime

being a whistleblower and... living with a whistleblower as well. What does a family do in a situation where mum or dad's life is being changed in such a profound way?... We'll see if Ida calls it quits or

if she decides to go full steam ahead, even though there will be some costs [to her]."

The actor praised Bache-Wiig and Eliassen: "They are so fantastic at writing good scenes with plots and

turning points – everything is so brilliantly planned out... When the script is so potent and great, [acting] is basically [about]... allowing it to live."

The duo have collaborated for a decade, and wrote *Utøya: July 22*, which was based on the murder of 69 teenagers at a socialist youth camp in Norway in 2011. "We're like an old married couple now. There's no way out – we're stuck with each other," joked Bache-Wiig.

Eliassen added: "You work on a project for two maybe three years and it's a lot of money; you have to work with a lot of people and producers and it can be daunting. To have someone who is equally invested... to share the blowbacks and the victories... is a pleasure."

When writing, she continued, "you have this constant inner monologue", which can be "both boring and lonely". Writing with someone else makes the writing process "more bearable".

Radio Times streaming editor Frances Taylor chaired the RTS London event.

Matthew Bell

A life spent telling stories

RTS East

Geoffrey Smith's first project was marked by tragedy and trauma, but it also made him as a documentary film-maker.

Melbourne-born Smith – who went on to win two Emmys for feature docs – discussed film-making in the company of TV producer and lecturer Hans Petch at an RTS East event last month. His Emmys were for *Presumed Guilty*, an exposé of Mexico's judicial system, and *The English Surgeon*, which follows a neurosurgeon working in Ukraine's Soviet-era hospitals.

His first film took him to Haiti to help make a documentary about the country's first free election in 30 years. "On the morning of that historic election, we discovered 23 people had been massacred in a school voting station," recalled Smith.

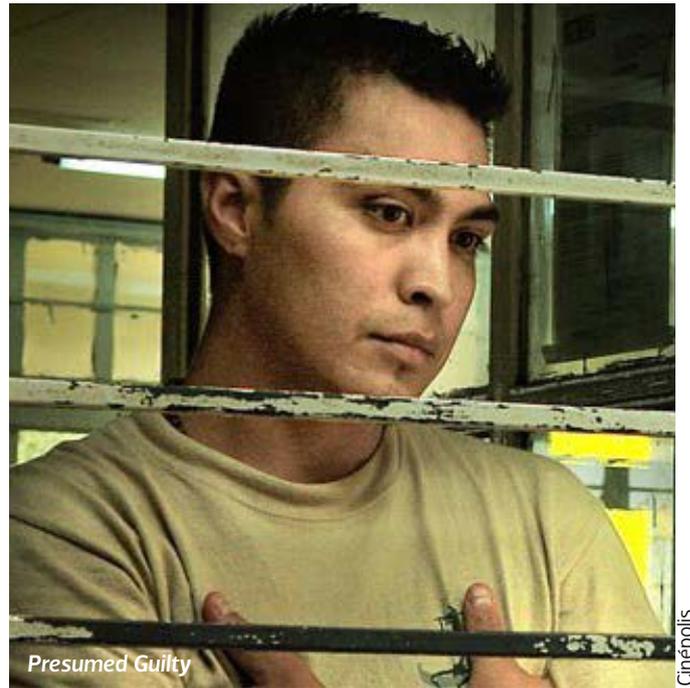
"Two of the killers came back... and killed the

journalist in front of me getting out of a car, and put a red-hot bullet into my leg and across my shoulder.

"There was physical trauma from my injuries, but the real trauma came from seeing 23 mangled bodies that had been cut and shot to pieces lying in deep pools of blood... those images really haunted me for years.

"Being shot was seriously and honestly the best thing that ever happened to me because I was forced to ask myself some big questions... If I'd died from that random bullet fired by a random stranger, what was I going to leave behind?"

Smith returned to Haiti a few years later and made *Searching for a Killer* for the BBC. Telling his story to camera "had such a cathartic impact", he thought: "If it could do that for me, it could perhaps also do it for other



Cinepolis

people." That realisation "completely unlocked my career as a film-maker. What has given my life meaning is telling stories."

Documentary film-makers, argued Smith, need to have "a functioning moral compass and a strong moral contract with our contributors and with our audience".

He added that there was a "special relationship"

between director and contributor and that needed to be built on "intimacy and trust... If we, the audience, are allowed inside the closed world of another person, it's a profound privilege.

"It's why character-led documentaries can be so powerful and compelling, and generate this very moving, on-screen catharsis."

