

February 2025

Television



Five-star mayhem

We check in at the White Lotus as the must-watch drama lands in Thailand



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From the CEO



The new year got off to a racing start for the RTS as we hosted two agenda-setting events (one in collaboration with Channel 4).

“2025 TV predictions: an expert view on the year ahead”, chaired by the BBC’s Katie Razzall, was sold out and live-streamed to two RTS Centres, the West of England in Bristol, and the NETB in Newcastle. Our knowledgeable panel didn’t disappoint, and this issue of *Television* contains a full report.

Later in January, Channel 4’s chief executive, Alex Mahon, unveiled revealing new research in “Gen Z: trends, truth and trust”, its study of

13-to-27-year-olds. This showcased a generation far more complex than suggested by conventional narratives. Alex’s powerful speech examined what steps UK TV news providers can take to prevent Gen Z being at the mercy of social media’s algorithms. There was also a fascinating panel discussion chaired by Ros Atkins, the BBC’s Analysis Editor. Do read our report of Alex’s speech inside.

This month’s cover story celebrates the return of a US show that crackles with subversive wit and dramatic tension, *The White Lotus*, set in Thailand for series three. I can’t wait to see it.

Silverprint’s new take on the Ruth Ellis case, commissioned by ITV, gives a fresh perspective on the last woman to be hanged in Britain. A largely female creative team is behind this

production, with Lucy Boynton in the lead role and the always brilliant Toby Jones as Ellis’s lawyer.

Don’t miss Matthew Bell’s piece on the breathtaking BBC documentary *The Last Musician of Auschwitz*, shown on Holocaust Memorial Day. Huge thanks to the BBC for partnering with us on a great event at the British Museum where the film was premiered.

We’re thrilled to have ITV News’s star Washington correspondent, Robert Moore, writing our Diary. Four years after being the only journalist embedded with the mob that stormed the Capitol on 6 January 2021, he returns to the same building to witness Donald Trump’s inauguration.

Theresa Wise

Contents

Cover: Sky

- 5 Robert Moore’s TV diary**
The Washington-based ITV News correspondent reflects on the irony of Trump’s inauguration inside the Capitol
- 6 Comfort classic: *Outnumbered***
Steve Clarke finds heart, warmth and wry humour in the long-running Brockman family saga
- 7 Ear candy: *Strangers on a Bench***
Harrison Bennett hears what happens when you break the ice and dare to talk to the people around you
- 8 Working lives: chief creative officer**
Richard Watsham tells Matthew Bell about the ups and downs of feeding UKTV’s content pipeline
- 10 Pack your bags for five-star nirvana**
The White Lotus lands in Thailand for a third series of mayhem and biting satire. Harrison Bennett reports
- 12 A view to die for**
Cosy crime rates are soaring as the addictive genre keeps millions of us hooked. Mark Lawson investigates
- 14 Are we heading for media dystopia?**
Channel 4 CEO Alex Mahon accuses social media platforms of abandoning truth in the pursuit of Gen Z
- 16 Our Friend in the North East**
Kate Squire hails the BBC comedy *Smoggie Queens* as just one triumph of a region in rude health
- 17 Musical solace amid Holocaust horror**
Anita Lasker-Wallfisch is the focus of *The Last Musician of Auschwitz*. Matthew Bell reports on a haunting new film
- 20 Cold-blooded killer or class victim?**
Caitlin Danaher hears how ITV drama *A Cruel Love* reframes the story of Ruth Ellis, the last woman hanged in Britain
- 22 Tracy Beaker takes charge**
Dani Harmer, who plays Jacqueline Wilson’s beloved rebel, is now behind the camera. Matthew Bell reports
- 24 Gazing into the crystal ball**
Shilpa Ganatra listens in as industry leaders make their predictions about broadcasting in the year ahead
- 26 RTS news and events**
Reports of the Society’s screenings and events from around the UK and Ireland
- 30 The Upside**
Our roving correspondent finds the sunny side – and the funny side – of the industry

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TV diary

Forgive me for having whiplash. The inauguration of Donald Trump was astonishing enough for most reporters and political observers gathered in Washington amid a polar vortex of brutally cold temperatures, but the decision to move the elaborate ceremony indoors made it particularly surreal for me. For where did the inaugural events take place? They unfolded in the magnificent Rotunda, the sacred space of US democracy directly below the dome of the United States Capitol.

■ This was the exact same space where, four years and 14 days earlier, we had filmed a mob of Trump loyalists fighting their way through the Capitol. Along with my *ITV News* camera operator, Mark Davey, and a producer, Sophie Alexander, I watched the skirmishes unfold around the statues of America's revered leaders and alongside the revolutionary-era paintings.

Four years later, on this bitterly cold January day, Trump was himself standing in the Rotunda, displaying no sense of irony, swearing loyalty to the US constitution.

■ It is impossible not to reflect on the vicissitudes of American politics. How did voters give such a striking mandate to a man who had come so close to overturning the constitutional order?

After a year of covering the US presidential election campaign – from the primaries at the start of 2024 through to the tumult of Joe Biden dropping out, and the drama of the twin assassination attempts against Trump – I could clearly see this election was not just focused on Trump but was also about deep voter dissatisfaction. American voters were



As shock and awe hit Washington, Robert Moore feels the chill – and the irony – at Trump's inauguration

heartily frustrated – furious, actually – with the Biden economy. Every trip to the grocery store felt like a mugging.

■ In an election documentary for *ITV*, I filmed with a woman in Erie, Pennsylvania, who was selling her blood to a medical clinic to pay for food. I spent time with black farmers in Georgia on the brink of bankruptcy. And I saw the despair of a young black voter in Detroit who told me that the Democrats make promises every four years and then deliver absolutely nothing to the poorest urban communities in America.

■ The American Dream has been defined as the belief that you have the chance to be more prosperous than your parents. In that sense, the dream has become a nightmare. People are working harder and harder and still struggling to put food on the table. It isn't a surprise that Americans voted to turn their back on the Biden-Harris economy.

■ The sight of Trump signing the executive orders pardoning the 6 January insurrectionists was quite the exclamation mark on a remarkable inauguration day. For the next two nights I was camped outside the grim DC city jail when several of the prisoners – “the J6ers”, as they are known – emerged. Collapsing into the arms of family members holding a vigil outside, they declared their lasting loyalty to Trump.

Looking on was Stewart Rhodes, former leader of the Oath Keepers militia. He was among those now free and feeling emboldened. He told *ITV News* that his militiamen would be able to offer security on the streets in the face of any leftist “resistance” to the Trump agenda.

■ The next day, I headed down to North Carolina to interview a released 6 January prisoner, Josh Pruitt, who I have stayed in touch with over the last four years.

In a strange way, we became friends while he was behind bars. I would send him books to read. He'd call me on a recorded prison phone line every month to tell me what was going on inside one of America's most violent jails. Now we were in a bar, playing pool, and he was enjoying his first beer for a long time.

Did he regret anything he did four years ago?

“Honestly, I don't,” he told me. “I would do it all again. And if there is a bonus to being in jail after 6 January, it's that I missed almost the entirety of the Biden presidency.”

*Robert Moore is an *ITV News* correspondent, based in Washington. He was the only TV reporter in the world embedded with the mob that stormed the Capitol on 6 January 2021. His latest *ITV* documentary, tracking the first 100 days of the second Trump presidency, will be broadcast in April.*

COMFORT CLASSIC

Steve Clarke finds heart, warmth and wry humour in the long-running Brockman family saga

From *Till Death Us Do Part* to *The Royle Family*, family life in all its wonderful and woeful iterations has proved fertile ground for the British television sitcom. Few, however, have been as innovative as BBC One's *Outnumbered*, which subverted conventions and moved the genre on.

In 1990, Andy Hamilton and Guy Jenkin, both experienced topical sketch writers, had shown off their sitcom chops by giving Channel 4 one of its comedy hits in the hilarious, fast-paced newsroom caper *Drop the Dead Donkey*. Seventeen years later, the pair struck sitcom gold again.

Outnumbered was launched as a six-episode series in 2007, inspired in part by the writers' experience at the sharp end of family life. The pair went on to write and direct all five series. The show appeared to come from another world to *Drop the Dead Donkey*, although both were made by comedy powerhouse Hat Trick Productions.

Set in the leafy, middle-class, west London neighbourhood of Chiswick, this naturalistic, part-improvised show is an exceptionally well-observed slice of contemporary family life that quickly gets under our skins. The feel is of a real-time, fly-on-the-wall documentary as we seem to eavesdrop on private conversations. Bryan Appleyard, in a 2008 *Times* review, called it "the best British sitcom in years and among the best ever". The following year, it won the Royal Television Society Award for Scripted Comedy. Other accolades soon piled up.

Apart from the title and end credits, there is no music or laughter track. By sitcom standards, not a lot happens as the fortysomething Brockman parents struggle to keep their heads above water while their three children run rings around them. Chaos and clutter



Outnumbered

BBC

are everywhere chez Brockman, where Pete (Hugh Dennis) and Sue (Claire Skinner) are very much outnumbered by spiky teenager Jake (Tyger Drew-Honey), raucous middle child Ben

(Daniel Roche) and precocious, super-smart Karen (Ramona Marquez).

It has frequently been said that it is the children's improvised lines and charisma that set this show apart from

other sitcoms that died an early and often merciful death. For my money, as wonderful as the kids are – and Marquez’s surreal flights of fancy are joyous to behold – this view underestimates Dennis and Skinner’s wholly convincing performances as long-suffering, exasperated but loving parents.

They are onscreen much of the time, and it’s hard to take your eyes off them as their expressions speak volumes on how demanding parenting can be. And the dynamic between Dennis and Drew-Honey, as they explore that difficult father and adolescent son relationship, is exquisite to watch. Jake pushes and pushes Pete, an exhausted history teacher who works at a challenging inner-city comprehensive. Yet Pete rarely loses his cool, despite everything life throws at him.

There is a refreshing lack of sentimentality. *Outnumbered* has never shied away from confronting life’s dark side head-on. There were com-

IT NEVER SHIED
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LIFE’S DARK SIDE
HEAD-ON

plaints about the recent Christmas special, which showed Pete – eight years on from the last time we saw the Brockmans – figuring out how to tell his now grown-up children of his prostate cancer diagnosis. This was said by some to be inappropriate subject matter for festive TV, but even in the early days of *Outnumbered*, you will find tricky subjects. We hear, for example, that Pete’s parents’ relationship is breaking down and observe the difficulty he has in communicating with his well-meaning mother.

