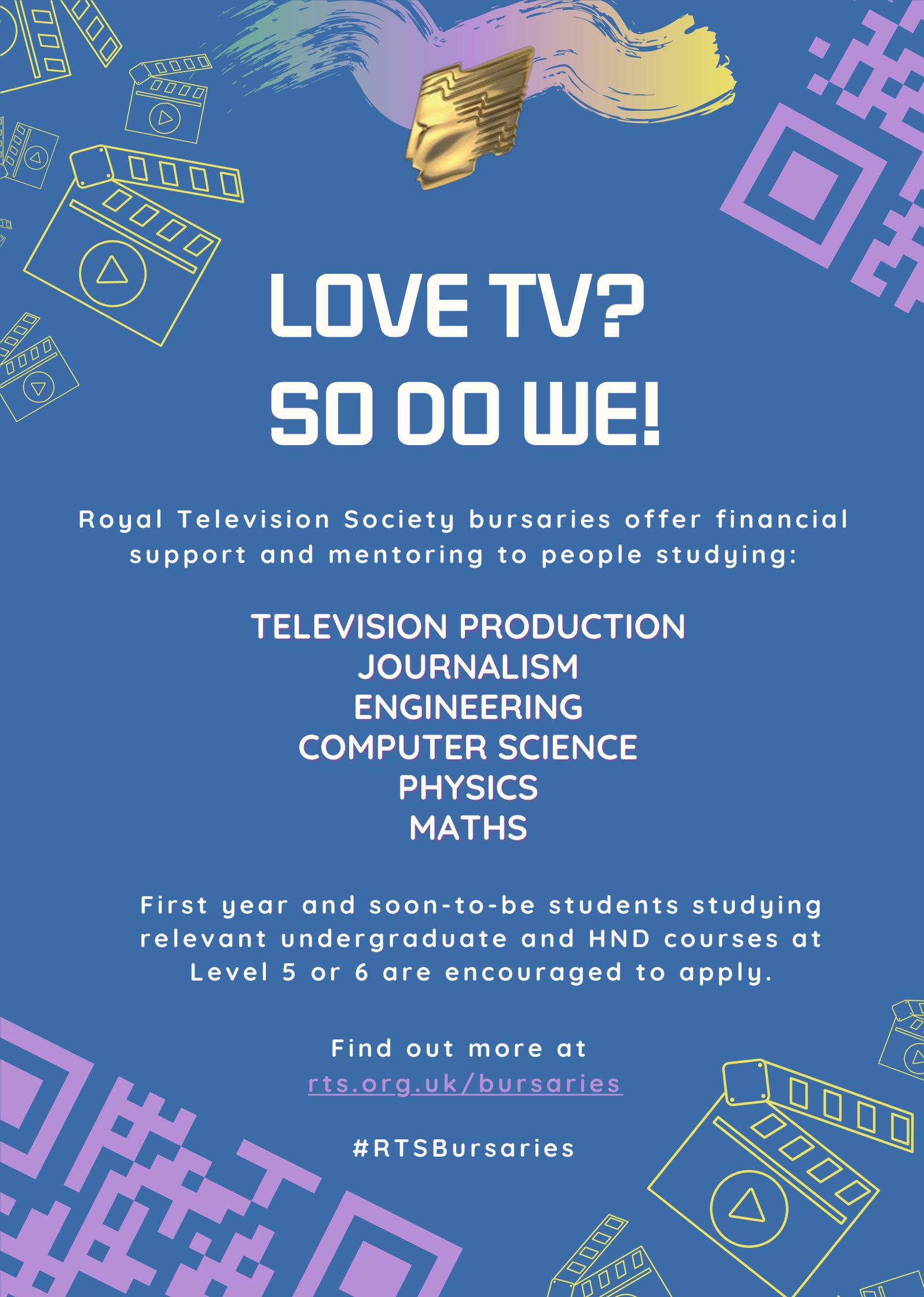


April 2021

Television



Sky's Intergalactic:
**Sci-fi sisters
with attitude**



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From the CEO



It's been all systems go this past month thanks to a crowded events calendar, culminating in the RTS Programme Awards 2021. Hosting a ceremony in what was, in effect, an empty room was a big ask for anyone, but Jonathan Ross more than rose to the occasion, and brought a real sense of fun to an outstanding evening.

I am proud to agree with no less a figure than Russell T Davies that the

winners were "an incredibly diverse" selection. Russell himself received the Outstanding Achievement Award.

Thanks to Jonathan and to Kenton Allen, the juries chair. Congratulations to the winners and nominees, who are all featured in this issue. The nations and regions have been busy with their own line-up of events, including four Student Television Awards ceremonies, which are reported in *Television*.

Also inside, Caroline Frost investigates how scripted TV is portraying people suffering mental health issues.

Finally, I am delighted to announce that this year's RTS bursary scheme is now open – applications can be made until 30 September. Thirty-five scholarships will be awarded to individuals studying TV production or journalism, and a further 10 bursaries will support those interested in working in a wide range of technology roles.

Theresa Wise

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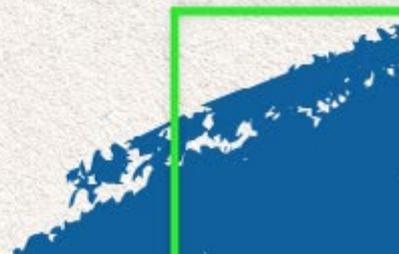
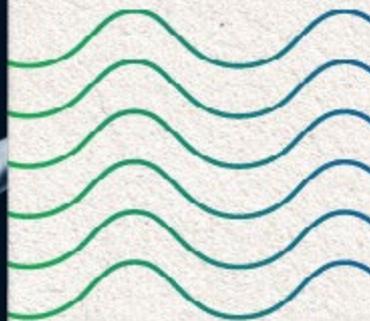
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TV diary

RTS bursary scholar **Georgia Keetch** senses optimism in the months ahead – and trades WhatsApp voice notes at 2:00am on a new film



When I drove to Sussex University to start my BA journalism course in September 2018, in my mind's eye I saw a heady montage of hypothetical events and experiences that would fill my three years in Brighton. My imagination did not stretch to wondering what it would be like to do half my degree during a pandemic.

But, following the government-mandated daily walks and abundant failed attempts to make satisfactory banana bread (oh, and about 100 Netflix shows), there is light at the end of the Covid tunnel. It is now conceivable that masks and hand sanitiser may one day be routine only for hospital workers, not the rest of us.

■ **I must say that, for the second half of my degree, I have been one of the lucky ones. I've been at Sussex University's newspaper, *The Badger*, for three years and I've almost completed my tenure as online production editor. I'm thrilled to say that I'm applying for the role of editor-in-chief for the next academic year. Wish me luck!**

■ Alongside this aspect of my academic world, I'm putting the finishing touches to my application for

a media and cultural studies MA at Sussex. So, to the professional world of TV, I will see you very soon.

■ **This year has been jam-packed with things happening that I still can't believe came my way. In early January, the Society kindly invited me to be a member of the RTS Television Journalism Awards jury for the Young Talent of the Year prize. Without having the bursary scheme or the Steve Hewlett Scholarship behind me, opportunities such as this would simply not be there for me.**

Joining a morning Zoom call with some of the true powerhouses of TV – and having them ask for my opinion – was truly incredible. I was given ample advice by everyone involved and it was a genuine honour to be on the jury.

■ The RTS bursary scheme constantly comes up on my Zoom calendar. These events not only keep me in the loop and involved in the TV sector, but give me 10 times more knowledge about the industry than I had prior to logging on.

A recent highlight for me and my fellow bursary students was joining an RTS Board of Trustees meeting. There, we were given the time to talk about what we were all up to. As always, we were welcomed with open arms and showered with compliments about our projects.

■ **Talking of these projects, a fellow bursary scholar and close friend of mine gave me the opportunity to be a researcher on her graduate documentary, *I Bet You Look Good on the Dance Floor*.**

We are halfway through shooting. The film is a love letter to the indie music venues that we risk losing because of the lack of government funding to see them through the pandemic.

Working professionally with Charly really brought it home that the greatest benefit of the RTS bursary scheme is the friendship and camaraderie that comes with it. Nothing says more about friendship in the TV industry than trading WhatsApp voice notes at 2:00am concerning contributors to a programme.

■ Being asked to write a diary doesn't half make you feel a bit pensive. After a year full of Covid, it seems to us RTS scholars that the only way is up.

I have made friends for life with people who look set to be trailblazers and "ones to watch" in the near future. I really do thank the constellation of lucky stars that helped me wind up on this page. Whenever the next in-person RTS event happens, you will see me there, 100%.

Georgia Keetch is RTS bursary scholar studying journalism at Sussex University.

COMFORT CLASSIC



BBC

Peep Show

To create a successful sitcom is one of the most difficult tasks in the TV firmament. To create a successful British sitcom that survives for 12 years, nine series and 54 episodes is staggering.

Unlike in the US, producers rarely have writers rooms on this side of the Atlantic, where teams of wordsmiths endlessly hone scripts to keep a show up and running. Remember, *Fawlty Towers* closed its doors after just two six-part series.

That remarkable longevity is one of the achievements of *Peep Show*, unquestionably a defining show for Channel 4. The programme ran from 2003 to 2015, and has the broadcaster's original DNA running through it – an edgy, swearsy adult comedy that puts sex and recreational drugs stage centre.

Steve Clarke can't get enough of this missing link between *Men Behaving Badly* and *Fleabag*

When *Peep Show* first stepped out, it would have been impossible to imagine another UK network taking such a risk on a programme that smashed so many taboos and which was filmed in such a startlingly original way.

Not that Channel 4 didn't occasionally get cold feet and consider axing it. *Peep Show* never struck ratings gold, and audiences hovered around the 1 million mark. But its status as a comedy classic now makes it perfect for binge viewing.

From the start, awards juries loved

Peep Show: it won the Rose d'Or at the Lucerne Television Festival 2004 in the Sitcom category; Best TV Comedy at both the 2006 and 2007 British Comedy Awards; and the 2008 Bafta for TV Sitcom. In 2019, *Radio Times* voted it the 13th best sitcom of all time.

At its heart, *Peep Show* is a buddy show: Mark (played by David Mitchell) and Jez (played by Robert Webb) have a love-hate relationship that skews more towards hate.

These pairings are part of a TV comedy tradition that goes back at least to the ever-bickering *Steptoe and Son*. Mark and Jez are the proverbial chalk and cheese, but they are utterly dependent on one another.

Mark is Captain Sensible, a man who wears brogues with his pyjamas, is sexually gauche and socially repressed. His slightly dodgy obsession with the

Second World War and wage-slave values are about as far as you can get from his bong-smoking, laid-back flatmate.

Jez is an uncompromising waster, self-deluded into thinking he's a great musician, sexually supercharged and overconfident – superficially, at least.

Like so many of their comedy forebears, Mitchell and Webb first acted together at the Cambridge Footlights. Their double act performance is a joy to watch. The writing, too, by Jesse Armstrong and Sam Bain, is usually pitch-perfect.

The use of Mark and Jez's interior monologues, inspired by a scene in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*, coupled with the close-up-and-personal camera-work enable us to see the odd couple from their own perspectives; for series 1 and part of series 2 the actors wore head cameras. These insights are often painful. Make no mistake, this is black comedy at its most unhinged.

Peep Show's supporting cast are inspired. Olivia Colman, then virtually unknown, as Mark's original love interest, and his prosaic and knowing work colleague, Sophie, sometimes steals the scenes.

Matt King as Jez's bandmate, the hapless, hedonistic and unreliable Super Hans, is priceless. As the years take their toll, and his drug use escalates, his eyes appear to sink further back into their sockets. It is not until series 6 that we learn that Hans, a one-time crack addict, is father to seven-year-old twins.

Does *Peep Show* ever go too far? Are the endless excruciating situations too cringeworthy? Perhaps, but many of them are laugh-out-loud if you can stomach the embarrassment and heightened reality. There's the time Mark pees in a desk drawer at his office to get his own back on a colleague – or when Jez wets himself in church at Mark's wedding. Or when Jez sleeps with Sophie's mum.

There is, of course, pathos aplenty in *Peep Show*. Ultimately, this no-holds-barred gem is mined from similar material to *Men Behaving Badly*. It took male relationship comedy to a blistering new place.

Without *Peep Show*, it's hard to imagine Phoebe Waller-Bridge creating the far slicker *Fleabag* – perhaps as a contemporary riposte to Mark and Jez's macho excesses. ■

Peep Show is available on All 4 and Netflix.

Ear candy



So much telly spoon feeds you, and it's really nice when there's not even a spoon... you can't even get in the packet of food," comments comedian Sarah Millican. She is, of course, praising the thrillingly impenetrable *Line of Duty*.

Everything is cryptic; minor characters from three series ago suddenly pop up on screen; and half of the dialogue is in acronyms. Yet viewers still can't get enough of Jed Mercurio's perplexing police procedural.

The series delights in plunging viewers into the darkness as they fumble to their own (often wrong) conclusions. Luckily for us, BBC Sounds' companion podcast *Obsessed with... Line of Duty* is on hand to offer illumination.

Hosted by actor Craig Parkinson, aka *Line of Duty's* "baddie caddy" DI Matthew "Dot" Cottan, each episode interrogates the latest instalment of the series.

Parkinson is joined weekly by a new celebrity super-fan, such as Millican.

They discuss their initial suspicions, air wild theories and attempt to decrypt what on earth all the police jargon actually means.

With a seven-episode bumper series, *Line of Duty* couldn't have returned at a better time. The drama is sure to keep us all rapt as we attempt to crack the case. Superintendent Ted Hastings has managed to elude the slammer and is back in AC-12 with DS (now DI) Steve Arnott, but the band isn't quite back together. Having left AC-12, DI Kate Fleming is now working on the Hill with a new murder investigation team, led by her inscrutable adversary, DCI Joanne Davidson, played by Kelly Macdonald. They are looking into the murder of investigative journalist Gail Vella in Operation Lighthouse.

It is AC-12's highest-profile investigation to date and, as expected, Mercurio won't be hand-holding any viewers. Mercifully, the brainboxes behind *Obsessed with... Line of Duty* will have us all sucking on diesel. ■

Caitlin Danaher

WORKING LIVES

Head of development

Britannia

Sky

Nathalie Peter-Contesse started her career in development with a bang in LA, working on the successful action movie *300*. Now based in London, at Vertigo Films, she continues to develop high-octane drama for TV and film.

What does your job involve?

Development starts with finding an idea and generally finishes when the drama goes into production – that’s a bittersweet moment, because that’s when I have to say goodbye to a show.

I oversee a slate of projects in development at Vertigo, supporting the process of taking them towards their goal of being commissioned. This means finding ideas or IP, such as books, working with writers and talent, and talking to commissioners. You need to have projects in the pipeline to make sure you have things ready to go when a show gets commissioned or falls through.

How many ideas make it to the screen?

You have a lot of runners at the beginning of the race, but few reach the finishing line. It’s part of the job that

you have to let go of projects along the way, but Vertigo has a very good development-to-production ratio.

Can you bring good ideas back?

Sometimes. A show needs so many stars to align. Timing is crucial for commissioners – there’s not much you can do if every broadcaster has something in that same space, even if the show is great. You then have to wait or move on.

How did you get into drama development?

I always liked stories, books and films, but I initially qualified as a lawyer in Switzerland; my mother is Italian, my father is Swiss. I moved to Los Angeles and I was lucky enough to get a job as an assistant at Gianni Nunnari’s Hollywood Gang Productions, which had made the vampire movie *From Dusk Till Dawn* and *Se7en*, among many other things. I grew in that company and became head of development.

What was the first film you developed?

The first movie I worked on in my development role was *300*, which was

an amazing first experience. In film, and especially in LA, the odds on anything getting to screen are against you. I was working on many other projects at the same time as *300*, but that was the first one that went into production.

What got it green-lit?

The brilliance of Frank Miller’s graphic novel and Zack Snyder’s vision and determination.

Who do you work with daily when developing dramas?

The writers, first. Without a writer, there’s no show. And then the fantastic team at Vertigo: the producers – Allan Niblo and James Richardson – and the two development executives. You can’t read and manage everything, so having a team you trust and whose tastes and opinions you respect, especially when different to yours, is very important.

What makes a good development producer?

First, you have to be able to recognise the material that has the potential to become a show, no matter what form it

comes in. You can fix a script, but a great idea is invaluable. Then, you have to know how to read a script or adapt that material and make it better. You also need to know where your project sits in the market – what’s getting commissioned and what the audience trends are. If you want to be original and distinctive, you need to know what else is out there and who your audience is.

the UK landscape at the moment. All of Vertigo’s dramas have a certain spirit – they are entertaining, innovative and also have a rebellious spirit that is unafraid to challenge the status quo. A Costa del Sol-set gangster series, titled *A Town Called Malice* and developed by *Bulletproof* co-creator Nick Love, is currently in development for Sky. Another project in development is

your role is primarily to support the writer and the process. Usually, it’s the writer who has the vision for the show and it needs to shine through – you are not the writer. If something is not working in the script, ask questions. Let the writer have the opportunity to come up with a way to address the concern rather than rush to provide suggestions.



How do you find stories and writers?

We read a lot: books, unpublished manuscripts, scripts and articles; and watch TV shows and films and listen to podcasts. Agents send us samples of their writers; there are writing programmes and competitions; at Vertigo, we are also very keen to champion new talent, to give a platform to emerging voices from all backgrounds, so we are always looking for under-represented voices; and people we’ve worked with in the past always send us scripts or ideas.

How do you pitch to a broadcaster?

If you can’t say what your show is and why it’s special in a sentence or two, then you shouldn’t pitch it. That means that the core concept is not clear enough and there’s still work to do.

Commissioners hear pitches all day long and are able to spot immediately something that could be of interest to them. If they like the concept, they will ask for more details and read the script.

What is the secret of *Britannia* and *Bulletproof*’s success?

There are no other shows like them in

based on the 2011 documentary *You’ve Been Trumped*. It is the story of the soon-to-be President’s attempt to build a golf course in Scotland and the tight Scottish community who opposed him.

What do you bring to work with you?

Since I started at Vertigo a year ago, I’ve had just two days in the office, thanks to Covid. In development, the most important thing you need to bring with you is an open mind, because you never know what you’re looking for until you see it and you never know where ideas will come from.

What are the best and worst parts of the job?

The best is when a script or voice really excites and you feel its huge potential – those moments are few and far between, and they can give you goosebumps. The worst is the sheer amount of material you have to go through to find those magical projects.

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

Leave your ego at the door, because

What advice would you give to someone wanting work in development?

Watch TV shows and films – and read all the scripts and books you can. When you’ve read thousands of scripts, it becomes second nature to understand why a story or characters are or aren’t working.

Has the job changed over time?