Matthew Bell

Taylor to address 'integrity' in RTS talk



Peter Taylor

BBC

■ Award-winning journalist Peter Taylor is set to give the fifth Steve Hewlett Memorial Lecture next month. Taylor, who is best known for his reporting on the political and armed conflict in Northern Ireland, will offer a lecture titled "Integrity in television: 50 years through the lens".

"Integrity means fairness, impartiality and trust – the bedrock of the BBC and public service broadcasting, both of which are under threat as never before. Their survival is central to our freedoms and the health of our democracy," said Taylor, who has collected numerous awards from the RTS and Bafta.

The lecture, which Taylor

will give on 15 December at the University of Westminster, is sponsored by the RTS and the Media Society. Previous Hewlett lecturers include political journalist Nick Robinson and former BBC Director-General Mark Thompson.

Proceeds from the lecture will go to the Steve Hewlett Scholarship Fund, which was set up following the death of the renowned journalist and broadcaster in 2017.

Fund Chair Sir Clive Jones said: "Peter's lecture promises to maintain the thought-provoking, insightful tradition set by our distinguished array of previous speakers."

Matthew Bell

The resilience and ingenuity of broadcasters and producers as they adapted their children's content to lockdown was emphasised at a joint RTS London and Children's Media Foundation (CMF) event, "Kids, Covid and content", last month.

Louise Bucknole, VP of programming for kids at ViacomCBS Networks International UK & Ireland, recalled how Covid-19 had forced producers to make Channel 5's pre-school service *Milkshake!* virtually.

Presenters were given a crash course in how to do their jobs from home, while programmes were adjusted to take account of the new circumstances of kids staying at home. "The feedback we got from audiences showed they felt we were with them all the way," she said.

Many of *Milkshake!*'s shows are animations and there were challenges recording voice-overs. Live action shows were delayed by up to 18 months.

Not all production stopped: *Go Green with the Grimwades* continued filming because the family it is based on were all able to form their own bubble at home.

For many parents coping with repeated lockdowns, the BBC's *Bitesize Daily* home-education initiative provided a vital lifeline.

Helen Foulkes, head of education and *Newsround* at the BBC, said that more than 2,000 online lessons had been provided, plus almost 300 episodes of educational TV across iPlayer, CBBC and BBC Two since the pandemic struck. She recalled how the BBC had only five weeks to get everything up and running, including liaising with teachers. "There's nothing that we use without having



Channel 5

The kids are alright

RTS London Steve Clarke hears how the TV industry has looked after its younger viewers during the Covid-19 pandemic

teacher consultants on it," said Foulkes.

She added: "That mash-up of educationalists, digital content-makers and children's programme-makers helped us to develop a strong concept that was both entertaining and educational."

Working at speed and in partnership with organisations such as London's Science Museum and commercial lesson providers, opened the BBC's eyes to the value of such collaborations. "The BBC has always championed education, but the pandemic demonstrated the real value of BBC Education to our audience," said Foulkes.

"When the world stopped spinning last March, we had to think very quickly," stressed Lucy Murphy, director of kids content at Sky UK & Ireland. She recalled how broadcasters had to adapt to the fact that

kids were no longer at school and their normal routines had been disrupted.

"Children were feeling pretty scared," she recalled. "Nothing like this had ever happened before. Their families could no longer answer all their children's questions."

At Sky, this was addressed by commissioning Fresh Start Media to create a weekly news show that explained the pandemic to youngsters.

The show was turned round in 10 days. "The kids' industry is used to being very nimble... Throw a problem at a kids' producer and they will find a solution," said Murphy.

YouTubers and kids' presenters Greg Foot and Maddie Moate recalled how they launched *Let's Go Live*, a daily science show, at the beginning of the first lockdown. "On the first weekend of lockdown, we decided to turn our spare

room into a multi-camera, live broadcasting studio," said Foot. "It was a lot of fun."

"We recognised the need for home-schooling material," added Moate. "Early on, we worked out that we needed to be daily, Monday to Friday, and be reliable for families... We wanted the audience to be involved."

Their live science lessons – full of in-jokes – were aimed at everyone from five to 15, with an emphasis on interactive learning. Part of the show was built on user-generated content, as viewers sent in videos and photos.

"In a way, it was a throw-back to Saturday morning kids' telly, but with education at the heart of it," said Foot. ■

'Kids, Covid and content' was produced by Nikki Stearman and Greg Childs, CMF, and Carol Owens, RTS. The chair was Kids Industries CEO Gary Pope.