Outnumbered isn’t laugh-out-loud, gag-laden comedy. Neither is it Larry David cringe-style humour in which one performer dominates. As the short, cold days drag on, it provides a pick-me-up in the shape of a slow-burning winter warmer, full of heart. It hasn’t dated, and its wry meditations on family life remain as relevant today as they were when they were newly minted. ■

All series of *Outnumbered* are available on BBC iPlayer.

Ear candy

Strangers on a Bench

The first rule of London is you do not talk to strangers. The second rule of London is you do not talk to strangers. Speaking as someone who has suffered his

fair share of silent treatment on the Underground, it’s refreshing to hear this rule so flagrantly broken, and with such profoundly moving results, in singer-songwriter Tom Rosenthal’s podcast, *Strangers on a Bench*.

It’s not an entirely new idea. *Alexei Sayle’s Strangers on a Train*, *Catherine Carr’s Where Are You Going?* and *This American Life* have all done something similar. But it’s an evergreen concept inspired by the fundamental truth that everyday life is filled with the kind of colourful characters and rich drama that you won’t find in a celebrity-on-celebrity interview, or the sensationalised true-crime story of the week.

This is probably because people tend to be candid, even in our stand-offish capital. That’s to take nothing away from Rosenthal. He’s a natural icebreaker, deftly eliciting confidences with gentle, open-ended prompts: “What’s your favourite day of the week?” “What are you most excited about at the moment?”

The latter kicks off a wholesome first episode featuring a young guy (Rosenthal’s subjects remain anonymous) who, we learn, is most excited about his next basketball game. He says he has fallen back in love with the sport, having recently been released from prison. And, surprisingly, he speaks glowingly of his time inside. “Everyone was really uplifting,” he says. The prisoners’ mantra was: “Just because you’ve done bad things, that

doesn’t mean you’re a bad person.” In stark contrast, his younger brother was busy studying in California. He had previously won a scholarship to Eton. Yet there is no competition between them. “He inspires me, if anything, to be the best version of myself.”

Asked for any rituals he developed with his cell-mate, he fondly recalls how their evening “bang-up” coincided with *The Simpsons* at 6pm on Channel 4. It’s often the small things that resonate most. The next conversation, entitled *Fruit Sculptures for Breakfast*, is full of them.

But even when conversation is

more stilted, as in episode three with an older gent who is hard of hearing, it doesn’t take long for Rosenthal to start drawing out some gems. We learn that the man got so fed up with smartphones that he threw his in the Mixed Pond on Hampstead Heath.

And his amusingly matter-of-fact approach to his own mortality has him marvelling at John Cleese’s £17,000-a-year stem cell therapy.

I’m only a few episodes in, but smartphones have been a recurring bugbear. This was, perhaps, inevitable as our heads droop ever deeper over our screens, where we sequester ourselves in narrow social networks and bellow into our echo chambers. Podcasts such as *Strangers on a Bench* are a timely antidote to this growing alienation and a testament to the power of listening. Strangely for a podcast, I can think of no higher compliment than to say it makes you want to rip out your earphones and speak to that overfamiliar stranger on the Tube. Or, better still, launch your phone into your local bathing pond. ■

Harrison Bennett



WORKING LIVES



Chief creative officer

UKTV breaks into period drama this year with *Outrageous*, telling the story of the Mitford sisters

Richard Watsham oversees UKTV's content pipeline. As its Chief Creative Officer and Global Director of Acquisitions, BBC Studios and UKTV, he is also responsible, alongside his commissioning remit, for acquiring shows for the broadcaster and BBC Studios' global channels. Current hits commissioned by Watsham's team include *The Marlow Murder Club* for U&Drama and *Will & Ralf Should Know Better* for U&Dave.

What do you do?

I look after commissioning and acquisitions at UKTV, and acquisitions for BBC Studios' global channels. At UKTV, we are building a large programme library on our newly rebranded VoD player, U.

My job also includes supporting the freelance TV community, and improving sustainability and diversity. I've just become Chair of the Creative Diversity Network – as broadcasters, we must use our influence to improve diversity, in front of and behind the camera.

How do you know what your viewers will watch?

It's a combination of data, experience and a lot of listening. I'm an aggregator of other people's tastes – I may love or hate a programme, but I am only one viewer in a potential audience of millions, so I make sure to listen to my colleagues' opinions across the commissioning and acquisitions team.

How did you get into TV?

Here's a secret – I didn't want to work in TV! I studied drama and did some low-level acting after university. I really wanted to get into film. I wrote to every film production company in the UK and got three responses. None of them would take me on, even for no pay. I'd given up on acting, moved up to London and run out of money after just a few weeks.

A flatmate who was working as an edit assistant suggested I call some post-production houses. I eventually got a job as a runner with Crow TV. I worked my way up the TV ladder to become a series producer and director

on shows such as *Dating in the Dark* and *Fat Families*.

How did you end up commissioning?

I had four children. I'd been a freelancer for 10 years and desperately needed stable work. Mark Sammon, who was a commissioning editor at Living at the time, became something of a mentor and gave me a chance. I stayed at Virgin for a year, then moved to UKTV channel Dave as the channel was just starting to commission.

What were your first commissions at Virgin?

For Bravo, two new series of the franchise *Brit Cops*, as well as a live fight night with Alex Reid, who was Katie Price's boyfriend at the time.

Do you need experience of making programmes before you can commission them?

In terms of understanding what people want to watch, coming from a production, scheduling or data and insight background are all equally valid. My

background as a series producer/director, mostly of new formats, has helped me understand how to make content better – and the potential pitfalls.

Do you face a lot of competition to acquire shows?

It's a very competitive market and we often have to fight hard. There are a number of ways to do that; unfortunately, the most telling is the depth of your pockets – and our pockets are not as deep as others. We have to box clever. Building good relationships with studios and producers is critical.

Is it frustrating when a rival broadcaster poaches one of your shows?

With commissions, that doesn't happen very often. *Taskmaster* was taken by Channel 4 after we'd commissioned 74 shows for Dave, but we are hugely proud of the fact that we developed the show. It was one of the first I commissioned at UKTV.

With acquisitions, shows often come in and out of licence, so I wouldn't say they are poached. There's a lot of content out there – sometimes you win, sometimes you don't. It's important you stick to your strategy and don't get pulled out of shape.

Is there a risk of playing it too safe?

There's a real danger in television of regurgitating things you've done before because – when you're trying to work out what to do next – you tend to look at what's worked before. When I started at UKTV, I didn't know how long I'd be there, so I was determined to do things differently and take brave decisions. Of course, as a smaller player, it's essential that we take risks because we need to get noticed. We won't get noticed by making slightly cheaper versions of other broadcasters' shows; we'll get noticed by doing stuff that no one else is doing.

Do you have trusted suppliers and partners?

Absolutely. For acquisitions, we work closely with the US studios and key distributors such as All3Media, Fremantle and Banijay. It's the same for commissions – you need to be able to trust the people who are making a show for you. Ideas, though, can come from anywhere, and we can marry

people with ideas to production companies. My commissioning team are out there talking to many people, not just sticking to the echo chamber of a few trusted suppliers.

What do you bring to work with you?

Bravery, ambition and determination – if you let them drop, you pay for it.

What are the best and worst parts of the job?

The best is working with the people at UKTV – we have a really special culture here. The worst is marrying ambition to budget, but that's the same for lots of people in TV, whether they're an exec on a production or a commissioner. We do so much with less money than our competitors.

a variety of routes you can take.

I would encourage people to explore all the different roles within a broadcaster and production company and work out what really interests you.

Which shows are you most proud of acquiring and commissioning at UKTV?

It's always a team game, and these are not just mine. As a commissioning editor, *Taskmaster*. In terms of acquisitions, the US political drama *Madam Secretary* has done really well, and our deal with AMC Networks for Acorn TV content has brought our viewers great shows such as *The Chelsea Detective*, *Signora Volpe* and *Darby and Joan*.

We're also keen to bring on talent at UKTV, and it was fantastic to develop a



'Developing talent': Hyder, Mo Farah, Big Zuu and Tubsey in *Big Zuu's Big Eats*

UKTV/Olly Courtney

Which skills and attributes do you need to do your job?

Sharp editorial judgement is key to making the right decisions about content, as well as trusting your instincts. You also need to be a good listener and have people skills, whether you are dealing with problems on a production, making a deal or talking to a well-known host.

What advice would you give to someone wanting to work in commissioning and acquisitions?

It's a tough time to break into the industry. Unfortunately, there are too many freelancers for the amount of work we currently have. Now, more than ever, passion and determination are key. Having said that, there are

vehicle in which the incredibly charismatic Zuhair Hassan could really shine, the Bafta award-winning *Big Zuu's Big Eats* for U&Dave.

What would you like to do more of?

Drama. We have our biggest original drama slate ever coming up this year, including *Bookish*, created by and starring Mark Gatiss.

Until now, we have predominantly done crime dramas, but we are branching out into family, historical and period drama with *Outrageous*, a co-production with BritBox International, about the Mitford sisters. ■

Richard Watsham was interviewed by Matthew Bell.

Pack your bags for five-star nirvana



Checking in: Jason Isaacs, Parker Posey, Patrick Schwarzenegger, Sarah Catherine Hook and Sam Nivola strut their stuff in Thailand for series three

What would you do if your prestige HBO drama won huge audiences and five-star reviews all round? You probably wouldn't kill off the fan favourite, the character who embodies all its comedy and tragedy in a performance of genius that revived her career at a stroke. Especially when she also happens to be one of your best friends.

But you're not Mike White, you didn't write *The White Lotus* and, although we'd all like to be, you're not best friends with Jennifer Coolidge.

White, who has a fraught history with Hollywood, has displayed his contempt for popular tropes. "I was like, 'You want your dead body? Here's your dead body,'" he told *The New Yorker*, explaining why he framed the first series as a typical murder mystery by opening with a coffin, occupant unknown, being loaded on to a plane.

The White Lotus is back for season three. Be ready for cultural clashes and biting satire, warns **Harrison Bennett**

Coffins have provided the perfect Trojan horse for this satire of privilege, so you can see why White has kept it up. Series one introduced us to the first White Lotus resort, in Hawaii, where White owns a home and drew on the ethical implications. Class conflict between the rich and needy hotel clientele and the long-suffering staff simmers away until, one by one, the masks drop. Or, in one memorable case, the trousers.