When I started, there was a big divide between developing a project for TV or film. Now, there’s not much difference – with all the streaming platforms, the boundaries between TV and film have blurred.

It is a time when we can choose what is the best format and way to tell a story and then find a home for it, rather than the other way around.

Television has also taken a lot of the space that independent cinema used to have, in terms of complex storytelling and also of less-represented voices. Like film, TV has become very exciting. ■

Nathalie Peter-Contesse, head of development at Vertigo Films, was interviewed by Matthew Bell.



Sharon Duncan-Brewster (right) in *Intergalactic*

Sky

It's sci-fi but not as we know it

Shilpa Ganatra hails Sky's mould-breaking space adventure *Intergalactic*

Going boldly where no woman has gone before, Sky's new drama *Intergalactic* follows the exploits of a group of female prisoners who commandeer their penal transport to escape to the free world of Arcadia.

But their journey is made trickier as one of the convicts is Ash Harper (played by Savannah Steyn), the daughter of a high-ranking member of the Commonworld's establishment. With Ash imprisoned for a crime she didn't commit, her own quest is the search for the truth. Imagine *Orange Is the New Black*, but set in space.

"That sums it up perfectly when you see it. For me, it's a relationship drama in sci-fi clothes," says Paul Gilbert, executive producer for Sky Studios.

"It felt like we hadn't seen a bold, British sci-fi for a long time," adds Serena Thompson, also an executive producer for Sky Studios. "The idea of doing something female-driven,

adrenaline-driven, about emotion and character, and with a thrilling ride, is something we could see working for Sky One."

Intergalactic's genesis came from producer Matthew Read. Sky approached *Cuffs* and *Prisoners' Wives* writer Julie Gearey to flesh it out into a compelling series. "They knew my big passion is writing female gang shows," says Gearey. "And I'd already been talking about wanting to work in a science-fiction genre. I was a child at exactly the right age for *Star Wars*. I was the kid who used to put the dressing gown on and the ear muffs and pretend to be Princess Leia."

Of its many novel aspects, it is particularly refreshing that *Intergalactic* has "an American scale of ambition while retaining a British identity at its heart", Gilbert notes. Indeed, the unhackneyed accents, subtle humour and the down-to-earthness (pardon the pun) mark the show as born in contemporary Britain.

That was what drew Sharon Duncan-Brewster to play the role of rebel gang

leader Tula. "I love that it doesn't try to be anything else but British, and you find that in the humour, pace and dialogue," she says. "It shows we can do space, too. We can do futuristic, too."

Duncan-Brewster made her mark in revered British productions such as *Years and Years*, *Top Boy* and *Sex Education* but is no stranger to big-budget sci-fi, having appeared in *Rogue One* and been cast in the latest adaptation of Frank Herbert's *Dune*, alongside Jason Momoa and Zendaya, due out later this year.

"I try to take on varied projects and, nowadays, I don't take on roles that aren't appealing to me," she says. "And, while this is a piece that is set in the future and we are in space a lot, at its heart, it is about people and relationships. You meet these characters and can make so many assumptions about them. Then, slowly, as the episodes progress, we get further under the skin of each individual, and you see that they are complex human beings."

For Gearey, the show's invitation for

empathy was a key factor when creating the dynamics of the prison gang and all whom they encounter.

“The underlying premise was taking characters with opposing viewpoints and putting them in a tense situation where they were forced to work together,” she says. “That is so resonant now, when everyone is in their ideological silos.

“But we don’t learn anything unless we come together. That’s how we grow and change and listen to each other.

with the fact that they have to address it,” she says. “It makes me happy that at least people are asking questions.

“People are actively seeking affirmation and I think that’s the promising start. Before, people were just making assumptions or not even realising.”

When it came to bringing the show to life, Sky understood that there was no doing sci-fi in half measures. “It was a top-level budget, as there’s an expectation from audiences who are used to seeing sci-fi films,” says

episodes into post-production after March 2020, which, happily, allowed for a natural ending.

“It’s the biggest show I’ve worked on, and it’s been the show where the most work was done in post-production,” says Gearey. “It will be quite odd to go back to doing something with people in a kitchen.”

Now that the space series is nearly ready to launch, who do the makers feel their audience will be? “The show places the female experience at the



Sky

That issue has become more prevalent since we first started working on it four years ago.”

In order to tease out the interplay between the characters, a breadth of acting talent was called for, and that came down to casting director Kharmel Cochrane.

In addition to big-draw actors such as Duncan-Brewster and Thomas Turgoose (of *This is England* fame), newcomers have been added to the fold. All in all, there is a range of shapes, sizes and colours. “I can’t remember the last time I was on set with more than one other black female on a TV show,” says Duncan-Brewster. “Our characters are so different, age-wise, background-wise.

“It’s refreshing and it’s promising, and it’s about time.”

Is it a sign that television has moved away from tokenism? “I would say it does occur still in certain genres, in certain production companies in particular, but people are coming to terms

Thompson. “It does require a certain level of budget – otherwise you end up with ‘wobbly set’ syndrome.”

The scale of the production meant that the operation had to be carefully thought through. Filming began in September 2019, partly in Valencia, Spain, but the main set was in the aptly named Space Studios in Manchester, where the spaceship was constructed.

“We had Dr Maggie Aderin-Pocock as our space advisor,” says Gearey.

“I’ve got an arts background and I got thrown out of my physics class, so I don’t understand any of it. She helped us understand, so the physics of the spaceship is based on real physics.”

With lead director Kieron Hawkes at the helm, Duncan-Brewster recalls that the set was “a barrel of laughs. There were no egos, just everyone getting on. My phone is pinging now and it’s them on the WhatsApp group”.

The curse of Covid struck before filming completed, but they had enough in the can to put eight of the 10 planned

heart of the storytelling, but we hope to bring everyone along on the journey,” says Gearey. “Good, emotional storytelling doesn’t have to be defined by gender.”

Nor is it just for sci-fi fans or prison drama fans, adds Brewster-Duncan: “I’m interested to see what audiences make of it, but I suspect that we’re going to gather a following that is not [just] the stereotypical sci-fi audience.”

That is certainly the hope at Sky, which has purposefully entered new territory and accepted the risk that goes with it. “We haven’t seen anything like it before on TV, but that’s our remit,” says Gilbert. “We want to challenge orthodoxy wherever possible, and the results speak for themselves.”

Overseas sales and a possible second series (that may or may not include the lost two episodes) are still under discussion. However it fares, it’s already successful in reinventing British sci-fi, bringing the genre up to date, and putting women at its centre. ■



Amazon Prime Video

A genius in his prime

It's a brave film-maker who takes on the story of the Renaissance master Leonardo da Vinci. Can their treatment hope to measure up to the real figure who – for starters – painted the world's most famous canvas, designed flying machines and was a ground-breaking anatomist and scientist.

“He was such a towering genius, so good at so many things, it's actually hard to believe he was real,” says Frank Spotnitz, the driving force behind the Amazon Prime drama *Leonardo*, which launches in the UK and Ireland this month. “You have to make him credible, but also not trivialise him or make his genius mundane or silly.”

Leonardo has featured in many fictional works, including novels, TV shows, video games and movies. Yet, only two major TV series have been made in half a century: RAI's Golden

Matthew Bell discovers how European producers and broadcasters struck new alliances for Amazon's lavish new drama *Leonardo*

Globe-winning 1971 biopic *La Vita di Leonardo Da Vinci*; and the BBC's 2003 semi-dramatised documentary, *Leonardo*, starring Mark Rylance.

The new eight-part series – made on a hefty €30m budget – is a triumph of European co-operation, involving Spotnitz's company, Big Light Productions, Italian producers Lux Vide and RAI Fiction, France Télévisions, Spain's RTVE, Germany's ZDF and Sony Pictures Television.

Despite its pan-European origins, *Leonardo* is anything but a stodgy, uninspiring “euro pudding”. The series looks beautiful, with cinematographer Steve Lawes using the light available to Leonardo – daylight and moonlight from outside, candlelight and firelight inside – to shoot the series. The performances are convincing and *Poldark* hunk Aidan Turner impresses as the obsessive, troubled painter.



Amazon Prime Video

Spotnitz, who wrote more than 40 episodes of *The X-Files*, left Los Angeles to make the BBC drama *Hunted* in 2010, relocating permanently to Europe when he set up Big Light, with offices in London and Paris, a few years later.

Leonardo was the first show to be green-lit by the Alliance, a grouping of three European public broadcasters (France Télévisions, RAI and ZDF) aiming to take on Netflix. “The Alliance came into being to make larger-scale shows that can compete,” says Spotnitz. “The streamers present a challenge to traditional broadcasters because they have very deep pockets. The traditional broadcaster can respond in two ways: one is to go even more local, into shows that serve their own culture; the other is to partner for bigger projects.”

Spotnitz points to his greying hair as he chats on Zoom from Formello, a short drive north of Rome: “I didn’t have any of these before I started doing co-productions. I’ve had, honestly, nightmarish experiences.

“As these experiences go, this has been extraordinarily successful. We’ve done three seasons of [historical drama] *Medici*, *Leonardo* and now we’re

doing the second season of *Devils* [shown by Sky Atlantic] with producer Lux Vide in Rome.

“It takes humility, because you have to go in and listen, and accept there are things you may not understand about another culture, broadcaster and audience. But, also, you don’t agree to everything just because your partner says that’s the way it is.”

Spotnitz has become something of a renaissance man himself, having shot three series of *Medici* for RAI and Netflix. Initially, he turned down *Leonardo*.

“I’d done a lot of 15th-century Italian history,” he recalls, “and I thought that making a show about an artist would be incredibly difficult. The stakes are:

‘YOU SOMETIMES HAVE TO RESCUE [WOMEN’S HISTORICAL ROLES] WITH YOUR IMAGINATION’

‘Will he or will he not complete his painting?’ How do you make a compelling drama out of that?”

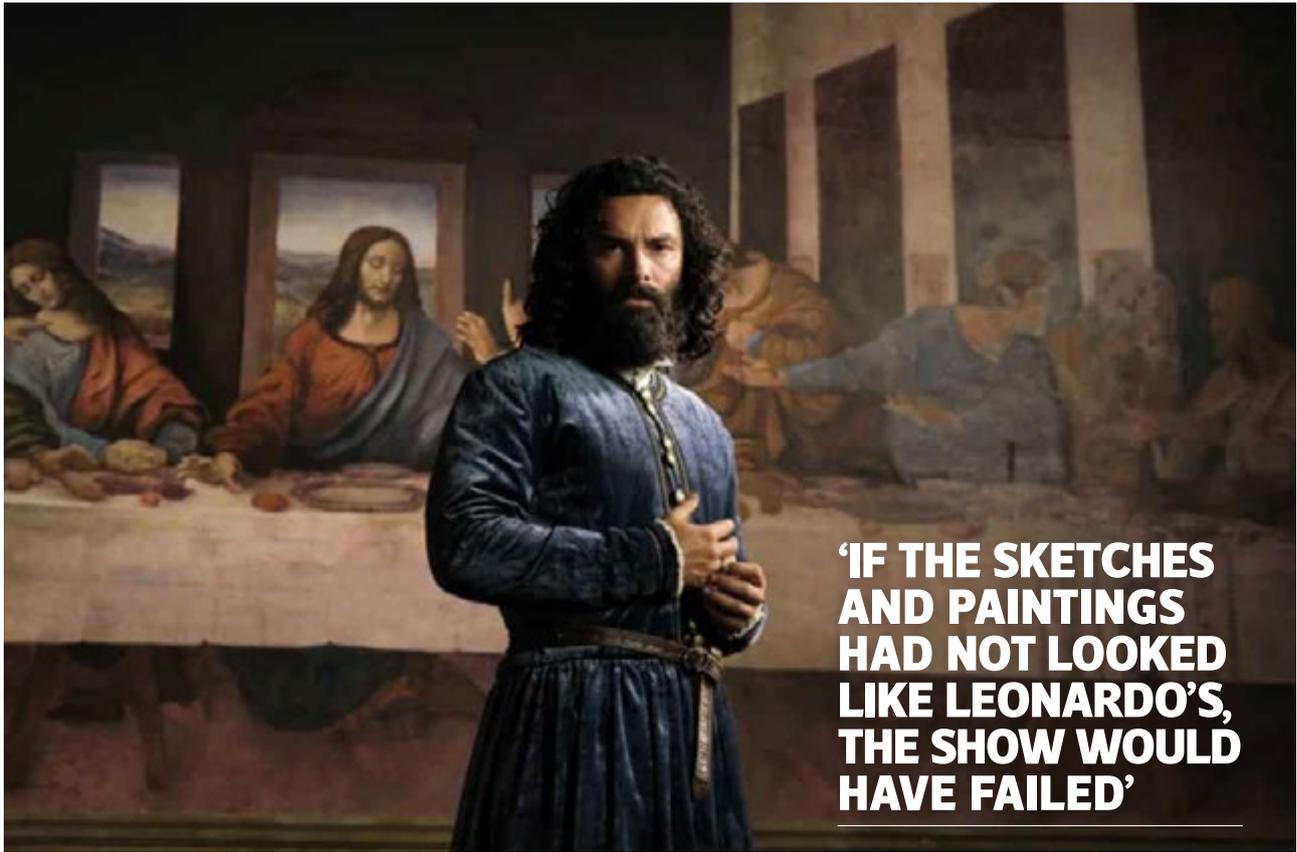
It took the involvement of Steve Thompson, a writer Spotnitz admired from his scripts for *Sherlock* and *Vienna Blood*, to change his mind. The duo constructed an “elaborate puzzle” with one of Leonardo’s models, Caterina da Cremona, at the centre, through which they tell the story of the artist’s life.

“One drawing of her survives and she sat for his most famous missing painting, *Leda and the Swan*, which some consider his greatest,” says Spotnitz. “She is an act of imagination, but she is based on a real character.

“History does not record women as faithfully as it does men and so, if you want to show women and the roles they obviously played in history, you sometimes have to rescue them with your imagination.”

Leonardo’s muse, Cremona, is played by Italian actor Matilda De Angelis (*The Undoing*), with Freddie Highmore (*The Good Doctor*) playing Stefano Giraldi, who investigates the murder at the heart of the story.

Leonardo was shot in English, >



Amazon Prime Video

‘IF THE SKETCHES AND PAINTINGS HAD NOT LOOKED LIKE LEONARDO’S, THE SHOW WOULD HAVE FAILED’

› although the cast is mostly Italian, and the series dubbed into other European languages. “It’s designed to be a big, international show and so you want big actors who are recognisable to an international audience. In Italy, there aren’t that many actors who are known worldwide, so that’s why shows such as this end up being cast with English actors and done in the English language,” Spotnitz explains.

Filming was a stop-start affair, recalls executive producer and Big Light creative director Emily Feller: “We started shooting in December 2019, broke for Christmas, came back and then Covid hit. I was in Italy in the third week of February 2020 and we were aware of what was happening. Northern Italy was already problematic by that point. It was only another few weeks and we shut down.”

Production resumed in mid-June, but now entirely on an expanded backlot at Formello, rather than on location. “Everyone had a real sense of determination to do whatever was needed – it was fantastic to see such wonderful collaboration,” says Feller. “I was just so excited to be getting rushes again.”

Lead director Daniel Percival took a break from filming in the US to

discuss *Leonardo*: “Shooting under Covid was challenging at first because we were still working out the rules. *Leonardo* was one of the first film projects to be back up and running after the first lockdown, and it was pretty experimental.

“But the basics – mask, social distance, no physical contact – were there from the beginning. I can hardly imagine shooting now without a mask on my face. It has become as much a part of my work equipment as headphones.”

Filming wrapped in early August but the shoot had taken longer than anticipated and cost more with “all the testing, having a medic on set and temperatures being taken many times a day”, recalls Feller. “We also had to do some rewriting to account for the fact that we couldn’t use locations or huge numbers of extras,” adds Spotnitz.

The film-makers were determined faithfully to recreate 15th-century Italy and the work of Leonardo. They employed restoration specialists to produce his sketches and paintings using Renaissance techniques and materials.

It helped that the director was also an artist. “Dan approached all the scenes, art, props, and every bit of engineering, with such maniacal

devotion to detail,” says Spotnitz. “Art is a character in the show and it was so important that we got it just right. If the sketches, drawings and paintings hadn’t looked like Leonardo’s, the show would have failed.”

Percival adds: “I think that being an artist myself helped most in terms of getting inside the mind of Leonardo. As I studied his technique, I started to understand more and more about how his mind must have worked. His attention to detail is astonishing. His striving for perfection is palpable.

“There is more than a touch of OCD in his work, but also perhaps autism. Someone who can focus so hard for so long with such razor-sharp precision and yet be able to switch from concept to concept with such ease, would have to have had a very noisy mind indeed.”

Leonardo is “a love story and a murder mystery”, says Spotnitz, but he’s adamant that viewers will “learn something about art, and in a very painless way. When you watch this show, you start to understand why Leonardo da Vinci was a radical, towering figure, not just in art but in civilisation.

“We wanted to entertain, move and inspire, and also teach you something about why he was such a genius.” ■

OUR FRIEND IN THE WEST

As Bristol City Council's new senior film manager, I have finally reached a position where I can support and promote my two main passions – Bristol and filming in the West Country.

My role is to oversee the work of the Bottle Yard Studios and Bristol Film Office, and make sure that Bristol can build on its past successes and deliver a single, complete and consistent offer encompassing studio and location filming. And, despite the pandemic, there has never been a better time.

Film and TV production is one of Bristol's fastest growing businesses, and the studios, which are owned by Bristol City Council, play an integral role in that growth.

After 10 years of operations, the studios are now recognised globally as a thriving centre for production. Titles currently shooting include Stephen Merchant's new BBC/Amazon Prime series *The Offenders*, starring Oscar-winner Christopher Walken, Netflix sci-fi series *The Last Bus* and Starz's *Becoming Elizabeth*.

The city's Film Office has consistently provided support for productions over the past 15 years. This has earned Bristol the reputation of being one of the most film-friendly places to shoot in the UK. And it contributed to us winning Unesco City of Film status in 2017, and persuading Channel 4 to open its creative hub here in early 2020.

Producers return time and time again, for good reason. There are many

Laura Aviles explains why Bristol's TV and film community is poised to play a vital role in the post-Covid economic recovery



Laura Aviles

benefits to being based here: it is less than two hours from London but, as a smaller city, Bristol is far quicker to navigate when shooting on location. Producers save precious time when units are in transit. Costs are lower, yet you will still find all the world-class production, post-production and facilities companies you could possibly need.

Bristol Film Office goes above and beyond to assist with recces, permits and logistics, plus there's a vast bank of experienced local crew who are only too keen to work closer to home.

Within the city, you'll find a mixture of architecture, including Regency and Georgian terraces, large green spaces and gritty urban settings.

