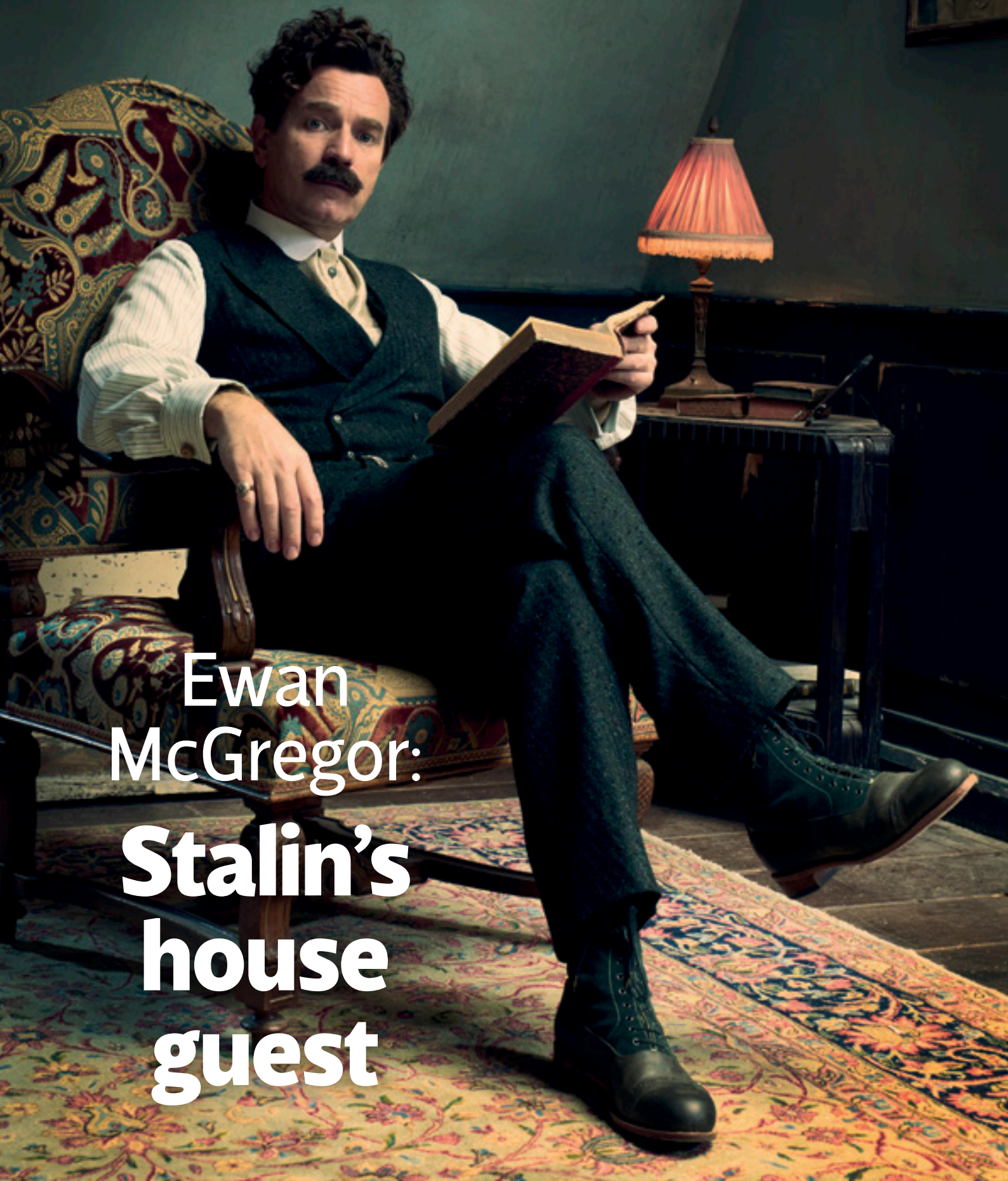


April 2024

Television



Ewan
McGregor:
**Stalin's
house
guest**

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From the CEO



The Great Room at the Grosvenor House Hotel was packed for the RTS Programme Awards to celebrate what has been a remarkable year of achievement in UK television.

To see so much talent present was a treat for everyone who attended.

No prizes for guessing which show won the Judges' Award – *Mr Bates vs the Post Office*, ITV's most successful drama in more than two decades and one whose national impact continues to be felt.

It is impossible to overstate this programme's impact as *Mr Bates*

has galvanised public anger at a truly appalling miscarriage of justice.

I was thrilled that we awarded the Society's Gold Medal to recognise the outstanding services to British television of national treasure Dame Esther Rantzen. Esther's daughter Rebecca Wilcox read out her mother's pithy and moving acceptance speech. Her words of gratitude and advice to the industry were very powerful.

Television carries details of every awards winner and nominee. Congratulations to them all. Thanks to Tom Allen for his irreverent MCing, to all the juries, to jury chair Kenton Allen and to Susanna Reid for introducing the Gold Medal presentation.

Our cover story examines how the makers of Paramount+'s flagship drama *A Gentleman in Moscow*, starring Ewan McGregor, turned Amor Towles's novel into must-see television.

As a lucky audience member at a show preview, I really enjoyed this beautiful adaptation, with its wealth of funny and poignant performances.

Elections are on our minds this year, so don't miss John Ryley's sage advice to news providers on how to deliver the best general election coverage.

Theresa Wise

Cover: *A Gentleman in Moscow* (Paramount+)

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TV diary

T **HURSDAY** Last day of the sound mix for *The Regime*, starring Kate Winslet as the tyrannical leader of a fictional European country. Great fun to sit in a room full of talented people discussing how this made-up country should sound.

We spend a lot of time calculating the right levels for the off-screen, unseen war. A deluge of helicopters is silenced as we decide the rebel army can't be that well-equipped.

Alongside me is editor Paulo Pandolpho. I've worked with him for eight years now. An incredible creative collaborator, he always pushes me and the work. No one laughs with quite as much delight as he does at the madness of what we've been making.

■ **SATURDAY** To New York for the premiere. Travelling with producer Tracey Seaward (*Philomena*, *The Two Popes*, *The Queen*), who I've been lucky enough to work with. She's such a force for good in an often-times challenging industry. And my daughter. Having missed so much time with me, I want to take her to make up for my months of absence. My son and his wife decide to come, too. It becomes an impromptu wonderful family trip.

■ **MONDAY** The premiere. Arrive to a whirl of actors, crew, executive producers and the highly organised HBO team. It's an excellent night and we are all relieved that *The Regime* is finally going out into the world.

I take my teenage daughter on to the red carpet with me, thinking it will be fun for her but the



Miro Lovejoy Tepitzky

Jessica Hobbs finds solace in her family after a turbulent week in Manhattan

bombardment of journalists and photographers is overwhelming.

I turn around to see her standing frozen behind me. When we can talk she makes me promise, "Never do that again, mum".

One reporter keeps asking: "I have only one question, 'Is it deliberate?'" I have no idea how to answer this but there's a camera in my face. When I ask what he's referring to, he repeats: "Is it deliberate?" It appears I can't move on without answering so I resort to a definitive, "Yes". And spend the next torturous trundle of the carpet imagining how that quote might be misused.

■ **NEXT DAY** Press conference. We are duly wheeled into a room in a pre-approved order that I am delighted to see director Stephen Frears ignore. Instead, he pitches down towards me and chooses the last seat. Whereupon we both

discover we can't hear much of anything. Least of all the questions we are being asked.

We're in a big cinema at Warner Bros. with a smattering of journalists. It looks manageable until it is announced that there are 100 more on Zoom. Relieved to discover we can't see them. The next 40 minutes pass in a haze of confusion from our end of the group and much laughing from the others.

■ **THURSDAY** Awoken early to a message from my wonderful agent, Jodi Shields, to tell me that beloved Jenne Casarotto has suddenly died. I'm shocked. Bereft. Find myself thinking that the 10 years I've had of her sage advice is nothing compared with her decades representing so many brilliant people. Day spent in a daze wandering Manhattan.

■ **Return from New York into that liminal space of – what next after 18 months focused on *The Regime*? I cook elaborate meals for the kids three nights in a row and I hear them whispering, "Is Mum OK?". Fair.**

■ Finish the week with an impromptu gathering to celebrate Jenne at the agency. A joy to be with so many producers, writers and directors talking about their love for her. Everyone felt the same: to have her in your corner was a wonderful thing. She will be so missed.

The Regime is available on Sky and streaming service Now from 8 April. Jessica Hobbs is the director and executive producer. She is represented by Casarotto Ramsay & Associates.

COMFORT CLASSIC



BBC

Dad's Army

The year 1968 was marked by student unrest on British campuses, anti-Vietnam war demonstrations and Enoch Powell's "rivers of blood" speech in Birmingham. It was also the year that, on a midweek night in late July, saw the debut of a deceptively unassuming and nostalgic English TV sitcom. *Dad's Army* was destined to become a classic of the genre. Even at the time, the show seemed to belong to a totally different and more reassuring world to the one erupting outside our front doors.

That escapism, perhaps, was part of its appeal for, almost immediately, viewers liked the show, whose success

A comedy set in wartime that feels safer than our own world. Like a favourite great uncle, it continues to spoil us, says Steve Clarke

took the BBC by surprise. At its peak, *Dad's Army* was regularly watched by a staggering 18 million viewers.

Looking back, the series seemed to be as much a part of my Saturday entertainment routine as an afternoon football match at Carrow Road or

Michael Parkinson's late-night chat show. In fact, series 1 was shown on Wednesday evenings and it was not until series 2 that the then-BBC One controller, Paul Fox, promoted *Dad's Army* to Saturday nights, where it remained for one season only.

Between 1968 and 1977 *Dad's Army* ran for nine series, in the process switching from black and white to colour. Many still watched in monochrome because they lacked a colour TV set. That it's been a fixture of so many TV schedules in the ensuing decades, not least on UK Gold and BBC Two (where it can currently be seen on Saturday evenings), speaks volumes about the enduring appeal of the

bumbling but endlessly endearing Home Guard of Walmington-on-Sea. These, mostly elderly, amateur soldiers are Britain's last line of defence against Hitler's feared invasion.

Creator and co-writer Jimmy Perry had served in a Local Defence Volunteers platoon, aged just 16. This experience was the inspiration for a show rightly described by the *Radio Times Guide to TV Comedy* as "the zenith of British broad-comedy ensemble sitcom". Perry and his writing partner, David Croft, conjured up a core cast of perfectly realised characters who are the closest thing we have to TV comedy immortals.

Arthur Lowe, who gives us that superb study in pomposity and self-delusion, Captain George Mainwaring, was already known to TV audiences as shopkeeper Leonard Swindley in *Coronation Street*. He had the perfect foil in John Le Mesurier's elegant Sergeant Wilson – cultured and, much to Mainwaring's annoyance, public-school educated. The English obsession with class and its attendant hypocrisies looms large in *Dad's Army's* comedy. Mainwaring, the town's bank manager, and Wilson, his chief clerk, needle one another like an old married couple.

Pike, the youngest member of the bumbling platoon, is in fact Wilson's illegitimate son but refers to him as "uncle Arthur".

The great Clive Dunn was probably *Dad's Army's* most popular character – Corporal Jones, the accident-prone local butcher, who gave *Dad's Army* its best catchphrases – "They don't like it up 'em", "Permission to speak, sir!" and "Don't panic!". Only 48 when the show first aired, Dunn forged a career in playing characters older than himself.

Arguably, only the British could have poked such gentle fun at their military incompetence and lack of martial machismo; unsurprisingly, *Rear Guard*, a US version of *Dad's Army*, got no further than a pilot in 1976.

The final member of the *Dad's Army* cast to die (this February) was Ian Lavender, who played Pike. He still owned the knitted scarf his character's mother gave him to protect his weak chest while on parade. He told *The Guardian* in 2018: "I feel immensely proud to have been part of the beast. We still watch it. Not every weekend but, if we're in, yes. [It is] funny and endearing – a pleasant reminder of a gentler time."

Who could possibly disagree. ■

Dad's Army is on UKTV Gold and BBC Two.

Ear candy

Electoral Dysfunction

And with that dick joke, Beth Rigby, Jess Phillips and Ruth Davidson set their sights on usurping the many "dadcasts" and their dominance of the podcast charts.

Especially in the politics genre, as the likes of Alastair Campbell and Rory Stewart's *The Rest Is Politics* and George Osbourne and Ed Balls' *Political Currency* continue to hold office here.

On paper, it certainly has the line-up to compete. As Sky News's Political Editor, Rigby almost brought the seemingly shameless Boris Johnson to tears with her probing on Partygate.

Here, she is questioning two straight-talking parliamentarians who are both known for often putting their principles ahead of their respective party loyalties (Phillips, Labour and Davidson, Scottish Conservative).

Indeed, Phillips says that she's not there as a Labour MP but as "a socialist rabble-rouser" and Davidson is "whatever the opposite of a socialist rabble-rouser is".

Rigby will apparently be kicking off each episode by asking "who's on top and who's having an electoral dysfunction?" – an early warning of the mileage that joke is going to get.

I did enjoy Phillips's deconstruction of the political opportunism of the perma-fedora'd George Galloway, in light of his Rochdale by-election win. She recalls her old man's aphorism: "Show me a man who wears a hat

while he's driving, and I'll show you a scoundrel."

But the discussion then descends into the kind of political partisanship and whataboutery that I generally tune into podcasts to avoid.

Rigby asks Phillips if Starmer needs to strengthen his position on the Israel-Gaza conflict, after briefly standing by Labour's Rochdale candidate, Azhar Ali, following his antisemitic remarks. She

deflects by bringing up the coinciding Islamophobia from MPs Lee Anderson (Reform) and Paul Scully (Tory).

Although the banter is a bit contrived and delineated (I often find that the funniest podcasts are the ones where the jokes arise from the

hosts' natural enthusiasm for their subject), it's at least a sign of some latent candidness.

Their dog lesbian vs cat lesbian riff drew out Phillips' hilarious admission that she calls the strong lesbian contingent of her Birmingham Yardley constituency the "clitterati".

But the partisanship problem persists. Later, Rigby asks Davidson, after five prime ministers in six years: "Do [the Conservatives] deserve to win?" To which she prevaricates: "I don't think anyone deserves anything in politics." And yet, a minute later, she makes an impassioned plea for our politicians to start answering questions. The same should go for our podcasters!

It's early doors, but if they want to find their feet they might want to stop toeing the party line. ■

Harrison Bennett



Sky

WORKING LIVES

Medical advisor

Dr Thom Petty playing Dr Neil Westland in *Breathtaking*

ITV

Dr Thom Petty ensured that ITV Covid drama *Breathtaking* was clinically and culturally accurate in its depiction of the health service during the pandemic. The NHS anaesthetist is also something of a Renaissance man – an actor, composer, director and writer in TV, film and theatre.

You were the lead medical advisor on *Breathtaking*. How did that come about?

I know Prasanna Puwanarajah, a former doctor, and had a little bit of input, along with a few other doctors, into the script he wrote with Dr Rachel Clarke and Jed Mercurio. The production felt they needed somebody on the ground as a medical advisor and I was available.

What did the job involve in pre-production?

The other medical advisor, Dr Andrew Cinnamond, and I designed a two-day boot camp for the actors and supporting artists with the brief of getting the medical sequences right, some of

which were really complicated. But I was always conscious that we needed to do a lot more than that – we also wanted to embed the NHS culture and communication style that health workers have into the cast and extras before they picked up their stethoscopes.

... And on set?

We were involved with everything from setting up the medical sequences to making sure the set designs and costumes were correct.

Joanne Froggatt, who played the main role of Dr Abbey Henderson, was an absolute sponge in terms of the way she approached the role, asking endless questions – it was brilliant to work with her.

... And in post-production?

On set, we'd have to think of ways around showing real medical procedures such as putting breathing tubes down throats – you can't ask actors to do that. We devised some cheats and then an amazing visual effects team

made it look absolutely brilliant in post-production.

Does it matter that TV drama gets medical procedures and details correct?

Rachel, Jed and Prasanna were adamant that *Breathtaking* had to be authentic and that everyone on the production was on the same page. We had to get the procedures right because the moment we didn't, people would say: "They wouldn't do that." Some medical dramas have a slightly different task; *Casualty*, for example, takes the viewer on a longer journey over weekly episodes and develops characters, as well as dealing with medical themes.

Did the actors like having an expert on set?

I was very conscious that my role was that of a medical advisor; I am also a director and have acted in television. But there is a grey area – giving a medical note can appear similar to

offering an acting note, which we didn't want to do and tread on the actors' or the director's toes. I would say: "In a medical sense, these are the sorts of things you might want to think about in this conversation and this is how it might play out in a clinical situation."

Is it hard for actors to play medical roles?

The first week was challenging. We were straight into some complicated resuscitation and A&E scenes, but people warmed up as we went on. That's a brilliant thing about actors – they are used to spinning all these plates, adapting on the fly and absorbing stuff.

Did it help, knowing how TV works?

It was a real advantage knowing my way around a TV set and people's roles, and hopefully they could sense that I had an understanding of what they needed beyond the purely medical.

I also played Dr Neil Westland in episode 1 and it was really helpful to immerse myself in the set so that I knew what the sensation was like for the rest of the cast.

How have NHS staff responded to *Breathtaking*?

I was a bit nervous about their response but it's been really good. As well as the medical procedures, it was important to represent the experiences of NHS staff during the pandemic. It's been heartening to hear people say that it looked and sounded like their workplace. If you're not faithful to what people in the NHS went through and their experiences, then there's a risk that you diminish it.

What are your favourite TV medical dramas?

I loved Jed's early-2000s BBC series *Bodies* and, most of all, *ER*. There have also been high-quality, day-in-the-life medical documentaries such as Channel 4's *24 Hours in A&E* and the BBC's *Hospital*.

Why did you leave medicine to go to the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art (LAMDA) and train as an actor?

Medics generally have quite a few

other interests outside medicine. There is a danger zone, which I entered when I was approaching 30 – I'd done a lot of medicine and not much else.

And you still work as a doctor part-time?

I'm an anaesthetist in the NHS, filling in at a hospital when they're short. I stepped up during the pandemic and worked full time in anaesthetics and intensive care, but now I'm part time again.

The balance for me is great – I'm

short and a first feature; just chipping away – it's a long slog.

... And compose?

That was the first creative thing I did. I went to the Junior Royal Northern College of Music school, alongside normal school, which was fantastic. I was part of *BBC Young Musician* and thought I was going to be a composer.

I guess that's when I first thought medicine was grabbing too much of my time, which later led to me going to Lamda.



Thom Petty (right) with fellow medical advisor Andrew Cinnamond on the set of *Breathtaking*

HTM Television

still a part of the day-to-day fabric of the NHS, but I'm able to do other things as well.

I enjoy being a doctor a lot more now that I don't do it full time.

You are a bit of a Renaissance man, you act, write, direct in TV and film...

After I trained as an actor, I worked in TV, film and radio but, over the last three or four years, I've moved into writing and directing more.

My short film with the BFI, *Ticker*, is on Channel 4 and doing the film festival circuit at the moment. I'm now working with a producer on another

I did compose the music for *Ticker*, although it's light touch.

Where do your ultimate ambitions lie?

For me, writing and directing is the most fulfilling, and I'm very passionate about making stuff local to where I live now, which is in the Staffordshire Moorlands. It's a place where not a lot is shot but it is a beautiful part of the world, on the edge of the Peak District. I've made one film here, *Ticker*, and I want to make more rural stories.

Thom Petty was interviewed by Matthew Bell.