Murray Bartlett was a revelation as hotel manager Armond, who is driven so

feral by an especially entitled guest, Jake Lacy's spoiled frat boy, Shane, that he excretes his revenge into Shane's luggage. Arguably, all the guests deserve such a foul fate, which allows White to keep viewers guessing as to who's in those coffins.

But the beauty of the show does not lie in whodunnit, or even in its idyllic settings. This is not *Death in Paradise*.

Take the second series, set in Sicily.

White upped the body count and Cristobal Tapia de Veer gave the theme tune an EDM remix that had clubbers everywhere dancing to its weird ululations.

But what elevated the series was White's stiletto-sharp writing about sex: Harper and Ethan's sexless marriage, Cameron and Daphne's



Fan favourite: Tanya rides out in series two

mutually assured infidelity, Portia's *Love Island*-style adventures and hotel manager Valentina's lesbian awakening. Not forgetting the three generations of Di Grasso men, each with their own outdated masculinities that lead them to shenanigans with local sex workers Lucia and Mia.

The funniest lines went, of course, to Coolidge's Tanya. Abandoned by her husband Greg, whom she suspects is cheating, she is taken under the wing of Tom Hollander's charismatic Quentin and his merry men, only to gradually realise they are scheming with Greg to rob and kill her. Her delivery of "These gays, they're trying to murder me!" was probably enough on its own to win her that Golden Globe.

For proof of White's artistic conviction, look no further than Tanya's untimely demise in its perfect pitch of the comedy and tragedy that she always staggered between. Whereas "dying at the hands of someone else felt too tragic", he told HBO, it made him laugh "to think she would take out this cabal of killers [...] then she just dies this derpy death".

But as one icon dies, a new cast is born. White and his casting director, Meredith Tucker, a friend since college, have put together another fascinating ensemble for season three, boasting series one standout Natasha Rothwell, Jason Isaacs, *Sex Education*'s Aimee Lou Wood, Blackpink member Lalisa Manobal and 90s "queen of the indies" Parker Posey.

Thailand is the setting, Tapia de Veer draws from TikTok cat videos for his new theme tune, and White promises it will be "longer [eight episodes],



Feral: Murray Bartlett (right) in series one

All photographs: Sky

THEN THE MASKS DROP... OR IN ONE MEMORABLE CASE, THE TROUSERS

bigger, crazier". What's it about? White tells *Vanity Fair*: "Eastern versus western religion, or western people in an eastern culture."

The trailer presents another feast for the senses, with foot massages and fireworks, sex and stress management meditations, snakes, monkeys, armed robberies and strobe lights from both nightclubs and ambulances.

"Something is off," says Posey's character. To which fans will reply with a unanimous: "No shit." There is always something off at the White Lotus, and it's not just the spectre of death haunting its guests. As they seek

the superficial comforts promised by the most luxurious of resorts, they also fall victim to deeper, more spiritual dissatisfactions. The drama often reminds me of David Foster Wallace's essay on his ill-advised Caribbean cruise, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, telling how the extreme indulgence of the passengers leads to an almost lethal introspection.

At one point in the trailer, a Buddhist monk teaches some surely unenlightened guests: "Everyone runs from pain towards pleasure, but they get there only to find more pain." Where better than a five-star "nirvana" to realise you're no closer to reaching it?

The show has always had spiritual concerns. Given that privileged westerners have long flocked to the east, adorned their homes with buddhas and read Eckhart Tolle in ill-fated attempts to "find themselves", there is fertile ground for satire here.

And who better than White to explore it? His previous masterpiece, *Enlightened*, which starred Laura Dern as a self-destructive executive attempting to rebuild her life after a nervous breakdown, was apparently inspired by White's own breakdown, which saw him turn to yoga, meditation and Buddhist self-help books.

Despite widespread critical acclaim, HBO cancelled *Enlightened* after two series, citing lack of viewers. The network has since broached the subject of a third, but White, ever the contrarian, is reluctant, for fear that it would now be "pandering to the zeitgeist".

So this third series of *The White Lotus* might be the closest thing we'll get to a spiritual successor to *Enlightened* – and hopefully it will be one to write about in our gratitude journals. ■

The White Lotus starts on 17 February on Sky and Now.



Return visit: Natasha Rothwell, a season one standout, now in Thailand for season three



A view to die for

Fancy living somewhere as pretty as St Mary Mead, Midsomer or Jersey? With cosy crime rates soaring, you'll be lucky to survive, warns **Mark Lawson**

Damien Molony as the maverick Jersey private eye in the rebooted *Bergerac*

UKTV

Satirical novelist Jonathan Coe skewers many peculiarities of modern Britain in his latest book, *The Proof Of My Innocence*. “I don’t think there’s another country in the world that would take the subject of violent homicide and rebrand it as ‘cosy,’” says one character. “It’s very British, in some indefinable way.”

While Coe’s stiletto is aimed at publishing – the novel contains a book-within-a-book parody of the genre and its current brand leaders, Richard Osman, Richard Coles and Janice Hallett – it might equally draw blood in British television. Death as light entertainment is inherently telegenic because a beautiful location is almost obligatory to such stories.

In the case of *Bergerac* – a BBC hit from 1981–91, and now revived by UKTV’s U and U&Drama this month – the selling point is that the murders occur in the tourist resort of Jersey. *Bergerac* creator Robert Banks Stewart decided to set a new series there when his hit show *Shoestring* (BBC1, 1979–80), an influential proto-cosy with Trevor Eve as a radio host investigator, came to an end. Subsequently, the blood-stained picture-postcard setting has

been a regular in the schedules. Its epicentre is the idyllic village of St Mary Mead, home to Agatha Christie’s spinster sleuth in *Miss Marple* (BBC, 1984–92) and *Marple* (ITV, 2004–13). Close by in Middle England lies the Berkshire-like setting of ITV’s *Midsomer Murders*, a cosy crime capital since 1997.

Indeed, you could draw a pleasant route through England – at the risk of the driver being slain by a homicidal

ANOTHER KILLING IS THE EASIEST WAY TO HOLD ATTENTION OVER AN AD BREAK

local – that also took in the Oxford of *Inspector Morse*, *Lewis* and *Endeavour* (ITV, 1987–2023), the quasi-Cambridge of *Grantchester* (ITV 2014–24) and various beautiful home counties gardens where two horticultural sleuths solve slayings in *Rosemary & Thyme* (ITV, 2003–07).

Having survived those sublime crime scenes, you might go north to

the Northumberland of *Vera* (ITV, 2011–25) or the island setting of *Shetland* (BBC One, since 2013), both adapted from novels by Ann Cleeves.

The trick of cosy crime is to take somewhere audiences might imagine themselves living and turn it into a place where luck is required to survive until the end of an episode. *Midsomer Murders* is approaching 150 episodes. Since there are generally a number of corpses in each of these (a screenwriter once told me that another killing is the easiest way to hold attention across a commercial break), living in the bailiwick of either DCI Barnaby senior or junior may be as dangerous as being a player in *Squid Game*.

The fact that both versions of *Bergerac* were supported by the Jersey Tourist Board suggests that viewers take the scenery as real but the death rate as imagined. At the peak of Inspector Morse’s popularity, it is said that American tourists refused to board their tour bus to Oxford, believing it to be as dangerous as downtown Detroit or LA.

This bizarre combination of panorama and bloodbath is what Coe objects to in his novel. The great crime writer PD James – whose Adam

Dagliesh stories have been adapted for TV three times (by ITV, the BBC and now Channel 5) – addressed this in her 2009 book, *Talking About Detective Fiction*. In it, she surveys the fantasies of rural English brutality that began in the so-called “golden age” of Christie and Dorothy L Sayers (Sayers’ Lord Peter Wimsey stories have been dramatised several times for TV).

“These novels,” James wrote, “are, of course, paradoxical. They deal with violent deaths and violent emotions, but they are novels of escape... All the mysteries will be explained, all the problems solved and peace and order will return to that mythical village which, despite its above-average homicide rate, never really loses its tranquillity or its innocence.”

My view is that both Coe and James are too harsh on cosy crime. He sees it as “very British”, yet Georges Simenon’s Maigret novels – televised multiple times, with the latest version impending from PBS – fit the format perfectly: one of the most beautiful

cities in the world (Paris, emblematic of love) is repeatedly scarred by death. As for James, though her invocation of an English hamlet that has the body count of *Hamlet* implicitly suggests Marple’s

patch, I think that Christie – who probably invented the homicidal idyll as we know it – was more psychologically astute than she is given credit for.

Although you wouldn’t know it from the TV schedules, premeditated



Joan Hickson as Miss Marple

UKTV

murder remains rare in the UK and is always a shock. “You don’t expect it here,” remains the standard bystander response to reporters. Temperamentally, most of us live in a St Mary Mead, Midsomer or Jersey rather than an inner-city gun zone – and so murder profoundly disturbs.

Cosy crime reflects this disconnect, the counter-argument to Coe being

that ugly murders in lovely settings are not an attempt to sanitise homicide but to make it more appalling. The drawback is that the more successful a franchise, the less surprising are the multiple

homicides. In real life, the property market in Midsomer or Morse’s Oxford would have died decades ago.

Although *Vera* has just been killed off, the rebirth of *Bergerac* suggests that the form still has more life than many

of its characters. It may be ominous, though, that, alongside Coe’s prose send-up, there is also a TV spoof of the genre in *Magpie Murders* and *Moonflower Murders* (Britbox/BBC since 2022), created by Anthony Horowitz, who was the first writer on *Midsomer Murders*.

The link between literary “cosy crime” and television is two-way. Several of the shows derive from best-selling books, and many of the latest practitioners came from broadcasting: quiz-show magus Osman writes *The Thursday Murder Club* and *We Solve Murders* book series, while presenter and reality show contestant Coles started his own series with *Murder Before Evening* and its successors.

In April, Jeremy Vine’s *Murder on Line One* will be published as the first in a projected series in which a sacked late-night radio presenter becomes an amateur sleuth. Perhaps, in the search for unusual death methods, Vine will have someone killed by swingometer.

The scale of Osman’s sales brought screen interest to *The Thursday Murder Club*: Netflix’s movie adaptation, starring Helen Mirren, Celia Imrie, Ben Kingsley, Pierce Brosnan and David Tennant, finished filming last autumn and is due for release this year.