Bristol is the gateway to the West of England – Cornwall, Devon and Dorset offer a wonderfully varied selection of landscapes, historic houses and coastlines.

Like everyone else, we had to adapt quickly to create a safe production environment during the pandemic. We have a dedicated Covid-19 safety supervisor in place and we published our Covid-19 site operating procedures in June to support productions and TV/film-related businesses based here.

Our recovery in Bristol has been relatively fast. The city was the location of choice for some of the first UK high-end TV titles to restart filming after the first lockdown.

These included the BBC and Amazon's Nancy Mitford adaptation, *The Pursuit of Love*, starring Lily James and Andrew Scott, and series 2 of Fox TV and StudioCanal's *War of the Worlds*. Both were up and running again by late July/early August.

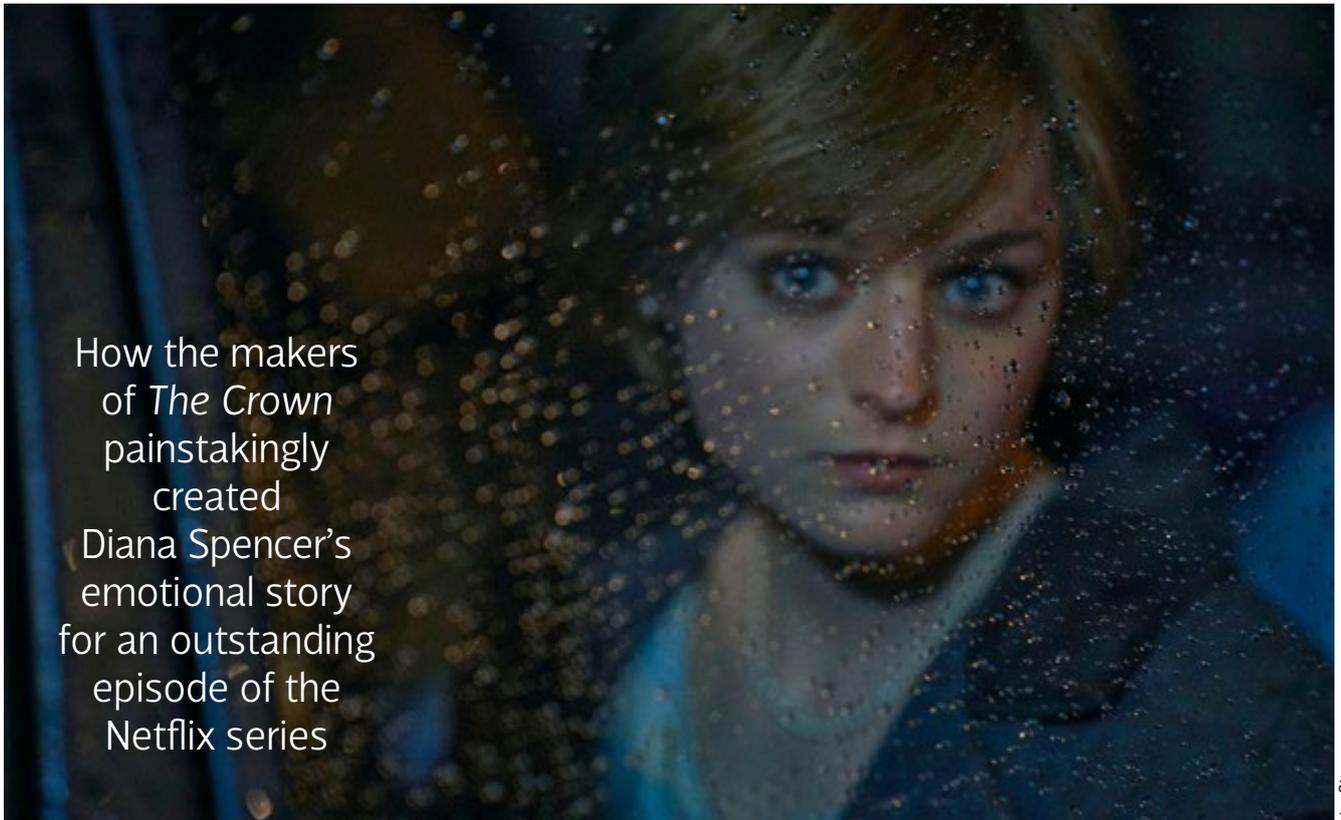
As streaming platforms and broadcasters ramp up their content, the need for additional stage space and skills is growing steadily. New studios are being built throughout the UK, and Bristol is not missing out. Plans for a £12m development have recently been approved, with the Bottle Yard growing from eight to 11 stages. If everything goes to plan, the new studios should launch late next spring.

Bristol is developing a skills agenda to grow a sustainable talent base to meet increased demand, and the city is set to be a key contributor to local and national economic recovery. ■

Laura Aviles is Bristol City Council's senior film manager.

The craft of telling a fairytale

How the makers of *The Crown* painstakingly created Diana Spencer's emotional story for an outstanding episode of the Netflix series



Netflix

‘We think we all know Diana’s story, but I always ask the question: what must it have been like for any person going through that experience – what she was thrown into at such a young age?’ said Benjamin Caron, the director of the *Fairytale* episode of *The Crown*.

Therein lies the challenge of the third episode of the fourth series of Netflix’s royal drama. A dramatisation loosely based on the royal family (and all the more contentious for it), the episode’s central figure is Diana Spencer, who accepts Prince Charles’s proposal and moves from her Earl’s Court flatshare to Buckingham Palace in preparation for her new life as a princess.

The Crown’s blurring of fact and fiction becomes trickier with, “arguably,

one of the most famous women in the world, a person about whom everyone has an opinion”, noted Caron at last month’s RTS event “Deconstructing the *Fairytale*”.

The episode is, arguably, a masterclass in storytelling, especially when the story is world-famous. The script was one of *The Crown*’s shortest, at just over 30 pages, which allowed a greater emphasis on the telltale details of this key moment in royal history.

Laden with visual metaphors, it leverages every aspect available to a director to depict the emotional journey behind Diana’s dramatic switch from her old life to the new – and to foreshadow the already-familiar events of her life as a royal.

“As a guiding principle, I like to focus on the anthropological weirdness of these people and this institution,” said Caron. “It always comes back to the

slightly cold, bruising, hurtful, lonely, locked-up pain. I love focusing on that uncomfortable stuff, that piece of gravel in the shoe.

“[But,] across the season, we see that remarkable strength of character which Diana possesses grow, and that power and resilience she has to rise above it all.”

Joining Caron on the panel were production designer Martin Childs and hair and make-up designer Cate Hall, both integral to the episode. Emma Corrin, who played Diana in the show, had to pull out of the panel due to a last-minute scheduling conflict, but her casting was the first and biggest step in the process.

“Casting Diana felt like no easy task until we met Emma. Very Diana-like, she walked into the room and instantly captured everyone’s attention,” said Caron. “She had this strength, this incredible vulnerability, which is a hard

thing to play without being clichéd.”

Corrin’s depiction, and the freedom that the lean script afforded, combine in a revealing scene in which Diana practises ballet alone. Inspired by a similar scene in *Billy Elliot* (directed by Stephen Daldry, also an executive producer for *The Crown*) and soundtracked by a haunting use of *Song for Guy* by Elton John, Diana begins in a rigid, taught fashion.

But, as the emotions get the better of her, “it breaks out into her expression of her character, her personality, of her trying to push out against the walls

“We put a bald piece underneath the wig so, when she moves, you can see skin underneath, and the hair flicking out,” said Cate Hall. “Emma was so confident [in the wig] that there was never any reticence to do any of the moves. She didn’t have to think about the wig, ever.”

Although costume designer Amy Roberts ensured that the looks always matched the setting, the softness of her ballet outfit is noticeably at odds with the imposing room. “It’s the only time where the costume and the environment didn’t go together, and deliberately

provided by the royals. “I have a theory that they only dusted the apartment the week before she got there and, in the past, they kept it there for brides-to-be. That was my brief to myself and the set decorator.”

Diana’s appearance acts as a visual device, too. Said Hall: “We had to plot the journey strategically over 10 individual films, and *Fairytale* is a springboard into that journey. She’s full of hope, but we know it can’t end well. We almost had to tell the whole story in one episode.”

To begin with, “we went as minimal as possible. We kept everything soft, creamy, really round, to give her that adolescent vibe. Then, we used beauty make-up to age her though the series. So we used those nice 1980s trends with cool, glittery tones. We used angular blusher, blue eyeliner – all that stuff. That helped to underpin the emotional narrative, and also to give us somewhere to go to tell that whole story.”

But blue eyeliners presented a particular challenge. Because their colours change with different lenses and cameras, the crew needed to camera-test them all. “We turned up with a make-up shop’s worth of make-up and looked at every different blue on camera, because we had to save our punchiest blues for the end of her story,” said Hall.

Diana’s hairstyle has its own journey: three wigs were used over this series. “They’re all essentially the same haircut – it’s that unique Diana cut. But, as she moves through the series, the hair gets more processed and styled, with more highlights. By the end, it’s a real do.”

Diana’s fateful storyline will continue in the fifth series. As has become customary after two series, it is all change for the cast. Imelda Staunton takes over from Olivia Colman as Queen Elizabeth; Lesley Manville plays Princess Margaret, instead of Helena Bonham Carter, and Elizabeth Debicki (*The Great Gatsby* and *Widows*) will take the baton from Corrin to play Diana.

Both Hall and Childs are working on the upcoming series but, unsurprisingly, are tight-lipped about what’s to come. “I have this pile of scripts with my name watermarked on them, so I can’t divulge a thing. They’re juicy, aren’t they, Cate?” teased Childs.

We wouldn’t expect anything less. ■

Report by Shilpa Ganatra. ‘Deconstructing the Fairytale’ was an RTS event held on 24 March, chaired by presenter Anita Rani.



Netflix

of the palace,” said Caron. “It’s raw, it’s emotional, it comes at a really difficult time for her, but it speaks volumes about her incredible ability to overcome.”

The scene was shot on a closed set, with loose direction. “I always talk about giving actors permission to fail, about allowing them to go further than they might do without the constraints of being judged,” said Caron. “It was just me and the camera, and we played Cher’s *Believe*. It didn’t matter because we were going to replace the music later on, but it was something Emma felt she could throw herself around the room to.”

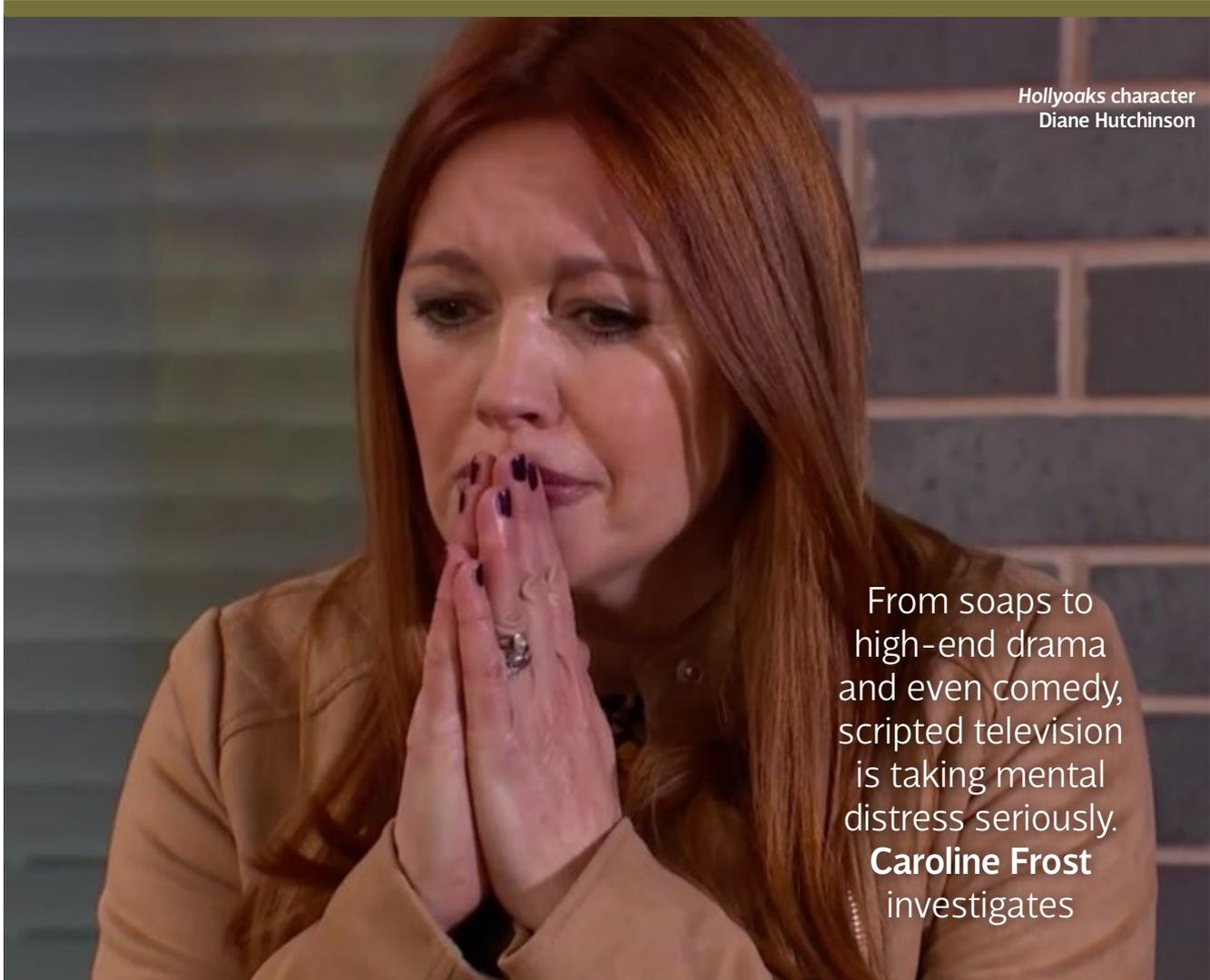
This scene also highlights the role that production plays. For Corrin to be able to throw herself around the room without restraint, her wig had to play its part by staying on and adding to the spectacle of her torment.

didn’t go together, so she could carry on being a fish out of water,” explained Childs.

The metaphors in the set have underpinned *The Crown*, especially with the cold formality of Buckingham Palace. Childs revealed that, ahead of the first series, he went undercover as a tourist to tour the palace. He then recreated “the house” using a combination of 11 stately homes and four sets in Elstree Studios.

Look carefully and staircases tell their own story. When Diana leaves her flat for the palace, she leaves her friends behind and descends a staircase with blood-red walls. “Then, Ben had the brilliant idea of providing a counterpoint [by] doing a much grander version of it once she gets to the palace,” said Childs.

There, the apartment in which Diana is kept speaks of the “cold hospitality”



Hollyoaks character
Diane Hutchinson

From soaps to high-end drama and even comedy, scripted television is taking mental distress seriously. **Caroline Frost** investigates

Channel 4

How TV is tackling our mental health

If that storyline wasn't there, I would not be here. That's the reality of it. You have saved my life." That's what *Hollyoaks* fan John told one of the soap's stars, Ashley Taylor Dawson, when the pair were brought together by BBC Radio 5 Live earlier this year.

John, who uses gender neutral pronouns, had previously phoned the station to share how they had been struggling during the lockdown of 2020, to the point where they had planned to end their life. Then they happened to sit down and watch an episode of *Hollyoaks*, coincidentally the traumatic conclusion

of a depression storyline featuring two characters Adam and Darren.

"Adam took his own life, but Darren didn't, and you see the fallout of that," explains Taylor Dawson, who has played Darren for more than two decades. "It was very testing as an actor, but the feedback was humbling and overwhelming, and then I spoke to John. They told me, 'I saw the reaction of the family, and I saw my own mum in my head, and I realised I couldn't do it'.

"Television reaches so many people, and if it helps just one person like John, it's invaluable."

Hollyoaks has been tireless in

highlighting mental health issues. A forthcoming storyline concentrates on character Diane Hutchinson's struggle with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). But it is by no means the only TV show to both reflect and help drive the UK's increasing concern with people's mental welfare.

Clive Crump, a mental health worker at Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health Service, credits modern writers with striking a delicate balance between compassion and narrative thrills. "On the one hand, they demonstrate that mental illness is just part of the tapestry of normal human life and, on the other,



Flowers

Channel 4

‘FLOWERS IS BOTH BRUTALLY DARK AND ACHINGLY FUNNY’

they serve ever-more sophisticated demands for drama and entertainment,” he says.

This new readiness to explore previously hidden aspects of all our psyches is apparent in almost all of the best of today’s TV scripted shows – from soaps to hard-hitting drama and through to comedy.

Crump cites Paul Mescal’s delicate depiction of depression and anxiety in *Normal People*, as well as Alison Steadman’s “remarkable performance” in Mike Bartlett’s *Life*. She plays a 70-year-old woman suddenly questioning her identity, having been mocked into a hollow existence by her long-time bully of a husband.

One writer clearly willing to embrace both light and shade is Will Sharpe, the creator, director and star of Channel 4’s *Flowers*, the show he has described as a “comedy with a mental illness”. Sure enough, it is brutally dark and achingly funny, as the *Flowers* family contends with all types of mental challenges, including father Maurice (Julian Barratt)’s depression and failed attempt to end his life in the very first scene of the show.

Comedy became Sharpe’s tool to break down the walls between his characters and their audience. He revealed: “I felt frustrated by the lack of understanding surrounding mental illness. I guess some things can feel so heavy or painful that it seems safer just

to look away. But comedy can be a really helpful tool to process stuff like that.”

TV shows have come a long way from using mental illness simply as a colourful plot device, often to make fun of a particular character. A crucial aspect of this evolution on screen is the collective sense of responsibility of broadcasters, writers, and actors to present far more authentic depictions of the challenges and feelings of those suffering.

Angela Samata, a suicide prevention campaigner for nearly two decades after losing her husband, has served as a script advisor to *Hollyoaks* on storylines. She credits this increasing attention to detail for the impact of storylines on vulnerable viewers such as John.

“Writers have always reflected the mood. What’s different is the diligence behind the storylines now,” she explains. “We took the actor, Ashley Taylor Dawson, and the writers to a house of therapy in Liverpool, where a man who had been feeling actively suicidal agreed to speak. Ashley was listening intently to him explaining his feelings and, later, on screen, I heard those same words reflected in the script.

“Since then, we’ve had people reaching out for support who wouldn’t have done it without that storyline. It was beautifully acted, but the words came from the truth of the situation, and that’s why it was able to touch them.”