Alexander Rostov,
played by Ewan
McGregor

The ambitious
creators of
*A Gentleman in
Moscow* let their
imaginings
run riot, says
Shilpa Ganatra

Paramount+

Ewan McGregor is under house arrest

Imagine what it would be like to live full-time in a hotel. A step further: what would it be like if your life depended on it? That thought experiment may be the initial appeal of *A Gentleman in Moscow* and perhaps explains why the book has sold 4 million copies worldwide since its publication in 2016. Fans include Barack Obama, Tom Hanks – who cited it as one of his 10 favourite books of all time – and Queen Camilla. She recommended it as a lockdown read during the pandemic.

Now Amor Towles’s novel has been brought to life in a landmark drama for Paramount+ and US partner Showtime. As a calling card for Paramount+’s UK arm, which launched in June 2022, it was given a budget that was “expensive for the UK, but not as expensive as *House*

of the Dragon”, says director Sam Miller (*I May Destroy You, Luther*). “Or *The Crown*,” adds showrunner Ben Vanstone (*All Creatures Great and Small, The English Game*).

“It was a really bold commission. There aren’t many things on TV that are so character-driven, and it eschewed the normal tropes of a lot of television. We didn’t approach it as a period drama. Our desire was to make a contemporary show that just happened to be set in Russia between the 1920s and 1950s,” says Vanstone.

The eight-part series follows the story of Count Alexander Rostov (played by Ewan McGregor) as he returns from Paris to a Moscow ruled by the Bolsheviks. Though the new regime is busy dismantling the aristocracy, he is spared execution provided he confines himself to the luxurious

Hotel Metropol. So begins a new life within this gilded cage, as the Russia outside its doors radically changes and the Count discovers some surprising emotional truths about himself.

It’s a timely watch, as Russia’s authoritarianism grabs headlines with the invasion of Ukraine, the deaths of oligarchs and opponents, and rigged elections that have put Vladimir Putin in charge for a fifth term. House arrest was not uncommon in Soviet Russia.

“Russia has a history of these cycles of autocrats and dictators who make the countries around it, and the people of Russia, suffer,” says Vanstone. “What makes the show so relevant is that this is a story about humanity fighting against those systems and regimes.”

Miller adds: “The human resonance is a big aspect. I remember Amor

explaining about how his desire was to examine chivalry, and the almost Victorian idea of gentlemanliness. One way to explore that is to set someone with those values against a regime that is without any kind of compassion, which was what seemed to happen after the Russian Revolution.”

The scale and ambition of the show is evident throughout, from its high-calibre cast and team of creatives to its lavish production values.

In addition to Vanstone and Miller, the assembled team included Popcorn Storm Pictures’ Tom Harper (*War & Peace*, *Wild Rose*), Moonriver’s Xavier Marchand and producer Lis Steele (*Riviera*, *Cold Feet*).

When it comes to adapting ambitious novels, television doesn’t always get it right. Series such as *Gormenghast* and last year’s version of *Great Expectations* got poor reviews, yet *War & Peace* and *Normal People* prove that small-screen adaptations can add distinct value.

With *A Gentleman in Moscow*, don’t expect a faithful retelling of the book: Vanstone’s teleplay reimagines the source material to work within the episodic structure and time constraints of TV serial drama.

“In many ways, it’s incredibly freeing to have a novel that doesn’t necessarily lend itself to adaptation,” he says. “If you’ve got something that’s pure plot or very neat, it’s just copying. Whereas, if you have a novel that has room for your own interpretation, in some ways it’s easier.”

True to the book’s spirit, the series strikes an impressive balance between light and shade. In the first episode, we see the opulence of the hotel and the austerity of the Count’s sparse attic room. Then there’s the levity of the Count’s repartee with a 10-year-old hotel guest, closely followed by a brutal killing by the Bolsheviks. Even the convivial atmosphere of the hotel’s dining room is juxtaposed against the shadowy corners of the building and lurking spies.

Miller explains: “Very early on, Ben and I connected about not wanting to make something that was overly heavy or earnest. There’s a playfulness about the way Amor shaped the book that we wanted to capture. It deals with very serious things and very funny things, and very beautiful things, but it manages to cross all those boundaries. It’s not relentlessly bleak and it’s also not just a fairytale.”

Although Kenneth Branagh was announced as the Count in a development prior to Vanstone’s project, McGregor was this team’s chosen lead, and is an executive producer. He brings nuance to the role of the Count and ensures he is immediately likeable. Says Steele: “We were all thrilled when Ewan signed up because he brings such a humanity to the character. Being an aristocrat, he is aloof but also accessible and warm.”

Vanstone adds: “Ewan is an incredibly playful actor. The Count has a mischievousness to him as well as a natural charm. And Ewan’s got a twinkle, which really lends itself to the part.”

The supporting cast includes Mary Elizabeth Winstead (*Fargo*, *Mercy Street*), Leah Harvey (*Foundation*, *Les Misérables*) and Fehinti Balogun (*Dune*, *I May Destroy*

telephone or lighting fixtures that become more modern.”

Surprisingly for a Russian period piece, filming took place across the north of England. Miller explains: “The walking scene from Red Square through to the Hotel Metropol was mostly shot in Bolton – it has these huge Victorian buildings and edifices that gave us the geometry we needed to make the walk feel real.

“A lot of VFX still had to be used. But, even if we had been able to shoot in Moscow, there isn’t that much we could shoot there because it’s the wrong period. So, it wasn’t as crazy an idea as it sounds to take Victorian Bolton and shape it into areas and streets near the Kremlin.”

A Gentleman in Moscow offers an alternative to the mystery thrillers that



Paramount+

You), all of whom deliver equally layered performances.

While the production was a tight operation to make the budget stretch further, “one aspect we didn’t skimp on was the design of the hotel. We knew it had to last for eight hours of television, and it always had to look like it was rich, lush and befitting for the Count to stay there,” Steele says.

As with *The Crown* and *Downton Abbey*, the on-screen opulence is likely to draw in viewers. From exquisite costumes to luxurious furniture, there is much to feast the eyes on. The set helps to show the passing of time from the 1920s to the 1950s.

Steele notes: “It was less about changing the structure of the sets and more about showing how props evolved – whether it’s a style of a

form the backbone of UK originals on Paramount+, such as *The Castaways* and *The Ex-Wife*. Paramount’s UK Deputy Chief Content Officer, Sebastian Cardwell, says: “We do lots of UK-based mystery thrillers, because there’s evidence you can get big numbers commissioning those. But you also need textural estate, and a show like *A Gentleman in Moscow* gives a bit of texture to cut against.”

Certainly, these series inhabit a unique space. “There’s so much TV that is brilliant, but which is very clearly a [particular] genre – a detective story or a murder or more of a salacious show,” says Vanstone. “But *A Gentleman in Moscow* is quite difficult to pigeonhole. Its greatest strength is its originality.” ■

A Gentleman in Moscow is on Paramount+.

A blueprint for the future

Tim Davie set out his vision for a digital-first BBC at an RTS event attended by media leaders

The BBC is gearing up for a multi-front battle that will see it leaning into AI and UK-centric algorithms, commercial partnerships with deep-pocketed tech companies, and a “progressive” licence fee.

Director-General Tim Davie delivered the corporation’s latest set of priorities at a standing-room-only RTS event held at the IET in London on 26 March. In the audience were super-indie bosses, senior producers and talent, as well as BBC colleagues, including the newly appointed BBC Chair, Samir Shah, Chief Content Officer Charlotte Moore and BBC Studios CEO Tom Fussell. Also present was Ofcom Chair Michael Grade.

The DG announced several new initiatives, ranging from the global expansion of BBC Verify to the creation of unique algorithms to integrate all BBC services under one “search” function. But it was Davie’s proposals for funding such innovation amid the drive to shave £500m from overall costs that were most notable, particularly his desire to cosy up to tech giants.

“We will need to work more strategically with the best tech companies to co-create solutions, and form business partnerships that save money, inject capital and create better products,” said Davie, nodding to headline-grabbing commercial partnerships such as the corporation’s exclusive global deal with Disney for *Doctor Who*.

Part of relieving financial pressure on the BBC involves asking the UK government to shoulder the “long-term funding” of the World Service, said Davie. “Not properly funding one of the UK’s most valuable soft power assets makes no sense, economically or culturally,” he added.


Elsewhere, the DG was upfront regarding his views on licence-fee reform, and his refusal to be “defensive about the future”. “It is right to ask fundamental questions about [the licence fee’s] longevity in a world that is now full of so much choice,” said Davie. At the same time, he warned, the BBC must be “appropriately cautious” about “unpicking a multi-genre BBC that leads the market rather than is simply about market failure.... We will proactively research how to reform the licence fee post-2028, looking at its scope, how it could be more progressive and making sure its enforcement is fair and proportionate.”

In a Q&A with Radio 4 *Today* presenter Martha Kearney, Davie later said it was “right” that the BBC Board was looking at potential concessions as part of licence-fee reform. “Do people of a certain age get a free licence? Should we stop there? What can we do? What are the other options? That doesn’t necessarily imply means testing; there could be a number of ways to make it more progressive. I just think the idea of sitting where we’re at is the wrong way.”

In 2025, the BBC will open its “biggest ever consultation process” to allow the public to “formally drive the debate” around the future of the corporation, said Davie. “Our aim is to make contact and get feedback from hundreds of thousands of people — and we do so with an open mind.”

Davie painted an ominous scene at the outset of his half-hour speech. He warned that “jeopardy is high” and that “the future of the UK — democratically, socially and culturally — is at risk” in the face of threats to civil society and its free press and “noisy, cultural disinformation”.

What would it take to succeed in



BBC Director-General Tim Davie

such a fraught climate? Doubling down on “what audiences see is our unique value”, answered Davie.

His speech revolved around three key objectives: pursuit of the truth with no agenda; backing British storytelling; and bringing British people together.

Pursuing truth without an agenda

As part of Davie’s refreshed journalistic agenda, the corporation vowed to use AI proactively and on its own terms, while “always holding on to our published principles, never compromising human creative control, supporting rights holders and sustaining our editorial standards”.

To this end, the broadcaster was working with major tech companies on ambitious BBC-specific pilots that will be rolled out in the coming months. Davie didn’t elaborate on what these might look like.

The BBC plans to increase fact-checking of sources, use translation and



Richard Kendal

reformatting technology “to take our best content across media and languages”, and offer more tailored learning services such as Bitesize.

“This is all AI for good,” said Davie. “We are developing unique ethical algorithms that dramatically increase personalisation but are not simply driven by individual recommendations. We want to keep other factors in play, like serendipity or curiosity, and an interest in what our BBC editors may judge to be important stories.”

The BBC was also investing in its year-old fact-checking service BBC Verify — billed on its May 2023 launch as “explaining the ‘how’” — which will expand globally.

It will also launch a new investigations brand that will be powered by 70 multimedia investigative reporters across the country. Meanwhile, BBC.com and the official BBC app will relaunch internationally. The aim is to “build up the division as the number one English online news brand globally”.

Backing British storytelling

Davie’s content-oriented message felt familiar in its targeting of global streamers and their perceived inability to tell authentically British stories.

“This is not a criticism,” insisted Davie. “They are very impressive companies that make many good shows, but there is no doubt that global economics will drive them to a different place editorially from a UK player.”

Meanwhile, the licence fee supports 14,000 external creative companies, said the DG, with 50% of the economic impact falling outside London. “The BBC is a growth and innovation fund for the UK and we want to do even more to back British storytelling.”

To this end, the BBC will continue to shift more production, editorial leadership and decision-making away from the capital: more than 60% of TV production is set to take place outside London by 2026, and 50% of radio and music by 2027.

“Within the BBC, you can now build

a career through to a very senior level, such as a network news editor, without even coming to London,” said Davie. “We will work very hard to keep opening up the organisation and the industry to all, which remains a big issue.”

The corporation remains on track to meet its 25% target for staff from a “lower socio-economic” background by 2027 — a quota first set two years ago as part of the BBC’s 2022–23 annual plan.

Bringing people together

Davie was again tech-oriented in his musings on community building, suggesting that UK-specific algorithms were necessary to protect the fabric of British society from external geopolitical forces.

“We can choose not to rely solely on US and Chinese tech companies that may not have the interests of a shared British culture and our democratic, tolerant society at their heart,” warned Davie. “This will require us to create unique algorithms to serve our values, ▶

► for good. Algorithms and AI that bring us closer, not drive us apart. Personalisation, of course, but not driven by narrow commercial return.”

The DG promised more live streams across BBC services “allowing you to connect communally to shared experiences in real time”. Notably, in the forthcoming local elections, the BBC would host mayoral debates in every combined authority.

Most significant, however, was the corporation’s plan to undertake “a total rewiring of the data and ‘horizontal’ systems, such as Search, that underpin our online offering. In the future BBC, you’ll be able to move across the content seamlessly, not limited by media type,” explained Davie. “If you’re interested in a topic, you should be able to easily mine the whole BBC – from archive to live output, [across] audio, video, World Service and local [services].” ■

Report by Manori Ravindran. ‘A BBC for the future’ was a speech given to the RTS by BBC Director-General Tim Davie at the IET, Savoy Place, central London, on 26 March. Radio 4 presenter Martha Kearney hosted the Q&A.



BBC Director-General Tim Davie

Richard Kendall

Q You said at the outset of your speech that the future of the UK is at risk democratically, socially, culturally. That’s quite a claim. And quite a claim, also, that the BBC could be a part of the change.

A You don’t want to overstate the role of the BBC itself. All I would say is: look at the data globally, look at the trend lines. Look at the trend lines on the free press, in terms of free democracies.

We’ve had a good run, our generation. We’ve had a situation in which we have been in a peaceful society; we have taken things for granted. And the history of humanity is to take those things for granted, and I worry about it.

I think those risks are real. Independent institutions that are independent of politics... have proven time and time again to be an essential counterweight to something that is purely about politics.

Q There’s a dilemma for the BBC, isn’t there? There are many critics concerned about the way the BBC is moving into the commercial landscape.

A We absolutely need to be careful how we develop commercial

QUESTION & ANSWER

revenue. There are two things on my mind when I say that. First, we absolutely want to protect a commercial-free offer in the UK at all costs. [Second], we talk about the funding, but not enough about editorial. In Henley, where I live, I’m sure people would pay a subscription [for the BBC]. But then, suddenly, we start making things for a certain audience. And I don’t want to do that.

Our target audience is everyone. And that brings stresses and strains as you try to bring everyone in. And, sometimes, it feels like a really tough cause – but it’s absolutely worth the pain.

So the first thing is, we absolutely don’t want to have a commercially funded UK offer.

Having said that, where we can monetise *around* that and create and attract capital, and do joint ventures

with, say, Disney and monetise some of our archive in the UK, I think that is appropriate.

Q You talked about technology companies. What are you planning there?

A I am worried because [scale is] one of the things we don’t have. You talk to the tech titans, and you do need deep pockets to compete. I think we do need major global partnerships with some of these tech players.

We can bring an enormous amount [to the table]. We’re an incredibly good testing ground: we can pilot things that maybe others can’t develop. But I don’t think we can do that alone, as a walled garden of R&D. We’re going to have to work with big companies.

We’ve done this for a while: look at natural history, which has been developed through partnerships, with the majority of funding coming from outside the UK.

So I think we need to push that [approach] into other areas, to attract capital, to create joint businesses. On our own, I don’t think we’ll have enough firepower.



Blue Lights series 2
(from left): Martin McCann
(Stevie), Siân Brooke (Grace),
Katherine Devlin (Annie)
and Nathan Braniff (Tommy)

BBC/Two Cities Television/Todd Antony

Inner city blues

Matthew Bell hails the return of *Blue Lights*, the Belfast-set cop show whose local following transcends the sectarian divide

A year after *Blue Lights* launched to five-star reviews, Belfast's rookie cops are back out on patrol in Adam Patterson and Declan Lawn's wonderfully human BBC One drama.

Second time around, the police officers are less green and more frazzled, but still trying to keep the peace in a city flooded with cheap drugs peddled by paramilitary gunmen turned gangsters.

Lawn accepts there is a "huge weight of expectation on our shoulders because the first series was such a success, but we were conscious that we couldn't keep on repeating the same old tricks – it has to evolve. All the great returning shows we've loved, primarily *The Wire*, do something different with each season."

Patterson admits to making that very mistake when he and Lawn, who met on *Panorama*, were working in current affairs: "That's what we ended up doing in documentaries and it was partly the catalyst for our exit from that creative form. We'd be fools to fall into the same trap once we've broken into the drama world."

The second series of *Blue Lights*, made by Two Cities Television, begins a year after the distressing death of Constable Gerry Cliff (Richard

Dormer), a father figure to the rookie cops. "The show's about the consequences of violence and we needed to show dreadful violence to explore that. Gerry's spirit lives on in a big way in series 2," says Lawn.

Summarising the differences between the two series, Lawn says, "Season 1 is what it takes to do the job and season 2 is what the job takes from you."

Siân Brooke, who plays social worker-turned-cop Grace Ellis, explains: "In series 1 she's a newbie, wide-eyed to this world, uncertain, trying to find her feet. With series 2, it's a year on... you're more experienced but maybe more ground down.

"[Originally], the thing that attracted me to [playing Grace] was that she's an optimist, trying to make things better; but in this series she's a bit more of a realist."

One constant is the "will they/won't they" flirting of Grace and Stevie Neil (Martin McCann), who share a patrol car and the food lovingly prepared by Neil.

"You have to retain the things that people love. The Stevie and Grace relationship landed well so we wanted that to be a central part of season 2," says Lawn.

The new series features different directions for existing characters ▶

► – Jen (Hannah McClean) is now a solicitor and more likeable – and new cast members, including Constable Shane Bradley (Frank Blake), who may be more than just a beat cop.

The setting also changes, from Catholic West Belfast to the Loyalist East. “Criminality has no borders,” notes Patterson.

“Lee [Thompson, played by Seamus O’Hara], our main loyalist character, is an idealist. While he does terrible things, you kind of like him, or at least understand him,” says Lawn, with Patterson adding: “That speaks to our general philosophy about all our characters – we don’t want to define people as good or bad.”

Such exchanges are typical of the duo, whose first TV screenplay, *The Salisbury Poisonings*, was the BBC’s most-watched new drama of 2020. They are a double act, constantly honing and expanding each other’s thoughts.

For series 2 of *Blue Lights*, they are taking on directing duties, helming the first three episodes of the six-part series. When scripting, Lawn takes the lead, as Patterson explains: “Declan is the natural dialogue writer – it just flows out of him. We realised that early in our writing partnership.

“Declan will always do the first pass on the dialogue: he’ll send it to me; I’ll have ideas and suggestions for changes; and then we start smashing it together as it goes back and forward.”

With directing – which they first tried on the short film *Rough* and then on their debut feature, *Rogue Agent*, starring Gemma Arterton and James Norton – the roles are reversed. “Adam leads the directing. I’m there helping him and advising him, but a ship can only have one captain,” says Lawn.

McCann, who grew up in



Adam Patterson (left) and Declan Lawn

working-class, nationalist West Belfast, has been pleasantly surprised by the show’s reception across the divide.

“On both sides of the community... it’s been received with open arms, which was never really guaranteed.”

And by the cops: “In the city centre, I got pulled over by two Land Rover police... it was selfies this and selfies that – that was quite surreal.”

Both writers and actors believe *Blue Lights* has changed public attitudes to the police; inevitably, says Lawn, “writing a character drama about police officers... humanises the faces of the people behind the uniform.”

Patterson amplifies that thought: “I’ve had people talk to me about the police in a way that I don’t think they ever would have before – they see how difficult the job is when previously... they would’ve had a reticence and resistance to the police.