Coles’ recent third place on *I’m A Celebrity... Get Me Out Of Here!* may bring similar screen interest, although his ecclesiastical hero already has a rival in *Grantchester*. But if the schedules can accommodate two detectives near the North Sea – in *Vera* and *Shetland* – there might also be space for a pair of C of E amateur sleuths. Vine’s DJ investigator in the West Country seems to follow in the footsteps of Eddie Shoestring, but just as *Shoestring* led to *Bergerac*, perhaps the return of the Jersey detective will bring another echo of its predecessor to the screen. ■

IN REAL LIFE, THE PROPERTY MARKET IN MIDSOMER WOULD HAVE DIED DECADES AGO



Dressed to Kill, a 2023 episode of Midsomer Murders

ITV

Are we on the brink of media dystopia?

Channel 4 CEO Alex Mahon accuses social media platforms of abandoning the commitment to truth in a relentless pursuit of Gen Z

The UK risks sliding into “an American news swamp” unless urgent action is taken by British TV news organisations, policy-makers and regulators to future-proof the news they provide for young people.

That was the stark message in what may have been a career-defining speech by Channel 4 CEO Alex Mahon, addressing an eclectic audience of public service broadcasters, content makers, opinion formers, AI specialists and RTS Bursary Scholars.

The speech was the centrepiece of a joint Channel 4/RTS event, “Gen Z: trends, truth and trust”, that also featured a panel discussion, chaired by the BBC’s Analysis Editor, Ros Atkins, on how Gen Z uses media.

“The percentage of the young in the UK who get their news from print or TV is effectively zero,” said Mahon. “The dangers are clear – a shift to non-facts, to untruth, a world where the challenging rigour of our media ecosystem is steadily devalued; where meaningful engagement, integrity and shared understanding are subsumed by the trade in shallow attention.

“If we don’t come up with a British solution, international market forces will impose on us some other reality that we can regret at leisure.”

At the event, Channel 4 revealed new research (see charts) into the complexities of the Gen Z mindset so that broadcasters might connect more effectively with them.

It was vital that Gen Z could find verified, trustworthy news easily on social media because platforms have “publicly announced a wanton abandonment of the pursuit of truth”. Mahon said: “Gen Z faces growing uncertainty in who and what to trust, struggling to reconcile issues of bias,



Alex Mahon at the lectern

Will Johnston

impartiality and truth in such an information-saturated environment?”

Young people were “hungry” for reliable information but had grown up in a continuous news cycle, and many experienced a “perpetual state of crisis and struggle, unimproved by successive governments”. The pandemic, the impact of man-made climate change and a grim international and economic situation all fed young people’s fears.

In 2024, 64% of 16-to-27-year-olds spent more than five hours a day watching videos on social platforms,

principally TikTok and YouTube. Mahon warned that such shortform content can lead to false information being promoted for the benefit of the tech companies hosting it.

She listed four problem areas: “Shortform means less detail; speed means less context; algorithms move the salacious [content] faster to the top of feeds; and solo viewing reduces socialisation of points of view, thus reducing the likelihood that radical or socially destructive perspectives will be questioned. Unsurprisingly, Gen Z

feels less and less able to trust what it reads or sees.”

There were confusing and conflicting signals about information consumption. “Students don’t want to read books at university when they can get AI-extracted clips. But three-hour podcast episodes are something they gladly commit to. The Trump/Joe Rogan interview did 54m views on YouTube alone, and it’s 179 minutes.

“We see a rise in the devouring of detailed conspiracy theories – a third of the UK public say they believe in conspiracy theories about Covid, mainstream media and government efforts to control people. A belief that the Government doesn’t work any more, that the social cohesion we have previously valued might be damaging individuals’ prospects, a lack of tools to distinguish truth and a shift towards authoritarianism are things that should really worry us. All of us.”

Gen Z has a much “flatter” hierarchy of trust than older generations, with 58% trusting friends’ social media posts, compared with 43% trusting the BBC (see table). To help remedy matters, the Channel 4 CEO supported the idea of a ‘Trustmark’ – “as an indicator of factual, trusted accuracy for content that emerges from professionally produced, regulated media. This could allow tech companies, their algorithms, advertisers and consumers to distinguish instantly between what is checked and true and what is not.”

She also proposed giving public service media algorithmic prominence on social media. Prominence was already regulated on TV platforms, and introducing it to the online space would ensure high-quality, trusted content was given a high profile on

‘GEN Z FEELS LESS AND LESS ABLE TO TRUST WHAT IT READS OR SEES’

An insight into the Gen Z mindset

52% think the UK would be a better place if a strong leader were in charge who doesn’t have to bother with Parliament and elections

33% think the UK would be a better place if the army were in charge

47% think the way our society is organised must be radically changed through revolution

73% think democracy is a ‘very’ or ‘fairly good’ way of governing the UK

44% of Gen Z men agree that, on equal rights for women, ‘things have gone far enough’

45% of Gen Z men believe ‘we have gone so far in promoting women’s equality that we are discriminating against men’

The research was carried out by polling company Craft and based on a representative sample of 3,000 respondents

social media and promoted to the top of online feeds.

“Algorithms designed to elicit anger, surprise or outrage have a devaluing effect on the currency of reliable information. The business model of the technology giants is at odds with the safety of our societies,” she said.

Mahon also suggested that ways could be found to guarantee fair revenue shares for public service content creators to ensure they are paid for the value their content generates for the tech behemoths.

She wants to see regulations allowing AI large language models (LLMs) to use validated public service content to ensure transparency around what AI models are trained on and fair remuneration for data owners.

“The way Gen Z learns to judge fact, fiction and fairness may become the defining issue of our age. A world where trust declines, truth is not universally accepted, the gender divide is widening and young people increasingly feel they are missing out is a dangerous world,” she said.

“We will lose the connections that bind us into community, and

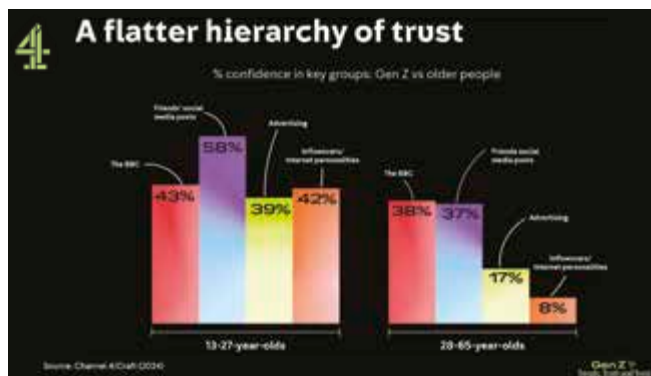
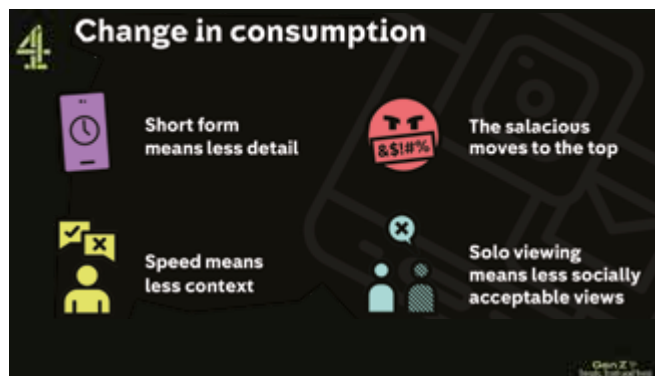
disconnect from democracy. If we cannot even agree on the facts, how can we reconcile our interests?”

The UK still had a deserved reputation for trusted broadcast news and was in a “better situation than most other countries” due to its regulatory framework. BBC News enjoyed a reputation and reach as a trusted source worldwide, while Channel 4’s brands were trusted by young people.

Mahon contrasted this with the media landscape in the US, and told PSBs to start quickly implementing changes to how they make, publish and promote content online. Gen Z wants its news “rapid, easy, entertaining and digestible, timely, well-made, engaging and accessible”, while retaining the PSBs’ commitment to impartiality.

These young people were a “brilliant, vibrant, creative mass of ideas and deep beliefs. Their collective genius represents our future”. Mahon concluded: “So, ask yourself what you can do to keep us together with them in one cohesive, shared society. Because if not us, who? If not now, when?” ■

Report by Steve Clarke. ‘Gen Z: trends, truth and trust’ was a Channel 4/RTS event held at Underbelly Boulevard, London, on 30 January. Read a full report of the panel discussion in the March edition of Television.



OUR FRIEND IN THE NORTH EAST

S *moggie Queens* – a fabulous comedy for BBC Three and iPlayer – launched late last year. It was filmed and set in Teesside, and we celebrated the launch with a spectacular “pink carpet” screening in Middlesbrough – surrounded by the local people who made the show a glamorous reality.

Written by and starring the amazing Phil Dunning, a Middlesbrough native, and with the outstanding acting talents of Mark Benton, Alexandra Mardell, Patsy Lowe and Elijah Young, *Smoggie Queens* is as fierce and inventive an idea as you can get. It tells the story of a group of friends who are hugely proud of their north-eastern roots and their small pocket of the LGBTQ+ community.

This unique perspective was a thrill to bring to the screen. Phil describes it as a “camp, silly, queer gang show set in the North East that follows a group of five friends as they navigate life, love and wigs. It’s essentially an out-and-out slapstick sitcom with a big old gay heart.”

It’s the first BBC Comedy to be made in Middlesbrough, so I hope viewers enjoy it and notice all the nuances and tributes to the area. We certainly enjoyed making it.

This programme shows the power of homegrown storytelling and the BBC’s commitment to supporting the North East. In 2021, the broadcaster made a landmark commitment to spend at least £25m in the region as part of our North East Screen Partnership, set up to develop the region’s TV production sector. Four years on, we’re on track to exceed this rate of spend by 2026 and have already created nearly 300 local



BBC

A ‘pink carpet’ launch, a Dragon with big ideas and Robson Green on walkabout all add up to a great start to the year, writes **Kate Squire**

jobs. We are projected to create a £50m-a-year production sector by 2027. *Smoggie Queens* was a direct product of this.