One writer able to chart this growing

need for diligence is Hans Rosenfeldt, the creator of *The Bridge*, with its supreme but socially awkward female detective, Saga Norén, and, more recently, ITV’s *Marcella*, with its equally talented but troubled crime-fighting protagonist.

“We created Saga almost 15 years ago, and she was just a character with no social skills,” he remembers. “We developed her over four years, until one director said, for the first time, ‘This woman must be on the autistic spectrum somewhere’.

“Back then, you could get away with a more vague portrayal, whereas now you have to be very careful with research into what she does and doesn’t do. We never even thought about it. It was only when the comments came in, it kind of became the truth. In our universe, she was just Saga.”

Rosenfeldt agrees that *Marcella* is a far more up-to-date, diagnosable creation. Although he jokes that her PTSD, capacity for blackouts and even eventual disappearance into another identity are all “simply plot-devices”, it becomes clear that the writer has done plenty of his own research into these conditions.

In contrast with Samata, however, Rosenfeldt’s equal duty of care comes out, it seems, in knowing his limitations: “For neither of these characters did we say this is a true description of a diagnosis or syndrome. If anything, I felt responsibility not to give them diagnoses. The moment you claim this is the truth, you become limited in the stories you can tell, because you have to do it right for that community.”

Despite such different approaches, it is evident that contemporary writers delight in the rich texture provided by characters who are both challenged and challenging – what Peter Bowker, creator of *The A Word*, about a family living with their child’s autism, describes as “somebody at the centre of something that doesn’t quite fit. From a purely selfish dramatist’s point of view, there’s no doubt about it, it’s incredibly rich territory.”

Rosenfeldt adds that these characters in all their complexity are also key to keeping modern viewers fulfilled. “Audiences are so much bigger, and one crime story is much like another, so you need characters who viewers will want to return to. That means more layers – and one that works well is a kind of flaw, something broken, so we can root for it to heal, or at least [for a character to] learn to deal with it.” ■

Even in a lockdown year, **Jane Tranter's** Bad Wolf produced a healthy litter of hits, including *Industry* and *I Hate Suzie*.

Interview by Tim Dams

Bad Wolf co-founder Jane Tranter shoots back with a rapid reply when asked what her Cardiff-based production company is up to: “Dealing with high-level anxiety all the time, probably emanating from myself.”

If so, Tranter – speaking over Zoom – hides it well. Any stress would be understandable. Against the backdrop of the pandemic, Bad Wolf has brought the second seasons of fantasy epics *His Dark Materials* and *A Discovery of Witches* to the screen, and launched two acclaimed contemporary dramas, *Industry* and *I Hate Suzie*.

This slate of high-end TV propelled Bad Wolf to seventh place in *Broadcast's* recently published Indie Survey, on a turnover of £65m. Not bad for a company that only launched in 2015, with backing from the Welsh government and, later on, minority investments from Sky, HBO and Access Industries.

Meanwhile, sister company Bad Wolf America, run by Julie Gardner, has just received a series order from Apple TV+ for *Lady in the Lake*, a thriller starring Natalie Portman and Lupita Nyong'o.

Home life sounds like it has been busy for Tranter, too. Her twins finished school last summer and had to navigate applying to university in a year when A levels were cancelled and the first term of university was disrupted by Covid.

As for many others, her dog – a Goldendoodle she got while working in Los Angeles as BBC Worldwide's EVP of programming and production – has been a lockdown solace. So, too, has watching television. She says she's “hoovered” her way through shows such as *Schitt's Creek*, *The Good Place*, *Call My Agent!*, *The Bureau* and *My Brilliant Friend*.

We speak on the day that the long winter lockdown restrictions have finally started to ease. The weather is sunny, and there is a palpable feeling of relief and anticipation about what lies ahead.

Tranter says she's looking forward to



Bad Wolf

Jane Tranter

The wolf of drama street

being able to go to restaurants again, and is keen to reapply for tickets to the delayed Tracey Emin exhibition at the Royal Academy. “But, for me, the main excitement is 12 April, at which point I can go to the hairdresser – that's my only real concern.”

Joking aside, her concerns do run

deeper. For Tranter, seeing Bad Wolf's position in *Broadcast's* Indie Survey, where it was also ranked as the second-biggest true indie, wasn't an entirely pleasurable experience. “The first thing I thought was, ‘Fuck me, how are we ever going to do that again?’”

“It's a constant feeling in our industry,

no matter how good or experienced you are. It is a naturally very precarious business, and that's without Covid thrown in."

Tranter says that Bad Wolf was lucky in 2020 in that only one of its four productions, *His Dark Materials*, had to stop filming when the March lockdown hit. Rather than postpone production, Bad Wolf was able, with backing from its funders, the BBC and HBO, to squeeze the narrative into seven, rather than eight, episodes, helped by visual effects.

The other three shows – *Industry*, *A Discovery of Witches* and *I Hate Suzie* – had all completed production. So Bad Wolf spent much of 2020 in post, before firing up production on the third season of *A Discovery of Witches* in September.

This continued shooting during the height of the Covid second wave, completing in February with only a few stops due to positive Covid tests.

"It was a very anxious time," admits Tranter, who doubts that Bad Wolf would have attempted this kind of challenge in the early days. Even with the Government-backed production insurance scheme, the additional cost and financial risk of proceeding was considerable.

Covid has made the production landscape much harder for newer indies, she reckons, threatening truly independent suppliers. "Even for a company the size of Bad Wolf, it really makes you think, 'Do I want to be here on my own, or do I want to join with a stronger partner?'"

This year, Bad Wolf is making the third series of *His Dark Materials*, second series of *Industry* and *I Hate Suzie*, and is editing *A Discovery of Witches*. "So 2021 is really a transitional year of nailing those shows that we set up in 2020," says Tranter.

Bad Wolf will also be looking to this year to get its next wave of dramas off the ground, to set the template for the company's next five years. "It's almost like starting again, because so much has changed in terms of how we want



Riz Ahmed in
The Night of

'PEOPLE
DON'T WATCH
TELEVISION
ANY MORE.
THEY WATCH
PROGRAMMES'

to view, and what we want to view," says Tranter, whose executive producer credits include acclaimed series such as *The Night of* and *Succession*.

With so much work on during 2020, Bad Wolf didn't spend lockdown madly developing, as many indies did, but development is a focus this year.

Tranter ushered in hit shows such as *Spooks* and *State of Play* and resurrected *Doctor Who* during her time as BBC head of fiction back in the 2000s.

She says she "absolutely loves" developing, but admits that, during the past year, it has been a struggle to "get my head around what the themes of our viewing lives are going to be" as the world has grappled with the pandemic.

She seems to have a clearer sense now. In the wake of 2020, she says, the traditional way of drama transmitting once a week has gone for ever. "We have got to look now for shows that work in a box-set environment. People don't watch television any more. They watch programmes."

In terms of content, Tranter says she is drawn to areas she has not looked at before – notably contemporary romance. British TV, she explains, has always held a mirror up to the way we

live now, and often has a slightly dark cloud to it. While she watches and admires this work, Tranter says she's now interested in exploring life in a slightly brighter way. "We have not done that so much in British television."

By romance, Tranter explains that she's taking a broad approach. It could also be romance in terms of our relationship with the environment, our community or families.

Could this focus on romance also be a reaction to what many think is TV's over-reliance on crime drama? Tranter doesn't think so: "People want to watch it – and it would be ludicrous to disregard that. All the way back through the 20th century and beyond, British people have loved a good crime story."

Beyond this, she thinks there is an appetite for what she calls "tourist porn", suggesting it was a key part of the appeal of *Emily in Paris*, *The Serpent* and *Call My Agent!* "We loved watching those worlds in lockdown, and I think that will continue."

Not that travel is easy for productions. The third series of *A Discovery of Witches* was due to shoot in Italy, the south of France, the east coast of the US and New Orleans. In the end, the whole series was shot in Wales, where Bad Wolf runs its own studio operation, Wolf Studios, in partnership with the Welsh government.

Bad Wolf is now hiring local crews in each country to film environment shots, and will stitch them into the series with visual effects.

Tranter is hoping that, as the vaccination programme picks up around the world, *His Dark Materials* might be able to film abroad later this year. "We are just going to have to be flexible," she says, admitting that Covid safety protocols such as mask-wearing and testing are going to be with the industry for quite some time.

This year, she thinks, will be a year when the industry just has to evolve as the coronavirus situation allows. "I'm hoping that next year, 2022, will feel more stable." ■

Drilling down into documentaries



YouTube

The RTS gains an insight into the commissioning strategy for YouTube Originals

‘We are in the middle of a revolution of creativity,’ according to Luke Hyams, who commissions documentaries for YouTube Originals. His aim is to nurture mould-breaking films that appeal to the platform’s young demographic and which don’t get lost in the deluge of video content available to his audience.

He explained his approach at a recent RTS event, “YouTube Originals: How an ecosystem of content creators and audience trends inspire the commissioning strategy”. Hyams was joined by the directors of two of his recent projects, *Terms and Conditions: A UK Drill Story* and *How to Be Behzinga*, Brian Hill and Kevin Batchelor, respectively.

Also present were London-based journalist Andre Montgomery-Johnson – aka Mr Montgomery – who narrates *Terms and Conditions: A UK Drill Story*, and Ethan Payne, aka Behzinga, YouTube star and the subject of *How to Be Behzinga*, which recounts Payne’s emotional and physical transition from overweight gamer to endurance athlete.

Hyams told the RTS that his focus was on “partnering British producers and YouTube creators to create exciting premium programming experiences. We take inspiration from the personalities, the trends, the formats that are blowing up on YouTube. Every show we do allows us to delve into a different pocket of YouTube taste [and] look at different targeted audiences, which makes it different to any other platform or broadcaster’s commissioning strategy.”

The two 2020 documentaries illustrated his point. Drill videos have been massively popular on YouTube, while Behzinga was an established YouTube star before the non-scripted three-parter was made.

Unusually, however, *Terms and Conditions...* was directed by a veteran award-winner (Hill’s credits include the Bafta-winning *Feltham Sings*, set in the London young offenders’ prison) who knew nothing about drill and little about working with YouTube before he took on the commission.

Hill said: “I was reluctant to do it at first but then I thought this is on my doorstep in London and it’s an interesting social phenomenon that needs

to be explored... I wanted to discover why music was again being blamed for causing society’s ills.

“I thought it would be hard to penetrate that world and get people to talk to me, but it wasn’t. That was largely due to Andre. He’s got an in and made the introductions.”

Andre’s Mr Montgomery channel is the voice of drill on YouTube, noted Hyams, who added: “To take Andre’s voice and mesh it with Brian’s was a great opportunity.”

The film was also something of a risk for YouTube, which has been criticised for providing a platform for what many people believe is a style of rap responsible for fostering gang violence. In May 2019, protesters gathered outside YouTube’s London HQ to urge the video-sharing platform to take a tougher stance against content that they believed promoted knife and gun crime.

Terms and Conditions... was an attempt to make a balanced film that explored the music’s connections to knife crime, gangs and drugs. Drill musicians and performers were featured alongside interviews with bereaved mothers

whose sons were killed on London's streets.

Hyams said the film contained "an anti-violence message wrapped up in the music [the participants] loved" – and acknowledged that it gave him a few sleepless nights, particularly as YouTube was criticised in the film. "It was a nail-biting experience," he admitted.

"I have to credit the guys I work with at YouTube and Google Policy, especially Ben McOwen Wilson [regional director, YouTube EMEA]. They stood behind me and pushed for us to make an honest appraisal."

For Montgomery-Johnson, being involved in *Terms and Conditions...* was "life-changing". He wanted to show drill "in all its facets" and "open doors for everybody within every demographic".

He added: "Growing up in Brixton, I felt like a statistic – one more child that will go through the system, maybe get a job, maybe go to uni, maybe go to jail. I didn't want that. I felt that sharing my story... I want to be who I want to be regardless of what anybody has to say. If that means doing it through a documentary... why not?"

He praised Hill's empathy and rapport for the rappers who agreed to be filmed: "He put two and two together quickly... A lot of drill artists are unreliable and quite dangerous.

"Some of them have mental health issues and behave in certain ways which they don't see are wrong. Or they haven't ever been corrected about certain behaviours. Brian was able to pick that stuff up quick."

Unusually, the interviews were filmed in black and white. Hill said that "in lots of places" that would have been impossible: "They'd think that black and white will freak out our audience. YouTube was completely on board with all of that."

How to Be Behzinga is another YouTube Originals project that touches on sensitive topics, including cancer, mental health, fitness, masculinity and friendship. Batchelor told the RTS that he had set out to make a series that

connected with Behzinga's YouTube following.

"When we spoke to Luke originally, we had an idea of what we wanted to make. The film was going to sit on his channel and speak to his audience," he recalled.



"I have never worked with anyone on camera who was as willing to put themselves out there as Ethan [Payne] was. There was nowhere we couldn't go. For a film-maker, that is brilliant but also terrifying – when do you know when to pull back and when do you know to go deeper?"

Payne, nevertheless, enjoyed the experience, despite the length of the shoot doubling from four to eight months due to disruptions caused by lockdown. "Working with Kevin and his crew felt like a family environment, it was so relaxed. I could laugh and joke but get the job done," he said.

These two documentaries are very different in terms of their running times – one is a feature-length film while the other is a three-part series.

"When producers come to us, we want them to think about what the best form is," explained Hyams. "We take data into consideration but there are no restrictions or limits. That's one of the great things about commissioning at YouTube."

As for subject matter, would he consider wildlife films? "Yes, if there is a way that they can be connected to something relevant to YouTube," said Hyams. "If there's a creator out there who's already doing some great stuff in wildlife or who has a passion for wildlife that you could partner with... If there is a wildlife channel that is doing well, potentially doing something together could be good.

"But, for the most part, we're very personality-led... Wildlife, yes, but it would definitely have to have a human element."

And animation? "We're open to it. We're commissioning for YouTube Kids, so if there is stuff that is skewed towards a younger audience, we'd love to take a look at any pitches.

"We try and stay one degree away from what's already on YouTube. We're not doing adult, narrative scripted animation."

Regardless of genre, originality is crucial. "We don't like things that feel as if they've already been pitched to Netflix or BBC Three or someone else. Stuff that could fit anywhere isn't really for us.

"It needs a USP that connects it to YouTube and makes it feel it could only ever exist on YouTube. One of the things that gets us off to a good start is saying, 'This is the YouTube channel I'd like to partner with.'"

"For us, it makes sense to partner with and celebrate people who've already put in loads of time with YouTube." ■

Report by Steve Clarke. 'YouTube Originals: How an ecosystem of content creators and audience trends inspire the commissioning strategy' was an RTS event held on 11 March. The session was hosted by Rhianna Dhillon, BBC 6 Music film and TV critic.



Channel 4

Monkey business

Over the past couple of decades, production company Monkey has made some of TV's most innovative entertainment shows. Love or loathe it, no one can doubt the pioneering success of, say, *Made in Chelsea*. It's a show that, along with Lime Pictures' *The Only Way Is Essex*, rewrote the script for reality television.

Monkey, aka Monkey Kingdom, celebrates its 21st birthday this year. The indie's founders, Will Macdonald and David Granger, had previously run Chris Evans's production company, Ginger Television. In the mid-1990s, Macdonald even found fleeting on-screen fame as Evans's sidekick on Channel 4's boundary-pushing *TFI Friday*.

However, Ginger, which was sold to the Scottish Media Group (later STV) in 2000, was "coming apart", recalled Macdonald.

The RTS learns how the influential indie helped reinvent entertainment genres

'POSH PEOPLE WERE ALWAYS LAMBASTED ON TV... BUT THE PEOPLE WE WERE SEEING WERE COOL AND INTERESTING'

He and Granger had enjoyed their autonomy at Ginger and wanted to keep it. The duo told the RTS that, although they had been successful at getting ideas such as *Don't Forget Your Toothbrush* on TV, they were less sure about how to set up an indie.

"I'd love to say there was a master plan but, like all good things, it was by default," admitted Macdonald. Monkey "started off with me and [Granger] on a park bench, and we bumbled our way through setting up the company".

Monkey's first success – the hidden-camera show *Make My Day*, for Channel 4 – gave unsuspecting people the greatest day of their lives, whether it was fulfilling a long-held dream or meeting a celebrity hero.

"The show is a really good reflection... of the sort of television we like to make," said Granger. "It's a mischievous format, it plays in real life and it does a lot with talent. We were told it was impossible [to make]."

Another early series, Channel 5 prank show *Swag*, tempted the public to commit a crime and then gave them their comeuppance; the action was again filmed on hidden cameras. The idea came from work associate – and movie director – Guy Ritchie, who had witnessed thieves making off with a bike belonging to his then wife, Madonna.

Made in Chelsea, which made its debut on E4 in 2011, gave Monkey its first big hit. “We had this idea for a show called ‘Daddy’s Little Princess,’” recalled Macdonald, based on a young woman who did her supermarket shop in a speedboat.

“Posh people were always lambasted on television – no one liked them, they were always portrayed as idiots, but the people we were seeing were cool and interesting,” said Granger. “We made the decision to [film their] love lives, relationships and friendships – and not have them just waving [their] money... in the face of the viewer.... People did warm to them massively and, 10 years later, it’s still going, and stronger than ever.”

Since their time at Ginger, Macdonald and Granger had sold formats and made shows in the US. But, a decade into Monkey’s life, frustration with interference from US partners was growing. “Every time we sold a show out there, we had to co-produce it with another company. That’s not always ideal,” said Macdonald.

The experience on one show in particular, *Man vs Cartoon* (in which scientists tried to recreate Wile E Coyote’s ridiculous contraptions from *Looney Tunes*), was particularly irritating. “We handed it over to this American producer and it didn’t really work. We started to realise that we needed to be as creative and involved as we are here.” In 2010, Monkey was acquired by NBCUniversal International Studios, which, Macdonald says, gave the indie creative control over its shows in the US.

Over the past decade, Monkey has continued to thrive, producing the RTS award-winning *The Real Housewives of Cheshire* and *Don’t Hate the Playaz*.

Its newest series is Sky One’s *Dating No Filter*, based on a show that first



Dating No Filter

Sky

aired on E! in the US. The result is something like the love child of *Gogglebox* and *First Dates*, and features pairs of comics commentating on blind dates.

The comedians include Josh Widdicombe, Tom Allen, Joel Dommett and Judi Love, with the latter two appearing at the RTS event. “You’re sat down with your friend, taking the mick. I literally do that when I watch *First Dates* anyway. That’s what’s beautiful about the format – it’s simple,” said Dommett.

“The dynamic of the pairings is really important.... We wanted people who had established relationships and, frankly, could take the piss out of each other as well. The self-deprecation and honesty around disastrous dates is really important because we’ve all had them,” added Granger.