Make the most of remote production

RTS
Scotland

'The pandemic [has] massively sped up the process of the... broadcast industry adopting live streaming technologies.' So said product specialist Kriss Hampton-Joyce, from cine and broadcast distributor Holdan, at an RTS Scotland workshop in October. Exploring the methods of

making remote production easier, he said: 'Streaming isn't just about going live on a platform any more. It's also about bringing remote presenters into a production or viewing a shot as it's happening on set, live, remotely from anywhere in the world.

'If you have a director on the other side of the world who

needs to be involved in the post-production process, they want to see everything that's happening and have a means of communicating with the people in that edit suite. We can do that using live streaming technologies.'

He added: 'Sure, a lot of these technologies are being used because of Covid [but] it

is... also [advantageous] from a zero carbon/green outlook. If you can do the work at the same level as if you were there in person, then, you know, why travel?'

During the workshop, Hampton-Joyce discussed the technology on the market and demonstrated how to use it.

Matthew Bell

RTS
London

A panel of neurodiverse TV professionals has identified the industry's long working hours as a key reason for mental health problems, and urged bosses to look after talent better.

Lucy Tallon, head of mental health and wellbeing at The Film and TV Charity, which organised the event with RTS London, said one in seven people in the UK have some form of neurodiversity. These are people, such as those with dyslexia and on the autism spectrum, whose "brains learn and function differently to a neurotypical person".

Lennie Varvarides started Dyspla (Dyslexic play) to give a voice to neurodiverse talent. She explained: "For neurodivergent creatives, the biggest challenge is with their confidence, because that has been eroded during their time in school and eroded again when they've been 'masking' in their work environment as they try to avoid being 'found out'."

Zeb Chadfield founded The Finish Line a decade ago, following a nervous breakdown that "led me to re-evaluate my life". With his own post-production company, the idea was to try to "do it better... for someone like me.

"My thinking [was]: 'How do we deliver the best-looking pictures?' Ultimately, talent



Bash the Entertainer: Behind the Smile

BBC

TV told: care for your talent

does that work. So our job as a company is to look after the talent, [giving them] more time with their families, more time to rest, more time to do the things that make their life fulfilling, so they can come to work and deliver their best work."

Tallon, who chaired the

event, added: "If you look after your people, it will be better for your business."

Leo Anna Thomas, a standby art director who also works as an on-set wellbeing facilitator, identified the "long hours and the impatience around me" as the triggers for her own mental health

problems. "It was seen that I wasn't paying attention, same as at school – which was the opposite of the reality: I would be desperately trying to understand what someone else, a neurotypical person, would get straight away," she said. "It's the intense hours, and tighter and tighter schedules. During Covid, it got even worse."

Thomas, who described a wellbeing facilitator as a "neutral third party on set", had just completed a shoot on an Amazon Prime production, working as a facilitator, and said the situation was "slowly changing" for the better.

Stewart Kyasimire, MD of BAME-led Scottish indie Create Anything, recently directed the BBC Scotland doc *Bash the Entertainer: Behind the Smile*, in which the comic discusses how he uses comedy to fight racism and his battles with mental health.

Kyasimire is bipolar and said that by "speaking up about my illness, it's hopefully allowing other people to feel comfortable in sharing their own stories".

Amber Fisher and Aradhna Tayal produced the London event, "Challenging the status quo: Production, mental health and neurodiversity". You can view the full event at: <https://bit.ly/RTS-neurodiverse>.

Matthew Bell

The making of hit Scottish drama *Guilt* was the subject of an RTS Scotland event in early November. The stylish and twisty BBC Scotland show, which is shot in Edinburgh and returned for a second series this autumn, opens with the antihero, lawyer Max (Mark Bonnar), being released from jail.

"*Guilt* is spoken about a lot in this series... but this show is more about revenge. Max's overarching desire is to revenge what has happened to him," explained the actor.

Guilt could have ended after a first series that cleverly tied up all the threads of the plot. "With series 1 we wanted to tell a story that finished," said Neil Webster, executive producer for Happy Tramp North. The thinking was: "If it doesn't come back, we've told a story and we're pleased with that. But if people connect with it, we'll always find a way back in."

Audiences and critics loved *Guilt*, which bagged numerous awards and quickly won a recommission.

Writer Neil Forsyth said: "The biggest thing was trying to make sure we weren't doing a retread... [We] wanted to be bold and bring in new characters and stories, and a new theme as well."



Guilt: Jamie Sives (left) and Mark Bonnar

BBC

From guilt to revenge

The series is known for complex storylines that trust an audience's intelligence.