The Dumping Ground [see our interview with *Tracy Beaker* star Dani Harmer, pages 22–23] has filmed all 13 series in our region, and that’s not all. The BBC has commissioned several programmes from North East-based

‘SMOGGIE QUEENS IS AN AN OUT-AND-OUT SLAPSTICK SITCOM WITH A BIG OLD GAY HEART’

companies. The brand-new *The Big Idea Works* is made by the Gateshead-based company Twenty Six 03. This sees *Dragons’ Den* star Sara Davies open a “one-stop ideas workshop” in the North East for aspiring inventors to transform their ideas into ingenious working prototypes.

Robson Green’s Weekend Escapes, returning for a third series, is also made and produced in the North East – by Signpost Entertainment and Rivers Meet Productions. Robson will again explore our wonderful coast and countryside, joined this time by presenter Helen Skelton, former world champion boxer and Olympic gold medallist Nicola Adams and comedian Rosie Jones.

Both these shows are due to be broadcast this month. What a start to the new year! This again demonstrates our commitment to the North East – a region that is also integral to the BBC’s mission to pursue the truth in news coverage.

Journalists across the North East continually deliver trusted local news for local services, including for BBC Radio Newcastle and Tees. *BBC Look North*, our dedicated TV news programme, reaches more than 1 million people every week.

The region is now at the forefront of the national conversation, with big cultural moments that bring people together. Last July, for example, BBC Proms returned to Gateshead for a weekend-long residency.

Telling stories like *Smoggie Queens* and supporting local creatives is the bedrock of what the BBC does and will continue to do. ■

Kate Squire is BBC Senior Head of Content Production for the North West and North East.



Family bond: Raphael Wallfisch plays cello for his mother, 99-year-old Anita, the titular last musician of Auschwitz

BBC

Musical solace amid the horror

Cellist Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, who survived the death factory of Auschwitz, is the focus of a remarkable new documentary. **Matthew Bell** reports

Auschwitz was a death factory where more than a million people, mostly Jewish, were murdered. As one survivor says of the Nazis' evil efficiency in a new feature-length documentary to mark the 80th anniversary of the camp's liberation on 27 January 1945: "Satan would have been envious."

Yet, incredibly, amid the terror there was music. It was performed and even composed in the camp, and for a fortunate few this enabled their survival. Music was a lifeline and a way of resisting.

The Last Musician of Auschwitz, made by Two Rivers Media for BBC Arts and

co-funder Access, is a remarkable film. It finds something new to say about Auschwitz and does it in a life-affirming way, without ever sparing us the horror of the Holocaust.

Two of the key figures involved in the project – Suzy Klein, Head of BBC Arts and Classical Music TV (who commissioned the programme alongside the BBC's Alistair Pegg), and producer Debbie Lee – had worked together on the 2017 BBC Four series *Tunes for Tyrants: Music and Power*, which explored the manipulation of music in the Second World War. Crucially, cellist Anita Lasker-Wallfisch had appeared in one episode, explaining how her musical talent saw her drafted into the Women's

Orchestra of Auschwitz, saving her from the gas chambers. Thanks to her relationship with Klein, and at the urging of her grandson, cellist and singer Simon Wallfisch, Lasker-Wallfisch agreed to be in *The Last Musician of Auschwitz*.

Fittingly, as the last musician alive to have played in the Auschwitz orchestras, she is the documentary's central character; a pin-sharp 99-year-old, recalling life in the camp, between puffs on her cigarette.

Director Toby Trackman has an eclectic CV, taking in the Grierson award-winning BBC One programme *Stabbed: Britain's Knife Crime Crisis* and *The Creative Brain*, a complex film about neuroscience, and has worked ▶



Grace notes: a string quartet plays outside Auschwitz

BBC

▶ alongside the high-profile documentary maker Asif Kapadia on the recent Disney+ series *Camden*.

Lee recalls that the BBC and Two Rivers Media “wanted a director who wasn’t steeped in making arts and history documentaries. Toby’s got an amazing CV which doesn’t have that bias; he has made lots of contemporary documentaries. He was liberated from some of the things that people who are more used to working with archive and talking-head academics might not have [been].”

Initially, Trackman was “hesitant” when Lee called him. “There was the huge emotional challenge of dedicating yourself to this subject matter for a year. Having made films about traumatic subjects in the past, I know how deeply they can affect the people making them,” he says. “On a bigger level, I was also aware of the huge weight of responsibility of a project like this and the calibre of the work that had preceded it – how do you add something new and worthwhile?”

The Nazis considered themselves highly cultured people, venerating German-speaking classical composers,

provided they weren’t Jewish like Mahler and Mendelssohn. Auschwitz boasted 15 orchestras, filled by the many virtuoso musicians in the camp, who entertained the SS officers and visiting Nazi dignitaries. Daily, they played marches as the slave labour walked through the Auschwitz gate bearing the cruel lie “Arbeit macht frei” (“Work sets you free”) to the factories and farms where they were literally worked to death.

As one survivor remembers in the film, it was incongruous to hear “fine music being played in a death factory”.

As well as Lasker-Wallfisch, *The Last Musician of Auschwitz* tells the stories of four other, now dead, musicians who were transported to concentration camps: Polish composer and conductor Adam Kopyciński; Paris-based composer Szymon Laks, radical

choirmaster Martin Rosebery D’Arguto and Czech singer-songwriter Ilse Weber. The production team took their time in selecting musicians to feature, looking for a story that could be told through the artist’s own words and a piece of music, preferably with the participation of a descendant “to give it a sense of now, of life and vitality,” explains Trackman.

Belonging to an orchestra increased a person’s chance of surviving Auschwitz, yet, as Lasker-Wallfisch realised: “The moment they don’t want music, we go to the gas chambers.”

The benefit was more physical than spiritual. Laks recalled later in life: “Music kept up the spirit or rather the body of all the musicians who did not have to go out to hard labour and who could eat a little better.” Lasker-Wallfisch wryly noted: “Nothing took you away from Auschwitz.”

The Last Musician of Auschwitz weaves together performances of the musicians’ work and stylised dramatic reconstructions, along with interviews with Lasker-Wallfisch and relatives of the other musicians. Historical context is provided by the *Guardian* journalist Jonathan Freedland. “He was keen to be involved and we were very thankful to have somebody who is so articulate on the subject,” says Lee.

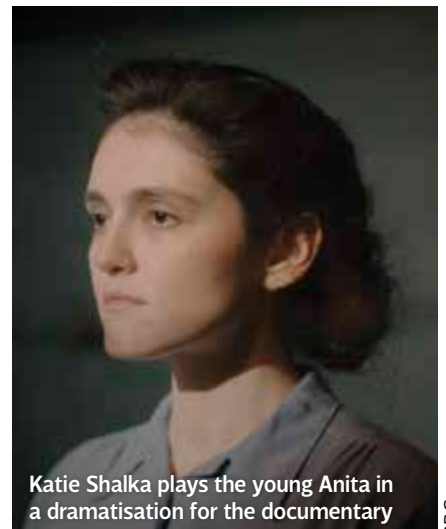
Performances were imaginatively staged and filmed outside the walls of Auschwitz (they are prohibited inside), including at a cemetery and in the grounds of the camp commandant.

“We were very keen to give each performance a real narrative purpose, so a piece appears at a point in the film where it is actually moving the story on,” explains Trackman. “Every one of those shoots felt thrilling for

‘THE MOMENT THEY DON’T WANT MUSIC IS WHEN WE GO TO THE GAS CHAMBERS’



Cellist Anita Lasker-Wallfisch pictured at the end of the war in 1945



Katie Shalka plays the young Anita in a dramatisation for the documentary

BBC

everybody who was there – and that wasn't only an emotional release for the performers, who were in some cases descendants of survivors, but for us as well.

"We'd spent nine months thinking about and planning these [performances], and when we pulled each one off, it's fair to say that they felt like huge cathartic releases. It was a tight-roped we had to walk throughout – we wanted to do things that were creatively different around this subject but we also had to show respect."

The documentary doesn't flinch from the grotesque reality of the Holocaust. "We spent a lot of time looking through the archive. When you see the full scale of the images that were recorded and witness the horror, it felt vital that we include them," says Trackman. "Having a camera to hide

'SOME NOW DENY WHAT HAPPENED IN THE CAMPS. IT WAS VITAL TO MAKE THEM SEE'

behind gave me a bit of protection. It gives you armour... but there were times when the emotion overwhelms.

"There are people who continue to deny what happened, and that appears to be on the increase. People are ignorant of the truth and the scale of it, so I felt very strongly that it was important to make people see."

While making the film, Trackman was struck by "the terrifying parallels between then and now. Spending time in Poland and across Eastern Europe for the film and speaking to people in those countries... made me realise that we are living in a dangerous time."

The director points to the current rise of the nationalist right amid economic uncertainty and rising inequality, which seems to mirror the Europe of the 1930s. "In an age of rising polarisation and fragmentation, watching this [film] should make you realise that hatred has terrible consequences," he says. "I hope that audiences absorb that message." ■

The Last Musician of Auschwitz is available on BBC iPlayer.

Bearing witness to the Holocaust

The RTS hosted a screening of *The Last Musician of Auschwitz* at the British Museum last month, shortly before its transmission on BBC Two on Holocaust Memorial Day. The Head of BBC Arts and Classical Music TV, Suzy Klein, called it a remarkable achievement: "It blends interviews, archive, contemporary footage, dramatic reconstruction and musical performance in a way that I have simply never seen done before.

"It's a film where the events of 80 years ago still resonate and speak to our world today. And it's a film which, sadly, is all too necessary."

Klein noted that a University College London study had revealed that 'nearly one in 10 people believed that the Holocaust was a complete myth' and that 'over half did not know that 6 million Jews and many others had been killed... [believing] the figure to be significantly smaller'. She added: 'Of course, that landscape of toxic antisemitism has only grown worldwide since [Hamas's attack on Israel on] 7 October 2023.'

The Last Musician of Auschwitz, continued Klein, manages to capture 'on-camera, an interview with the last remaining survivor of the women's orchestra at Auschwitz.

'Anita Lasker-Wallfisch occupies a unique position and her interview at the centre of this film stands as a piece of irrefutable, first-person testimony.

Anita is living proof of what happened at Auschwitz.'

The 90-minute documentary also features the stories of other musicians at Auschwitz. Klein explained: 'We felt that this film is about bearing undeniable witness to what happened, and so we wanted the memoirs and records of [these musicians] who were there to be sitting alongside Anita's first-person testimony... telling in their own words the story of what happened to them.'