“I’m not saying *Blue Lights* has torn all that away, but I think it’s making people... consider a bit more.”

In West Belfast, says McCann, “being a police officer is not only just not thought of, it’s not really an option... If you’d wanted to be one, you would have had to have move out of the area... This is only a show but there are effects, especially among younger audiences.

“For the first time, people in the likes of West Belfast are being introduced, and not in a propaganda way [to] what a police officer is. A few of my friends have said to me that they loved the show and they hated the show – they loved the show because it was great and they hated the fact that it made them love cops.”

Belfast, like many British cities, is broken by poverty, homelessness, addiction and the collapse of mental



Adam Patterson on location with cast

BBC/Two Cities Television/Todd Antony

health services; as Constable Annie Conlon (Katherine Devlin) says at the start of series 2, “Everything is just fucked”.

The writing of Lawn and Patterson, though, is notable for its optimism, in stark contrast to the often grim surroundings their characters inhabit: “We truly believe there is decency and civility everywhere... even in the darkest places, there is cause for hope. I think it’s being born in a place that was in conflict and is exiting into a peaceful transition,” says Patterson.

“There’s a lot of TV that is dark and miserabilist, and I think the world is heavy enough. It’s important to be respectful of how difficult the world is but also show there is light.”

Lawn adds: “As Adam says, most people are good and trying to do their best.... There are a lot of reasons why our partnership works, but our ethical sensibilities are very closely aligned.”

The BBC recently recommissioned *Blue Lights* for a third and fourth series in the wake of its rave reviews and ratings. Lawn, though, is quick to credit other Northern Ireland series for preparing the ground: “We’re standing on the shoulders of other shows: *The Fall*, *Line of Duty*, which wasn’t set in Belfast but filmed there, and *Derry Girls*.

“Without those three shows, *Blue Lights* probably would not have been greenlit.”

Belfast, added Patterson, “also had to be in a certain place to accept a contemporary series looking at itself.... *Blue Lights* shows that we are ready as a people to look at ourselves and that is a big step forward – it couldn’t have been done five years ago.” ■

The second series of *Blue Lights* airs on BBC One from 15 April.

Made in Belfast, reflecting Belfast

The idea for *Blue Lights* came from Belfast-based executive producer Louise Gallagher, who grew up loving *Cagney & Lacey* and *Hill Street Blues*. She explains: “We have a police force that’s very polarising and I’ve always been fascinated by the people who choose to do that job. [The idea] was based on two people I met who were originally social workers and had joined the police in their late thirties.”

Gallagher took her idea to Stephen Wright, then Head of Drama at BBC Northern Ireland. “We had a wee bit of a false start with it, but Stephen recognised there was something there,” she recalls.

As is often the way with TV, time passed before Gallagher and Wright – by now Creative Director of Two Cities Television and also an executive producer of *Blue Lights* – met Adam Patterson and Declan Lawn and got things moving.

Gallagher produced the duo’s award-winning short film *Rough*, in which Belfast paramilitaries pass a death sentence on a dog, and then the BBC commissioned *Blue Lights*.

“A police story lets us tell the story of the place where we live in a way that allows a wider audience in. They’re going to come for the cops and they’re going to see the characters and the city; the tensions, the difficulties, all the wrinkles – the stuff that makes it messy and interesting,” says Wright.

Both execs moved to Belfast in their late teens during the Troubles: Gallagher, from Derry, to take up a job at the BBC and Wright to study.

Belfast has since been transformed; peace came with the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 and, a decade later, when *Game of Thrones* came to town, a TV and film industry began to grow. Hit crime series *Line of Duty* and *The Fall*, both ordered by Wright at the BBC, followed and now there is *Blue Lights*.

“Returning series give people a sense of stability because the [industry] is freelance,” says Wright. “[It] has grown over 15 years, bit by bit. I’ve seen people come up, gain experience and become brilliant at their jobs.”

Gallagher adds: “The crew are proud of *Blue Lights*.... It means something to them because it’s us telling our story.”

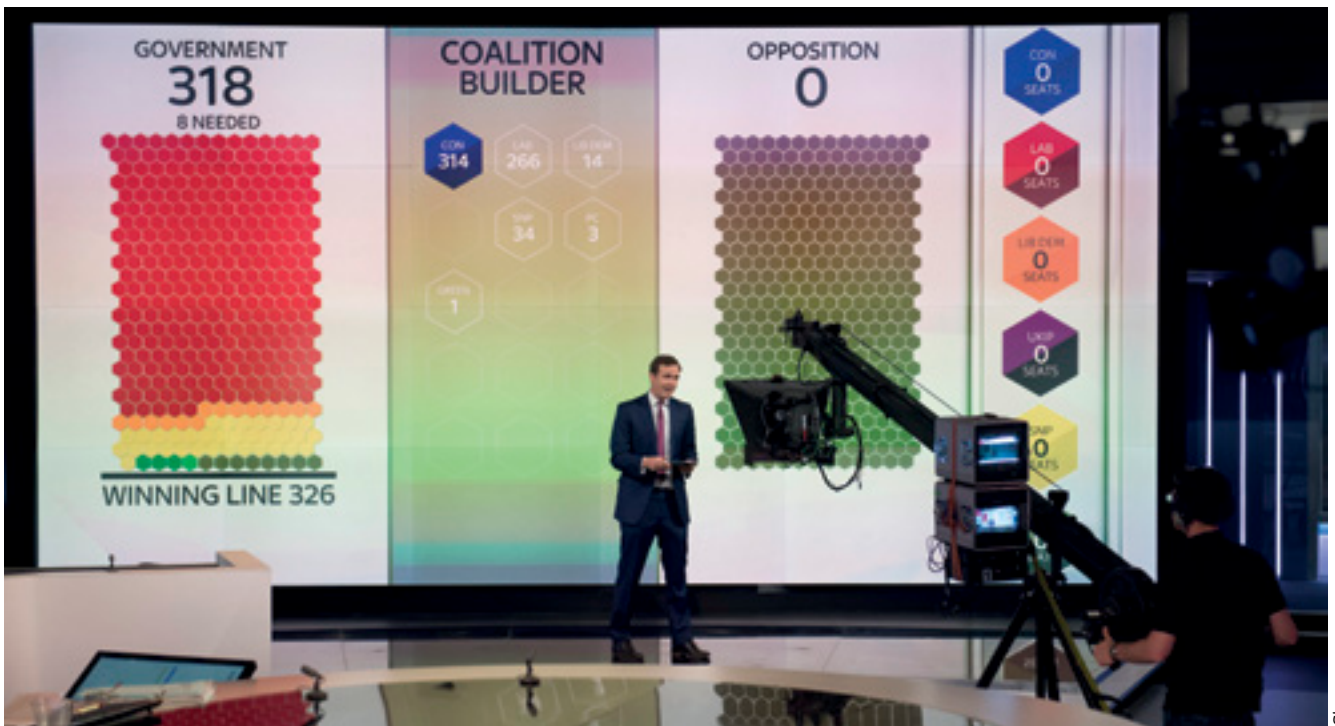
The soundtrack, curated by music supervisor Catherine Grimes, is largely local, including new artists such as Dea Matrona and Muireann Bradley. “There’s a brilliant music scene in Belfast covering all genres... seeing the breadth of talent is just amazing. We’ve got so many young bands coming through,” says Gallagher, an avid gig goer.

“I have two children, 22 and 19, and... they have cafés, restaurants and nightlife. When we were growing up, Belfast and Derry city centres closed at 6:00pm.”

Composer Eoin O’Callaghan, like Gallagher, hails from Derry. “He gets the soul of it; he knows our world; he is of our place,” says Gallagher. “The atmosphere he can create with his music is phenomenal.”

“I always knew we could do it – we just needed to be given the opportunity to make *Blue Lights*.... I just got a lump in my throat. I’m going to start crying again.”

John Ryley's TV election manifesto



Sky

Just fucking start talking”, shouted the legendary ITN studio director Diana Edwards-Jones into the earpiece of a reticent reporter at a constituency count more than 40 years ago as she commanded general election night coverage with great panache.

Election nights haven't changed much since because the format works and millions watch. Have a look at BBC Parliament's reruns of old election nights from the 1960s and you will see very few differences: a focus on the live results; live pictures from across the country as votes are counted; live interviews with key politicians; a craggy psephologist explaining what the incoming results signify about which party is on track to win a majority in the House of Commons; and, on most occasions, a fanfare at the winning moment.

Sure, the psephology has been transformed. The number crunching has come a long way but, at heart, it's the same approach, with charts and

TV news must provide fearless and robust coverage in the coming general election, insists **John Ryley**

graphics deployed using the latest technology to achieve maximum dazzlement. What you won't see is a 21st-century Robin Day smoking a cigar on the set.

Election nights get seriously detailed attention from TV producers and their bosses months in advance. But – and it is a big but – it is the TV, digital and audio producers left to work on the long weeks of an election campaign who need to realise they have a golden opportunity to better equip audiences to make decisions when they vote in a world awash with mistruths, disinformation and blatant lies.

In recent times, broadcast news

organisations have tried to spend as little as possible on election campaigns. The financial pressures are even harder this year, given the huge cost of reporting the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, along with a defining US general election.

But democracy depends on establishing the truth. Journalists need to assess the evidence to determine the facts and to accurately report and analyse what the political parties and senior politicians are advocating to make society better.

Sky News has already launched its “Target towns” project, centered on the bellwether seat of Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes, and GB News is calling itself “Britain's election channel”, though no election date has been set. It is doing well in the ratings. In the week beginning 4 March, GB News beat Sky News five days out of seven, including on budget day, in terms of share according to Barb. Expect GB News to aim to hit hard on topics such as taxes, health, immigration, education, housing and transport.

The recent comments at the Philip Geddes Memorial Trust lecture by Melanie Dawes, CEO of Ofcom, that the BBC is regulated to a higher standard on impartiality than GB News because the state broadcaster has a bigger audience may encourage the upstart to push the boundaries of impartiality even further than it has already. Boris Johnson has signed up for it, though he may not show.

But GB News's high command at its Paddington Basin newsroom needs to be careful that its plugging of Reform UK's policies and top people – the party's Chair, Honorary Secretary and

more? The grid's structured approach might include an interview with a relevant minister and their shadow.

The grid should be reintroduced by broadcasters in 2024 to examine closely the key areas of the parties' manifestos.

Of course, there will be moments of editorial tension between this approach and the spills and thrills of an election campaign.

Remember the day in May 2001 when outgoing home secretary Jack Straw was slow handclapped by the Police Federation, postmistress Sharon Storer squared up to Tony Blair over her husband's cancer treatment on the

The interviewer should prepare hard, question hard and listen hard – the voters expect it.

3 Debates

There is a vital need for head-to-head leadership debates during the 2024 election campaign. Broadcasters need to start working together to hold debates between the two leaders most likely to be the next prime minister.

Voters need to see the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition debate the big issues that face the country at election time. Hold just one debate to avoid more debates “sucking the oxygen out of the campaign”, as the former Conservative leader David Cameron put it. There is no need for the leader of the third-largest party to participate.

The electoral performance of the Liberal Democrats over the past 11 years does not justify their leader, Ed Davey, taking part. Expect GB News to try to take a lead on this as both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition will want to get in front of undecided voters in the “red wall” seats.

4 Artificial intelligence

AI makes it easier for politicians to mislead the electorate but also offers journalists a golden opportunity for evidence-based journalism compiled at speed. This critical tool will allow journalists to rapidly call out politicians' lies.

AI would have swiftly spotted that Joe Biden, running for the Democratic nomination in 1987, had parroted some of Neil Kinnock's campaign phrases without crediting the Labour leader. Talk to computer scientists for advice.

5 The opinion polls

Don't fixate on the opinion polls during the campaign. They skew the narrative. In 2015, this obsession with the polls suggested the most likely outcome would be a hung parliament. Journalists wrongly focused on whether Labour would form a coalition with the SNP, rather than examine what would happen if the Conservatives, having won an overall majority, would stick to their manifesto pledge to hold an in/out referendum on EU membership. A big miss. “The only poll that matters”, Margaret Thatcher used to say, “is the one on election day”. She got that right. ■

John Ryley is a former Head of Sky News.



PA

first and only MP are all GB News presenters – together with largely unchallenged criticism of the Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats doesn't blow up in its face.

Winning the trust of voters will be the critical principle on which the election in 2024 will be fought. Here are five ways to improve television's coverage of the campaign to help voters understand the issues and make better decisions about how they vote.

1 The grid

Thirty years ago, broadcasters would run a grid system during the campaign, and designate set days during the campaign when they would look in detail at specific areas of policy. For example, they might compare the two main parties' plans and policies to grow the UK's stagnant economy.

Conservative and Labour are evasive at the moment. Reform of public services is critical, but how different are the plans of Labour and the Conservatives? Will Labour borrow more or tax

NHS and John Prescott punched Craig Evans, a farm worker, with a left jab. All three moments were filmed on video. Twenty-three years ago a news producer's nirvana, but now moments largely forgotten.

2 Interviews

Push hard for set-piece interviews with the big decision-takers and give them the airtime and prominence they deserve. Prime Ministers Blair, Thatcher, Heath and Wilson all submitted themselves to being questioned on prime-time TV. They saw it as part of the job to try to explain their position.

It is the journalists' job to hold politicians to account, to question those in authority rigorously. Interviews with top politicians matter.

As the BBC's David Dimbleby put it at the start of the 1987 election, “You've got somewhere a revealing moment when the viewer sees something unexpected – a train of thought, a reason for policy, the gut instinct that lies behind it, an attitude to society”.

A dive into the misinformation cesspool

‘Disinformation Correspondent’ is surely a top contender in the Orwellian job title stakes. The BBC’s Marianna Spring has “and Social Media” tagged on, but that’s not her focus. Social media, as she explains in this disturbing book, is just the vehicle for spreading unfounded scare stories, half-baked pseudoscience, racist bigotry and unadulterated hate.

Spring, winner of the RTS Television Journalism Awards 2023 Innovation prize, has delved deep in the cesspool of disinformation and unearthed some of the mad, bad and sad characters who inhabit the cyber underground.

Among the Trolls – My Journey Through Conspiracyland is an unashamed spin-off of Spring’s broadcast journalism, from podcasts to *Panorama*, where she is nicknamed “Miss Information”. Much of her narrative, and many of the people she meets, will already be familiar to regular BBC listeners and viewers.

Her title is a deliberate reference to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Conspiracyland, she explains, is a topsy-turvy parallel universe reached by falling down a virtual rabbit hole. As in *Alice*, any initially benign impressions of its inhabitants disguise an underlying sinister darkness.

Spring cleverly contrasts the superficially mundane aspects of the trolls with their outlandish notions. Among the more infamous is Kate Shemirani, a glamorous trained nurse and mother of grown-up children, living with her chihuahuas and cats, serving juice and fruit. She is also one of the most extreme conspiracy theorists on Covid-19, dubbing it a “scamdemic”;

Simon Bucks follows Marianna Spring on a disturbing trek through the mires and warrens of Conspiracyland

its symptoms, she thinks, are caused by 5G phone radiation.

Shemirani subscribes to “Nuremberg 2.0”, a widely held belief among conspiracists that doctors and others, including journalists, should be tried for “crimes against humanity” for concocting the pandemic and the Covid vaccines and, if convicted, should be hanged.

Covid and vaccines, more generally, are the two biggest preoccupations of conspiracists. While Spring acknowledges that there is a legitimate debate about how “for-profit” pharmaceutical companies make their money, she highlights a particularly tragic case to illustrate the harm that trolls can cause. Gary, a committed non-believer in Covid and an anti-vaxxer, became so convinced that mainstream media and politicians were lying that he eschewed medical help when he caught the disease and eventually died.

A central theme of Spring’s book, and,

arguably, one that should most alarm readers of *Television*, is the serious mistrust of mainstream media that suffuses the continent of Conspiracyland.

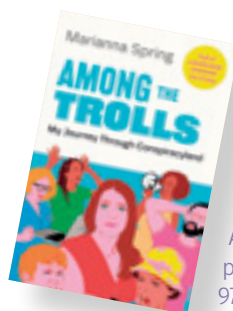
Conspiracists, she contends, feel betrayed by the media. At rallies, journalists are often described as “the enemy of the people” and the BBC as “Satan’s advocates” for disseminating what are claimed to be false stories. “A highly paid Nato and BBC propagandist” is one of the more printable charges aimed at Spring.

The conspiracists’ suspicion of the BBC and other mainstream media was behind the launch, during the pandemic, of their own free newspaper, *The Light*, which is handed out by volunteers in many towns and cities. It argues that the pandemic was a hoax. Its articles are a ragbag of misleading claims about vaccines, the financial system and climate change. It’s not without influence: its print run is 100,000, and it reaches 18,000 subscribers on Telegram, the social media platform of choice for conspiracists because of its relaxed attitude to moderation.

Spring goes in search of *The Light*’s editor, Darren Nesbitt (alias Smith), eventually persuading him to do an on-camera interview. Nesbitt will only answer her questions if she will answer his alternating questions.

Spring describes this bizarre television duel, each facing the other’s cameras and taking it in turns to ask questions. The same technique has been adopted by others in the public eye, such as Elon Musk and Andrew Tate.

Spring – rightly – agrees; she is happy to answer questions about her journalism. Nesbitt’s answers, however, illustrate how easily conspiracists can



Among the Trolls – My Journey Through Conspiracyland by Marianna Spring is published by Atlantic Books, priced £18.99. ISBN 978-1838955236



slip from respectable scepticism to bonkers, evidence-free theories.

“We don’t have to accept what the BBC tells us... what the official narrative is,” Nesbitt tells Spring. For BBC, you could read any mainstream media or government message – and few would argue with that. Challenge and counter challenge are the stuff of intellectual debate.

But when Spring presents him with evidence to contradict his theories, he brushes off these inconvenient facts, adamant that, if he says something isn’t true, it isn’t true. “That’s how Conspiracyland works,” Spring writes. “You can build a whole world where objective truth is irrelevant.”

Given her job, it’s hardly surprising that Spring receives most of the online abuse sent to BBC staff. She even had a stalker waiting for her outside New Broadcasting House and worries that

the trolls who routinely send her death threats might one day be tipped into actually trying to kill her.

Some disobliging posts by Elon Musk on X/Twitter after she investigated him for *Panorama* prompted an avalanche of hate messages, including videos of hangings and of a woman tied up at gunpoint. Twitter insiders told her that the job cuts imposed by Musk meant the platform could no longer prevent trolling. Although the company maintained that protecting users was a priority, Spring notes that its press office responded to information requests with poo emojis.

The lurking question throughout *Conspiracyland* is: what motivates the trolls? Spring identifies two types: true believers, utterly convinced by conspiracy theories; and non-believers who are in it for the power or the money.

Among the believers she finds Natalie, in Totnes, South Devon; oddly, it is a veritable hotbed of conspiracists. Natalie thinks governments and global organisations want to control us and the planet is cooling down, not warming up. She tells Spring, tearfully, “We’ve lost our families, we’ve lost our friends, and we will still stand in our truth because we know it is the truth...” Spring ends up comforting Natalie; her emotion, she says, is raw and fearful.

On the other hand, there is Richard D Hall, the “non-believing” troll who claims the Manchester Arena bombing in 2017, which killed 22 and injured hundreds, was faked by government agencies. “He’s created a conspiracy world that causes real-world harm, and he’s willing to keep it up because he seems to like being at its centre,” she writes.