"The scripts are so delicate, dense and clever. We don't spoon-feed anyone – [maybe] to the point where it might be quite frustrating to tease out some of the storylines," said Nerys Evans, executive producer for Expectation, which made the show with Happy Tramp North. "It all

becomes clear if you stick with it."

Producer Eric Coulter, new to series 2 but a fan of the show, added: "I loved its tone – it felt like nothing else I was watching.... A confused audience is a hostile audience but an intrigued audience is not, and what Neil does is intrigue you."

Will there be another series of *Guilt*? "I'd love to do

a third and final series and make it a trilogy," said Forsyth. "I could keep the thematic storytelling going: guilt, revenge, and then redemption – that would be a real creative ambition and we'll see where we get to."

BBC Scotland commissioning executive Gavin Smith chaired the RTS Scotland event.

Matthew Bell

Society launches its 2022 awards

Entries have opened for the RTS Programme Awards 2022. To qualify for the awards, which span 31 categories, shows and performances must have been broadcast or streamed between 1 January and 31 December 2021.

"It has been an incredibly challenging year, possibly the most difficult production environment any of us have experienced," said Kenton

Allen, Awards Chair and CEO of Big Talk Productions.

"Despite this, the phenomenal creative talents of the UK industry, both in front of and behind the camera, have managed to produce a remarkable year of record-breaking, genre-defining programming."

Entries close on 10 December. The awards, held in partnership with Audio Network, will take place on

29 March 2022 at London's Grosvenor House Hotel.

Entries for the RTS Television Journalism Awards 2022 are being accepted until 1 December for broadcasts on a UK-based platform, or for online video content created from a UK production base between 16 November 2020 and 15 November 2021.

The ceremony will be held on 23 February 2022, also at the Grosvenor House Hotel.

The Society has also launched the RTS Student Television Awards 2022, which include a new Sustainability category.

"The awards have a proven track record in discovering and nurturing the next generation of world-class talent," said Sinéad Rocks, Awards Chair and Managing Director for nations and regions at Channel 4.

The student awards, which include both undergraduate and postgraduate categories, will be presented on 24 June next year.

Uni panels offer insights

■ Devon and Cornwall Centre linked up with the film-making course at the University of Plymouth at the start of the month to offer expert insights into the local TV and film industry.

The first of two panels featured Plymouth-based artist Katy Richardson, filmmaker and director Esther Campbell, who worked on *Wallander*, and Jack Hinchey,

a senior production co-ordinator at Drummer TV.

The second panel was composed of recent graduates of the University of Plymouth.

Centre Chair Siobhan Robbie-James said: 'If you join the RTS, it will give you lots of opportunities to meet industry professionals. Our focus is on helping to develop anyone who works in the industry.'

Good design wins viewers

Northern Ireland

BBC Three's head of creative design, Pascual Diaz, discussed the relevance and impact of his work on shows such as *Normal People* and *RuPaul's Drag Race UK* at an RTS Northern Ireland event early this month.

Talking to students at Belfast Metropolitan College, Diaz said: "Because we live in a very visual world, design has a key [role] in delivering our content... [and] attracting the attention of our audience.

We can also communicate our content through social media... in a visual way."

Diaz, a native of Spain, has worked in the UK for the past decade. Good design, he said, should be "integrated in the content.... If nobody notices the design, it's a good thing."

Looking forward to the return of BBC Three to TV screens early next year, he added: "Design is going to be a big part of getting back to linear-TV – we want to say, 'We're back!'"

RTS Futures Earlier this month, RTS Futures caught up with a first-time writer and director of a bittersweet romcom – and the experienced executive producers who assisted them.

Writer Samantha O'Rourke and director Nadira Amrani are the creative duo behind *Mincemeat*, one of three half-hour films in series 3 of Channel 4's *On the Edge* anthology.

On the Edge, which has been developed in conjunction with the 4Stories new-talent initiative, offers new writers and directors the opportunity to work with BlackLight Television executives Philip Trethowan and Ben Bickerton.

"The aim is to find voices that are under-represented in the industry," explained Bickerton. "It's also about bold ideas and exciting writing. We tend to look for things that have some substance and meaning, but we always want to entertain as well."

Trethowan said *On the Edge* was "unique" in that "something actually gets made". He added: "It's only at the coal-face that you really learn your trade."