In conversation with the director, Toby Trackman, Klein discussed one memorable scene, the performance of Adam Kopyciński's *Kołysanka (Lullaby)*, which he composed at Auschwitz. The director filmed it in the grounds of the camp commandant, Rudolf Höss, the 'zone of interest' (a term used by the Nazis to describe the land around Auschwitz), which was the subject of Jonathan Glazer's Oscar-winning film based on Martin Amis's novel.

"The symbolic power of doing that was the real driver – the sense that we were reclaiming that space," said Trackman. "Putting the grand piano in the grounds of Höss's house... it was one of the most powerful experiences."

The screening was held at the British Museum on 15 January and produced by the BBC, Two Rivers Media and Terry Marsh for the RTS.



Toby Trackman and Suzy Klein at the RTS screening

Paul Hampartsoumian

Ruth Ellis is no stranger to our screens, but now a largely female team has dramatised the 1950s case that triggered the end of the death penalty. **Caitlin Danaher** hears a more nuanced story

In June 1955, a jury took just 14 minutes to convict Ruth Ellis, the last woman to be executed in Britain. Charged with murdering her lover, David Blakely, outside the Magdala pub in Hampstead, north London, Ellis was in the dock for little over a day, but the case sent shockwaves across the nation and contributed to the end of the death penalty.

Now, 70 years later, the trial is cast in a new light in ITV and Silverprint Picture's gripping *A Cruel Love: The Ruth Ellis Story*. Adapted from Carol Ann Lee's forensically researched book, *A Fine Day for a Hanging*, it follows the legal battle that preceded Ellis being put to death at the age of 28.

A Cruel Love explores the role of Britain's class system in the execution. Written and created by Kelly Jones (*The Long Call*), it stars Lucy Boynton (*Bohemian Rhapsody*) as Ellis. Toby Jones, fresh from *Mr Bates vs the Post Office*, returns to ITV as the lawyer, John Bickford, who fought for clemency.

Researching her role, Boynton was stunned to discover the impact the case had on Britain's judicial system, and the public outrage it generated. "I was 29 when I was reading and filming it, and she was 28 when she was hanged. There are so many parallels that you can identify with as a modern woman looking back at her treatment then," says Boynton.

With her coiffed bleach-blond hair and red lipstick, Ellis looked like a film-noir starlet at the Old Bailey. She drew gasps from the public gallery as she admitted: "It is obvious that, when I shot him, I intended to kill him."

Kelly Jones says: "That's why she became so notorious. She was lifted from the pages of a Raymond Chandler novel. This glamorous blonde in her little pencil skirt, with the revolver at her side, shooting her lover dead."

Passion: Laurie Davidson and Lucy Boynton as Blakely and Ellis



**Cold-blooded
killer... or class
victim?**

Set in London's 1950s clubland – all cigarette smoke and dry martinis – the four-episode drama sees Ellis become the youngest club manager in the capital, defying the gender expectations of her time as a working-class single mother. As she embarks on a passionate relationship with upper-crust racing driver Blakely (Laurie Davidson, *Mary & George*), *A Cruel Love* charts an all-consuming love affair that turns brutally violent.

Ellis's story has generated numerous TV shows, including documentaries, and film adaptations, most famously 1985's *Dance With a Stranger*, starring Miranda Richardson. But portrayals have tended to caricature Ellis as either hysterical or a cold-blooded killer. For executive producers Kate Bartlett and Antonia Gordon of Silverprint Pictures, it was crucial to capture Ellis in all her difficult complexity.



Queen of clubs:
Lucy Boynton as Ellis

WORKING-CLASS ELLIS IS LEFT TO FACE THE FULL FORCE OF THE LAW

appeared shortly after shooting her lover: the court remains intact, albeit now used as an artist studio.

"That was chilling, especially for Lucy – standing in the dock that Ruth Ellis stood in," Gordon says.

The production was led by a largely female team. "It was important to have a woman writer," says Bartlett. "It felt right that we were the team making it, that Kelly was writing it and Angie [Daniell] producing."

Boynton says that being surrounded

France, and were heroes and had this valour and significance. Then they came back to London with a sense of: 'Who are we now?'"

In private clubs, women like Ellis sold men a fantasy that they were still special. One such man was Desmond Cussen (played by Mark Stanley, known for *Happy Valley*), a former RAF pilot who falls for Ellis at her club. "He sees himself as her saviour, and it becomes quite pathological and obsessive. It really is his undoing," Jones says.

We see how Cussen played a crucial role in Blakely's murder which, had it been raised in the trial, might have led to Ellis avoiding the death penalty. While working-class Ellis is left to face the full force of the law, Cussen is protected by his connections in the old boys' club of the establishment.

Alongside class, *A Cruel Love* tackles



Plea for mercy:
Toby Jones as Ellis's lawyer

All photographs: ITV

"She was by no means perfect. This was a passionate, abusive, volatile relationship. But she shouldn't have been hanged," Bartlett says. Jones agrees: "It feels like we have a new, truer version of Ruth Ellis which isn't in the public consciousness.

"The single detail I find so moving is that she refused any sedative just before execution. She just wanted to face it. She's a very flawed, complex, but brave and interesting person who changed our whole legal system."

Across two timelines, the narrative follows the trial verbatim, set against Ellis and Blakely's love affair. To meet the huge cost of making period drama, Silverprint found financing via BritBox International and ITV Studios. This enabled it to shoot in real London locations, from the Magdala Tavern to the corridors of the Old Bailey, to the magistrates' court where Ellis

by women who could empathise with Ellis's plight on a visceral level was crucial. "Especially having a woman write it – I don't know that it would be possible to gain this level of nuance and insight otherwise."

As it shows brutal scenes of domestic violence, the creative team had to tread a fine line between depicting the glamour of the era without glamorising the harsh reality of the pair's domestic life. "We never wanted it to be grim or gritty. We have caught the glamour of the 50s, but also its much darker side," Bartlett says.

Jones was keen to explore the issues facing men in the postwar era. "All these men are affected by the war. It casts such a long shadow over the whole story," she says.

London's flourishing club scene was a response to the war, says Jones: "All these men had been fighting Nazis in

other subjects that will resonate with audiences today. Bartlett cites "coercive control or abusive relationships, or a working-class woman in a court who's the single mother of two children by two different fathers".

How will audiences react? The creative team expects a mixed and emotive response. Boynton says: "I've already encountered both sides of the conversation – people who have more understanding and empathy for [Ellis's] situation, and then people who really fixate on her being an unlikable person."

Jones concludes: "I've always tried not to judge [Ellis] by the standards of our time. All I've tried to do is paint her as a real person, and I hope that people see that." ■

A Cruel Love: the Ruth Ellis Story will be shown by ITV in March.

Dani Harmer directs on the set of *The Dumping Ground*



Tracy Beaker takes charge

Dani Harmer, the actor who plays Jacqueline Wilson's beloved rebel, is now behind the camera. **Matthew Bell** reports

When *The Story of Tracy Beaker* was first broadcast in 2002, there was no YouTube or Netflix streaming service, let alone TikTok. Kids, it is said, do not watch traditional TV any more, yet millions grew up enraptured by Jacqueline Wilson's care home rebel on CBBC, and now their own children are doing the same.

Dani Harmer certainly grew up with Tracy, playing her as a child in care in *The Story of Tracy Beaker*, a care worker in *Tracy Beaker Returns* and a mum in *The Beaker Girls*. "We grew up together," she tells *Television*, while preparing to play Fairy Bon Bon in *Beauty and the Beast*, which has just finished a run at the Grand Opera House in York.

Harmer is always happy to play Tracy. In the current 13th series of Beaker spin-off *The Dumping Ground* – the children's name for the care home where they've been "dumped" – she has a cameo turn. But she also satisfies a long-held ambition by directing an episode. "I've been interested in directing since I was teeny-tiny," says Harmer. "I was that annoying kid who wanted to know

everything about everyone's job [on set]. It was a pinch-me moment to come full circle and direct."

She shadowed *Dumping Ground* directors before taking charge herself but admits to first-day anxiety: "I was really nervous, like I had impostor syndrome. But after 10 minutes in command, I was: 'No, I've got this. I've done my prep, I know the script inside out and I know what I'm doing.'"

Did anything surprise her? "Other directors told me that you get asked at least 250 questions a day, and I thought: 'You're being a bit over-dramatic.' But, oh my gosh, you really do, even when you're having your lunch. I don't say this often, but I was really proud of myself. I loved every second. I can't wait to do it again."

Harmer, who turns 36 this month, is incredulous but proud when I point out that almost three decades have passed since her London stage debut in the rock musical of the Who's *Tommy* in 1996. "Not many actors stick it out, actually, and I still love it as much now as I did then," she says.

Small parts in adult dramas followed *Tommy* before Harmer landed the role that made her name. *The Story of Tracy Beaker* was an instant hit. "It was so

successful because it was about something; it felt different to everything else going on. Without being rude, at that time we had very male-led comedy, slapstick programmes.

"I loved the Chuckle Brothers – don't get me wrong, they were brilliant, genius almost. That was the stuff I grew up on. But along came Tracy, and she was huge – a larger-than-life strong, fierce female character.

"And it was a programme that dealt with some serious issues. You didn't need to be care-experienced to relate to her. It was about growing up, but it was also teaching kids about care-experienced problems as well."

Harmer reserves special praise for the author who created Tracy Beaker, the former Children's Laureate Jacqueline Wilson: "I worship that woman – she just makes people feel seen. As a kid who had divorced parents, just to be able to pick up a book and [think]: 'I'm not the only one. I can relate to this book I'm reading. I'm not weird!'"

Like the Tracy Beaker series, *The Dumping Ground* has become a TV institution, with series 14 due to shoot this summer. "It's not afraid to tackle serious issues in a way that's not patronising for kids. But at the same time, it's still a kids' programme and we balance [the serious] with the light and fun," says Harmer of the BBC Studios Kids & Family show.

"The BBC does kids programmes better than anyone else. It's what I let my kids watch [rather than] those shiny American programmes. We all love a bit of singing and dancing, but you just can't beat what the BBC does."

Tracy Beaker made Harmer an actor, easing the tricky transition from child to adult performer, but is it also a curse? "I'm very much seen as Tracy Beaker, which is great – I've been playing her for 20-plus years now. I don't feel old enough to say that but there we go!