Spring tracks Hall down to a market in Wales where he is selling his books and DVDs, profiting from his lies. Despite an ongoing legal action brought by two of the bombing’s victims, Hall remains adamant his theory is not only right but in the public interest. “Retaining his followers is more important than the financial risk of owning up to the mistruth he’s promoted,” Spring concludes.

Her wide-ranging book does a good job of exposing how a handful of conspiracists, motivated by money and power, can manipulate the minds of many vulnerable people ready to believe evidence-free nonsense.

Depressingly, however, despite interviewing a raft of academics and experts, Spring finds no easy or obvious solutions to the conspiracy theory epidemic.

Stressing that she is an investigative reporter, not a campaigner, she concludes – unsurprisingly – that social media is responsible for fracturing and polarising society, making the world ever more vulnerable to harmful ideologies. It is, she says, all about trust, education and media literacy. In Finland, where schools routinely teach children how to spot misleading and fake news online, 71% trust their government, compared with 41% elsewhere, according to the OECD.

We should all be grateful to Spring for shining a penetrating light down the rabbit hole of Conspiracyland. She gives the rest of us an alarming glimpse of this murky and perverse realm but saves us from actually having to go there. ■

From left:
Mark Lawson,
Monica Dolan,
Patrick Spence,
Natasha Bondy,
James Strong,
Chris Clough
and Polly Hill



Paul Hampartsoumian

The drama that outraged Britain

Mr *Bates vs the Post Office* belongs to that handful of British TV dramas – think *Cathy Come Home* or *Queer as Folk* – that changed the world we live in, but the shocking truth is that it almost didn't get made.

This was one of several remarkable insights shared with the RTS into the four-part ITV series that finally drew the public's attention to what may be our broken nation's gravest miscarriage of justice ever.

At a packed RTS event, “*Mr Bates vs the Post Office: How drama can change society*”, the audience heard how one of the founders of factual specialist Little Gem read an article, four years ago, in the *Sunday Times* colour

The RTS hears how an angry nation united in response to ITV's seminal *Mr Bates vs the Post Office*

supplement. The piece highlighted how hundreds of sub-postmasters' lives were ruined by a mendacious conspiracy of silence over faulty accounting software installed by Fujitsu at branches of one of Britain's most trusted institutions.

Within hours of *Mr Bates vs the Post Office* airing on New Year's Day, social media lit up with Britain's anger at how these people, often vital to the smooth working of their communities,

had been treated by the Post Office.

“We tapped into a feeling of rage in the country that, all too often, people who are supposed to have our backs, who run our country and who run our companies... are liars and bullies and cheats,” ex-ITV Studios Creative Director Patrick Spence told the RTS.

“And I think that was what prompted the entire nation to say, ‘We've been feeling this for too long. Not on our watch any more... we're going to protect these people.’ And they were all already angry.”

ITV was expecting around 2 million live viewers for the programme. Instead, *Mr Bates* won an initial audience of 3.7 million viewers against stiff opposition from BBC One's *The Tourist*. It was the biggest show of New Year's Day.

The reaction online was even

Monica Dolan on playing her part

Panellist Monica Dolan described how she prepared for playing Hampshire sub-postmistress Jo Hamilton, wrongly accused by the Post Office of theft and fraud.

'I was very lucky because she was a lot more approachable than many real people who I've played.... When I walked through the door at the read-through, Jo Hamilton was the first person I saw. We gave each other a hug..

'I talked to her a lot. Sometimes, it's more helpful to watch footage of the person or watch them meet someone else because you can be more objective..

'Jo was very open, so I asked her if she wouldn't mind sending me an audio recording of her life up until the point where the script starts. That was so useful because she'd done so



Sub-postmistress Jo Hamilton, played by Monica Dolan

many different jobs and had so many different interests.

'It also meant that I could listen to her voice every day. The voice is always useful to me because that's the soul.'

She added: 'Rule number one is that your character is not you, otherwise the whole thing would be awash with anger. I'm quite clinical about it and try and play the situation.'

stronger. "One of the other executive producers, Joe [Williams], texted to say, 'We've broken the internet,'" remembered Spence. Remarkably, a high proportion of viewers watched all four episodes as soon as they appeared on ITVX.

ITV's Head of Drama, Polly Hill, said: "They chose us, stuck with us and then they got angry. It was the anger that changed everything."

Within 10 weeks, almost 15 million people had watched *Mr Bates vs the Post Office*. Toby Jones, cast perfectly as the eponymous Bates, is an unlikely and unassuming hero. His dogged determination to ensure the sub-postmasters obtain justice after being falsely accused of stealing from their employer – and in some cases, imprisoned – is the pivot of the ITV drama.

Bates's campaign is a complex story that plays out over almost two decades in the drama. The heroes are neither glamorous nor charismatic; as writer Gwyneth Hughes said earlier this year, "It's about hundreds of people who are not fashionable, not young, not edgy, not metropolitan. It's got nothing going for it, in a way."

Yet, remarkably, this deceptively low-key television drama exposed a national scandal hiding in plain sight

ever since *Computer Weekly* broke the story back in 2008. That it took a TV drama to bring this massive miscarriage of justice to the public's attention, despite numerous news reports by broadcast and print media over many years, proves that traditional TV drama can still change the political weather and, indeed, society.

Politicians, captains of industry, the Government and tech giant Fujitsu have all been embarrassed by the show's revelations.

The Prime Minister was caught off guard by what *Mr Bates* told the public about our green and unpleasant land. Little Gem producer Natasha Bondy told the RTS: "Rishi Sunak was door-stepped at a flood and the journalists asked him, 'What about the Post Office?'

"And he was like, 'Oh, that happened in the 1990s.' And that irritated me because I don't think he [has] quite understood that it didn't [just] happen in the 1990s." Incredibly, the victims are still waiting to be properly compensated, so the echoes of the programme continue to be felt.

Bondy explained what it was about the Post Office scandal that caught her attention: "The sub-postmasters' stories were heartbreaking.... They lost their businesses, relationships, their mental

health, their physical health – and it was all at the hands of a seemingly very benign, cosy, sweet brand that we all love and trust. Or used to trust.

"That made it really unbelievable. And also weirdly visual, because it was happening all around the country in beautiful villages, and the Post Office was this sort of dark, malevolent force.

"This sense of unfairness is why I think the country went ballistic. The nightmare of being accused of something you haven't done was so visceral, it immediately felt like it had to be a drama. That moment [on screen] when you have the doubling of the shortfall before your eyes is such a visceral moment that viewers really remember."

As astonishing as the story was, Spence knew that, for *Mr Bates* to succeed in attracting viewers, star casting was essential. "Polly [Hill] told me that we needed to have many much-loved actors in the show, so people would go, 'If all those people are doing it, I need to watch it.'"

But the budget for *Mr Bates* was stretched. At one point, prior to the commencement of filming, there was a very real risk that the project would implode due to lack of money.

Spence recalled: "There was a very uncomfortable point in the lead up ►

► to filming when the wheels very nearly came off and Polly made a phone call that kept it alive. Without that, we would have fallen apart – *Mr Bates* would not have been made. The funding of four-part non-crime shows such as *It's a Sin*, *This Is England* and *Mr Bates* is in serious danger” due to their need to have international appeal (see box below).

Even so, everyone involved in making *Mr Bates*, including the cast, agreed to accept a cut of between 20% and 30% to their fee “because they believed in the show”, Spence told the RTS.

Hill described the first time the cast got together with the script: “It was the most moving read-through I’ve ever been to. Patrick [Spence] made a speech that made me cry. I went round thanking all the actors and they all said, ‘This is why we want to act’. Everyone was invested in telling this story. It was amazing.”

It was, of course, essential that *Mr Bates* was legally watertight given the Post Office’s willingness to be litigious. Hughes came up with the idea that all the dialogue spoken by Post Office CEO Paula Vennells should be based on words used by her either in emails or in minutes taken at various meetings that lawyers tried to redact.

“We didn’t want the Post Office to have a chance to correct anything,” said Spence. “It had to be a matter of fact that she had used those words.” That way, *Mr Bates* could not be accused of being inaccurate; nor could the Post Office use the courts to stop the programme being shown.

“As if Lia Williams [who played Vennells] needs to prove herself as an actor it is worth pointing out that the incredible, naturalistic performance that she gives is based on dialogue



Alan Bates,
played by
Toby Jones

ITV

written by Paula Vennells herself in emails,” emphasised Spence.

After the outrage generated by the drama Vennells handed back her CBE.

Spence revealed that Alan Bates was concerned about how he would be portrayed in the series. He said: “There was a conflict between us, as a programme-making team, and Alan, over what we’re going to call his emotional journey. He passionately

believed he never felt one emotion across 20 years – otherwise, he would have gone crazy.

“As programme-makers we would often say to him, ‘We don’t believe you... We needed to track his emotional journey without betraying his trust in us that we wouldn’t play him as a hugely emotional man.’”

Hill recounted how she was present when Bates thanked Spence for having delivered such a brilliant show. “That moment was really moving,” she said.

Added Spence: “Alan was very, very wary of us. But by the end he did feel – and I think these are the exact words he used – ‘You have captured the suffering of the sub-postmasters’ community better than anyone so far.’” ■

Report by Steve Clarke. ‘Mr Bates vs the Post Office: How drama can change society’ was an RTS National Event held at the Cavendish Conference Centre in central London on 12 March. The producer was Tom Popay, Creative Director of Chalkboard TV.

The shows at risk of extinction

Patrick Spence: “To a great extent, the single film for television has died out as an art form. There are very few of them being made, however much broadcasters would like to make them.

“We can’t afford to make them because they don’t sell internationally... If we’re not careful, the non-crime four-parter is next because they don’t make money... Shows such as *It’s a*

Sin, *This Is England* and *Mr Bates* are in serious danger.”

Spence, ex-Creative Director at ITV Studios, now Managing Director of AC Chapter One, said that, although ITV, the BBC and, particularly, Channel 4, were keener than ever on British stories, there was pressure from distributors – whose role in financing shows is more critical than ever – to make shows with international appeal.

OUR FRIEND ACROSS THE REGIONS

Over the past year or so I'm sure many of you reading this have enjoyed the likes of *Blue Lights*, *The Responder*, *Happy Valley* and *The Way*. All huge BBC dramas. They have something else in common – they're rooted in towns and cities across the UK.

This is no accident. In March 2021, we laid out our "Across the UK" blueprint for the BBC's biggest transformation in decades, designed to move more of our programming and decision-making across the UK. The goal: to bring us closer to our audiences.

Three years on, we've delivered significant change and economic impact. The programme aimed to invest an extra £700m outside London by 2028. We're on track to exceed this and to date have delivered more than £200m additional investment.

In 2022, 58% of BBC network television spend was invested outside London, which is more than £500m in total. We're now looking at this reaching 60% by the end of the BBC's Charter period in December 2027.

We committed to delivering, within three years, more than 100 drama and comedy series set across the UK, telling the stories and showcasing the accents of those areas, particularly in the Midlands and North of England and the devolved nations. We expect this target will be exceeded. We hope almost a third of these series will be produced in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Our high-end dramas set across the UK not only smash viewing records.



BBC

Tom Wrathmell highlights the progress of a BBC initiative to forge stronger links with audiences outside London

They also prove that audiences respond to seeing their own lives represented on screen. *Blue Lights* was watched by 40% of adults in Northern Ireland (see feature on page 15).

Happy Valley was the biggest drama in 2023 and had a 46% share of viewers from Yorkshire alone. This isn't just about making audiences feel represented. These prime-time television moments have a real impact on the areas where they're set.

After *Happy Valley* aired, Halifax and the Calder Valley saw a boost to their economy and Disney/Marvel was encouraged to film there.

It's not just about drama. Some of the BBC's most-loved programmes, such as *The Traitors* in Scotland, *Gladiators* in Sheffield or *Morning Live* in

Manchester, are based outside London and make a difference.

Of course, there's still more work to do. We have outstanding partners across the nations and in the West Midlands and North East supporting the creative industries and growing significant creative clusters. We're also working together to increase investment in skills and training to ensure the infrastructure is there to support productions and supply chains.

In the West Midlands, we're working with Banijay to move *MasterChef* to Digbeth, creating 130 jobs and supporting the growth of Digbeth Loc studios as a major regional production base.

As part of our drive to grow skills and opportunities across the UK, we've relocated more than 350 roles outside London so far, across TV, radio and news. We've doubled our apprenticeship commitments and now have 600 in-house apprentices, 60% of whom are outside London.

We can't do this alone. We're delighted to see others joining us by investing more across the UK, whether it's an indie such as Spun Gold relocating to Birmingham, or others such as Fullwell 73 investing to deliver the world-class Crown Works Studios in Sunderland, which will be a game changer in the North East.

This activity supports growth for the creative sector, widens access and opportunities for the best creative talent and storytellers, and ensures that the UK continues to punch above its weight globally.

Tom Wrathmell is Director of the BBC's Across the UK programme.

An “Access Coordinator” is a relatively new role in the world of British television. But it is one that disabled-led organisations, such as TripleC and DDPTV (Deaf and Disabled People in TV), have wanted to see brought in for several years.

Jack Thorne helped to shine a light with his blistering 2021 Edinburgh MacTaggart lecture. His stark message was that TV had “failed disabled people utterly and totally”.

That same year, Thorne and some of his colleagues launched a group called Underlying Health Condition (UHC), referencing the phrase that has been used to denigrate disabled people and – in the pandemic – to explain away or excuse a huge number of deaths.

Working with TripleC, DDPTV and the CDN (Creative Diversity Network), UHC published an independent study into access in the TV industry called “Everybody forgot about the toilets”. A key recommendation was that all productions should hire an Access Coordinator to be “the main point of contact for all cast and crew.... They should be brought on in the early stages of production... and work [throughout it].”

Since then, ScreenSkills’ High-End TV Skills Fund has supported the training of 25 deaf, disabled and/or neurodivergent people to become Access Coordinators. The first cohort is already working in the industry, with the second cohort moving on to industry placements between April and December 2024.

So what does the job of Access Coordinator involve?

Following the calls to create a new AC role, TripleC embarked on a consultation with its 1,800-strong community of deaf, disabled and/or neurodivergent creatives. The thinking was that the people who the role was designed to support should have a say in what it became. It was felt strongly across the community that the AC role should be undertaken only by a deaf, disabled and/or neurodivergent person.

As to what that job involved, the TripleC consultation said: “The job is essentially one of problem solving, working with people to find solutions – removing barriers so they can do



Then Barbara Met Alan,
written by Jack Thorne

One way to stop failing disabled people

Katy Boulton looks at how TV is starting to employ Access Coordinators – and what the job entails

BBC

their best work.... Access means not stopping a person from doing something or participating on an equal basis because their requirements have not been taken into account.

“This is far wider than just providing physical access, such as ramps or lifts. Access means that people can do what they need to do in a similar amount of time and effort to other people.”

It continued: “Access requirements can encompass mental health, physical health, caring responsibilities, the physical environment, communication, attitudes, and the way things are done.

“Every single person on a production will have access requirements and will benefit from having adjustments made for them.”

The TripleC consultation emphasised that “access needs to be everyone’s responsibility; ACs are only part of the solution... [which should encompass] training and education of people working in the industry around access and inclusion.”

To find out how the new role has been playing out in real life, I spoke to two working ACs and two trainees – all of whom are deaf, disabled and/or neurodivergent.

Bethany Matthews, AC at ITV Studios – Drama, said: “My job is wide and varied. An AC is someone who specialises in understanding the barriers people might face and finding creative solutions to overcome them. I help facilitate access for anyone whose personal conditions prevent them from giving their all at their job.”

Matthews noted that this could include people with caring responsibilities and people living with health conditions.

She added that it was common for people to hide their disability or condition due to stigma and stereotypes, some of which were perpetuated by on-screen portrayal. “An AC helps combat these stigmas and raises awareness of the barriers.... An AC will encourage best practice regardless of whether anyone has come forward to say they have access requirements.

“This creates a more welcoming and inclusive environment, where people know they are safe to embrace themselves and do their job to the best of their ability.”



Access Coordinator Bethany Matthews

‘THE INDUSTRY NEEDS TO BRING ITSELF UP TO DATE – WE’RE MISSING OUT ON INCREDIBLE TALENT’

Freelance AC Jess Mabel Jones said: “Attitudes to access and inclusion are definitely shifting, but progress is still frustratingly slow. I can really tell the difference between companies that see inclusion as a crucial human right and a powerful, creative opportunity – and those who are just ticking boxes. I want to work with people who mean it, who are excited and bold about it. The alternative is boring and deeply uncool.”

Like Matthews, Jones was clear that it was the AC’s job to embed best practice across the whole production. She was frank about what still needs to be done better: “Let’s be real – the industry needs to bring itself up to date. We’re missing out on incredible talent and failing to properly support the amazing individuals already here.

“People are our industry’s most valuable resource and, for too long, their physical and mental well-being has been seen as fair collateral.”

I also spoke to two trainee ACs, Vijay Patel and Sally Lisk-Lewis. Patel said: “I felt it was important for me to become an AC to show the importance

of both access and intersectionality. As a person who has lived experience of varying forms of marginalisation, I believe access should be for everyone and should include intersectional approaches.”

They continued: “I want to play a part in a more inclusive society that values deaf/disabled/neurodivergent/autistic people and remove barriers so that they can do their best work. I hope my role will give people the confidence to ask for what they need and find ways to communicate that to others.

“I hope that this creates a blueprint for organisations to value access in their daily practice and not think of it as an afterthought.”

Patel’s point about access not being an afterthought is crucial, for the sake of the all-important bottom line, if nothing else. It’s much more expensive to firefight at the last minute than it is to build access in from day one.

Lisk-Lewis added: “It’s been a real education, seeing the challenges that deaf, disabled and neurodivergent talent face within our sector. And how important it is to level the playing field on- and off-screen and through the stories we tell.

“I’d like to empower disabled creatives to focus on the roles they’re paid for, rather than spend their time putting the right support and adjustments in place. And help to create welcoming, thriving and inclusive workplaces that are better for everyone.”

It was abundantly clear from all these conversations that the industry is in great hands when it comes to ACs. My rallying cry to all heads of department, producers, commissioners and decision makers out there is to urge you to champion this vital, long-overdue role. ACs will need the backing of senior members of the production. Please give them your all! ■

Katy Boulton is TripleC’s Strategy and Operations Lead. With a group of delivery partners, Triple C has led the current phase of AC training. The trainee ACs will undertake a placement on a high-end TV production for up to 12 weeks between April and December 2024. TripleC and ScreenSkills are looking for productions to host these placements.

Hannah Waddingham –
Eurovision Song Contest 2023,
Entertainment Performance

RTS Programme Awards 2024

Hosted by **Tom Allen**, the awards were presented on 26 March at the JW Marriott Grosvenor House, London, in partnership with Cast & Crew





Scam Interceptors,
Daytime Programme

BBC

Arts

Fight the Power: How Hip Hop Changed the World

BBC Studios Specialist Factual Productions for BBC

'The winning programme elevated its subject... it was a thorough exploration delivered with vision and authority.'

Nominees:

► **Becoming Frida Kahlo**, Rogan Scotland for BBC

► **Lewis Capaldi: How I'm Feeling Now**, A Netflix Documentary/BMG Presents in association with Quickfire Films/A Pulse Films Production for Netflix



Rob & Romesh Vs,
Comedy Entertainment

BSkyB



A Kind of Spark,
Children's Programme

Richard Kendal

Breakthrough Award

Lucy Edwards – Japan – The Way I See It – The Travel Show

BBC Current Affairs for BBC

'A refreshing, exciting talent who brings genuine originality and integrity to their work.'