Bickerton said that he and Trethowan liked to have "a loose theme that runs through [all three films] and this year it's about mental health and



Mincemeat stars Rosie Cavaliero (left) and Aimee Lou Wood

Channel 4

Drama offers big break

family". The duo receive "thousands" of spec scripts and then interview 50 or so of the most promising writers, who are asked to bring ideas with them. "We had a lot of ideas in and around mental health," noted Trethowan.

O'Rourke recalled: "I applied... and then tried to forget all about it.... Somehow I made it to the final three. What I've found so special

about this process, considering I was brand new, was that I always felt so trusted."

Amrani reached the interview stage for series 2 of *On the Edge*. "I got some really good feedback about working more with actors," she said. After gaining more experience directing a play, she reapplied and was successful.

The director was sent the draft scripts for the three films

in the series and "fell in love with *Mincemeat*.... It was funny, sad, it looked at class, race.

"Looking back, I'm so glad I didn't get it the first time because I don't think I would have been ready to do this."

The three *On the Edge* films aired earlier this month and are now on All4.

The RTS Futures event was chaired by Caroline Frost.

Matthew Bell

Sky opens up on factual TV

RTS West of England

Factual producers in the West of England gathered at Bristol's Watershed this month to hear from Poppy Dixon, Sky's director of documentaries, and factual commissioning editor Hayley Reynolds.

In a wide-ranging discussion, hosted by True to Nature founder Wendy Darke, the duo talked about creating "content worth paying for", with Reynolds commenting that the "fight for audiences has never been bigger".

Dixon was delighted at the first 18 months of Sky Documentaries, particularly its Factual Channel win at the recent *Broadcast Digital Awards*.

The pair talked through the four pillars of Sky Documentaries, which include "contemporary history" with

an intimate emotional narrative and "stranger than fiction", which looks for extraordinary individuals with amazing stories to tell.

Showing a clip from *Positive*, a documentary for World Aids Day on 1 December, Dixon highlighted the "ultimately uplifting" tone of a film that covered many heartbreaking tragedies in Britain's 40-year battle with HIV.

For Sky Nature, the team is looking for three to four original natural history commissions a year, but Reynolds warned they were "picky and ambitious". Reynolds cited the importance of revelatory experiences for viewers as well as innovation.

The Sky execs also showed a preview clip of a new series made by True to Nature, *Shark with Steve Backshall*.



Poppy Dixon (left) and Hayley Reynolds

Justin Yockney

Turning to Sky Crime, Dixon noted that "true crime is having a moment – which has been ongoing now for a couple of years – and we're excited to work with production companies to figure out what's next for true crime, and how the

genre can evolve." She revealed that Sky Crime was looking for four to six premium series, which are emotionally driven, about ordinary people who are victims of crime and, ideally, would be UK-focused.

Suzy Lambert



It'll be a great story if you live to tell it

The RTS's first Patrons' Dinner since the start of the pandemic was a night to remember. It was held in the gilded Edwardian splendour of Westminster's One Great George Street, where four of six new RTS Fellows stepped up to receive their Fellowships. Among the quartet was the RTS-award-winning BBC journalist Clive Myrie.

Clive not only gripped his audience with the story of

how he went undercover with a BBC crew in North Korea, but, after the formalities had ended, he stayed until the early hours talking to a long queue of starstruck bursary scholars. What a generous chap!

TV's pensioners need fresh talent

Also receiving a Fellowship was the self-styled "Pope of Soap", ITV's John Whiston. The Managing Director of continuing drama couldn't resist an affectionate dig at his boss, Kevin Lygo, whose idea of mentoring was just "watching a lot of cricket".

John reminded the RTS bursary scholars attending

the dinner that he needed them much more than they needed him: his pension depended on their success.

He also had one piece of advice for the wannabes: "Only pitch programmes that will get you into trouble."

Reading music aids your comic timing

Presenting the entertainment session at the RTS Student Programme Masterclasses, Kenton Allen, CEO of Big Talk, offered a fascinating insight into why people who work in comedy frequently have a background in music.

"There's quite a common thread I've noticed over the years, particularly in comedy

– lots of comedy writers and performers are very musical. I think that's because there's a rhythm to comedy and obviously a rhythm to music... The rhythm of comedy is quite musical," suggested Kenton, no slouch himself at playing the saxophone.

Newsnight's loss is Channel 4's gain

Congratulations to Esme Wren, who is leaving the BBC as the editor of *Newsnight* to join ITN, where she is taking over the editorship of *Channel 4 News*. *Newsnight* has thrived under her leadership. It's hard to imagine that she won't do a similarly outstanding job at Gray's Inn Road. ■



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