"I love the part. I would play Tracy at the drop of a hat, but I also feel typecast. At the moment, my passion is very much directing, so fingers crossed that I get to do more of it. I had an absolute ball on *The Dumping Ground*."

She adds, laughing: "Who knows where this path may take me? I hope it will continue in directing but you never know – I may end up producing ... or running BBC Kids & Family." ■

The perfect place to be 'dumped'

Since its inception in 2013, *The Dumping Ground* has been shot in the North East – first at Jesmond, then Gateshead, Morpeth and now Hexham.

"We know our target audiences enjoy watching things from around the world, but it's important that some of what is available to them is made in the UK and they can see themselves represented," says Tali Walters, BBC Studios Kids & Family Creative Director. "Shows like *The Dumping Ground* do an important public service job [reflecting] issues that are particularly relevant to UK kids."

For the past three years, a North East Screen/BBC training scheme has given local entrants to the industry paid, hands-on experience on the show's set. Walters says: "When you're not from an area that has lots of TV, it seems impossible to get into [the industry]. Our message is: there might be a role for you – so come and see us."

The scheme starts with an open day, which Walters says 'excites and inspires people'. Next, attendees apply to shadow heads of department before trainees are selected for a paid five-day placement. Some have then won full-time roles on *The Dumping Ground* and other current North East productions:

Hartlepool-set ITV comedy *Trans-action* and an adaptation of Virginia Woolf's *Night and Day*, shooting in Newcastle.

"We've got amazing local talent that needs to be nurtured and given the opportunity to shine," says North East Screen Skills Manager Lisa Davidson, a former production designer on *The Dumping Ground*.

Davidson says the region is 'seeing a real boost in production. The North East has got all the locations you need – you can get from a rural castle to a city in half an hour.'

Shows like *Trans-action* and BBC Three comedy *Smoggie Queens*, written and starring Middlesbrough native Phil Dunning, have benefited from North East Screen funding. The region is also set to gain from the planned £450m Crown Works Studios on the

River Wear, a joint-venture by Fulwell 73 (the makers of Netflix doc *Sunderland 'Til I Die*) and investment firm Cain International.

Davidson concludes: "Production companies around the UK are more aware of what we have to offer. We're improving the skills of our crews, and I'm encouraging talent that has moved away from the North East to come home – the productions are starting to come in."

'WE'VE GOT AMAZING LOCAL TALENT IN THE NORTH EAST'



Dani Harmer on location with cast members of *The Dumping Ground*

Survive till '25. That was the mantra of the TV industry in 2024, as budgets were squeezed, costs surged, and viewers changed habits. We've made it through

2024 – creating national moments with *Mr Bates vs The Post Office*, *The Traitors* and the *Gavin & Stacey* Christmas special. But what happens next?

To assess the landscape, a panel of heavyweight industry leaders assembled in central London for the RTS's keenly anticipated "2025 TV predictions: an expert view on the year ahead". There was standing room only as Chair Katie Razzall, BBC News Culture and Media Editor, began the discussion by inviting the panel to look at the advertising market.

Josh Krichefski, CEO of the media investors GroupM for the UK and EMEA and President of the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising, said the overall advertising market was "quite buoyant". He expected 7% growth this year, with retail and utilities likely to be

TV ADVERTISING IS EXPECTED TO GROW BETWEEN 2% AND 3% IN 2025

A glimpse into the crystal ball

Can broadcast fight back? At a sold-out RTS event, industry leaders gave their predictions for the year ahead on this and many more vital questions

particularly strong. Inevitably, digital was driving growth, though, he said: "Broadcast is more circumspect, which probably doesn't surprise you all"

Krichefski said that weekly reach in broadcast viewing was down 12% year-on-year in 2023, and 6% in 2024. "The decline is slowing, which is a good thing, but the starkest figure is that less than 50% of 16- to 24-year-olds would have tuned in to broadcast TV in an average week."

With an anticipated 3% decline in broadcast advertising and a 20%

increase in streaming advertising, he expected TV advertising to grow between 2 and 3%.

For Amelia Brown, Fremantle UK CEO, shifting patterns in the industry meant that a "process of adjustment is going to continue throughout this year." While Fremantle remains one of the UK's biggest independent production companies, creating the likes of *The Apprentice* and *Too Hot to Handle*, Brown said: "We are also built on a very old business model. A lot of adjustment has to come from the



The RTS panel: Chris Bird, Amelia Brown, Josh Krichefski, Kiran Nataraja and Kate Phillips

bigger players to make sure we can move forward. The old business model doesn't really exist any more, and we're heading towards multiple new business models."

In common with other streamers, Prime Video UK introduced unskippable ads last year to its basic package; subscribers can pay an extra £2.99 a month to remove the ads. Reflecting on how this fared, its Managing Director, Chris Bird, said: "We don't expect any customers to thank us for adding advertising into their programming, but we've had a positive response to the way customers have managed the low-level ads, and the ads' relevance."

The move has helped Amazon to invest more in content, with the UK production *The Rings of Power* – "probably the biggest TV show in the world right now", said Bird – a case in point.

Kiran Nataraja, Director of Streaming and Content Strategy at Channel 4, and Kate Phillips, Director of Unscripted at the BBC, were "cautiously optimistic" about 2025.

Channel 4 was hit hard by the advertising downturn, but it plans to spend more on content in 2025. "Our content budgets aren't back to the post-pandemic boom, but we're looking at 2019 levels," Nataraja said.

That was encouraging for independent producers, as was Phillips' renewed commitment. "When we commission shows, indies usually keep their intellectual property. That's important," she said. "As a public service broadcaster, it's audience first, but it's also about supporting the ecosystem in this country. We're commissioning from as wide a variety of indies as we can."

Yet in this competitive market, where commissioners and programme-makers battle with one another and other entertainment platforms for eyeballs and revenue, were they in danger of playing it too safe? Phillips said every commission was a gamble. "You can do all the audience research you want, but you still don't know if it's going to land," she said, using recent BBC successes *The Traitors* and the *Gladiators* reboot as examples of shows that were not cast-iron hits at the start.

Brown agreed, while acknowledging that "maybe our industry has lost its guts a little bit", as one breakout hit tends to be followed by a wave of similar pitches. "That's less on the buyers and more on the developers and us,"



Lower-tariff drama as seen in C4's *Patience*

Channel 4

she said. "A derivative version is never going to be the next thing to hit big. It never has done, and it never will. Everybody [needs to] trust their gut."

Programmes need time to grow, said Phillips. "I don't understand this obsession still with overnight figures," she added, pointing

out that the BBC, Channel 4, and Sweden's SVT are among those that have shifted away from this metric.

For the streamers, the most desired content in Britain is quality scripted drama that also appeals to a global audience.

What's evolving is collaboration rather than competition with UK broadcasters. Bird said: "For example, we're co-producing *The Night Manager* seasons 2 and 3 with the BBC. The BBC will have it in the UK and Amazon will have it internationally. That's an opportunity, not necessarily a threat or challenge, in the market."

Something else we are likely to see more of this year is scheduling that complements digital and linear viewing habits and gives rise to what Nataraja called "event moments". "It's quite unusual for single episodes of shows [on C4] to play weekly now," she said. "If we had a four-part crime piece, in the past that would have played over four weeks. Now we schedule Sunday to Wednesday.

"It works well because you're creating a mini-event in the linear schedule, but you're also creating an instant box set for streaming viewers, so you're getting the best of both worlds."

Phillips said: "You want people to want more. You want to give them a dopamine hit and then say you've got to wait a bit now."

The panel discussed technological advancements. Fremantle was exploring AI for cost and time savings, but, said Brown: "It will start with a human and end with a human." The BBC was investigating efficiencies in the production process, too, and looking at AI to curate content for viewers.

A gamechanger in TV advertising is the maturing of addressability, which uses customer data to match ads with the most relevant programmes. "It's growing significantly, both in terms of viewing and in terms of advertisers doubling down on it," said Kricheski, whose company is using AI to build addressability models. "It enables ads to deliver a better return on investment, so advertisers will spend more money, which is beneficial to broadcasters and streamers."

Each panellist was asked to forecast one key trend. Kricheski predicted a significant year for women's sport, while Nataraja saw opportunity for "producers who can crack lower-tariff drama". She cited *Patience*,

THERE'S A GREAT OPPORTUNITY FOR PRODUCERS WHO CAN CRACK LOWER-TARRIF DRAMA'

Channel 4's high-profile drama, as an example that was at the other end of the scale to *The Day of the Jackal*, which reputedly cost £10m an episode.

Brown predicted "a live event that will surprise us all, but I don't know what it is yet". Bird envisioned more crossover between mainstream broadcasters and personalities from social platforms. He said: "YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and so on have created a new generation of talent for their networks. You'll see many more of those talents transition to big TV and streaming, and successfully so. "Hopefully they will bring in audiences from those environments to our TV services." ■

Report by Shilpa Ganatra. The RTS National Event '2025 TV predictions: an expert view on the year ahead' was held at the Cavendish Conference Centre, London on 22 January. It was hosted by Katie Razzall, Culture and Media Editor, BBC News, and produced by Julie McKeen, David Amodio and Nicola Moon.

The *Jury: Murder Trial* was a gripping TV experiment: would two juries come to the same decision about a restaged trial – and, if they did, would it match the outcome of the real-life case?

Series 1, which played out over the final week of February last year on Channel 4, featured a case in which a man admitted killing his wife, but denied it was murder. It mixed drama – with actors playing the accused, witnesses and barristers in court – and documentary, with scenes in the jury rooms filmed like a reality show, using a fixed camera rig.

The latest RTS Futures event revealed how *The Jury: Murder Trial* was developed from the germ of an idea to a successful first series, with a second on the way. “[The show is] a test of our jury system to find out if it’s fair and we can trust it,” explained Ed Kellie, founder of programme-maker ScreenDog Productions.

Having established there were no legal barriers to restaging a trial for TV using the transcript of a real case, Kellie took the idea to C4, which funded development.

Ian Dunkley, Channel 4 Commissioning Editor, Factual Entertainment, said the first decision was to select “a murder trial that speaks to something beyond the act itself – it had to have something about it that tapped into shared experiences with the audience.

“For that reason, we shied away from things like gun crime [to] something that had more of a domestic, universal setting.” The case, he added, needed “twists and turns... in terms of the evidence”.