Nominees:

► **Ashley Thomas – Great Expectations**, Hardy, Son & Baker, Scott Free Productions, BBC Studios, FX Network for BBC

► **Hamza Yassin – Hamza: Strictly Birds of Prey**, Silverback Films for BBC



Juice, Comedy Drama

Richard Kendal

Children's Programme

A Kind of Spark

9 Story Media for BBC

'An intriguing thematic hook combined with truly great storytelling.'

Nominees:

► **FYI Investigates: Kids Who Vape**, Fresh Start Media for Sky Kids and Sky News

► **Tabby McTat**, Magic Light Pictures for BBC

Comedy Drama

Juice

Various Artists Limited for BBC

'The programme felt very original, packed with both innovation and imagination.'

Nominees:

► **Big Boys**, Roughcut TV for Channel 4

► **There She Goes**, Merman Television for BBC

Comedy Entertainment

Rob & Romesh Vs

CPL Productions for Sky Max

'Highly entertaining, brilliantly funny – and produced with real care from start to finish.'

Nominees:

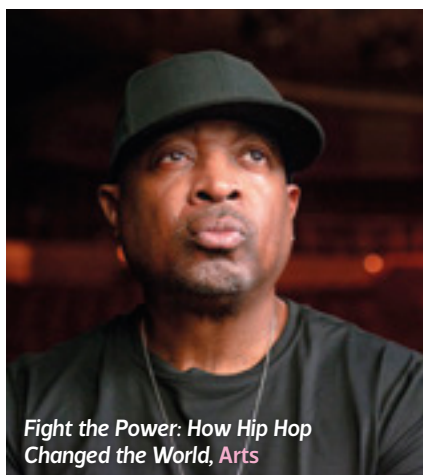
► **Taskmaster**, Avalon for Channel 4

► **The Graham Norton Show**, So Television for BBC



Lucy Edwards – Japan – The Way I See It – The Travel Show, Breakthrough Award

BBC



Fight the Power: How Hip Hop Changed the World, Arts

BBC

Comedy Performance – Female

Gbemisola Ikumelo – *Black Ops*

BBC Studios Comedy Productions and Mondo Deluxe Productions for BBC
‘The range, warmth and timing showed off a pure comic talent.’

Nominees:

- ▶ **Máiréad Tyers** – *Extraordinary*, Sid Gentle Films Ltd for Disney+
- ▶ **Kat Sadler** – *Such Brave Girls*, Various Artists Limited for BBC

Comedy Performance – Male

Hammed Animashaun – *Black Ops*

BBC Studios Comedy Productions and Mondo Deluxe Productions for BBC
‘What a joyous and skillful performance this was.’

Nominees:

- ▶ **Freddie Meredith** – *Such Brave Girls*, Various Artists Limited for BBC
- ▶ **Jon Pointing** – *Big Boys*, Roughcut TV for Channel 4

Daytime Programme

Scam Interceptors

BBC Studios Documentary Unit for BBC
‘Totally gripping throughout and it made a real impact on viewers.’

Nominees:

- ▶ **Good Morning Britain** – **Matt Hancock Interview**, ITV Studios for ITV1
- ▶ **Junior Bake Off**, Love Productions for Channel 4

Documentary Series

Once Upon a Time in Northern Ireland

KEO Films and Walk on Air Films for BBC
‘A gold-standard masterclass in telling a complex story through the words of the people who experienced it.’

Nominees:

- ▶ **Evacuation**, Wonderhood Studios for Channel 4
- ▶ **Kids**, Expectation for Channel 4

Drama Series

Happy Valley

Lookout Point in co-production with AMC for BBC

‘Top of the class; sometimes operatic in scale, but attentive to the tiniest detail.’

Nominees:

- ▶ **The Gold**, Tannadice Pictures, part of Objective Media Group, for BBC and Paramount
- ▶ **Top Boy**, Cowboy Films, Easter Partisan Films, Dream Crew and SpringHill Entertainment for Netflix



Once Upon a Time in Northern Ireland, Documentary Series

BBC



Black Ops – Hammed Animashaun and Gbemisola Ikumelo Comedy Performances

Richard Kendal



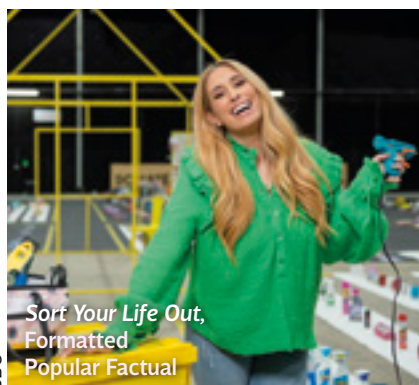
White Nanny, Black Child, History

Richard Kendal



Squid Game: The Challenge, Entertainment

Netflix



Sort Your Life Out, Formatted Popular Factual

BBC



Drama Series, Happy Valley

BBC



RTS Gold Medal Dame Esther Rantzen

‘We can think of no other British broadcaster who has used television more effectively for the greater good than Esther Rantzen.

‘She was television’s original consumer’s champion and its most fearless campaigner. Her shows investigated the darker corners of British society, while – incredibly – celebrating the lighter side of life.

‘She took on vested interests and bureaucracy, politicians and the boss class, con artists and criminals. She positively relished a David vs Goliath fight... her name became a byword for standing up against injustice – “Any more of that, and I’ll get Esther on to you!”, people would say.

‘In her most celebrated campaign, in the mid-1980s, Esther put the issue of child abuse on to the national agenda. It had virtually been a taboo [subject], but Esther’s programmes made it one that society could no longer ignore. From these groundbreaking shows came Childline, Britain’s first national helpline for children in danger or

distress. Childline’s model has now been replicated in 150 countries.

‘Esther started her TV career as a secretarial clerk at the BBC. She became a researcher, a producer and then a presenter. In 1974, Esther became the lead presenter and producer of a new programme, *That’s Life!*, and remained so for the next 21 series. It was the show that made her a household name.

‘*That’s Life!* was a brilliant cocktail of consumer journalism and curiosities about eccentric aspects of everyday life. Arguments with utility companies were followed by items about singing pets; the show unmasked fraudsters trying to rip the public off; and Esther’s famous vox pops were filmed in the streets behind Harrods.

‘Esther also reunited Kindertransport organiser Nicholas Winton on air with some of the many Jewish children, now adults, rescued from Nazi Germany by his brave work.

‘Today, she’s campaigning for the right to an assisted death for people with a terminal illness. By any measure, Esther’s has been a career of huge achievement and impact.’

Outstanding Achievement Award

Stephen Lambert

‘Until about 25 years ago, the idea of a “format” was the domain of entertainment. It was at RDF Media, between 1998 and 2007, that Stephen Lambert reinvented factual television when he took the idea of a format, cast it with ordinary people and built it around a real-life premise.

‘His first was *Faking It* – in the opening episode a well-spoken, cultured man was taught to “fake it” as a rough-around-the-edges Cockney nightclub bouncer, and then a panel of judges gave their verdict. The show became a huge hit and ran for nine series.

‘He followed its success with *Wife Swap*. The format sold to 23 countries – and Stephen was suddenly in the vanguard of exporting British formats to the world. He created *The Secret*



Richard Kendal

Millionaire, which went on to win a Rose D’Or.

‘In 2009, he did it all again. His first show for Studio Lambert, which he set up the year before, was *Undercover Boss*. Then came *Gogglebox*... was this an entertainment show or a factual

piece? It didn’t matter, because it became a smash hit.

‘He cares passionately about the programmes he produces, harbours a deep respect for the audience and loves the industry upon which he’s made such an indelible mark.’

Entertainment

Squid Game: The Challenge

Studio Lambert and The Garden for Netflix
'Immaculately produced, with both incredible scale and flawless attention to detail.'

Nominees:

- ▶ **Michael McIntyre's The Wheel**, Hungry McBear for BBC
- ▶ **Strictly Come Dancing**, BBC Studios Entertainment Productions for BBC

Entertainment Performance

Hannah Waddingham –

Eurovision Song Contest 2023

BBC Studios Entertainment Productions for BBC

'A performance that was witty, warm, funny and with real emotion.'

Nominees:

- ▶ **Noel Fielding and Alison Hammond – The Great British Bake Off**, Love Productions for Channel 4
- ▶ **Rob Beckett and Romesh Ranganathan – Rob & Romesh Vs**, CPL Productions for Sky Max

Formatted Popular Factual

Sort Your Life Out

Optomen Television for BBC

'Authentic, engaging and with effortlessly brilliant storytelling.'

Nominees:

- ▶ **Banged Up**, Shine TV for Channel 4
- ▶ **The Piano**, Love Productions for Channel 4

History

White Nanny, Black Child

Doc Hearts/Tigerlily Productions for Channel 5

'It managed to be both intimate and epic at the same time... a truly revealing watch.'

Nominees:

- ▶ **Britain's Human Zoos**, Red Bicycle with Milk & Honey for Channel 4
- ▶ **The Man Who Played with Fire**, Raw TV for Sky Documentaries

Leading Actor – Female

Tamara Lawrance – Time

BBC Studios Drama Productions for BBC

'A deep, layered performance – and a beautifully calibrated piece of work.'

Nominees:

- ▶ **Jodie Whittaker – Time**, BBC Studios Drama Productions for BBC
- ▶ **Sarah Lancashire – Happy Valley**, Lookout Point in co-production with AMC for BBC



Kane Robinson – *Top Boy*,
Leading Actor – Male

Netflix



Eurovision Song Contest
2023, Live Event and
Hannah Waddingham –
Eurovision Song Contest 2023,
Entertainment Performance

Richard Kendal



Extraordinary,
Scripted Comedy

Disney+



The Sixth Commandment, Limited Series, Sarah Phelps, Writer – Drama, and Éanna Hardwicke, Supporting Actor – Male

Richard Kendal

Leading Actor – Male

Kane Robinson – Top Boy

Cowboy Films, Easter Partisan Films, Dream Crew and SpringHill Entertainment for Netflix
‘A defining performance; captivating, devastating and deeply complex.’

Nominees:

- ▶ **Gary Oldman – Slow Horses**, See-Saw Films in association with Apple for Apple TV+
- ▶ **Timothy Spall – The Sixth Commandment**, Wild Mercury Productions and True Vision for BBC

Limited Series

The Sixth Commandment

Wild Mercury Productions and True Vision for BBC

‘Pitch perfect, with exquisite performances and first-class writing.’

Nominees:

- ▶ **Best Interests**, AC Chapter One for BBC
- ▶ **Boiling Point**, Ascendant Fox and Matriarch Productions with It’s All Made Up Productions for BBC



Tamara Lawrance – Time, Leading Actor Female and Bella Ramsey – Time, Supporting Actor – Female

Richard Kendal

Live Event

Eurovision Song Contest 2023

BBC Studios Entertainment Productions, Windfall Films for BBC

‘A hugely impressive spectacle delivered with great style by an outstanding team.’

Nominees:

- ▶ **The Coronation Concert**, BBC Studios Event Productions for BBC
- ▶ **The Coronation of TM The King and Queen Camilla**, BBC Studios Event Productions for BBC

Presenter

Chris Packham – Inside Our Autistic Minds

BBC Studios Specialist Factual Productions for BBC

‘He brought charisma and directness to this programme and was captivating.’

Nominees:

- ▶ **Rhod Gilbert – Rhod Gilbert: A Pain in the Neck**, Kailash Films and Llanbobl Vision for Channel 4
- ▶ **Stacey Solomon – Sort Your Life Out**, Optomen Television for BBC

Science and the Natural World

Chimp Empire

Keo Films and Underdog Films for Netflix
‘It delivered a totally immersive experience for viewers.’

Nominees:

- ▶ **Inside Our Autistic Minds**, BBC Studios Specialist Factual Productions for BBC
- ▶ **Planet Earth III**, BBC Studios Natural History Unit, BBC America, ZDF, France Télévisions and Open University for BBC



Chimp Empire, Science and the Natural World

Richard Kendal



Chris Packham – Inside Our Autistic Minds, Presenter

Richard Kendal

Scripted Comedy

Extraordinary

Sid Gentle Films Ltd for Disney+
'Confident in tone and heavy on the funny – a thrilling piece of work.'

Nominees:

- ▶ **Black Ops**, BBC Studios Comedy Productions and Mondo Deluxe Productions for BBC
- ▶ **Such Brave Girls**, Various Artists Limited for BBC

Single Documentary

Otto Baxter: Not a F*ing Horror Story**
Story Films; Archface Films for Sky Documentaries

'Bold and distinctive, and told the story with compassion and originality.'

Nominees:

- ▶ **Anorexic**, Proper Content for Channel 5
- ▶ **The Price of Truth**, Oxford Film & Television for Channel 4

Single Drama

Partygate

Halcyons Heart Films for Channel 4
'An affecting piece of drama, brilliantly written and cast... and still with a real sense of raw emotion.'

Nominees:

- ▶ **Consent**, Firebird Pictures for Channel 4
- ▶ **Men Up**, Quay Street Productions, Boom for BBC

Soap and Continuing Drama

EastEnders

BBC Studios Drama Productions for BBC
'A showcase for absorbing storytelling with highly emotional content and beautifully nuanced performances.'

Nominees:

- ▶ **Casualty**, BBC Studios Drama Productions for BBC
- ▶ **Waterloo Road**, Rope Ladder Fiction, Wall to Wall for BBC

Sports Presenter, Commentator or Pundit

Alex Scott – FIFA Women's World Cup
IMG for BBC

'She offers balance, objectivity and truly exceptional expert analysis.'

Nominees:

- ▶ **Gabby Logan – FIFA Women's World Cup**, IMG for BBC
- ▶ **Nasser Hussain – The Ashes**, Sky Sports Cricket

Sports Programme

All Ireland Senior Football Championship Final

BBC Northern Ireland for BBC

'The passion and joy in this clever production poured through the screen.'

Judges' Award

Mr Bates vs the Post Office

'Tonight, we honour a production which brought into our living rooms the biggest miscarriage of justice of our times...the story of the Post Office's flawed Horizon computer system. More than 900 sub-postmasters were held responsible for financial losses they simply did not incur.'

'There were entirely baseless accusations of fraud, false accounting and theft. People were arrested; some postmasters were jailed; some took their own lives. The scandal festered for two decades. Then, over four dark nights in January, a brilliant television drama shone a light on to the human stories of some of the real people caught up in this living nightmare.'

'The audience reaction was huge, the dam bursting on public outrage about the scandal. Just a week after the series aired, the Prime Minister announced new legislation to exonerate wrongly convicted postmasters and speed up compensation.'



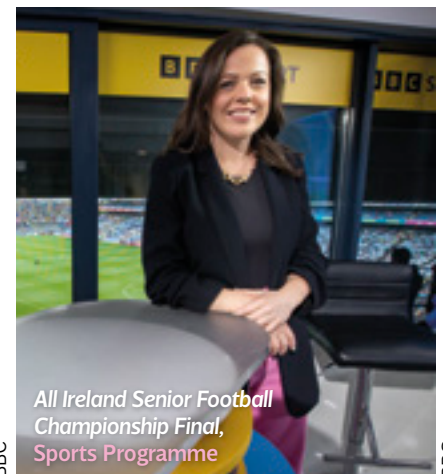
Postmistress
Jo Hamilton

Richard Kendal

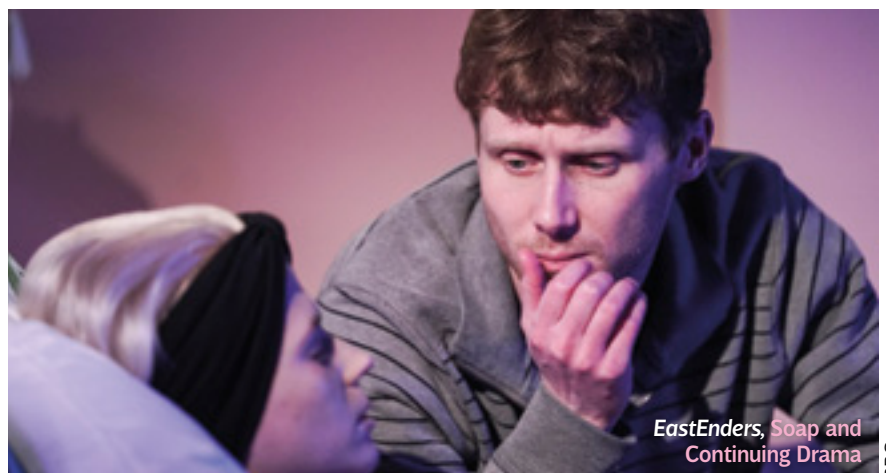
'Mr Bates vs the Post Office was produced by Little Gem and ITV Studios. It took years to research and develop – but in just four hours, this remarkable series reminded us that a great piece of television can not only capture the nation's attention, it can change the national agenda.'



Alex Scott – FIFA Women's
World Cup, Sports Presenter,
Commentator or Pundit



All Ireland Senior Football
Championship Final,
Sports Programme



EastEnders, Soap and
Continuing Drama

BBC



Otto Baxter: *Not a F***ing Horror Story*, Single Documentary

Richard Kendall

Nominees:

- ▶ **2023 Rugby World Cup**, ITV Sport for ITV1 and ITV4
- ▶ **The Ashes**, Sky Sports Cricket

Supporting Actor – Female

Bella Ramsey – *Time*

BBC Studios Drama Productions for BBC
‘The winner brought a searing truth to their performance throughout.’

Nominees:

- ▶ **Jasmine Jobson – *Top Boy***, Cowboy Films, Easter Partisan Films, Dream Crew and SpringHill Entertainment for Netflix
- ▶ **Ronke Adékoluẹjo – *Rain Dogs***, Sid Gentle Films Ltd for BBC

Supporting Actor – Male

Éanna Hardwicke –

The Sixth Commandment

Wild Mercury Productions and True Vision for BBC

‘A performance of compelling control and skill, both mesmerising and subtle.’

Nominees:

- ▶ **Araloyin Oshunremi – *Top Boy***, Cowboy Films, Easter Partisan Films, Dream Crew and SpringHill Entertainment for Netflix
- ▶ **Mark Gatiss – *Nolly***, Quay Street Productions for ITVX



Partygate, Single Drama

Channel 4

Writer – Comedy

Jack Rooke – *Big Boys*

Roughcut TV for Channel 4

‘Comedically daring and life-affirming in its warmth.’

Nominees:

- ▶ **Bridget Christie – *The Change***, Expectation for Channel 4
- ▶ **Joe Tucker, Lloyd Wolf, Gbemisola Ikumelo and Akemnji Ndifornyen – *Black Ops***, BBC Studios Comedy Productions and Mondo Deluxe Productions for BBC



Jack Rooke – *Big Boys*, Writer – Comedy

Channel 4

Writer – Drama

Sarah Phelps – *The Sixth Commandment*

Wild Mercury Productions and True Vision for BBC

‘This piece was sensitive and savage in equal measure... and, while never sensational, it was sometimes almost unbearably difficult to watch.’

Nominees:

- ▶ **Emma Dennis-Edwards – *Consent***, Firebird Pictures for Channel 4
- ▶ **Sally Wainwright – *Happy Valley***, Lookout Point in co-production with AMC for BBC



Watch the full video of the awards at: bit.ly/RTS-prog24

‘None of us could believe it hadn’t been done before,’ recalled Chloe Sarosh, discussing Wildstar Films’ natural history series about female-led societies. As the series producer and writer of *Queens*, she was there from the start.

Five years, 12 countries and more than 1,700 days in the field later, seven engrossing episodes have come to National Geographic and Disney+.