Dating No Filter and Monkey’s other shows have continued to be made during the Covid-19 lockdowns. “We’ve learned that we’re incredibly resilient,” said Samantha Lawrence,

who joined the indie as Managing Director in 2017. “The three of us are not very good at not working and making shows. For our own sanity, we had to keep going.”

As Monkey enters its third decade, Macdonald is hoping to make “big series on big networks” for a media world that, he says, is consolidating into “fewer, bigger, better” outfits.

The large US streamers, he added, are creating global markets for shows: “Some shows we’re making in the UK for the UK and some shows in the US for the US, but we’re also thinking how we can [bring them together].”

“There are also some shows that we’re still determined to make that sit on scraps of paper from 20 years ago because, in the end, a good idea needs to find the right time.” ■

Report by Matthew Bell. The RTS event ‘Monkey: 21 in 2021’ was held on 18 March and chaired by journalist Caroline Frost.

Arrested development

An all-star RTS panel discusses the genesis of Channel 4's *Frank of Ireland*, a waster for our times



From *Father Ted* to *Derry Girls*, Channel 4's reputation for Irish comedy is second to none. Now comes *Frank of Ireland*, a new, six-part series made by Sharon Horgan's production company, Merman, producer of BBC Two's *Motherland*. The show stars Brian Gleeson, who plays the eponymous Frank, and his brother Domhnall. The Gleeson family are, of course, Irish acting royalty.

The broadcaster hopes that Frank Marron, a 32-year-old man locked in an adolescent's mind, will join that exclusive group of TV comic monsters, who, despite their self-centred ways and empathy deficit, somehow engage our sympathies.

Think, to name but three, of Basil Fawlty, Alan Partridge, or Larry David in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* – all hilarious but people you'd really want to keep at arm's length, were you to run into them.

So, just who is Frank and where did

he come from? The short answer is that he came from the minds of the distinguished trio of creatives – Michael Moloney and Brian and Domhnall Gleeson – with some input from Horgan, an executive producer on the show.

Frankly, an early inspiration for Frank himself seems a tad mysterious but goes back at least five years. The two Gleeson brothers had worked on a short together, which partly led to the character.

But then, so did another creation worked up by Domhnall Gleeson and Moloney, writing songs together, centred on a struggling country singer.

What we do know about Frank is that he is a walking disaster area – newly single, jobless, living at home with his mother (who doesn't want him in the house) and an accomplished musician who hasn't written a song or played a gig in years.

Horgan's involvement began when Domhnall (he featured as a guest star in an episode of *Catastrophe*) ran into her in New York and showed her the script. "We didn't know what we had – was it a film thing or was it just a load of funny stuff?" he recalled.

The idea began to take shape when Merman came on board. Domhnall added: "It was not a million miles away from what we ended up filming, but Sharon was amazing about helping us to turn it into something that could be on the telly."

"I remember Domhnall being on the *Catastrophe* set and he was telling me how to talk to actors properly," she said, smiling at the memory. "I'd seen his Irish sketch show, *Your Bad Self*, and thought it was the funniest thing I'd ever seen on Irish or UK TV. I keep posting the sketches on Twitter."

She continued: "I remember, when I read the scripts for *Frank of Ireland*, that I couldn't stop laughing. Obviously, we went through a million rewrites and Channel 4 allowed us to do a mini-pilot, which gave us confidence.

"When I got the first cut, I couldn't breathe I was laughing so much. It made me so happy because that never happens.

"When you've been a comedy person for a while, you get a bit jaded, but this cracked me up."

As for *Frank of Ireland*'s antecedents, Domhnall Gleeson references *Fleabag*, *Alan Partridge* and the physical comedy of *Dumb and Dumber* – the show contains a lot of slapstick. "You care about

Channel 4/Amazon Prime

Frank because you find out about his vulnerabilities,” noted Horgan.

“Frank takes delight and joy in things even if they’re ridiculous,” added Brian Gleeson. “We drew from our childhood, the immediacy of being young and having no responsibility. We took that notion to the extreme.”

“Frank can’t move forward in his life for a lot of different reasons,” said Moloney. “His best friend, Doofus (played by Domhnall), admires Frank and feeds into his misguided self-belief... There is a playfulness about him. You get the sense that there is a nugget of goodness inside him that he just can’t get in contact with.”

As for the female characters, who include Frank’s mother, Mary (Pom Boyd), and Aine (Sarah Greene), his ex, they are all as badly behaved as the men. This developed organically. Said Brian Gleeson: “The minute you’re conscious about it, you start giving people funny things to do.”

“It made us laugh that his mother is, in a sense, his mate. That was more interesting to us than the classic Irish mammy trope.”

Domhnall Gleeson added: “We wanted everyone in the show to make us laugh, so you don’t want well-behaved people in there. Then, someone will end up being the butt of the joke in a bad way.”

“As the series progresses, you realise that all the characters are as bad as each other and are awful to each other.”

Horgan stressed how important it was to have a show in which all the women were as funny as the men, and to have an ensemble cast.

“We spent a lot of time talking about the female characters. For me, the women are some of the funniest characters in the show,” she said. “Mary is a feminist icon. I can’t stop watching her, I love her so much... They [the Gleeson brothers and Moloney] knew instinctively what was going to be funny because they’ve known each other so long.”

This familiarity could, in theory, be a disadvantage. Domhnall Gleeson acknowledged that creating and making Frank was an “intense” experience: “My favourite time was just before we started shooting and the three of us got together in an office in Dublin and thrashed through the scripts, line by line.”

“We asked ourselves, ‘Is that the funniest that line could be, is that line pulling its weight, does this make

sense for Frank?’ Sharon and Clelia [Clelia Mountford, another executive producer] also helped us to find the funny in certain characters. It was amazing to see the scripts get better but, at times, it was tense. No, tense is the wrong word. It was difficult.”

Horgan agreed on this point. “When Rob [Delaney] and I did *Catastrophe*, that bit at the end, when you make it funnier, is always the best – but then it gets hard.”

Domhnall added: “We never forgot that, despite any differences of opin-

film, be it *Home Alone* or *Taxi Driver*.

“We thought we’d just do that in one episode but, as things went along, it developed. A lot of our shared references are movies, we grew up with all these great movies, it grew out of that,” explained Domhnall.

“We didn’t want to push it too much into pastiche or parody, but where we ended up was that the world never conspires to be like the movie but, rather, it’s Frank interpreting the world as if it were a movie,” added Moloney.

Horgan said: “We didn’t want it to be



Frank of Ireland

Channel 4/Amazon Prime

ion, we wanted to come out of it as brothers and friends. It was lovely to see how solid that bond was, even under a lot of pressure.”

In episode 2, another brother, Fergus Gleeson, pops up, singing a song written by Moloney, while their father, Brendan Gleeson (who starred in *The Guard* and *In Bruges*), appears in episode 6 as Mary’s boyfriend.

The Gleeson clan are steeped in movie culture and each episode of *Frank* references a well-known feature

a gimmick, but embedded in the show and to be something that added to its richness, so audiences wouldn’t feel manipulated by it.” ■

Report by Steve Clarke. Journalist Emma Cox hosted an RTS Q&A with Brian and Domhnall Gleeson, Sharon Horgan and Michael Moloney on 25 March. Frank of Ireland is a co-production with Amazon Prime and debuts on Channel 4 on 16 April, when all episodes will be available to stream on All 4.

Phoebe Waller-Bridge and Donald Glover will star in the remake of *Mr and Mrs Smith*



Getty Images

A revolution for UK production

Like football scouts spotting a magical left foot, the deep-pocketed US streaming platforms have made no bones about scooping up the best of British on-screen talent. Charlie Brooker has signed to Netflix, Phoebe Waller-Bridge is in bed with Amazon Prime, and relative latecomer Apple TV+ is able to boast the likes of Ewan McGregor and David Attenborough on its books.

Meanwhile, from Dagenham to Manchester, physical studios are on the rise, with more than 100 sites across the UK in planning and development. It is another manifestation of the burgeoning inward investment on high-end TV production in the UK, which topped £1.6bn in 2019, a figure expected to at least double by 2025.

A line-up of senior TV industry figures analyses the streamer-led boom for British talent and facilities

Meanwhile, spending by public service broadcasters (PSBs) is diminishing, having fallen by nearly 30% over the past 15 years. How will these new dynamics disrupt the UK's unique production ecology, and how might broadcasters and indies best adapt?

The RTS invited four senior industry figures to explore: the impact of US high-end television investment on the UK production sector; the future shape of our output; the implications for UK

indies' funding models; and the prospects for Britain's physical studios.

James Bennett, MD of *Televisual*, moderated the panel comprising Jane Millichip (chief creative officer, Sky Studios), Wayne Garvie (President of international production, Sony Pictures International), Seetha Kumar (CEO, ScreenSkills) and Roger Morris (MD, Elstree Studios).

The UK's strength in TV came from the fact that it had never really had a film industry, according to Garvie, who added: "We've been good at embracing high and low culture."

He ascribed the UK's popularity with US investors to four main factors: a very strong history in TV; the English language; creative entrepreneurs used to going out and selling their wares for the past 40 years or longer; and "unbelievable quality in acting

talent". To illustrate his last point, he cited *The Crown*: "No one can come close." Garvie then added: "The tax credit has really helped."

Morris went further: "Tax incentives have kept our industry going. Other countries are catching up. We have to stay on our toes if we wish to continue the business."

Kumar added three more reasons why US companies look to the UK to realise their projects: the studios and their infrastructure; the locations we can offer; and, most precious of all, our workforce. "For decades, the creativity in front and behind the camera is something that has been lauded globally," she said.

It was not "either PSB or streamer", it was "as well as", argued Millichip, adding that, over the past year, Sky Studios had worked on 29 projects for US buyers with either co-production or pre-sales deals, for 15 different networks and platforms. "The US sees the UK as an exciting market but, equally, we still need the US for a lot of our funding. So we have an increasingly complex and nuanced world. It's not binary."

Garvie pointed out that Netflix's second-biggest market was Brazil, emphasising the model of spending less, while getting more. "It's about finding the local and making it universal," he reflected.

Millichip agreed, and namechecked Sky Italia's *Gomorra* – "Italian mafia, very rooted in its world, but with a huge global audience. Audiences are becoming more sophisticated".

What steps did the industry need to take to remain competitive and attractive to inward investors? The panel agreed that building on the UK's reputation for creativity was key. "Do we have the writing schemes, the production schemes, and are we able to fund them?" asked Millichip.

She also credited British soaps for creating organic but excellent training grounds. "You see superb writers coming out of those factories. They are great for our skills base."

Morris, whose Elstree Studios is connected to a training college, stressed the ongoing need for technical know-how, including the growing visual effects business. "We have to make sure our workforce remains skilled, and trained, and that we're bringing young people into the industry," he said.

Were the deals being offered by

streamers to indies good or bad? Again, said Millichip, it was not binary. At one end, indies had long retained control of their rights and distributed them internationally; at the opposite end, streamers offered all-rights deals up to 130% of the budget. She described a "sweet spot in the middle": working with streamers to secure margin upfront – helpful for working capital – while retaining rights when working with linear platforms in the conventional way, and hopefully seeing an upside.

IT'S ABOUT FINDING THE LOCAL AND MAKING IT UNIVERSAL

Garvie described how securing an upfront premium might be most beneficial for a small indie. He predicted that, in the increasingly crowded market, it would be the medium-sized production companies that might lose out.

For any producer hoping to break into the market, Millichip urged them to take advantage of the myriad of different deals offered by Sky and others: "Owning your own company isn't the only way. Quite a lot of producers are terrible at running businesses, but brilliant at making shows. Getting an in-house deal that allows third-party shows could liberate you to spend all your day developing and writing."

Where does PSB sit in all of this? Millichip credited the PSB tradition for nurturing the best talent, creating a healthy marketplace and influencing others to offer value, diversity and inclusion. "Those decades of PSB have suffused our cultural sector," she said.

PSBs continued to serve as a middle ground for the workforce between training and working on high-end productions. Morris also noted the importance of PSBs in providing opportunities for young people, such as writers on radio. "What we try to do is be ahead of the game, which changes rapidly, by trying to encompass the workforce of young people and learn from their ideas. They'll colour what the industry looks like in 10 years' time."

So were studios more than just a real-estate investment? Sound stages were now popping up in response to a famine-hit period during which the value of their land had made redevelopment of lots such as Teddington attractive. The challenge would be to make these big new investments pay, said Morris. "The studio business isn't one that makes a fortune."

As well as coping with political pressure to push production to the regions, Morris stressed the need for joined-up thinking by the DCMS and every one else involved, to answer the needs of clients, and for training to keep the workforce fresh and diverse.

Building on the training college at Elstree, with its curriculum for 14- to 19-year-olds, Morris wanted to transfer that model to other areas of the UK and to develop more training alliances with the BBC and other studios and bodies. "We will talk and work together to find solutions for the skills shortage we anticipate. Together, we can create a workforce appropriate for this century."

"Our currency is experience," agreed Kumar. "If we look at our role in storytelling, that involves a range of skills. Perhaps we should look ahead, ask what we want to do and work backwards from that to identify the skills we need."

Finally, each of the panellists was asked for one piece of advice. "For indies, don't think binary in terms of rights or your relationships. Understand your customer and who they're trying to attract. Work with the broadest spectrum of writing talent, think nations and regions, think forwards," said Millichip

"Think global by being local. It doesn't matter who you are, you can construct a story that will be watched around the world. This is a unique moment in communications history, and that's the goal to win. Win by understanding your environment," suggested Garvie. "Embrace creativity, embrace technology, understand business," said Kumar.

"We all have to talk together, move together, provide for each other and also have to try to understand what each other needs," concluded Morris. ■

Report by Caroline Frost. 'The streamers and the UK production ecology' was an RTS event held on 31 March. The producers were Heather Jones and James Bennett.



Vice

Shine True

At the cutting edge

The idea that I got to watch things and get paid for it was mind-blowing.” For Kate Ward, television has been a big part of her life. As she confessed, she is an “unashamed TV addict – I loved it, and I still love it”.

As the London-based President of Vice Studios, the international TV and feature-film production arm of Vice Media Group, she commissions content for Vice’s worldwide outlets and for third parties, such as Netflix, Disney and Amazon, and oversees sales from a catalogue comprising 900 hours of shows.

Ward detailed her career to the RTS at an event chaired by Manori Ravindran, international editor of *Variety*. She revealed that she once wanted to make and/or present history programmes, but her professional life in TV began in distribution: she was employed by specialist factual distributor TVF International, before she joined Shine and rose to be director of distribution at EndemolShine. The experience “left

Vice Studios President Kate Ward explains to the RTS how her group built a unique international production business

me with a passion for the international business and the format business”.

She went on to be president of international for the US young women’s online lifestyle brand Refinery29. The role attracted her because of the company’s focus on digital.

In late 2019, Vice acquired Refinery29, and Ward took charge of the assimilated entity. The deal was designed to unite two digital-centric media businesses and then diversify beyond Vice’s male-skewing core audience.

“The two businesses maybe had slightly different audiences, but there

was a huge amount of common ground. Vice had a slate of really excellent documentaries – and there was a huge amount of mutual respect for the journalism,” said Ward of Vice’s acquisition of Refinery29. “To return to the TV business at a time when there was an explosion of content... was an attractive proposition.”

The move was another sign that Nancy Dubuc, the veteran US TV executive who took over as CEO of Vice Media in 2018, was determined to reinvent Vice. The former digital upstart had lost its way amid allegations of sexual harassment and a “boys’ club culture”.

Ravindran also noted other difficulties Vice had experienced, with “the channel [Viceland] and content not getting sufficient notice because of low viewership”. Ward responded: “We’ve diversified now, both by genre and by geography. It is driven by thinking about how we work with US premium cable and streamers, and internationally with linear channels. We really wanted to

be part of that explosion of demand for content.”

What, then, of the company’s culture? Ravindran quoted Dubuc’s desire to “stamp out bro culture”, employ more women and boost inclusion. What did Vice stand for now?

Ward said that the company had evolved for the better under Dubuc’s leadership and, thanks to “the incredible work we have done to support that change”, had developed an inclusive culture. “We’re at this incredibly interesting moment... Vice exists to give voice to emerging voices and talent rooted in youth culture.

“What excites me about Vice Studios is that we tell stories that others don’t tell, and with access that others don’t have. Whether it’s our journalism, our entertainment or reflecting the forefront of culture, we try to be there first...

“Vice is more than 25 years old, so I think that speaks to this desire to regenerate – and it can continue to deliver for the audience.”

Vice Studios, which launched in 2017, has produced such fare as Diego Osorno’s *1994* for Netflix, *The Satanic Verses: 30 Years On* for the BBC and *Britain’s Cocaine Epidemic* for Channel 5. Ward’s commissions embrace feature films, scripted series, formats and “premium, 90-minute documentaries”.

She explained: “The common thread has been, ‘Is it reflecting culture and is it giving voice to under-represented voices? Is it challenging and speaking truth to power?’”

How has Vice Studios’ production pipeline been affected by the pandemic? “It was obviously a year like no other – the resilience, the innovation, the tenacity of the industry was extraordinary,” said Ward. Its global business had mitigated the worst effects of the crisis because it was able to “move things around”.

Accelerated demand for unscripted content had helped, too, she said: “The scripted business, like everyone else’s, will fire back to full superpower this year and beyond. But I think that explosion of demand for unscripted content has allowed us to accelerate things.

“Covid has posed some big questions about what people want to watch. We’re still solving those big creative questions but there is a sense of optimism.”

Vice Studios recently announced that it was making a true-crime series, *Indian Predator*, for Netflix in India, “a super-premium” documentary with the potential to become a global success, it believes, that attempts to get into the minds of serial killers.

“It’s a documentary series full of suspense and full of intrigue,” said Ward. “It is content that hasn’t been



[seen] before in the unscripted space and is delivered with an authentic local perspective.” She believed that “super-premium factual shows” represented a big opportunity for Vice Studios.

Beyond London, the company has offices in New York, Los Angeles, Toronto, Mumbai and Mexico City, where Ward said it had led the way in Spanish-language documentaries, such as *The Three Deaths of Marisela Escobedo*, which chronicles a bereaved mother’s quest for justice. The film reflected the themes Vice Studios was interested in – justice, crime, identity, and speaking truth to power.

On the digital front, globally, Vice publishes “1,500 pieces of content a day”, ranging from feature-length content to news briefs at Vice News.

With 350 million people a month accessing Vice’s channels worldwide, Vice Studios is in a unique place to understand young audiences and their digital tastes and to predict trends. Vice Studios can tap into other parts of the group, including Refinery29 and

Motherboard, which covers technology. “We work closely with digital,” said Ward. “We are always thinking about how we can translate those amazing pieces of IP into traditional TV.”

A recent example is *Shine True*, a factual series exploring the experience of trans and gender non-binary young people at pivotal moments in their lives. The inspiration was the digital short-form series *Clothes Minded*.