Given the show’s focus on fierce female leaders in the animal kingdom, the creators felt it was only right to have a female-led team behind the show. But this meant working against gender inequalities within the industry.

At a sold-out RTS West of England event in Bristol last month, Sarosh explained: “There is an issue in this industry that, to make films like this, you have to go away for a long time.... If you want a family, that becomes almost impossible, so a lot of female talent ... drops off at a certain point.”

However, the team didn’t let this stand in their way. Sarosh continued: “We had to make... a whole new model... that supported women, allowed it to be possible that you could make a film like this even if you didn’t step into the field.”

Ilaire Mallalieu, producer/director on *Queens*, found that it was a “really lovely collaborative team to be part of and that really kept us all going”.

The team spent a year in pre-production developing stories. While many wildlife series tend to be more sequence-based, *Queens* focuses on the story of one animal species per episode.

“It is a challenge,” said editor Nick Carline. “In some ways it’s harder, because



Queens of the jungle

A bonobo in the Congo jungle

National Geographic

West of England Wildstar assembled a women-led crew for its series on nature’s female leaders. Seraphina Allard-Bridge reports

you’ve got to really, really lock in that audience and make them care about the character – and then hold them for the duration.”

“Every one of the *Queens* episodes is completely different,” said Sarosh, “and we wanted each one thematically to talk about female leadership in a very different way.

“It’s also unapologetically dramatic. It has story at its heart. We wanted it to appeal to a very different audience; perhaps an audience that may not be drawn to natural history in the first place.”

Carline was excited to use contemporary music to draw in this fresh audience: “I think that commercial music just helps you to connect and relate to those characters.... Those big orchestral scores can be

a bit alienating sometimes.”

The RTS audience was treated to a screening of the “Rainforest Queens” episode, which tells the story of a young bonobo in the Congo forest, Zoe, leaving her family to seek out a new home. The team agreed that the bonobos really lent themselves to telling a heartfelt story.

“Luckily, bonobos are just a gift,” said Carline. “They’re so charismatic and like us, and you just relate to them.”

“I love this episode so much,” said Sarosh, “because I... so relate to Zoe going out into the world, and finding her people, and finding her place.... I think we can all relate to that feeling.”

For cinematographer Tania Escobar, filming the bonobos was a special experience: “There are not many

documentaries that have been made about bonobos and that makes this one very, very special. I hope that [this episode] opens the possibilities... for everyone in the world to just know a little bit more about bonobos.”

Kenya-based producer/director Faith Musembi hoped that the series inspires others to pursue their passions.

She said: “I want to get more diverse voices entering this space, because I think we can all agree that we need as many people [as possible] championing conservation in the world right now.” ■

*The screening of *Queens* and the Q&A that followed were hosted by RTS West of England, in association with Wildscreen, at the Bristol Beacon on 12 March.*

The new BBC One drama *This Town* opens with the streets of Birmingham ablaze with violence during the Handsworth riots of 1981, before the action moves to council estates.

But its creator, Steven Knight, wants to make it clear that his working-class tale is not bleak or tragic, but set in a vibrant world full of energy and promise. He even manages to make tower blocks and Spaghetti Junction look beautiful.

Knight made his native Birmingham an exciting place to be in *Peaky Blinders*, and now he celebrates the emerging musical scene of the West Midlands in the early 1980s, which brought us bands such as UB40, The Beat and The Specials.

He told the audience at a red-carpet premiere at Birmingham Town Hall, supported by RTS Midlands, that *This Town* is a project close to his heart. He said: "It's a love letter to Birmingham and Coventry but I hope it tells a universal story with a global reach, about teenagers trying to find their identity and take control of their own destiny.

"It's not bleak, dark and tragic, these are young people who just get on with it."

This Town follows an extended family who live on the council estates of Chelmsley Wood in Birmingham and Hillside in Coventry, featuring four young people whose only way out is through music.

The six-part series, produced with Mercury Studios, has music as its beating heart. Six contemporary artists, including Gregory Porter, Celeste and Self Esteem, each recorded a cover version to play over the end credits, while Kae Tempest and producer Dan



This Town: Jeannie Keefe (Eve Austin) and Dante Williams (Levi Brown)

BBC

Two-tone explosion

RTS Midlands Steven Knight's new BBC drama recreates the vibrant early-80s music scene in the Midlands. **Roz Laws** listens in

Carey wrote the songs performed by the fictional band.

The cast includes Michelle Dockery, Geraldine James, David Dawson and Nicholas Pinnock, plus rising stars Levi Brown, Ben Rose and Eve Austin, as well as Coventry actor Jordan Bolger who played the original Isaiah in *Peaky Blinders*.

Director Paul Whittington said: "One character dreams of being a poet from his council tower, and why not? Steve has written a magical world full of energy and vitality that's an incredibly exciting place to be. Dante is writing love poetry underneath Spaghetti Junction and it's utterly joyous."

Knight agreed: "Chelmsley Wood and Spaghetti Junction really are beautiful. People say, 'Oh what a shame it's so

bad', but it's not like that to those who live there. I wanted to reference working-class life as it's properly lived, not how it's perceived by other people."

The panel at the screening included two of the main young stars, Levi Brown, from Dudley, who plays Dante and Eve Austin, from Nottingham, as Jeannie.

Brown noted: "We don't celebrate our stories as much and I think Midlands stories get put to the side quite often, so it's been nice to grow our artistic identity."

Executive producer Karen Wilson added: "There have not been enough dramas set in the Midlands. It's been brilliant to film here [with new company Kudos Knight] and to get a pipeline of new productions coming out of

here, finding writers, stories and talent from the region.

"People have got bored of content made in and about London and Manchester. The audience really enjoys watching themselves back and we haven't seen enough of that in the Midlands."

Knight ended the event with some advice for would-be writers by quoting Leonard Cohen: "He said: 'All you need to be a writer is arrogance and inexperience'. You have to believe you can do it and then not realise that you are doing the wrong thing." ■

The *This Town* premiere, a BBC production supported by RTS Midlands, was held at Birmingham Town Hall on 19 March. The series is on BBC One on Sunday nights and on iPlayer.

The nation's favourite TV husband and wife, Ricky Tomlinson and Sue Johnston, are roadtripping their way round Britain in their new show for More4, revisiting places that shaped them as performers and people.

Ricky, Sue & a Trip or Two is a celebration of their 40 years as an on-screen married couple, first as *Brookside's* Sheila and Bobby Grant, then as Jim and Barbara in *The Royle Family*, and the lasting bond it has created between them.

Episode 2, which is based around the Midlands, was shown at an RTS Midlands screening at the Midlands Arts Centre (MAC), followed by a Q&A with the two stars.

Jazz Gowans, Creative Director at Nine Lives Media, who was behind the show, revealed how it came together: "We'd been working with the brilliant Colin McKeown [co-creator of *Brookside*] and his team at LA Productions, trying to find the right project. They rang up and said Ricky and Sue might be available at the same time. We were jumping up and down and pinching ourselves.

"The idea for what they'd do was collaborative. It was very much driven by what they felt was real and authentic."

Tomlinson said they knew that this very personal travelogue would work. "The chemistry between us was just natural. We have a lot in common – we're both fanatical Liverpool supporters. And we have a good laugh. We're lucky at our age [Tomlinson is 84 and Johnston is 80] still to be working and having a laugh and a joke."

The first episode in the three-part series focuses on Liverpool, the city they're most closely associated with, but the second reveals some surprising, and emotional, connections to the Midlands.

Many of their guides to

A right Royle road trip

RTS Midlands

Sue Johnston and Ricky Tomlinson are travelling the country for a new More4 series. **Alison Jones** reports



Ricky, Sue & a Trip or Two

Channel 4

Birmingham were in the audience at the MAC, including comedian Shazia Mirza, who tried to persuade plain-food-loving Tomlinson of the delights of curry with a meal at the Michelin-starred Opheem, and local historian Professor Carl Chinn, who navigated a trip on the canal.

Director Debbie Isitt, whom Tomlinson worked with on the film *Nativity!*, was also there, and a community group who were out rowing on the canal when they saw the *Royle* pair go by, and lost an oar in surprise.

There were tears amid the laughter, as Tomlinson recalled his time in Shrewsbury Prison, after being jailed for his activities as a trade union picket during the national building workers' strike in 1972. He and construction worker Des Warren

were known as the Shrewsbury Two as people protested at their unfair imprisonment – including Johnston.

"We did our time, but we wouldn't wear clothes and we wouldn't work because we shouldn't have been there," recalls Tomlinson. "It killed Dessie; they were giving him the liquid cosh [a cocktail of tranquillisers] and needle. I went on hunger strike for 31 days and was so ill they moved me to the prison hospital.

"One of the last times I saw Dessie before he died – he'd been hard as nails – he was just a crease in a sheet lying on a mattress."

Johnston recalled the groundbreaking work she did as an actress with Theatre-in-Education at Coventry's Belgrade Theatre: "It was wonderful. It opened

up children's lives and minds. Teachers told us they had never seen their pupils react that way.

"When I did *Brookside*, the young make-up assistant remembered us going into her school when she was 11, and it affected her. We did things that mattered, they meant something."

Johnston said she was proud they had shown off the often underappreciated beauty of Birmingham in the episode, though, in typical Jim Royle style, Tomlinson said he wouldn't be back for another curry: "No thanks, my arse still hasn't recovered." ■

The screening and panel, hosted by Nikki Tapper of BBC Radio WM, was an RTS Midlands event held at the Midlands Arts Centre on 20 March. It was produced by Jayne Rae.

Dublin comedy drama *The Dry* made a welcome return to ITVX last month, reuniting viewers with the Sheridans, a family so messed up that they are a bigger threat to daughter Shiv's sobriety than the booze.

Writer and creator Nancy Harris told the RTS that *The Dry* was "never a show just about addiction; it was about how somebody lives within their family".

Series 1, Harris said, left the Sheridans in a "bitter-sweet place". Shiv (Roisin Gallagher) had "fallen off the wagon quite spectacularly". Her family rallied around and took her to AA, where her mother, Bernie (Pom Boyd), realising she too had a problem, joined her. "We are left with this little moment of hope between [Shiv] and her mother who she's had this long and fractious relationship with."

Series 2 starts seven months later, with Shiv sober but fragile. The Sheridans, though, remain entirely dysfunctional. The original cast, which includes Ciarán Hinds as Shiv's father, Tom, Siobhán Cullen (her sister, Caroline) and Adam Richardson (brother Ant), is joined by Bernie's boyfriend, Finbar (Michael McElhatton), an awful ex-sociology professor, and Alex (Sam Keeley), Shiv's new love interest.

Gallagher said she "was so thrilled when I knew there was going to be a second series. I just wasn't ready to let Shiv go. I felt like there was so much more story to tell."

Shiv is a great role: lovable, funny, vulnerable, but capable of making terrible decisions. Gallagher added: "If she was a person sitting beside me, sometimes I'd want to hug her, sometimes I'd want to hit her and sometimes I'd want to give her a good kick up the arse."

Harris, a successful Irish playwright, wrote *The Dry* from experience: "I grew up around



The Dry's Sheridan family (left to right): Caroline, Bernie, Shiv, Tom and Ant

ITVX

Dublin dysfunction

National Event

Matthew Bell hears how a second helping of the glorious comedy drama *The Dry* made it to the screen

a lot of people in recovery and then had a number of relationships with people in active addiction in later life.

"I learnt very quickly that alcoholism and addiction are all around us... In Ireland, one of the reviewers said, 'Well, she doesn't look like an alcoholic', which got all of us enraged because that was the point of the show – we don't know what an alcoholic looks like.

"It's such a complex subject: there's no one right way of getting sober; there's no one way an addict is... and there's no one way of being affected by being a child or partner of an alcoholic – everybody is different. I felt this would be a really interesting way to look at a family and explore its dynamics."

Harris approached Element Pictures, makers of *Normal People*, and Irish broadcaster RTÉ came on board. But Element needed to attract a UK

broadcaster to fund the series.

"We were faced with a lot of conversations [that went], 'I have a messy thirtysomething show already' or 'We've got an Irish show', recalled Element executive producer Emma Norton. "There were a lot of knockbacks but the scripts were really funny. I'd worked on a lot of very serious things and I didn't want to lose the funny one."

Eventually, BritBox signed up and the first series dropped on the streamer in May 2022, with RTÉ One screening it in 2023 and ITV1 earlier this year. The 8 x 30-minute series 2 was commissioned by RTÉ and ITVX.

Paddy Breathnach, whom Norton worked with on the Roddy Doyle-scripted film about homelessness, *Rosie*, has directed both series of *The Dry*.

The duo cast series 1 of *The Dry* during the pandemic. "It allowed us to watch a lot of

tapes, then go through recalls on Zoom... and get into chemistry testing. It was intensive but revealing," recalled Norton.

Breathnach likes to take time over casting: "[Deciding] who you're casting makes the character come alive... you get to know the scripts and characters... By the time you come to shoot the thing, you've ingested a lot of it and also the voices of the other core creatives involved. It unifies the vision."

That vision is of a series that moves from the darkest of places to broad comedy and back again in a flash. It works because the writing, direction and acting are superlative – it's addictive, in all the right ways. ■

'The Dry: series 2 Q&A' was held on 14 March, hosted by Rachael Sigee and produced by Molly Diver from Premier. It can be watched at bit.ly/RTS-Dry.

CBBC drama grabs double

Long-running CBBC drama *The Dumping Ground* won the prestigious Centre Award for its contribution to jobs and opportunities in the region's screen sector at the RTS North East and the Border Awards in late February.

The children's show, which made its debut in 2013 and is made by BBC Studios Kids & Family, is set in a care home and has been filmed across the North East. The series is a continuation of the CBBC drama *Tracy Beaker Returns*, which was based on the novels of Jacqueline Wilson.

The Dumping Ground received a second prize when Ruben Reuter, who plays Finn McLaine, took home the award for his performance in a Drama.

The citation for *The Dumping Ground* read: "The show, now into its 11th season, has



Award winner Ruben Reuter in *The Dumping Ground*

BBC

explored the roots of his fragile mental health. The programme received the Broadcast Factual prize.

Dragonfly's long-running BBC One series *Ambulance* won the Factual Entertainment award.

In the news categories, ITV Tyne Tees won the News Programme prize, with two of its journalists also gaining awards: Katie Cole accepted the Journalism prize and Molly Sharples took home the Newcomer award.

The Craft Award went to make-up designer Michael Birtley, whose television credits include *Inspector George Gently*, *Vera* and *The Dumping Ground*.

Former BBC engineering boss Garth Jeffery, who has been the technical director of the North East and the Border Awards since they were launched more than 30 years ago, was presented with the Outstanding Contribution award.

In the student categories, the awards were shared around the region's colleges and universities.

More than 400 industry guests filled the Hilton in Gateshead at a ceremony hosted by the comedian and producer Jason Cook. Guests included the star of locally made ITV drama *Vera*, Brenda Blethyn.

"The awards are a brilliant showcase for the achievements and talent of programme-makers working here in this part of the UK," said RTS North East and the Border Chair Joanna Makepeace-Woods.

"Production activity has increased by nearly a third, year on year, and there are signs the BBC's commitment to the region is bringing in other players."

The principal sponsors of the RTS North East and the Border Awards were production company Fulwell 73 and events specialists Sparq Live.

RTS NE & Border Matthew Bell reports on the centre's awards in Gateshead

provided a springboard for the careers of hundreds of actors, writers, crew, producers and directors. And it has won plaudits and prizes for the way it has tackled the often difficult social issues facing young people, with

storylines including mental health, racism, family break-up and LGBT parenting."

Other winners on the night included the BBC One series *James Arthur: Out of Our Minds*, made by Summer Films, in which the singer-songwriter

RTS North East and the Border Television Awards winners

Outstanding Contribution - Garth Jeffery

Centre Award - *The Dumping Ground* - BBC Studios Kids & Family for CBBC

Craft Award - Michael Birtley

Drama - *Lore* - Sea & Sky Pictures

Drama Performance - Ruben Reuter, *The Dumping Ground* - BBC Studios Kids & Family for CBBC

Comedy - *Where It Ends* - Tiger Aspect for BBC iPlayer

Factual Entertainment - *Ambulance* - Dragonfly Film + TV for BBC One

Broadcast Factual Production - *James Arthur: Out of Our Minds* - Summer Films for BBC One

Non-broadcast Factual Production - *Tish* - Freya Films, Hopscotch Films and Velvet Joy Productions

Children's - *Cooking with the Gills* - MCC Media for Channel 5

News Programme - *ITV News Tyne Tees*

Sport - *Great North Run* - FilmNova for BBC Sport

Journalism - Presentation - Katie Cole, *ITV Tyne Tees*

Newcomer - Molly Sharples, *ITV Tyne Tees*

Short Form - *Waving at Trucks* - BBC North East & Cumbria

Commercial - *Home to Hospital* - Future and Co Films

Professional Excellence: Cinematography - Kyle Heslop, *The Dawdler*

Professional Excellence: Post-production - Stephen Hedley

Student Awards: Animation - *Dream* - Teesside University

Student Awards: Drama - *Swine* - Northumbria University

Student Awards: Entertainment and Comedy Drama - *CoWbOys & COntemPlaTioN - A Fever Dream* - Gateshead College

Student Awards: Saving the Planet - Pine Marten - University of Cumbria

Student Awards: Factual Short - *The Milky Way* - Newcastle University

Dublin gangster drama *Kin* was honoured at the RTS Ireland Awards, with the RTÉ series winning the Scripted award for its second season.

Katja Mia, who presents *The Six O'Clock Show* and *Uprising* on Virgin Media Television, received the Breakthrough Talent award. Mia recently won the hearts of the nation as a contestant on RTÉ's *Dancing with the Stars*.

She said: "It means the absolute world to me to have my achievements recognised by RTS Ireland and the industry. This is just the beginning for me, and I'm so excited for what's next."

The Entertainment award went to Virgin Media Television's breakfast show, *Ireland AM*, whose AI special featured a script that was AI-composed.

The News Coverage prize was won by *Dublin Riots: A Day That Shook the Nation*, the Sky News report on last November's shocking disturbances, while the Current Affairs award went to RTÉ Investigates for its report *Milking It: Dairy's Dirty Secret*, an exposé of the mistreatment of livestock.

The 11 winners, announced at a ceremony hosted by Dermot Whelan at Dublin's



Kin: the terrifying Bren Kinsella played by Francis Magee

RTÉ

Kin wins Scripted prize

Republic of Ireland Matthew Bell reports on the centre's Ireland Awards, Gradaim, and Student Awards, both held in Dublin

Liberty Hall Theatre in March, were spread across RTÉ, Virgin Media, Sky Ireland and TG4. RTS Republic of Ireland

Chair Agnes Cogan said: "This year's winners exemplify the exceptional calibre of Irish television content..."

We are a small but flourishing island, and I couldn't be prouder of the outstanding programming we produce."

RTS Republic of Ireland Television Awards winners

Animation and Children's - *JourneyCam International* - Dyehouse Films for RTÉ
Breakthrough Talent - *Katja Mia*
Entertainment - *Ireland AM, AI Special* - Virgin Media Television
Factual Entertainment - *Secrets from*

the Dancefloor - RTÉ Documentary Unit for RTÉ

Factual Series - *Six Silent Killings: Ireland's Vanishing Triangle* - Five Mile Films for Sky

Factual Single - *Taking Back Control* - Fine Point Films for RTÉ

Specialist Factual - *Ireland's Wild Islands* - Crossing The Line Productions for RTÉ

News Coverage - *Dublin Riots: A Day that Shook the Nation* - Sky News for Sky

Current Affairs - *RTÉ Investigates, Milking It: Dairy's Dirty Secret* - RTÉ Investigations Unit for RTÉ

Scripted - *Kin, season 2* - Metropolitan Films International Ltd for RTÉ

Sport - *Misneach: Alex Lee* - Midas Productions for TG4

With Love from Aidan tops awards

The National Film School at IADT dominated the RTS Republic of Ireland Student Awards in late February on the iconic *The Late Late Show* stage at RTÉ in Dublin.