But it is the big shows that attract most attention. With a lot of companies competing for commissions from the major streamers, Ravindran asked what Vice’s strategy was for pitching to Netflix and even Disney+. “There are more buyers,” replied Ward, “but it has always been competitive.... It doesn’t make it easier, you have to be as sharp as you ever were.... Audiences for challenging feature documentaries that, before, might have been niche, are now attracting mainstream audiences.” She revealed that Vice Studios was working with Disney but declined to provide details.

The event chair turned to the distribution side of the business: what were the key markets for Vice content? Ward highlighted the group’s partnership with SBS in Australia, including the SBS Viceland channel. Documentaries were driving Vice’s catalogue and she highlighted *Dark Side of the Ring*, about professional wrestling. Sports, pop culture and entertainment were also doing well.

“The distribution business launched at the right time – last summer, at the height of the pandemic,” she noted, adding that “being an independent allows us to sell to everyone”.

Did the Vice sales arm ever run into censorship problems, given the edgy nature of some of its fare? “*Bong Appétit* and *Weediquette* are amazing shows but they’re unlikely to be broadcast by a UK linear broadcaster,” Ward conceded. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t produce other powerful content for the UK market. You always have to be culturally sensitive and put an audience first.” ■

Report by Omar Mehtab. Kate Ward, President of Vice Studios, was in conversation with Manori Ravindran, international editor of Variety, for the RTS on 4 March.

A lockdown sensation



The RTS hears how the BBC's *Normal People* energised the careers of its two stars

A year ago, *Normal People* became the huge TV hit of the first lockdown, changing the lives of its young stars, Daisy Edgar-Jones and Paul Mescal, overnight.

The adaptation of Sally Rooney's novel was the BBC's most-streamed series of last year, clocking up almost 63 million views on iPlayer in the eight months following its April launch.

"I felt incredibly surprised, not at the show being received so well, but at the volume of people who were watching it so quickly," recalled Mescal, who was talking at an RTS event last month. "It felt quite overwhelming. And then I felt a great sense of pride because it feels to me like a show that was made

the right way, not just creatively, but... with great spirit. Good shows that are emotionally heavy don't have to be traumatic experiences to film. A lot of joy went into making it."

Since appearing in *Normal People*, the careers of the two actors have taken off. Edgar-Jones has landed starring roles in two films, *Fresh* and *Where the Crawdads Sing*, while Mescal is the male lead in *Carmen*, a modern-day reimagining of the opera, filmed in Australia.

"Before *Normal People*, the idea of choosing what you do next was never something – it was just about hoping to goodness something would come [at all]," said Edgar-Jones.

She had been working "on-off" since the age of 17, picking up "very

small parts" in shows such as *Cold Feet*. Today, five years on, "at least now, when I'm sending [off] a self-tape, there's less of a feeling that this is just going into the ether, which it often felt like [before]."

Pre-*Normal People*, Mescal had made an impression on the Dublin stage in *The Great Gatsby* and *The Red Shoes*, but now "film-makers and companies want to sit down and talk", he says.

The two actors recalled auditioning for the roles of Marianne and Connell. County Kildare-born Mescal said: "I really wanted to play the part... I felt an attachment to [Connell], I understood who he was and what motivated him."

With Mescal confirmed as Connell, Londoner Edgar-Jones flew to Ireland for a "chemistry read". Mescal recalled: "When I was working the scene, I found it just way easier to act with her and for Connell to come to the surface a little bit more. Auditions are just such awful experiences, full stop, I find. So, to be in an audition and feel comfortable is not a feeling I'm familiar with. I felt calm when I was working with Daisy... I really felt the script come off the page."

To play Marianne, Edgar-Jones, helped by her Northern Ireland-born mother, nailed a widely praised rural Ireland accent, and read the novel over and over. But, she said, "there's only so much prep that you can do because so much is found on the day. You have an idea from your reading of a scene, but it's then so changed by the other actors you're performing with."

Marianne and Connell's relationship changes as they move from school in Sligo to university in Dublin, and beyond, over 12 roughly half-hour parts. "By the end, we see that they are content with who they are," said Edgar-Jones. "I think they'll always be in each other's lives but I don't know in what sense." Clearly, if Rooney ever felt the urge, there is more to be written about the characters.

Mescal is adamant that he does not want any more Connell-like characters: "I love him deeply, but I want to play characters that scare me a little bit."

But would he return to the original if his and Marianne's story continued? "Happily," said Mescal. "One hundred per cent," added Edgar-Jones. ■

Report by Matthew Bell. 'In conversation with Daisy Edgar-Jones and Paul Mescal' was held on 29 March, hosted by journalist Caroline Frost and produced by the RTS.

Michaela Coel – *I
May Destroy You*,
Actor (Female);
Writer – Drama
and Mini-Series

A photograph of Michaela Coel standing waist-deep in clear blue water. She has long, thin, reddish-brown dreadlocks that are wet and dripping with water. She is wearing a blue and black patterned shirt under a thick, textured, multi-colored jacket (red, white, and blue). The background shows a blurred shoreline with buildings and a fence under a clear blue sky.

RTS Programme Awards 2021

Hosted by **Jonathan Ross**, the awards were presented on 16 March at the Grosvenor House Hotel, London, in partnership with Audio Network

audionetwork 

BBC

Actor (Female)

Michaela Coel – *I May Destroy You*

Various Artists/Falkna for BBC One and HBO

‘Nothing short of electrifying... Somehow, she brought the audience into her head, heart and skin.’

Nominees:

- ▶ **Daisy Edgar-Jones – *Normal People***, Element Pictures for BBC Three
- ▶ **Glenda Jackson – *Elizabeth Is Missing***, STV Studios for BBC One

Actor (Male)

Shaun Parkes – *Small Axe*

Turbine Studios and Lammas Park for BBC One

‘Pitch perfect – so measured, so carefully crafted, so absolutely right.’

Nominees:

- ▶ **Lennie James – *Save Me Too***, World Productions for Sky Atlantic
- ▶ **Paul Mescal – *Normal People***, Element Pictures for BBC Three

Arts

Grayson’s Art Club

Swan Films for Channel 4

‘Refreshing, accessible and original – a truly joyous piece of work.’

Nominees:

- ▶ **African Renaissance: *When Art Meets Power***, ClearStory for BBC Four
- ▶ **Keith Haring: *Street Art Boy***, BBC Studios for BBC Two

Breakthrough Award

Mae Martin – *Feel Good*

Objective Fiction and Objective Media Group Scotland for Channel 4 and Netflix

‘Clearly a star in the making, bringing a fresh perspective and real originality to the screen.’

Nominees:

- ▶ **Robert Softley Gale – *CripTales: Hamish***, BBC Studios for BBC Four
- ▶ **Big Zuu – *Big Zuu’s Big Eats***, Boomerang for Dave

Children’s Programme

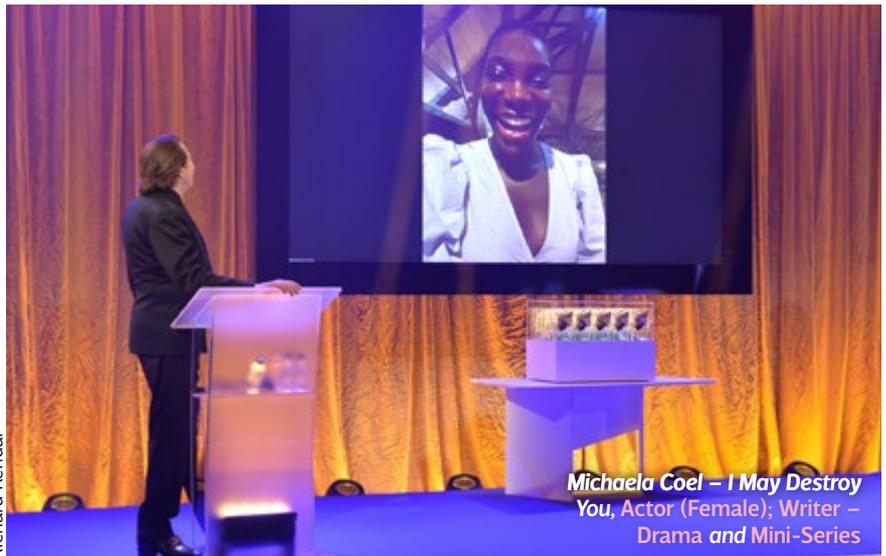
IRL with Team Charlene

ITN Productions for ITV & CITV

‘As a children’s show, it feels fresh, inclusive and hugely engaging.’

Nominees:

- ▶ **Jojo and Gran Gran/*It’s Time to Go to the Hairdresser’s***, BBC Children’s In-House Productions in collaboration with A Productions for CBeebies
- ▶ **FYI Investigates – *Brazil: Children Caught in the Crossfire***, Fresh Start Media for Sky News and Sky Kids



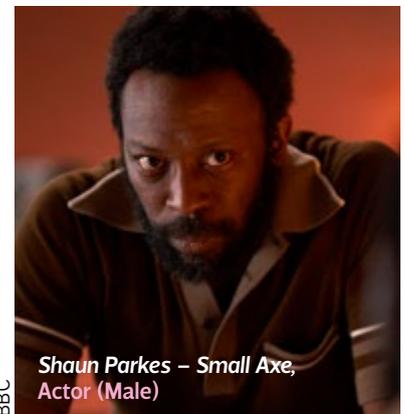
Richard Kendall

Michaela Coel – *I May Destroy You*, Actor (Female); Writer – Drama and Mini-Series



Channel 4

Grayson’s Art Club, Arts



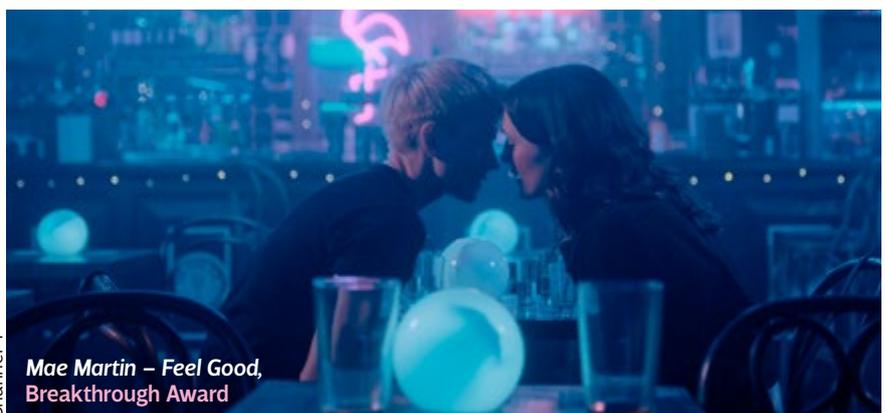
BBC

Shaun Parkes – *Small Axe*, Actor (Male)



ITV

IRL with Team Charlene, Children’s Programme



Channel 4

Mae Martin – *Feel Good*, Breakthrough Award

Outstanding Achievement

Russell T Davies OBE

'This is presented to a screenwriter whose work over the past 20 years has taken television drama to places it's never been before, explored themes never explored before, and – more than anything – told stories never allowed before.'

'Russell T Davies is one of the greatest dramatists of his generation, a writer who – as he puts it himself – writes about "the big stuff... the stuff that makes you laugh, the stuff that makes you cry".'

'He grew up in Swansea in a house full of books, but it was what came out of the television in the corner of the living room that intrigued him most. The BBC turned him down three times for its graduate traineeship but, by chance, he landed a job on the children's show *Why Don't You?*, produced by BBC Wales.'

'He directed, wrote and produced all kinds of children's television at the BBC. In the early 1990s, Russell moved to Granada Television as a writer on *Children's Ward*.

'Living in Manchester led Russell to his breakthrough work, *Queer as Folk*, in 1999. He was writing mainstream shows for Granada by day – and, by night, immersing himself in the city's exploding gay culture. Why was no one putting these characters on television or telling their stories, he wondered? If anyone was to do so, it should be him.'

'For five years, from 2005, the colossal machine that *Doctor Who* became more or less took over his life... As showrunner and chief writer, he reimagined it for a new century and a sophisticated new audience, building epic stories around big, technicolour characters. More than anything, he brought warmth and heart to *Doctor Who*, refashioning the show as a drama for the whole family.'

'The potential consequences of the rising tide of populism in Britain were examined in *Years and Years* in 2019. And, this year, came *It's a Sin*, in some ways, the ultimate Russell T Davies drama – a story of characters looking for their truth, and dealing with the consequences.'



Channel 4



Channel 4



Richard Kendal

Comedy Entertainment

The Ranganation

Zeppotron for BBC Two

'A genuinely funny, laugh-out-loud event – the perfect showcase for the huge talent of its star.'

Nominees:

- ▶ **The Big Narstie Show**, Expectation/Dice Productions for Channel 4
- ▶ **Charlie Brooker's Antiviral Wipe**, Broke and Bones/Endemol Shine Group for BBC Two



Richard Kendall

Loose Women,
Daytime Programme

Comedy Performance (Female)

Gbemisola Ikumelo – Famalam

BBC Studios for BBC Three

'The winner is supremely entertaining... she just has funny bones. When she's on screen you simply can't take your eyes off her.'

Nominees:

- ▶ **Ruth Jones – Gavin & Stacey Christmas Special**, Fulwell 73, Baby Cow and Tidy Productions for BBC One
- ▶ **Sophie Willan – Alma's Not Normal**, Expectation for BBC Two



BBC

The Ranganation,
Comedy Entertainment

Comedy Performance (Male)

Youssef Kerkour – Home

Jantaculum and Channel X for Channel 4

'Youssef Kerkour has an amazing presence. His was a truly impactful performance.'

Nominees:

- ▶ **Paul Chahidi – This Country**, BBC Studios for BBC Three
- ▶ **O-T Fagbenle – Maxxx**, Luti Media for Channel 4



Channel 4

Youssef Kerkour – Home,
Comedy Performance (Male)

Daytime Programme

Loose Women

ITV Studios – Daytime for ITV

'The show makes a real connection with its audience – making them laugh, making them think.'

Nominees:

- ▶ **The Bidding Room**, Ricochet for BBC One
- ▶ **Junior Bake Off**, Love Productions for Channel 4

Documentary Series

Once Upon a Time in Iraq

Keo Films for BBC Two

'A gripping piece of television, telling a story we thought we knew, but actually didn't, full of characters who confounded stereotypes.'

Nominees:

- ▶ **Hospital: Fighting Covid-19**, Label1 for BBC Two
- ▶ **The School That Tried to End Racism**, Proper Content for Channel 4



BBC

Once Upon a Time in Iraq,
Documentary Series



Richard Kendall

Gbemisola Ikumelo – Famalam,
Comedy Performance (Female)



Sky

Save Me



Richard Kendall

Anne Mensah, Judges' Award

Judges' Award

Anne Mensah

'The recipient began her commissioning career at the BBC, where she developed and commissioned an impressive array of drama hits – shows such as *Wallander*, *Single Father* and *Waterloo Road*.

'She became head of drama at Sky in 2011, and soon turned Sky into a powerhouse of high-quality, British-produced drama, with critically acclaimed shows such as *Fortitude*, *Patrick Melrose*, *Save Me* and *Chernobyl*.

'Now, as vice-president for UK original series at Netflix, her slate includes *The Crown*, *Sex Education* and *After Life*. But, in a short time, she's built a UK-based drama commissioning team with the aim of capturing authentic British voices in high-production-value, British-produced shows.

'Alongside Anne's uncanny ability to sniff out a hit is her unwavering commitment to reflecting society's diversity on the screen and championing of diverse production talent.'

Special Award

Pact

'This year has been a profoundly challenging one for our industry. But right from the earliest signs of the pandemic, one organisation swung into action. Pact is the body that represents Britain's independent production sector – and, in those first days of lockdown, it took on a new mission: to somehow find a way for television to be produced safely again, when everything seemed to make that feel impossible. The very survival of the independent production sector hung in the balance.

'Quickly, Pact helped on two fronts. To producers, it offered regular briefings designed to share safety information between companies. Straight away, the focus was on finding a way back to safe programme-making.

'On the second front, Pact was on political manoeuvres. A senior team led the industry's working group on production insurance,



Pact, Special Award

BBC (Why is Covid Killing People of Colour?)

and lobbied the Government to create the Film and Television Production Restart Scheme. In July, the Government announced £500m of immediate funding – which meant that the industry could turn the lights back on. It was a real win for Britain's TV industry – due in large part to the successful lobbying by Pact.

'Taken together, these measures ensured production was able to resume in the summer. A full-scale catastrophe for our industry had been avoided. In recognition of this, the RTS is presenting a Special Award to mark the exceptional work this year of John McVay, Sara Geater, Max Rumney and Hakan Kousetta.'

Drama Series

In My Skin

Expectation for BBC Three and BBC One Wales

‘A fresh and exciting viewing experience, a piece of work executed with genuine creative vision.’

Nominees:

- ▶ **Save Me Too**, World Productions for Sky Atlantic
- ▶ **I Hate Suzie**, Bad Wolf for Sky Atlantic

Entertainment

The Masked Singer

Bandicoot Scotland for ITV

‘A smartly produced, joyful, silly, escapist family watch... and just what we all need right now.’

Nominees:

- ▶ **Beat the Chasers**, Potato for ITV
- ▶ **Big Zuu’s Big Eats**, Boomerang for Dave

Entertainment Performance

Big Narstie and Mo Gilligan – The Big Narstie Show

Expectation/Dice Productions for Channel 4

‘An infectious sense of fun is created. It’s like a party that you want to be at.’

Nominees:

- ▶ **Rob Beckett and Romesh Ranganathan – Rob & Romesh Vs**, CPL Productions for Sky One
- ▶ **Yung Filly – Hot Property**, BBC Three
- In-house Productions for BBC Three

Formatted Popular Factual

Joe Lycett’s Got Your Back

Rumpus Media for Channel 4

‘Distinctive in style, yet broad in appeal, all wrapped in a highly original format.’

Nominees:

- ▶ **Long Lost Family: Born Without Trace**, Wall to Wall Media for ITV
- ▶ **The Rap Game UK**, Naked (a Fremantle label) for BBC Three

History

Damilola: The Boy Next Door

Acme Films for Channel 4

‘This delivered real emotional resonance, a proper piece of history film-making but with a compelling personal approach.’

Nominees:

- ▶ **Lost Home Movies of Nazi Germany**, Bright Button Productions for BBC Four
- ▶ **The World’s Biggest Murder Trial: Nuremberg**, Middlechild Productions for Channel 5

Jonathan Ross, Host



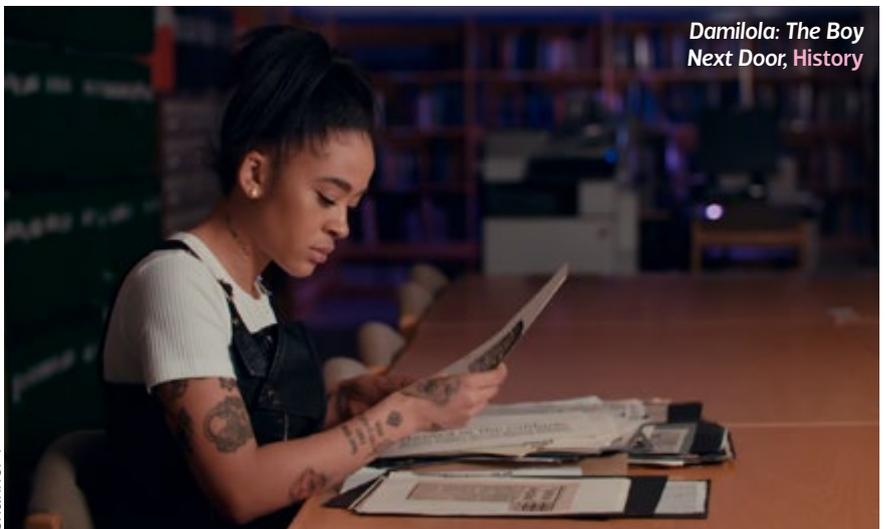
Richard Kendal

BBC One,
RTS Channel
of the Year



BBC

Damilola: *The Boy Next Door*, History



Channel 4

Behind the scenes at the awards



Live Event

The Third Day: Autumn

Sky Studios, Plan B Entertainment and Punchdrunk Entertainment for Sky Arts
‘An astonishing feat, soaring in both its ambition and its first-class execution.’

Nominees:

▶ **ENO’s Drive & Live: La Bohème**, Somethin’ Else for Sky Arts

▶ **Election 2019 Live: The Results**, ITV News for ITV

Mini-Series

I May Destroy You

Various Artists/Falkna for BBC One and HBO

‘An incredible achievement, showing us something we rarely talk about but should. Its impact was huge.’

Nominees:

▶ **Adult Material**, Fifty Fathoms for Channel 4

▶ **Small Axe**, Turbine Studios and Lammas Park for BBC One

Richard Kendall

Presenter

Joe Lycett – The Great British Sewing Bee

Love Productions for BBC One

‘This presenter showed all the qualities the audience loves to see right now: he was warm, approachable and kind, with tremendous enthusiasm for the subject matter.’

Nominees:

▶ **Yinka Bokinni – Damilola: The Boy Next Door**, Acme Films for Channel 4

▶ **Grayson Perry – Grayson’s Art Club**, Swan Films for Channel 4

RTS Channel of the Year

BBC One

‘In 2020, the winning channel did what it does at its best. It became a place that the nation huddled around in a time of crisis... offering up an extraordinary range of quality programming, from bold new drama to innovative comedy and entertainment, plus outstanding news coverage.’

Nominees:

▶ **ITV**

▶ **Sky Arts**

Richard Kendall

Big Narstie and Mo Gilligan – The Big Narstie Show, Entertainment Performance



The Surgeon’s Cut, Science and Natural History

BBC

Science and Natural History

The Surgeon's Cut

BBC Studios Production for Netflix
'Beautifully made – sensitive and poignant, and offering an astonishing insight into a fascinating subject.'

Nominees:

- ▶ **Surviving the Virus: My Brother & Me**, Little Gem for BBC One
- ▶ **Brain Surgeons: Between Life and Death**, Blast! Films for Channel 4

Scripted Comedy

The Young Offenders

Vico Films for BBC Three

'Authentic, absurd and hilarious.'

Nominees:

- ▶ **Brassic**, Calamity Films for Sky One
- ▶ **Sex Education**, Eleven Film for Netflix



BBC

The Young Offenders,
Scripted Comedy

Single Documentary

Anton Ferdinand: Football, Racism and Me
Wonder and New Era Global Productions for BBC One

'This programme was powerful and affecting, a revelatory piece that confronted the issue in a new way.'

Nominees:

- ▶ **Surviving Covid**, Sandpaper Films for Channel 4
- ▶ **The Family Secret**, Candour Productions for Channel 4



BBC

Anton Ferdinand: Football, Racism and Me,
Single Documentary



BBC

Elizabeth is Missing,
Single Drama

Single Drama

Elizabeth is Missing

STV Studios for BBC One

'The winning piece was a beautiful film, full of layers, all built around an intensely emotional and compassionate central performance.'

Nominees:

- ▶ **Anthony**, LA Productions for BBC One
- ▶ **Sitting in Limbo**, Left Bank Pictures for BBC One

Soap and Continuing Drama

Casualty

BBC Studios for BBC One

'Still innovating, still pioneering in using new technology, and still pushing forward what this type of show can do and say.'

Nominees:

- ▶ **Coronation Street**, ITV Studios for ITV
- ▶ **Holby City**, BBC Studios for BBC One



BBC

Casualty,
Soap and
Continuing
Drama



England vs West Indies
First Test – Black Lives
Matter, Sports Programme

Sky/Getty

Sports Presenter, Commentator or Pundit

Michael Holding – England vs West Indies

Sky Sports for Sky Sports Cricket
‘The winner captured the mood of the event perfectly, bringing a personal perspective to bear on a moment of huge significance.’

Nominees:

- ▶ **Bryan Habana – 2019 Rugby World Cup Final**, ITV Sport for ITV
- ▶ **Gabby Logan – London Marathon 2020**, BBC Sport for BBC One and BBC Two

Sports Programme

England vs West Indies First Test – Black Lives Matter

Sky Sports for Sky Sports Cricket
‘This was a remarkable piece of television – editorially superb and technically exceptional.’

Nominees:

- ▶ **London Marathon 2020**, BBC Sport for BBC One and BBC Two
- ▶ **The Open for the Ages**, IMG for The R&A and Sky Sports

Writer – Comedy

Mae Martin and Joe Hampson – Feel Good

Objective Fiction and Objective Media Group Scotland for Channel 4 and Netflix

‘This writing was engaging, warm and truthful, but also landed the humour with real skill.’

Nominees:

- ▶ **Peter Foott – The Young Offenders**, Vico Films for BBC Three
- ▶ **Writing Team – Ghosts**, Monumental Television for BBC One

Writer – Drama

Michaela Coel – I May Destroy You

Various Artists/Falkna for BBC One and HBO

‘This will be discussed for years to come... it is brave, poignant and highly original.’

Nominees:

- ▶ **Steve McQueen and Alastair Siddons – Small Axe**, Turbine Studios and Lammas Park for BBC One
- ▶ **Lucy Prebble – I Hate Suzie**, Bad Wolf for Sky Atlantic



Mae Martin and Joe Hampson – Feel Good,
Writer – Comedy

Channel 4



Joe Lycett – The Great British Sewing Bee, Presenter;
Joe Lycett’s Got Your Back Formatted Popular Factual

BBC



Watch the full video of the
RTS Programme Awards 2021
at: bit.ly/RTS-pr21



Channel 4

From behind the wall

RTS London Matthew Bell discovers how the *Deutschland* trilogy became a worldwide television phenomenon

Deutschland 89, the final series of the Emmy award-winning Cold War drama, has recently come to All 4. But fans of the show have discovered that some of the show's characters could yet draw new breath.

"The trilogy is over," confirmed the show's co-creator, Jörg Winger, at an RTS London event, "but we are thinking about a spin-off that is not *Deutschland*, but maybe follows some of our characters into new territory."

Walter Iuzzolino chose *Deutschland 83* to launch Channel 4's foreign-drama strand, Walter Presents, in January 2016. Starring Jonas Nay as reluctant spy Martin Rauch, it aired in the most competitive drama slot, 9:00pm on Sunday.

"The [ratings] surprised us beyond our wildest dreams. The programme bagged over 1.5 million viewers live and, with consolidation a week later, 4 million, which made it the highest-rating foreign drama ever in the UK. It put *Deutschland 83* in a completely different league to even the most successful Scandi noirs we all knew and loved," said Iuzzolino, who was introducing the London event.

The thriller became a worldwide hit after Amazon bought the second series, *Deutschland 86*, and then *Deutschland 89*. "[It is] a show that truly changed the TV landscape," said Iuzzolino.

Deutschland 89 begins with the fall of the Berlin Wall. "In Germany, you have seen the lead up to the fall of the wall many times," said Jörg. "For

us, the most interesting question was, 'How do people reinvent themselves when their country and everything around them is falling apart? How do people deal with a crisis of that magnitude?'

"It was far from clear that we were going into an era of unification.... People were dreaming of a new socialism, a better socialism. Many, many people were against reunification."

The *Deutschland* trilogy has found fans around the world. "The more specific the story, the more universally it can travel, which is counter-intuitive," argued Anna Winger, the drama's British-American co-creator and Jörg's wife.

She offered the Netflix show *Unorthodox*, which she co-created, as another

example. "[It is] in Yiddish, a language almost no one speaks, [yet] people really connected to it around the world. The same is true with *Deutschland*."

"It's fantastic that you can make a niche product... and you can find the other crazy people in the world who are just as interested in it. The scaling of niche content that is possible through global streaming is an amazing thing."

"It doesn't change the national experience, because you're still talking to your friends, family and colleagues about something you watched on TV, but it provides this opportunity to have a big conversation with a wider audience, and that's exciting."

A series set in the recent past, explained the executive producers, is just as expensive to make as a "frocks and bonnets" costume drama.

"As soon as someone goes outside, you have to change all the cars in the street – it doesn't matter if it's 1800 or 1985," said Anna. "[If] it's Berlin or Leipzig, you have to change everything because these cities have changed in a way that no other cities in the western world, at least, have changed over the past 30 years," added Jörg.

The Cologne-born Jörg recalled thinking, when the Berlin Wall fell, that the "battle between ideologies is over, every country will become a liberal democracy. I could never imagine in 1989 that we would see countries putting up walls... [like] the wall between the US and Mexico. Brexit is a kind of a wall, too, [because] it limits free movement." ■

'Deutschland 89: Behind the wall' was held on 9 March, chaired by the journalist Stephen Armstrong and produced by Damien Ashton-Wellman.

Sarah Parish revealed that her character in the BBC satire *WIA*, scary Anna Rampton, is based on three media executives – but she refused to reveal their names. “I’d never work again. It’s three different people – they’re all in the business and they’re all very powerful, so I’m never going to say – but I love them all dearly.”

Parish and her husband and fellow actor, James Murray, were discussing their careers with *ITV News Meridian* presenter Sangeeta Bhabra at an RTS Southern event in March.

The two actors said their favourite roles were characterised by great writing; for Parish, these included playing Beatrice in David Nicholls’ adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing*, Anna in the John Morton-scripted *WIA* and parts in two Peter Bowker series, *Blackpool* and *Monroe*.

Murray namechecked Russell T Davies’s *Cucumber*: “When the writing sings and you connect with it, everything else is just so easy.”

Despite their success, both actors admitted to insecurity. Parish said many actors suffer from “imposter syndrome”, explaining: “You turn up on set and you think, ‘I don’t feel that I deserve to be here’... We’re all as insecure as each other; we are all filled with self-doubt. It’s



James Murray and Sarah Parish

Philip Hartley/News UK

All actors are ‘insecure’

what we live with as actors.”

Murray added: “Being on set and doing what you love doing probably represents about 5% of what the job entails; the lion’s share is waiting around, either for the phone to ring or managing your anxiety or expectations – that’s the tough part of being an actor and why you have to commit to it.”

Rejection, he said, was part of the job, although “the older you get, the better you deal with rejection, because you have so much experience of it”. He revealed that he had come “really close to [landing] a life-changing role” in

Game of Thrones. “[Rejection] is really tough but it is an acute pain – it’s like ripping off a Band-Aid – so it’s really painful for a really short period of time. Then you take a deep breath and you go, ‘Next!’”

One of Parish’s recent roles was in ITV drama *Bancroft*, in which she played a corrupt cop who is also a cold-blooded killer. “We are all typecast as actors by the way we look. I just happen to have quite an angular look about me that doesn’t scream ‘fluffy bunny’, so I do tend to get cast as either people of quite high status or people who like

to kill other people,” she said, laughing. “I really enjoy playing baddies – they always have the best lines.”

The couple worked together shortly before Christmas on ITV cop show *McDonald & Dodds*, in which Murray plays a police chief superintendent, for the first time since the BBC One drama *Cutting It*, 16 years ago. “It was really lovely. We had a few scenes together. We were a bit nervous,” said Murray. “I wouldn’t want to do it every day, because you want to keep your work life and home life separate.”

Matthew Bell

Young tech award open for business

The Society is inviting entries for its Young Technologist of the Year Award 2021, a prize that recognises an outstanding

engineer or technologist in the early stages of their career.

“After what has been such a challenging time, it is more important than ever to continue celebrating innovation in technology and the people behind it, by shining a spotlight on future talent who are excelling in their fields,” said Terry Marsh, Chair of the award jury.

The prize is open to those



CNN

working within the technical side of broadcasting or its related industries. Last year, WarnerMedia CNN Engineering associate broadcast-IT engineer Krystel Richards won the award. The runner-up receives the Coffey Award for Excellence in Technology.

Entry closes at 5:00pm on 24 May; please go to: rts.org.uk/award/rts-young-technologist-year-2021.

RTS Isle of Man Isle of Man sports specialist Greenlight Television switched to remote production in 2020, allowing the company to continue working despite the pandemic.

Director Rob Hurdman, who was talking to RTS Isle of Man's Paul Moulton at an event in early March, said 2020 had been "a proper rollercoaster year. We went [to] probably the depths of despair... [with] the first lockdown, thinking that everything we'd worked for in the past 25 years was going to fall through the floor."

He continued: "Coming out of a very difficult year... we are starting to feel a bit more optimistic."

Greenlight is best known for its coverage of the Isle of Man TT for ITV4, but the motorcycle road race has been cancelled this year as well as last, due to the pandemic. "There were very strong public health reasons for not doing it, but it's obviously disappointing for us, the fans and the riders," said Greenlight director David Beynon. "Hopefully, 2022 will be all guns blazing."

The Isle of Man company covers events worldwide, including the Trans-Am sports car racing series in the US. Greenlight has a



Trans Am Racing Company

Filming in the US from Tromode

production office in Tampa, Florida, and had already trialled a remote outside broadcast (OB) of a Trans-Am race before the first coronavirus lockdown in March 2020.

It was "a huge stroke of luck" doing a first remote

production shortly before lockdown", recalled Hurdman. "We didn't have a full budget to do things in a traditional sort of way."

The race was held at Sebring, two hours from Tampa, and was covered

using cameramen at the circuit, on-board cameras and a drone, with OB production in Tampa. Beynon flew to the US to oversee operations.

The pandemic confined Greenlight to the Isle of Man but the outfit continued to cover the Trans-Am Series live from its Tromode base – a distance of some 6,800km.

"It massively saves money," said Hurdman, noting the costs of flying crew to a race and then paying for their food and accommodation. "Will we ever go back to the traditional way of doing OBs? I really can't see it."

He added: "When 5G comes on stream, that will revolutionise it again."

Covering sport internationally had meant near-constant travel before the pandemic and advances in remote production came along, said Hurdman: "I've just had my first year, in 30-odd years, here on the Isle of Man. I can't see myself ever getting my BA gold card back.

"With remote production, we can go anywhere that needs a live production. What gives us our USP is that we can be very, very competitive price-wise. That will be even more important after the pandemic [when] money is going to be tight."

Matthew Bell

AI is the future: for good or ill

Thames Valley Artificial intelligence (AI) is having a huge impact on the TV industry – for good or bad – according to experts at an RTS event last month.

"It can be [anything] from a very simple and specific task being replicated in a simple algorithm to an intelligence system that can take complicated decisions," explained the Digital TV

Group's Yvonne Thomas. "We see a big advantage to using AI and machine learning technologies in... search and discovery. Increasing the reach of content and making it discoverable is absolutely key [for the] monetisation of content."

Rich Welsh, SVP for innovation at digital technology outfit Deluxe, who chaired the RTS event, said: "[AI] can

be used, like any technology, for good or for bad."

"The risk is very obvious with synthetic [AI-generated] media... you can influence the results of elections; you can have conspiracy theories going wild," said audio-visual specialist Yota Georgakopoulos. "There is a need for very good deep-fake detection technologies, but I think it also should be obligatory to

have clear labelling of synthetic media. Legislation has a role to play here to safeguard us from any potential misuses of technologies."

Video coding and AI expert Yiannis Andreopoulos said knowledge could fall into too few hands: "There is a risk of monopolies, [with] AI expertise being concentrated in a few companies around the world... It may increase inequality and it may force people in the industry to work with [only] a limited supply of partners."

Matthew Bell

Live from your living room...

RTS London Live-streamed concerts and plays are thriving during lockdown, hears **Steve Clarke**

As the performing arts went into hibernation during the past year, streaming performances have arguably started to come into their own. In 2020, Dua Lipa's *Studio 2054* live stream netted 5 million viewers in more than 170 countries, while *National Theatre at Home* generated around 15 million views.

The hope in certain parts of the creative industries is that the pandemic has shown the beginnings of new streaming business models akin to, say, pay-per-view live boxing, where people are happy to pay £20 to watch a big fight.

Three leading practitioners discussed the future of streaming at an RTS London event, "Full stream ahead", last month. They presented an upbeat vision, albeit one tinged with caution, of the future where live streaming could complement concert- and theatre-going.

"There is an important new audience out there. I look forward to the industry adapting," said Lisa Burger, executive director at the National Theatre.

The success of the not-for-profit UK arts powerhouse's response to coronavirus speaks for itself: *National Theatre at Home* launched on 1 December and has screened 17 productions. Forty per cent of the audience were under 35, said Burger, who revealed that, despite the streams being free (with an

option to donate), the National Theatre still had to pay fees to the artists and creators involved in the productions.

The RTS also heard from Mark Mulligan, who runs MIDiA Research. He noted that the pandemic had stimulated live music streaming, despite the complexity of clearing rights. This is also a difficulty for the National Theatre, as most licensing frameworks do not cover performances of this kind.

One factor holding back live streaming pre-pandemic was the live music sector but, when venues closed in March 2020, it was a case of needs must.

Live music streaming remains a niche activity but a growing one, according to Mulligan. "The audience is still fairly small," he said. "Fewer than 10% of consumers are doing this semi-regularly, compared with around 19% of people who would normally go to a concert." Young men were more likely to watch a live music stream.

People watching together online was becoming more common, and this trend had been observed across different countries. So, insisted Mulligan, "there is the potential for music live streaming to become mainstream".

James Sutcliffe, chief marketing and content officer at LiveNow, whose business embraces music and sport,



said the aim was to complement the live experience.