With Love from Aidan won four awards for the National Film School: Best Drama, and Craft Awards in Camerawork,

Editing and Production Design. The National Film School also took home the Factual – Short-form prize for *Simone James Documentary*, and the Craft Awards for Sound (*The Lesser Part*) and Writing (*How to Skin a Cheetah*).

The Animation prize went to Ballyfermot College of Further Education for *Tooth Be Told*; Comedy and Entertainment to Technological University Dublin – City Campus (*Robbie Rents a Room*).

"The 2024 Student Awards showcased an exceptionally high level of talent and promise – the judges were

RTS Republic of Ireland Student Television Awards winners

Animation - *Tooth Be Told* - Ballyfermot College of Further Education

Drama - *With Love from Aidan* - National Film School at IADT

Comedy and Entertainment - *Robbie Rents a Room* - Technological University Dublin City Campus

Factual - *Short-form-Simone James Documentary* - National Film School, IADT

Craft Skills - *Camerawork* - *With Love*

from Aidan - Eamonn MacMahon, National Film School at IADT

Craft Skills: Editing - *With Love from Aidan* - Caoimhe Gallagher Lawson, National Film School at IADT

Craft Skills: Production Design - *With Love from Aidan* - Ciara Kelly, National Film School at IADT

Craft Skills: Sound - *The Lesser Part* - Kane Fannie, Cian Fagan and Song Du, National Film School at IADT

Craft Skills: Writing - *How to Skin a Cheetah* - Thomas Purdy and Meghan O'Shaughnessy, National Film School at IADT

blown away by this year's entries," said RTS Republic of Ireland Chair Agnes Cogan.

The awards were presented by Sinéad Crowley, Director of Media Development at

media regulator Coimisiún na Meán; producer Bill Malone; Anthony Nilan, Virgin Media Television Head of Content Strategy; and RTÉ Director-General Kevin Bakhurst.

Simon Dewhurst



Kate Is Sad prize-winning team

RTS Yorkshire Student Television Awards winners

- Animation** - *The Princess and the Dragon* - Annie Nicholson and Daniel Simms, Leeds Arts University
- Drama** - *Worry-Fear-Unease* - *The Triptych* - Cameron Haggie, Agrippina Mescherakova and Callum Auckland, Northern Film School, Leeds Beckett University
- Entertainment and Comedy Drama** - *Kate Is Sad* - Elliot Foster, Annie Foulkes and Andrei Stanescu, Northern Film School, Leeds Beckett University
- Factual** - *Beyond Borders: Mo's Story* - Oliver Burke, Searus Aynsley and Max Clibbon, Sheffield Hallam University
- Journalism** - *Women Who Weightlift: Raising the Bar for Gender Equality* - Evie Samman, University of Leeds
- Craft Skills: Cinematography** - *Shark Mindset* - Christopher Scattergood, Sheffield Hallam University
- Strangers** - Elian Beaumont, Leeds Trinity University
- Three To Hide** - Tom Morrison, University of York
- Craft Skills: Editing** - *The Final Cut* - Austin Jones, University of York
- The Impossibility of Happiness** - Beth Cameron, York St John University
- Craft Skills: Production Design** - *The Collector* - Timm Cleasby, Sheffield Hallam University
- Inked In** - Marta Bjork Atladottir, Leeds Arts University
- Sandwich Suspicions** - Antonia Walsh, Sheffield Hallam University
- Sherst** - Louis Veevers, Sheffield Hallam University
- Voyage** - Hope Hewart and Vivienne Percival, Leeds Arts University
- Craft Skills: Writing** - *Kate Is Sad* - Annie Foulkes, Northern Film School, Leeds Beckett University
- Planets Aligned** - Liv Berry, Sheffield Hallam University

Kate Is Sad wins in York

RTS Yorkshire *Kate Is Sad*, made by students from the Northern Film School, picked up two prizes at the RTS Yorkshire Student Television Awards, which were held for the first time at York St John University in

early March. Elliot Foster, Annie Foulkes and Andrei Stanescu won the Entertainment and Comedy Drama award, with Foulkes also recognised in the Craft Skills: Writing category. The judges praised *Kate Is Sad* for its

“great script and cracking performances”.

Northern Film School students also took home the Drama award with *Worry-Fear-Unease*. *The Triptych*, which the judges called “cinematic, with great art direction,

strong performances and an ambitious story structure”.

RTS Yorkshire Chair Michael Donnelly said: “Celebrating the next generation of film-makers is some of the most exciting and important work of the RTS. The pieces this year have shown exemplary skill and proficiency; the judges have been blown away.”

Matthew Bell

University of Plymouth hits home hat-trick

Devon & Cornwall The University of Plymouth picked up three of the main prizes at the RTS Devon and Cornwall Student Television Awards at the Barbican Theatre, Plymouth, in March. A record 27 entries were received from six universities and colleges in the region.

The Factual: Short Form award went to Tom Box’s *Dancing Minds*, which the judges admired for its “contemporary visual style.... We really got to know the young people and their concerns.”

DISC by Kian Radford and Olin Quigley Daly won the Journalism award. The judges were moved by the “heart-

breaking sound bites” from contributors, which revealed a little-seen view of the picturesque town of Newquay.

The Potential of Crab Aquaculture – “a well-constructed [film] with a very clear narrative, showcased with beautiful cinematic imagery” – took home the Saving the Planet prize for a team of University of Plymouth students.

Falmouth University students won the Animation (*Scenes of the Absurd*) and Drama (*Tipsy Sugar Flipping*) awards; the Entertainment and Comedy Drama prize went to Arts University Plymouth for *More Than Friends*.

Matthew Bell



Saving the Planet award winners

Constance Flynn

RTS Devon and Cornwall Student Television Awards winners

- Animation** - *Scenes of the Absurd* - Sophie Dique, Talia Sellers, Kirsten Reed and team, Falmouth University
- Drama** - *Tipsy Sugar Flipping* - Amber Clarke-McGrath, Falmouth University
- Entertainment and Comedy Drama** - *More Than Friends* - Sam Evans, Willow Whatley, Nathan Brennan, Alexander Austin and Libby Ward, Arts University Plymouth
- Factual: Short Form** - *Dancing Minds* - Tom Box, University of Plymouth
- Journalism** - *DISC* - Kian Radford and Olin Quigley Daly, University of Plymouth
- Saving the Planet** - *The Potential of Crab Aquaculture* - Finley Lake, Yulia Weir, Simona Pedrali Noy, Reuben Davy, Mallika Dawar and Tripti Shukla, University of Plymouth
- Craft Skills: Camera** - *Exodus* - Elliot Barry, University of Plymouth
- Craft Skills: Editing** - *The Hills of Cornwall* - Finn Venn, Falmouth University
- Craft Skills: Production Design** - *Scenes of the Absurd* - Sophie Dique and Talia Sellers, Falmouth University
- Craft Skills: Sound** - *Malus* - Jacob Dodson, Falmouth University
- Craft Skills: Writing** - *The Ivory Wife* - Ella Thrasher, Falmouth University

UWE enjoys night in Bristol



Entertainment and Comedy Drama award winners

Justin Yockney

RTS West of England

Students from the University of the West of England took home four of the six main prizes from the RTS West of England Student Television Awards. The Animation award went to Michael Blake's film *Doggerland*, which the judges said "was a highly original story, which really stood out with real craft and emotion". *Skive* won the Drama award as a film that was "compelling" and "brilliantly acted".

The Entertainment and Comedy Drama category went to the "hilarious" and "sophisticated" *Shmelvis*, while *Forgotten Fibre* took home the Saving the Planet prize.

Dragons, from Bath Spa University, won the Factual: Short-form prize for a film that was "heart-warming" and "powerful", while the "informative" *I'll Just Have Cats*

from the University of Gloucestershire was awarded the Journalism prize.

Mo Jannah, a life coach, TV presenter and producer, gave the keynote speech at the ceremony at Bristol's Water-

shed cinema in early March.

"Undoubtedly our strongest year yet, with some outstanding work from across the region and a full house to celebrate the successes of the newest talents

in the West Country. The range of subjects, access and innovative ways of telling great stories really impressed the judges," said RTS West of England Chair Lynn Barlow.

Matthew Bell

RTS West of England Student Television Awards winners

Animation - *Doggerland* - Michael Blake, University of the West of England (UWE)

Drama - *Skive* - Corinna Elleschild, Ellis Cate, Louis Barron-Forde, Charlie Guy-Wilson, Electra Zaloni, Tommy Hepp, Eve Morris, Andy Langley and Nick Curtis-Purnell, UWE

Entertainment and Comedy Drama - *Shmelvis* - Bella Considine, Amy Smith, Fin Bromham, Emily Cavell Griffiths, Pierre Antoine-Penichon and Niall Power, UWE

Factual: Short-form - *Dragons* - Tyrese Shipp, Sophie Taylor, Harry Orr and Alex Chiles, Bath Spa University

Journalism - *I'll Just Have Cats* - Kay Proctor, Katie Stacey, Megan Davies, Will Chapple and Morris Haynes, University of Gloucestershire

Saving the Planet - *Forgotten Fibre* - Tristan Patrick Sherfield, Alex Stevenson, Maurice A Wren, Robert Loud, Damien Fowler and Greg Holden, UWE

Craft Skills - Animation:
- **Sound, Writing, Editing, Directing - *Doggerland*** - Michael Blake

- **Sound - *Pest*** - Jack Woodman

Craft Skills - Drama:

- **Acting - *Inception of Silence***

- **Cinematography - *Skive*** - Charlie Guy-Wilson - ***Einstein's Brain*** - Ben Murphy - ***Coconut*** - Max Roberts

- **Directing - *Skive*** - Corinna Elleschild

- **Production Design - *Inside My Tux Shop*** - Rowan Hales - ***Einstein's Brain*** - Christopher Lewin and Myla Morris - ***Inception of Silence***

- **Writing - *Skive*** - Corinna Elleschild - ***Coconut*** - Roshan Balu

Craft Skills - Entertainment and Comedy Drama:

- **Camerawork - *Shroom Omelette*** - Zak Jespersen

- **Editing - *Shmelvis*** - Niall Power

- **Producing - *Shmelvis*** - Amy Smith

- **Production Design - *Shroom Omelette*** - Tom Beavis, Katie Brown, Arlo Bebbington-Wood and Ben Meehan

- **Writing - *Shmelvis*** - Bella Considine - ***The Bristol Crocodile*** - Lucy Rowe and Teddy Smith

Craft Skills - Factual - Short-form:

- **Camerawork - *Dragons*** - Tyrese Shipp, Harry Orr and Alex Chiles - ***Long Live the Kings*** - Olivia Merrick

- **Editing - *Wicked and Bad*** - Aaron Botelho and Toni Lotta Groner - ***Long Live the Kings*** - Austin Pickles

- **Producing - *Dragons*** - Sophie Taylor - ***Long Live the Kings*** - Robert Allen

- **Sound - *Dragons*** - Sophie Taylor

- **Writing - *Killing Bugs*** - Jack Lee Pitchford

Craft Skills - Journalism:

- **Editing - *The Suicide Headache*** - Suleman Aqeel and Leon Lock

- **Producing - *I'll Just Have Cats*** - Katie Stacey - ***Angle News Final News Day*** - Aoife Harkin

- **Production Design and Writing - *I'll Just Have Cats*** - Kay Proctor

- **Sound - *The Suicide Headache*** - Tom Foster

Craft Skills - Saving the Planet:

- **Camerawork - *Forgotten Fibre*** - Alex Stevenson

- **Directing and Producing - *Forgotten Fibre*** - Tristan Patrick Sherfield

- **Grading - *Forgotten Fibre*** - Robert Loud

- **Sound - *Forgotten Fibre*** - Maurice A Wren

Awards shared around the East of England region

RTS East

The prizes at the RTS East Student Awards were shared around the region's colleges and universities.

At the March awards ceremony, held at the Old Divinity School, St John's College, Cambridge, the main Drama,

Animation and Factual prizes were awarded to students from Anglia Ruskin University, Norwich University of the Arts and the University of Hertfordshire, respectively.

Two films picked up two awards each: *Eternity's Grace* (Drama and Camerawork),

RTS East Student Television Awards winners

Animation - *The Curse of Dracular* - Jack Paterson, Norwich University of the Arts

Drama - *Eternity's Grace* - Yegor Chmilevsky, Guilherme Pires, George Cocea, Christopher Buckenham, Alex Sole-Leris, Finnan Balfour-Mckie, Nirelain Kayernbe, Emily Miles, Arianna Bruno and Alessia Mavakala, Anglia Ruskin University

Factual: Short-film - *This Able Man*

Raphael Arp Rodrigues, Minh Thuan Le, Francesco Di Ilio and Irene D'Alea, University of Hertfordshire

Craft Skills: Camerawork - *Eternity's Grace* - George Cocea and Christopher Buckenham, Anglia Ruskin University

Craft Skills: Editing - *Editing: Hip Hop in Norwich* - Jack Bernardin, City College Norwich

Craft Skills: Production Design - *The Curse of Dracular* - Jack Paterson, Norwich University of the Arts

which was praised by the judges as a "brilliantly executed and skilfully acted piece" and *The Curse of Dracular* (Animation and Production

Design), "heart-warming and effective; the animation was full of character and most skilful - a lovely idea".

Matthew Bell

Get three takeaways from each discussion. Set yourself three skills to develop. Make three meaningful contacts.” This advice came from host Beth Hewitt, welcoming students to RTS North West’s Student Networking Day.

First up was a panel discussion, “Hidden roles in TV production”. Katie Bayman, with “one of the coolest jobs in TV”, according to session chair Lyndon Saunders, is a virtual studio developer.

Bayman uses software programmes to build 3D models. CBS gameshow *Lingo* “flies its contestants, hosts and producers here [from the US] and films it with us,” she said. “We can save productions £30,000, because you don’t build physical sets.”

This interested development executive Ben Armstrong, who described development people as “the superheroes of the industry”, though “not often credited on the end roll”. He added: “Having a diverse team is important – it unlocks different worlds, [providing] a melting pot of ideas.”

Screen Manchester crew and facilities manager Elli Metcalfe forecast that “it is going to get busier”, and listed current skills shortages such as “grading, audio, electrical roles and stand-by props,



RTS North West's Networking Day

ER Event Photography

North West Carole Solazzo reports from Salford where students learnt about working in TV from some of the industry’s top talent

plus roles in co-ordination, from line producers to production co-ordinators”.

In “Anatomy of a show”, chaired by producer/director Leasha Waddingham, the panel looked at factual shows, from idea to transmission.

Development producer Zena Oliani explained that

“ideas come from briefs on websites, from our relationships with commissioners or from where we think the gaps in schedules are”.

However, once an idea was greenlit, “we don’t go straight into production”, CEO of Workerbee Rick Murray said. “If it’s an access documentary, whether to an institution or a person, we have to agree that contract first, then the contract with the broadcaster.” Often, that is Netflix or Amazon, “which take a ‘traditionally American’ approach.... Every hire we make, they want to be across”, he said.

“A love letter to the NHS and the human spirit” was series producer Colin Stone’s description of Channel 4’s *24 Hours in A&E*. Stone plays “a role in pre-production, creating relationships. A&E is a sensitive space, where people don’t expect cameras.

Then we go into production, getting the raw footage with 120 cameras across the department”.

He continued: “In post-production we take all that footage, combine it with interviews with staff and patients, and, over nine weeks, turn it into an episode.”

Further panel talks covered soft skills and networking tips. The students also had an opportunity to network with professionals, followed by workshops on topics such as the virtual studio and BBC Sport.

The RTS North West Student Awards were held later the same day. ■

The networking event was held on 20 March at Dock10 Studios MediaCity UK by RTS North West in association with Beautiful Productions and the University of Salford, supported by Dock10.

RTS North West Student Television Awards winners

Animation-Sketchbook-James Watt, Nyah Deamer, Marta Smielewski and Steven Watt, Manchester Metropolitan University

Drama-Pink Carnations and Purple Hyacinths-Adam Cowell, Tom Walters, Colin Lewin, Luke Hearne-Brown and team, University of Salford

Entertainment and Comedy Drama-Lulu’s Zoo-Sarah Baker, University of Salford

Factual-Long-form-Floss’ Farm-Emma Jane Preston, University of Central Lancashire

Factual-Short-form-Operation Babylift: The Stunt that Saved Lives-Samuel Taylor, University of Salford

Journalism-Screen Time-Sophie Rumsby, University of Salford

■ Craft Skills Awards

Animation: Director-Squab-Olivia Timms, Manchester Metropolitan University

Drama: Director-Pause-Ben Robertson, University of Salford

Drama: Screenwriter-Love, Death & Lime Dresses-Ryan Johnson, University of Salford

Entertainment and Comedy Drama: Director-Get The Matches-Alexander Silvester, Manchester Film School – UCEN

Factual: Long-form – Director-Floss’ Farm-Emma Jane Preston, University of Central Lancashire

Factual: Short-form – Director-Operation Babylift: The Stunt that Saved Lives-Samuel Taylor, University of Salford

Journalism: Director-Screen Time-Sophie Rumsby, University of Salford

Anyone who has questioned the importance and relevance of regional news will have been conclusively set straight by presenter Amy Garcia.

The anchor of BBC Yorkshire's flagship news show celebrated 10 years at *Look North* by speaking about her life and job to media and communications students at the University of Leeds.

"I started in kids' TV at the age of 19, presenting CITV programme *S Club TV*," she recalled. "That was my first experience in live TV, interviewing the big bands of the early noughties, like Atomic Kitten and Busted."

From there she graduated to presenting travel and lifestyle programmes, but her passion was journalism. "At the age of 27, I signed up for an MA in TV journalism at Goldsmiths in London," she said.

After qualifying, she applied for breakfast presenter cover at *Look North*. "I didn't get the job but was offered a junior role to learn the ropes... I felt I had to prove myself – I was working with journalists from newspapers and radio, so I worked twice as hard."

Within weeks she was "given opportunities to go out and report, and was soon trained up to read shorter bulletins". She ended: "The rest is history!"

One of Garcia's first challenges as co-anchor, alongside the late broadcaster and "Yorkshire institution" Harry Gration, was "riding the Yorkshire stage of the Tour de France on a tandem. We had no idea how it would go down," she admitted. "But we had rows upon rows of people lining the streets, ringing cow bells, cheering us on."

Garcia described this as "what regional news is all about. That real sense of community... giving viewers a voice, something to celebrate



A decade at Look North

RTS Yorkshire Carole Solazzo hears Amy Garcia discuss a career that has taken her from kids' TV to anchoring regional news

where they're from... telling the stories that matter."

Because of this approach, Garcia asserted: "There's still a huge role for regional in the news agenda. A lot of the time, the national news outlets very much rely on us....

We've got the contacts. People are more comfortable telling their stories to us."

Garcia has reported on tragedies such as the Huddersfield grooming scandal and murdered Yorkshire toddler Star Hobson. "You hear the real grim details that you can't tell people on screen," she said, adding that the team was offered counselling by the BBC. "Any story [of this kind], particularly involving children, we all struggle with."

What has changed during Garcia's 10-year tenure, however, is the way news stories are uncovered and reported, and the technology and skills she uses to bring them to air.