TV viewers had shown that they would pay to watch a boxing match at any time of the day or night. The challenge, he said, was: "How do we do that for music and entertainment?" LiveNow's first standalone music event was Ellie Goulding at the V&A last August, which was live-streamed on a pay-per-view basis worldwide.

"Content that fans love drives our business," said Sutcliffe. Various business models were available, such as pay-per-view, subscription, sponsorship, e-commerce and merchandising. Other LiveNow live streams have included a show with Gorillaz, Pete Tong at the O2 and a performance by Maroon 5.

"Record labels are starting to look at these streams as marketing vehicles," argued Sutcliffe. Following the Dua Lipa live stream, her album

Future Nostalgia jumped 15 places in the album chart. In other words, live streaming could be an effective way to help launch an album or a single.

The big question was, once live gigs returned, what was the role for streaming? Sutcliffe claimed that streaming offered experiences to fans that they could not get at a live event. One initiative, Meet and Greet, enabled small groups of fans to meet artists online prior to or after a performance. Also, merchandising could be bought while fans watched the music virtually.

Moreover, streaming was a lot more environmentally friendly than live performance, particularly if it involved global tours. ■

'Full stream ahead' was held on 24 March. It was chaired by journalist Nadine Dereza, who co-produced it with Phil Barnes.

Clean sweep for film school

Republic of Ireland

The National Film School at IADT took home all the prizes on offer at the 15th RTS Republic of Ireland Student Television Awards.

The Scripted award went to *Cease*, a film about the friendship between two girls. “The violent sexual assault and its aftermath, which is at the heart of the drama, is sensitively and skilfully dealt with,” said the judges.

Fatherly, which tells the story of a man who loses contact with his child, took

the Non-Scripted prize. The judges said: “The story of the heartbreak of this young father is sympathetically told.”

Husky, Darragh Scott’s story of heroism in the old West, told with “chalk on a black-board” style line drawings and “with the fading and flickering appearance of an old movie”, won the Animation award.

Craft Skills awards were made to Ciara Rigney, for *To All My Darlings* (Cinematography), and Daragh Goan, for *SOS* (Script).

“We had an amazing entry,

both in quality and quantity, despite the adverse circumstances,” said RTS Republic of Ireland Chair Agnes Cogan. “The sheer invention and ingenuity with which our entrants tackled the daunting prospect of production in a time of lockdown was so impressive. We are filled with admiration for them.”

Leading television figures presented the awards at the online ceremony in early March: Dee Forbes, Director-General of RTÉ; Alan Esslemont, Director-General of

RTS Republic of Ireland Student Television Awards winners

Animation-*Husky*-Darragh Scott, National Film School, IADT

Non-scripted-*Fatherly*-Karin Pritzel and Daniel Bolanos Meade, National Film School, IADT

Scripted-*Cease*-Aisling O’Regan Sargent, Philip Erno, Dylan Keenan, Cormac Campbell and Keen Murphy, National Film School, IADT

Craft Skills: Cinematography-*To All My Darlings*-Ciara Rigney, National Film School, IADT

Craft Skills: Script-*SOS*-Daragh Goan, National Film School, IADT

Irish language channel TG4; and Bill Malone, director of content at Virgin Media Television.

Matthew Bell

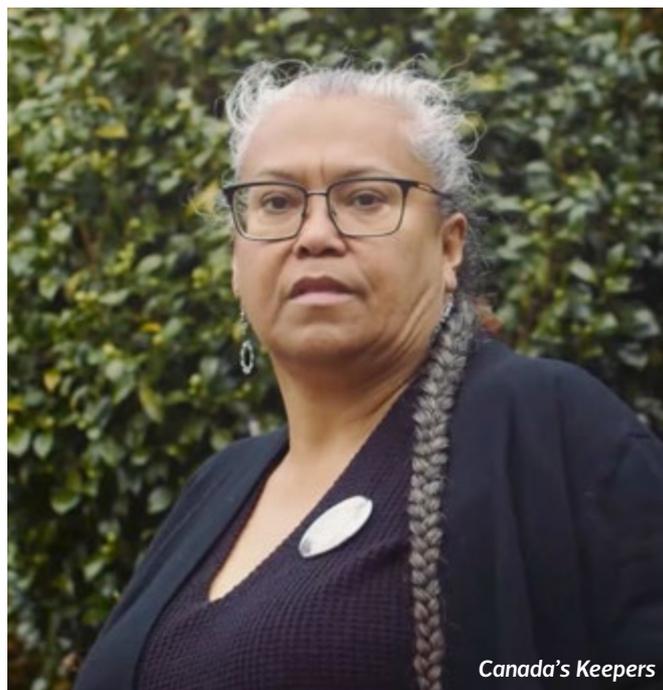
RTS Yorkshire

Students from Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Leeds triumphed in the two principal categories at the RTS Yorkshire Student Television Awards in mid-March. ITV Yorkshire presenters Christine Talbot and Duncan Wood hosted the online ceremony from the *ITV News Calendar* studio.

Scripted winner *Future for Our Children*, made by a team of Sheffield Hallam University students, is set in a refugee camp for Syrian children. The judges praised the film for its “extraordinary naturalism”, which was backed up by “technical excellence and incredible performances”.

Canada’s Keepers, a University of Leeds documentary about the destruction of the identity of indigenous Canadian women, took the Non-Scripted category. The judges said it was an “ambitious film, telling an untold story using powerful testimony and excellent film-making techniques”. Karyan Au-Yeung also won a Craft Skills: Sound award for *Canada’s Keepers*.

“Despite the conditions under which students and university and college staff have had to work over the



University of Leeds

RTS Yorkshire Student Television Awards winners

Non-scripted-*Canada’s Keepers*-University of Leeds

Scripted-*Future for Our Children*-Sheffield Hallam University

Craft Skills: Camerawork-*Submerged in Nature*-Omar Skalli, Sheffield Hallam University

Craft Skills: Editing-*YSTV Does*

Hunted-Thomas Schubert, University of York | **Jude-**Amos Menin and Megan Decaluwe, Northern Film School at Leeds Beckett University |

At Work with Winston-Danny Haywood, Sheffield Hallam University.

Craft Skills: Lighting-*Night Shift*-Northern School of Art

Craft Skills: Production Design-*Louise and Becca*-Teva Fux, University of York

Craft Skills: Sound-*Canada’s Keepers*-Karyan Au-Yeung, University of Leeds | **Jude-**Amos Menin and Megan Decaluwe, Northern Film School at Leeds Beckett University | **Sweet 16-**Amelia Lund, Northern Film School at LBU

Films move judges to tears

past year, the quality of submissions was extremely high, with a number of broadcast-quality productions,” said RTS Yorkshire Chair Fiona Thompson. “Some films

were so moving that they left judges in tears. The students demonstrated excellent creativity, resilience and innovation in their storytelling.”

Nine prizes were awarded

in five craft categories, with two (for Editing and Sound) going to *Jude*, made by Amos Menin and Megan Decaluwe at the Northern Film School.

Candour Productions and Universal Production Music sponsored the awards.

Five Zoom sessions, covering factual film-making, scriptwriting and short films, were put on for students following the ceremony.

Matthew Bell

Middlesex Uni makes its mark

RTS London RuPaul's *Drag Race UK*'s The Vivienne added glitz and glamour as the host of RTS London's Student Television Awards last month. "This year has proved how important this industry is – if I hadn't had my TV in my house during lockdown, I would have been climbing the walls," said the winner of *Drag Race*'s first UK series. "Knowing that the future of TV is in your hands really puts me at ease."

Middlesex University took two of the main awards. *Yard Kings* by Billy King and Vasco Alexandre won the Scripted award, while Timea Moshaver and Anand Tiwari's *One Day You Will Hear My Voice* scooped the Non-scripted prize.

University of Westminster student Aisha Boudjillouli's film *It's Okay* took the Animation prize. The Short Form award went to the London

South Bank University team of Ben Watson, Jem Horstead, Aeneas Macdonald and Sam Cousins for *Introspection*. Watson also won the Craft Skills: Editing award.

"It was great to see so many entries, and so many colleges taking part, despite these testing times. We hope our online extravaganza was the next best thing to being able to award the winners in person," said RTS London Chair Phil Barnes.

Observational documentary film-maker Vanessa Stockley offered advice to the nominees at the ceremony: "Always stay open-minded – the stories you film never quite work out as expected and are often far more interesting than you could ever have anticipated."

She added: "Stay curious – you'll always be learning." **Matthew Bell**



Yard Kings

Middlesex University

RTS London Student Television Awards winners

Animation - *It's Okay* - Aisha Boudjillouli, University of Westminster

Non-scripted - *One Day You Will Hear My Voice* - Timea Moshaver and Anand Tiwari, Middlesex University

Short Form - *Introspection* - Ben Watson, Jem Horstead, Aeneas Macdonald and Sam Cousins, South Bank University

Scripted - *Yard Kings* - Billy King and Vasco Alexandre, Middlesex University

Craft Skills: Camerawork - *Above Everything* - Niall Langlands, LCC, University of the Arts

Craft Skills: Editing - *Introspection* - Ben Watson, London South Bank University

Craft Skills: Production Design - *Know Your Sh...* - Olga Rokosz, Kingston University

Craft Skills: Sound - *Down There the Seafolk Live* - Stan Greengrass, Goldsmiths, University of London

Craft Skills: Writing - *D48 Cuckoo Lane* - James Sinton, University of Westminster

Ulster students reap spoils

Northern Ireland Ulster University won two main prizes at the Northern Ireland Student Awards last month at a ceremony hosted by UTV journalist Katie Andrews.

The Forlorn Piscator by Matthew McGuigan triumphed in the Animation category. The judges described it as "reminiscent of the early work of Nick Park". *Antisocial Behaviour*, by Lyndsay Clarke and Phillip Steele from the Northern Regional College, Coleraine, was highly commended.

The Non-Scripted winner, *The Rising of Jordan Adetunji* by Joe Warden, Nathan Emery

and Reece Williams, was "professionally finished, with great use of contributors and beautifully shot". *Isolation: Overcoming Adversity as a Community* by Aodhán Roberts (North West Regional College) was highly commended.

Stephen Parker, Jane McLoughlin, John Lennox and Josh Bell (Northern Ireland

Film and Television School at SERC, Bangor) took the Scripted prize with *She Cries at Night*. "A polished piece created on a budget," said the judges. Queen's University Belfast students Benedict Goddard, Sam Bell, Ross Cullen, Morgyn Lutton and Ethan Rea were highly commended for *High & Dry*. George O'Hagan

of Ulster University took the Directing award for *Fear*.

Writer/director Oisín Kearney, who co-wrote BBC Three series *My Left Nut*, gave the Joe McKinney Memorial Lecture during the ceremony.

He said: "If you know what you want to do, go for it. If you don't know yet, don't worry. Explore by meeting people, taking courses, reading books. Do your research.

"TV and film is a world where it can take a long time to create things, so stick at it and be ready for failure – it's part of the process. Above all else, enjoy the ride."

Northern Ireland Screen and the Department for Communities backed the awards.

Matthew Bell

RTS Northern Ireland Student Television Awards winners

Animation - *The Forlorn Piscator* - Matthew McGuigan, Ulster University

Non-Scripted - *The Rising of Jordan*

Adetunji - Joe Warden, Nathan Emery and Reece Williams, Ulster University

Scripted - *She Cries at Night* - Stephen Parker, Jane McLoughlin, John Lennox and Josh Bell, The Northern Ireland Film and Television School at SERC, Bangor

Craft Skills: Directing - *Fear* - George O'Hagan, Ulster University, Belfast

Regulators are supposed to be dry, bureaucratic figures who hover in the background. Not so, Barbara Nancy Hosking, who has died at the age of 94.

As controller of information services at the Independent Broadcasting Authority, political consultant at Yorkshire Television and deputy chair of Westcountry Television, Barbara was a high-profile and influential figure in British broadcasting.

She was elected a Fellow of the Royal Television Society in 1988 and was often referred to as “formidable”, but this was only part of the story.

Barbara certainly possessed charisma and, into her nineties, remained a commanding figure who could entertain a lunch table with gossip, anecdotes and trenchantly held views. She was fond of lunching with journalists, sometimes at their homes. On one such occasion, three years ago, she arrived fashionably late, completely unflustered and clutching two bottles of Champagne as a gift for her hostess.

Barbara, like the politician she was closest to during her career as a civil servant, Edward Heath, was a committed European and made no secret of her opposition to Brexit.

Her sharp eye and keen sense of humour – and sense of fun much in evidence at after-hours TV gatherings – were evident in the title of her memoir, *Exceeding My Brief: Memoirs of a Disobedient Civil Servant*, which was published in 2017.

Her words when she finally decided to tell the world she was gay are redolent of her humorous side. “I’ve come out at the age of 91,” she declared, “and if I don’t like it, I’m going back in again.” At a reception to launch the book at London’s



Antonio Olmos/The Observer

Barbara Hosking 1926–2021

Steve Clarke looks back over the life of an influential figure in UK broadcasting

Reform Club, the remark, which closed her speech, led to fits of laughter.

Throughout her adult life, Barbara was a campaigner for women’s rights. She first came to London after the Second World War, following an unhappy childhood in her native Cornwall due to health problems and her parents’ miserable marriage.

At the time, it was difficult for women to succeed in the male-dominated world of work, but Barbara was determined that being female would not stand in her way.

She worked for a cinema

magazine and took an adult education course at Hillcroft College in Surbiton.

A Cornish friend helped to secure her a job at a copper mine in what was then Tanganyika, now Tanzania. “I was a woman in a totally male environment,” she recalled. “But I made friends with the toughest of them, without compromising my own beliefs.”

Barbara joined the civil service as a press officer at the Ministry of Technology, having previously freelanced for the BBC and the satirical weekly *Punch*. Within a

decade, she was working in Downing Street as part of Harold Wilson’s press team.

When Labour lost the 1970 election, she was asked to stay on, subsequently forging a close working relationship with the new Prime Minister, Edward Heath.

At their first meeting, she recalled, he told her to speak up: “I’ve been bullied by bigger men than him; I thought: ‘Nye Bevan, for a start.’”

She recalled how she was treated as an equal at Downing Street: “I was surrounded by educated men who all got firsts, and I hadn’t been to university, but they treated me as if I was as educated and as intelligent as they were, and I responded enormously to that opportunity and trust.”

Barbara left the civil service in 1977 for the Independent Broadcasting Authority, a powerful body that exercised great influence over ITV’s programming.

Despite her background working for Wilson and Heath, she was not expected to get the job at the IBA, but her personality and way of working introduced what many of her colleagues regarded as a breath of fresh air to an institution that could seem somewhat aloof.

At the IBA, she was involved in the emergence of breakfast television and its birth pains. In 1986, she moved to Yorkshire Television, one of the big five ITV companies, as a political consultant, working closely with Managing Director Paul Fox.

She was later invited to join a team bidding for the West of England ITV franchise. When the company secured the licence, she became a board member at Westcountry Television.

On Barbara’s insistence, Westcountry’s application had contained a promise of equal pay for women. ■

The Syndicate, Kay Mellor's drama about lottery winners, has returned to BBC One – six years after the third series – with a new cast of characters, this time working at a Yorkshire kennels.

"I wanted to do something completely different, so this is a cat and mouse story... although it's actually about dogs," explained Mellor, who was interviewed by TV presenter Michelle Ackerley at a BBC event, co-streamed by RTS Yorkshire and Screen Yorkshire.

"Each other *Syndicate* has been about a group of people who have won the lottery and what happens to them. This is completely different. I was able to look at all aspects of contemporary life in the north of England."

In the latest series, a syndicate of young kennel workers think they've won the lottery but all is not as it seems and they soon find themselves out of their depth in Monaco.



The Syndicate: Gaynor Faye and Neil Morrissey

BBC

From Yorkshire to the Riviera

The award-winning creator of *Band of Gold* and *Fat Friends* praised the actors for their dedication during a tricky shoot under Covid

restrictions: "They didn't go home half the time; they didn't socialise... that's a big thing to ask young people to do for their own mental

health. It was work, work, work, work, work. They were wonderful: they never moaned, they just got on with it."

The young cast are joined by the experienced Neil Morrissey and Gaynor Faye. "[The shoot] was really tough and there was a lot of anxiety, but also a lot of fun and coming together," said Faye.

How was filming done differently, asked Ackerley. "We were all wrapped in cling film," joked Morrissey.

"Testing, testing, testing," added Mellor. "I didn't want to create a Covid world or shoot with everybody two metres apart – it would not have worked. *The Syndicate* is about a group of people and I had intimate scenes in it as well."

A fifth series is a possibility. "There's something cooking," said Mellor. "It took six years for this to come to screen. There's one in there but it's not cooked up yet."

Matthew Bell

The UPSIDE

And the award for best net provider...

It was an eventful evening at the RTS Programme Awards, as the sure-footed Jonathan Ross dealt effortlessly with connectivity glitches.

Triple-award-winner Michaela Coel's internet crashed as the star tried in vain to give her acceptance speeches. "Michaela, I may destroy your internet provider," quipped the MC.

At the third time of trying, the connection held, allowing her to give some heartfelt thoughts on the success of *I May Destroy You* and how it

had helped to raise the profile of sexual assault.

"I am so grateful to know I have been seen and heard," concluded the brilliant writer and performer.

... may have to go back in its envelope

There was another glitch when Ross attempted to present the prize for the Entertainment Performance category to Big Narstie and his co-host, Mo Gilligan, for *The Big Narstie Show*.

At the last moment, Narstie disappeared. Minutes later, he managed to reconnect but not before some impressive ad-libbing from Gilligan.

No wonder Ross once described *The Big Narstie Show* as his "favourite show on TV" – with the caveat, "You

clearly don't know what you're doing but somehow it's fun".

An award for telling stories once banned

Staying with the awards, the prolific screenwriter "the wondrous" Russell T Davies was deservedly presented with the Outstanding Achievement Award for a career dedicated to "telling stories never allowed before" on television.

Davies generously switched the spotlight away from his own pioneering programmes to name some prominent gay TV stars and writers who preceded him.

"It's a great, grand tradition that I am enormously proud to be part of," he said, singling out such famous camp

performers as Larry Grayson and Frankie Howerd.

He ended with a tribute to Drew Griffiths, the gay playwright, actor and activist murdered in 1984, aged 37.

More cracks in the glass ceiling

And finally, congratulations to two leading TV women who have made headlines recently. Deborah Turness, once the first female editor of *ITV News*, takes over as CEO of ITN this month. It is hard to imagine a better qualified head of the news provider.

Over at Sky Studios, Jane Millichip's remit as chief content officer has been expanded. She is now responsible for delivering shows to Sky UK, Sky Italia and Sky Deutschland.



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