Priorities now are "deliver to online first, then television, then radio," she said.

"And last week our top story was filmed on a mobile phone. It's called MoJo [mobile journalism] – using a mobile with a better microphone [and other kit] attached."

Discussing opportunities for young entrants, she said: "We have a young 'techie' team and a dedicated social media team. We need young people to watch the programme, therefore we need

young people to tell the stories they identify with."

Things have changed for women at different life stages, too. "When I started at *Look North* there were no part-time presenters," she said. "But when my son was born, I managed to go down to four days one week and three the next. That was quite new."

"Now I see women on screen getting older, as I'm getting older," she continued. "Women on screen talking about menopause and the ageing process has broken down so many barriers."

"Will I still be here when I'm 70, like Harry?" she joked. "I hope I'll be doing it as long as I want to, as long as I feel fresh and can still give something back" ■

The RTS Yorkshire/BBC Yorkshire event on 13 March was chaired by BBC Look North correspondent Emma Glasbey at the University of Leeds, and produced by Jane Hall.

TV's sound experts offer live music lesson

RTS Technology

From Glastonbury to Glyndebourne, putting live music on television is challenging. TV doesn't lend itself naturally to music events – it always looks great but getting the audio right can be hard work.

Last month, the University of Surrey – home to the renowned Music and Sound Recording (Tonmeister) audio degree course – welcomed the RTS Technology Centre and students from several

universities to meet expert sound engineers Mike Hatch, Mike Felton and Tudor Davies.

Their TV credits include *Later... with Jools Holland*, Eurovision and the Brit Awards, as well as Glastonbury and BBC Proms in the Park.

Live television with multiple bands can be a tricky proposition. Logistics and detailed planning are important because events are unpredictable. Microphones get in the way of cameras or

lights; cables can be messy and obstruct cameras and artists.

Live audiences are wonderful on camera and directors usually want more buzz and cheering, but the audio team has to manage sound levels, audience amplification and deal with feedback from the stage in order to provide clean feeds.

Topics discussed included recording 5.1 surround sound while delivering stereo at

home; how much (or little) rehearsal time is given for live performances; and how to cope when a mic goes down – it's not as simple as switching to another camera.

The event was preceded by guided tours and live demonstrations of a Floating Earth outside broadcast truck, hosted by Hatch, and the Mixbus OB truck, hosted by Conrad Fletcher of SounDesign.

Ciarán Doran

RTS Scotland

RTS Scotland kicked off a busy month of training events in late February with a session, held in partnership with ScreenSkills, on production office jobs.

Two RTS Scotland Futures masterclasses, on audio post-production and scriptwriting, followed in early March.

Sandy Robertson, Head of Production, Factual Entertainment, at BBC Studios (Scotland), which makes *Dragons' Den*, *Amazing Hotels* and *Points of View*, explained some of the roles in the production office.

A production secretary, she said, is an entry-level job, involving booking travel and accommodation. "The person would be quite green – I would expect to be telling them what they need to do and how to do it."

A production co-ordinator needs to show "more initiative", she continued. As well as logistics, they would be "hiring crew and kit... and understanding more about the [production] process".

Isha Krishnan, a production co-ordinator at Red Sky Productions, who has just finished work on series 2 of *Scotland's Greatest Escape*, said that her role is "very diverse", taking in everything from



BBC

Taking flight in production jobs

runners' jobs to arguing with car hire companies and hotels about bookings.

"It can get really intense," she added.

Marc Harvey, a production secretary at Friel Kean Films,

described his job as doing "anything and everything I can to help the production team". He is currently working on BBC One daytime show *Money for Nothing*.

Fola Abdul, a freelance

production secretary whose first job was on CBBC show *Saturday Mash-Up!*, said she had enjoyed "every moment" of her career to this point. "I've only been in [the industry] for two years and two months, with no background whatsoever in film and TV... it's been amazing."

The ScreenSkills/RTS Scotland webinar "Select sessions: The production office" was hosted by Kate Cotter, Programme Leader for the Broadcast Production: TV and Radio course at the University of the West of Scotland.

■ The "Dubbing for TV masterclass" at the Centre for Contemporary Arts in Glasgow featured a discussion about working in audio post-production, followed by an opportunity to network.

"Break into scriptwriting", held at STV on Pacific Quay, Glasgow, boasted the talents of three TV writers: Andrea Gibb, who adapted the book of the same name for dementia drama *Elizabeth Is Missing* and Andrew O'Hagan's novel *Mayflies*, both for the BBC; Maryam Hamidi, who was part of the writing team for series 2 of BBC thriller *Vigil*; and David Macpherson, the creator and writer of Amazon Prime eco-thriller *The Rig*.

Matthew Bell

RTS London heard how the visual effects were created for *The Crown* over six series of the landmark Netflix drama – everything from recreating Buckingham Palace to real-life incidents such as the death of Princess Diana in Paris, the Aberfan disaster and the fire at Windsor Castle.

“[As] a historical drama, there are things that we have to... recreate, so we needed visual effects to be able to bring those stories to life,” explained Reece Ewing, VFX (visual effects) producer and post-production supervisor, who joined the drama in series 3.

With no access to royal buildings such as Buckingham Palace, these had to be recreated using VFX wizardry. “There isn’t anywhere to hide,” said visual effects supervisor Ben Turner, “everyone knows what it looks like.”

Turner, who worked on the show from its 2016 debut, said that his work started in pre-production, when he received the scripts for the series: “When the 10 episodes land in your inbox, you learn your fate for the next year and a half.



The Crown: Buckingham Palace

Netflix

‘Invisible’ visual effects

RTS London *The Crown’s* visual effects and, below, TV trailers come under the RTS London microscope. **Matthew Bell** reports

“It’s always an interesting moment when you turn the page of a script and it describes a squadron of bombers flying overhead, a huge coal tip collapsing or a castle bursting into flames. You think, ‘Oh, that might be on our [VFX] list.’”

Ewing and Turner – plus VFX supervisors Ollie Bersey

from Framestore and Joe Cork (Rumble VFX) – used clips from *The Crown* to explain how they added effects.

“It’s a career highlight for me,” said Bersey. “I get a real kick out of seeing the surprise on people’s faces when they [discover] that there are VFX in *The Crown*.”

Cork was proud of “the

sheer quantity of invisible work... We did close to 300 VFX” shots in series 6, running to 37 minutes – “almost an entire episode”. ■

‘The Crown: VFX masterclass’ was held at Kings Cross Everyman on 29 February, chaired by Broadcast’s Rebecca Cooney and produced by Phil Barnes.

Building a buzz

Two award-winning trailer makers discussed their work at a second RTS London event looking at a specialist TV craft.

The process, explained Jonathan Truin, a creative at ITV, starts with a brief and then moves on to ‘ideation, which is mostly staring at a wall, thinking you’re not very good at your job... I then try to craft an insight or truth about the show... Eventually, I add the sound and effects and let it out the door.’

Briefs, added Lawrence

Ching, Creative Director at marketing agency Ignition Creative, can be truly brief, as brief as: ‘Make a good trailer.’

He added: ‘Being able to put yourselves into the shoes of the people we’re trying to target is so key... What appeals to them [may] be so beyond your personal taste.’

The hardest part comes as the finishing line approaches, said Ching. ‘When you’re working very closely with showrunners and film-makers, they are

very close to their project. It’s their baby and no one knows that title like they do.

‘But, sometimes, they may not be seeing it from a marketing perspective and so we have to be the annoying ones and go, “We appreciate this piece of art but... we do have to market it and give it to the masses.”’

Truin said: ‘My previous creative director described [making trailers] as [like] “pulling a giant ice cube through the desert” – you just hope that, when you get to the end, you’ve still got enough ice left to be proud of what you’ve done.’

Ching added: ‘We can’t

objectively say this is a good or bad trailer. Everyone has different tastes. [When we discuss] whether a trailer feels good to put out into the world, there’s always going to be friction.’

Big budgets are good but, said Truin, ‘an idea doesn’t have to be really expensive to be good... and budgets are going down; there’s less money, especially in original content, which means we have to get better at being creative.’

‘Building a buzz: Trailers unveiled’ was held at the Everyman Kings Cross on 18 March, chaired by Lettija Lee and produced by Jon-Jon Jones.

John Gau, who has died aged 83 and was a former Chair of the RTS, was one of the leading broadcasters and producers of his era. He almost certainly would have been promoted to the prestigious job of running BBC One were it not for a row over the BBC's coverage of the Troubles in Northern Ireland involving the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher.

He was an influential BBC current affairs producer and, as a pioneering independent producer, an important maker of TV documentaries. A former BBC colleague, the ex-Radio 4 *Feedback* presenter Roger Bolton, described John as "decisive, tough but kind and possessing a lovely sense of humour, and having a capacity for mischief".

His mother, Nan Munro, was an actor and he was later married to another actor, Susan Tebbs, so was familiar from childhood with an important aspect of the arts. He spent some of his childhood in South Africa but was educated in England, at Haileybury public school in Hertfordshire, before reading classics and modern languages at Trinity Hall, Cambridge. He later studied at the University of Wisconsin, where he was active in campus television.

John joined the BBC as an assistant film editor in 1963.

As a producer on BBC current affairs flagship *Panorama* from 1969 to 1973, he collaborated extensively with presenter Julian Pettifer, having earlier worked with him on another BBC current affairs series, *24 Hours*, which John had produced from 1965 to 1969.

He was also a successful editor of *Nationwide*, which took a noticeably populist and sometimes light-hearted attitude to TV journalism.

"At the time, I remember people thinking John editing



John Gau 1940-2024

Steve Clarke remembers a BBC TV executive once seen as a future DG, who went on to chair the RTS

Nationwide was a rather improbable choice because, up until then, his background was in very serious stories, often with an international bent," recalled Bolton.

In 1978, John was promoted by the BBC to the powerful role of Head of Television Current Affairs. There he found himself at odds with BBC management. Coverage of the Troubles was a sensitive area for all British broadcasters, especially the BBC.

The so-called Carrickmore row – Carrickmore was a

village in County Tyrone – was one of those BBC controversies that regularly plague the corporation, leading to outraged comments in Parliament and the press. The footage shot of the IRA carrying out "road checks" on motorists by a team including *Panorama* reporter Jeremy Paxman and producer David Darlow – staged for the cameras as a display of terrorist power – was never shown.

Word did, however, leak to the papers, which accused the BBC of "colluding with

the enemy". Thatcher told the BBC "to put its house in order". Bolton, the editor of *Panorama*, was sacked but swiftly reinstated following protests by BBC journalists and support from John Gau.

John argued that the BBC he had joined in the 1960s had been "fiercely independent, journalistically courageous and steadfastly loyal to its staff" and that "the handling of the Carrickmore incident seems to me to call these virtues into question". He kept his job but was disciplined.

Not long after, he applied to succeed Bill Cotton as BBC One Controller. Within Television Centre, John was widely regarded as the best candidate for the job, which, to many people's surprise, went to the Head of Sport, Alan Hart. "The Director-General wanted John Gau to be Controller, but the governors blocked the appointment," said Bolton. "John was probably the best BBC One Controller the BBC never had and looked like becoming a future Director-General."

"John Gau was a big figure," recalled another colleague, Will Wyatt, former MD of BBC Television.

In 1981, he left the BBC to form John Gau Productions, partly in response to the arrival of Channel 4, conceived as a publisher-broadcaster that would buy all its programmes from independent producers. An early commission was *Soldiers*, presented by Frederick Forsyth, for BBC One. From 1988 to 1990, Gau was Director of Programmes at British Satellite Broadcasting, before it was taken over by Sky, but it was not his finest hour.

He became a CBE in 1989, chaired the Independent Programme Producers Association (1983-86) and the RTS (1987-91) and was a director of Channel 4 (1984-88). John is survived by his wife and their children, William and Chris. ■

Millions of children owe a debt to Kay Benbow, the former CBeebies Controller, who has died at the age of 62.

She helped to bring to the screen numerous shows that engaged and educated generations of youngsters, including *In the Night Garden*, *Octonauts* and *Tweenies*.

Kay was renowned for creating ambitious children's television – from commissioning TV's first animated autistic character, Pablo, to introducing the CBeebies pantomime and an acclaimed adaptation of *The Tempest*, performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company.

After studying theology at Oxford University, Kay joined the BBC in 1985 as a radio studio manager, before moving to television presentation in 1988, where she met her husband, Ian Stubbs. They married in 1991.

She then moved to the Young Children's department and worked with children's producer Alison Stewart. They became close friends, making shows such as *Superbods*. "Kay was a great director. Organised, thorough, impressive in the production gallery and the edit, and artists loved working with her," said Stewart.

Kay subsequently worked on shows aimed at older children and became a producer, before going freelance in 1999 to direct the hit series *Tweenies*.

She returned to the BBC in 2000, rising up the ranks before the CBeebies channel began in 2002. There, Kay launched the careers of presenter Justin Fletcher and groundbreaking producer Blue Zoo Animation.

In 2006, she was appointed Head of CBeebies Production, Animation and Acquisitions, before becoming CBeebies Controller in 2010. She moved to MediaCity in

Kay Benbow

1962-2024

Tara Conlan mourns the loss of a great force for good in children's television



BBC

Salford and continued her work during successful treatment for cancer.

During her time as Controller, CBeebies won RTS Channel of the Year and Bafta Children's Channel of the Year five times. Her commissions included CBeebies' first live-action scripted series, *Topsy and Tim*, *Hey Duggee* and a partnership with Northern Ballet.

Diversity was paramount. Stewart recalled that Kay's motto was "Everyone is

welcome" at CBeebies: "The 'learning through play' message was present in all her commissions."

Kay became acting Director of Children's in 2014 for five months. In 2018, she left the corporation to become a consultant and script editor on series such as CBeebies' *Roots and Fruits* and the RTS North West Awards-nominated *The World According to Grandpa* strand within Channel 5's *Milkshake!*.

Outside of TV, she loved

gardening, theatre, Arsenal football club and regularly seeing her former BBC colleagues, who paid tribute to her. Former BBC executive Tanya Motie said that, when they were BBC Children's commissioners, each day started "reflecting on the fortunes of Arsenal over a cuppa before switching into work mode... She was a fiercely loyal, utterly supportive and deeply caring human and the world is a sadder place without her."

BBC Director of Unscripted Kate Phillips remembered her love of dancing and how "she had time for everyone. Kay had amazing energy and drive and was a trailblazer but was without ego. She was a complete delight."

Former CBBC Controller, now consultant, Anne Gilchrist said: "Kay made CBeebies the rarely acknowledged jewel in the BBC's crown... I often heard viewers say that they'd be prepared to pay the licence fee for CBeebies alone. Her passing is an enormous loss."

Tina Jaffray, who was a production manager and met Kay working on shows that included *Bodger & Badger*, said she was always "a fabulously supportive friend. How did she find the time to not only create a very successful channel but also give people so much of herself in friendship? Truly inspirational."

Stewart agreed: "Kay was kind, generous, fiercely loyal, clever and absolutely passionate about the things that meant most to her – her family, of course, of whom she was so proud and on whom she relied so much. They were everything to her."

Floella Benjamin added that Kay "was passionate about creating magic for children and her legacy still lives on. Her achievements will not be forgotten."

Kay is survived by her husband and two sons. ■

RTS Yorkshire Screenwriter Lisa Holdsworth, producer/director Sally Ogden and documentary filmmaker Jin-Theng Craven reunited last month for an RTS Yorkshire event celebrating International Women's Day, five years after they first discussed the state of the TV industry and gender equality.

The cuts in unscripted TV and the cost of living crisis, said Holdsworth, the creator of upcoming Channel 4 drama *Dance School*, had hit the largely freelance workforce in the industry hard. "If you have to keep a roof over people's heads... it doesn't feel stable to be working in television at the moment. I don't blame anyone who's looked elsewhere," she said.

In the writer's own sector, Holdsworth said that "places where, traditionally, women have written [such as] continuing drama, have been eroded", citing the axing of *Holby City* and *Doctors*, and fewer episodes of *Casualty* and *Hollyoaks* being made.



Axing soap hits women writers

"[There is a] feeling that our industry is not being run very well at the top, that we don't weather these storms... that the people who take the

brunt are the freelancers at the bottom."

There were, though, grounds for optimism. Holdsworth held up "the ability of

old-fashioned storytelling to surprise us. Who would have predicted a year ago that a drama about the Post Office [*Mr Bates vs the Post Office*] would have inflamed the country? Hats off to Gwyneth Hughes for writing an incredibly human, empathetic [drama]."

"Email networks... are essential, especially when you are a freelancer. It can be such a lonely world," said Ogden, who has worked on documentary series such as *24 Hours in A&E*.

Mentors are important, too, she added. "I was mentored by Anna Hall from Candour Productions for 10 years... She assured me that it was possible to [have a baby] and she was living proof. She'd had three children and continued to work full-time as a documentary director."

"Lights, camera, equality: Revisited" was hosted by University of Leeds Professor of Television and Media Studies Dr Beth Johnson. **Matthew Bell**

The UPSIDE

Thirty reasons to be dishevelled

Well, what a night that was! Across 30 competitive categories at the RTS Programme Awards, the Beeb pocketed 21 awards, and its showing in the drama prizes was particularly strong.

BBC One's comedy *Black Ops* swept the board in Comedy Performance – Male and Female, with wins for Hammed Animashaun and Gbemisola Ikumelo, respectively. Hammed dedicated his award to his teacher at drama school: "She saw something in me that I didn't see in myself."

Also, two awards for Eurovision: one for Live Event and the other for Entertainment Performance, presented to the infinitely glamorous Hannah Waddingham.

"I've had a bit too much to drink and feel a bit dishevelled," beamed Hannah.

Top Boy leads the charge for Netflix

Not that the BBC had it all its own way. Kane Robinson, the star of Netflix's *Top Boy*, defeated strong competition from Gary Oldman (*Slow Horses*) and Timothy Spall (*The Sixth Commandment*) to take Leading Actor – Male, one of three wins for Netflix.

Disney+ won its first RTS Programme Award: Scripted Comedy, for British superhero show *Extraordinary*.

Channel 5 punched above its weight to win the History prize with *White Nanny*, *Black Child*, the moving stories of children of black Nigerian immigrants fostered by white British families.

Horror story with a happy ending

There was a lot of emotion in the room. Otto Baxter, the Single Documentary winner for Sky's *Otto Baxter: Not a F***ing Horror Story*, was seen celebrating on the blue carpet clutching his trophy.

Chris Packham, wearing an immaculate bootlace tie that wouldn't have looked out of place on Bob Dylan, won the Presenter award for his brilliant *Inside Our Autistic Minds*.

He dedicated his win to the entire autistic community:

"Autism is a gift but you're never quite sure what it will give – but tonight we've got what we need."

Two reasons to toast Stephen Lambert

Stephen Lambert's company not only won the Entertainment category for *Squid Game: The Challenge*, but he himself received the Outstanding Achievement Award.

Stephen thanked production director Jo Crawley – the pair have worked together for 30 years – business partner Tim Harcourt and wife Jenny.

He pinpointed what audiences love about TV – it is "brilliant at showing people's emotions and humanity", traits much in evidence in Studio Lambert shows such as *Gogglebox* and *The Traitors*. ■



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

The Shiers Trust can make a grant of up to £5,000 towards publishing work on any aspect of TV history

Grants will be given to assist in the completion of new or unfinished projects, work or literature specific to the objectives of the Trust.

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

Application procedure

Applications are now invited and should be submitted to the Trustees by **Tuesday 30 April 2024** on the official application form. Applicants must read all the conditions

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