Next came a series of meetings with commissioning, scheduling and financing



The Jury: Murder Trial

Channel 4

Justice is seen to be done

RTS Futures Matthew Bell hears how C4’s audacious TV experiment, *The Jury: Murder Trial*, went from bright idea to hit series

teams. “My job is to kill people’s dreams,” joked Sean Collins, who is responsible for scheduling at Channel 4. “Do I think [a show’s] going to rate, is it going to work on linear... and streaming? Where would I schedule it? When would I launch it?”

The idea for *The Jury: Murder Trial* was concept-tested, asking people, based on the show’s top line, whether they thought it would be successful. “We got good feedback, which added another tick on its journey to getting commissioned,” said Collins.

Dunkley added: “We do audience research but we’re not slaves to it. Part of the joy of being a commissioner is that you have to trust gut instinct.

“Famously, *Bake Off* was pitched for, I think, eight years before anyone

commissioned it. No one thought a load of people baking cakes in a tent was ever going to rate.”

Before shooting started, scripts were written, and actors and jurors cast. Discussing the latter, Kellie revealed: “All we said was: ‘Do you want to be a juror on a restaged version of a real case of a major crime?’”

“We didn’t tell them anything about the crime. We didn’t seek people who had particular experiences. We wanted a range of ages and a range of attitudes.”

Potential jurors were vetted by psychologists who advised whether the person was sufficiently robust to take part in the series.

With filming finished, the last decision for Channel 4 was when to air the series. “Once you’ve seen a rough

cut of the show, you get a better feel for the selling point,” said Collins.

“It felt a lot younger than I’d anticipated. It had more of a reality skew, which meant it couldn’t play against *Celebrity Big Brother*, which we knew was coming back on ITV1, so we had to tweak and dodge accordingly – there was a bit of last-minute jiggery-pokery.”

“The other decision was to strip it on consecutive nights, and box-set all episodes on the first night except for the finale so that we could create a [big] linear moment.” ■

‘Murder Jury – lifecycle of a commission: how to get your programme on the telly’ was hosted by the show’s producer, Grace Goddard, on 12 December. It was produced by Ethel Mercedes and Natalie Hobkirk.

Drama, drama... and more drama” is what viewers can expect from series 2 of *Boarders*, according to Myles Kamwendo, who plays Omar. The first episode of the new BBC Three series had a sold-out preview last month for an audience at Bristol’s Watershed cinema.

Series 1 introduced us to five black inner-city teenagers who had been offered scholarships to a prestigious private school, so the question facing the writers room for the second outing was: where do we go from here?

Madeleine Sinclair, executive producer for programme-maker Studio Lambert, said that Daniel Lawrence Taylor, writer and creator of *Boarders*, was keen to start from the premise: “Now these students are in this school, what are they going to have to do to survive it?”

Production was based at the Bottle Yard Studios in Bristol, with eight weeks of shooting in a school followed by four weeks on location in the city, with the support of Bristol Film Office.

Sinclair said the production had a range of locations on its list, “from posh houses to little random country bus stops. Bristol is an incredible place for that – you can get everything here.”

Filming in Bristol also offered the opportunity to use local talent. “It has been really important to the production, right from series 1. We try to offer as many opportunities as we can to under-represented talent.

“I think we had a trainee in every department this year. Some departments had multiple trainees,” said Sinclair, adding that this “enriched the whole experience”.

A panel discussion followed the screening, and it



Boarders: Josh Tedeku (left) and Myles Kamwendo (centre)

BBC

Young, gifted and black

West of England BBC Three’s fish-out-of-water comedy-drama *Boarders* is back for a second series. **Seraphina Allard-Bridge** reports

soon became clear how much the cast and crew enjoy each other’s company.

“We’re very fortunate to be surrounded not only by talented actors but people you

“We love having fun with each other... all five of us,” said Josh Tedeku, who plays Jaheim. “Whenever we get the chance to, we always... have a laugh... and then we

“That’s my way of directing,” said Masud. “To make sure these guys know that they’re good – and that they don’t need me.”

He added: “They know their characters so well that I’ve stepped back a little bit... I leave room for them.”

However, to know a character well is not necessarily to like them.

On playing Jaheim, Tedeku explained: “I don’t think you always have to like a character, and I think that’s kind of the beauty in it.

“As an actor, when you are playing the character... you have to know what they want and, even if it’s wrong, you have to want it.” ■

The RTS West of England event was held on 27 January at the Watershed cinema, Bristol, and produced by Suzy Lambert.

WHAT ARE THEY GOING TO HAVE TO DO TO SURVIVE?

just get on with,” said Kamwendo. “It’s not every day that you’re going to have a job and meet a fantastic group of people that you get to work with.”

Thinking back to his work on the first series, director Sarmad Masud recalled: “My favourite stuff was actually the behind-the-scenes stuff. Watching it, I wanted to be part of their gang.” It was this camaraderie that he tried to highlight in the new series.

try to translate that on to the screen.” Sinclair added: “They’re definitely some of Daniel’s favourite scenes to write – where the five come together – because that’s where the real gem of the show is.”

Masud recalled a quote that summed up his approach to directing: “The greatest good you can do for someone is not to share your riches but to show them theirs.”

By common consent, there is too much TV to watch. But, paradoxically, TV's once ironclad commitment to local journalism is a shadow of its former self.

That was one of the main takeaways of an RTS evening with Sir Trevor Phillips, who, more than 40 years ago, helped to change the face of TV current affairs as a pioneering black journalist at London Weekend Television.

He said: "One of the great failures of contemporary journalism – newspapers, radio and TV – is that there's a shortage of serious local journalism. On *The London Programme*, we'd spend six weeks making half an hour of telly. If we couldn't get there, we'd spend nine weeks. That wouldn't happen today."

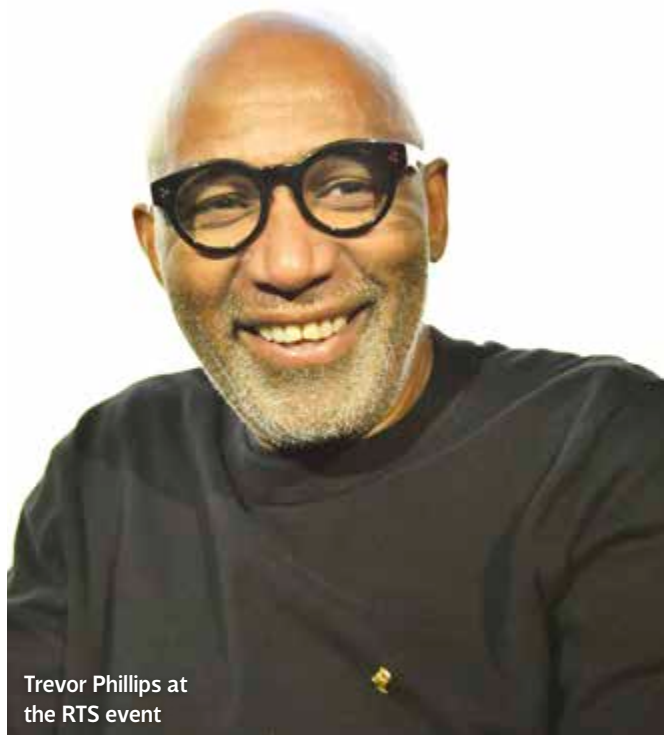
Phillips added: "We've got these great big machines that are 24-hour news, like Sky News, whom I love working for. People care about the output, but there is a different culture today.

"Television journalism has been infected by entertainment. In TV journalism, we now think first about the booking and then about the story. When I started, the story came first – then we'd worry about who we were going to interview."

Grilled for the RTS by his young colleague, Sky News presenter Kamali Melbourne, Phillips, who had been planning a career as an engineer, revealed that he had some misgivings about working in TV, despite a family friend suggesting that he should try for a job at LWT.

"I thought that journalists were basically parasites," said Phillips. To his surprise, joining LWT turned out to be a revelation. The highly profitable London ITV station was a hotbed of innovation.

LWT was famous for entertaining millions with shows such as *Blind Date*,



Trevor Phillips at the RTS event

John Stone

Trevor Phillips: a true pioneer

RTS London The Sky News political presenter looks back over four decades in television. **Steve Clarke reports**

hosted by the ever-chirpy Cilla Black, and its stellar arts coverage, thanks to Melvyn Bragg's *South Bank Show*. But the ITV station also re-invented current affairs

of its time is an understatement. At the start of his LWT career, Phillips worked in the company's London Minorities Unit on *Skin*, aimed at London's black and Asian

'I THOUGHT THAT JOURNALISTS WERE BASICALLY PARASITES'

with programmes such as the cerebral *Weekend World* and more populist fare including *The London Programme*, an RTS award-winner that employed Phillips for more than 15 years.

To say that LWT was ahead

communities. The company also pioneered a show for gay people and another for teenagers.

Much of the impetus for these groundbreaking initiatives came from John Birt, the hands-on programme

chief who would go on to become Director-General of the BBC. "John Birt was involved in the hiring of all staff, not just senior employees," Phillips remembered.

Landing a gig at LWT was far from easy: the rigorous Birt led an eight-person interview panel that put applicants through their paces. Thousands of people applied for the job that Phillips secured at LWT, he recalled. But once you were in, you were looked after.

"There was complete confidence in you," he said, recalling how Birt and his lieutenants encouraged programme-makers to push boundaries.

What was it like walking into the LWT newsroom as a young black man?

"I was fortunate because I wasn't alone. There were other places where you'd be the only one, but [at LWT] there was a group of us, including [current BBC Chair] Samir Shah.

"Samir and I started on the same programme on the same day. We'd been hired to be ourselves. I was very, very lucky to be in the right place at the right time.

"Nobody who works in television today could imagine the amount of time and money that were put at our disposal. We'd go out to make a short video with a crew of nine."

As the presenter and editor of *The London Programme*, Phillips, along with his team, became known for exposing aspects of the city's underbelly, including ticket touts and sex traffickers.

"If *The London Programme's* ratings were falling, we'd do crime, sex or house prices – and they'd pick up." ■

'In conversation with Trevor Phillips' was held at the Everyman, King's Cross, London, on 26 November. The producer was Phillip Barnes.

RTS Cymru Wales held an advance screening at University of South Wales last month of a BBC Wales documentary, *The Impossible Show: Tsunami Relief Concert*, made by Cardiff indie Orchard Media.

After watching harrowing news images from the Indian Ocean tsunami on Boxing Day 2004, Paul Sergeant, then manager of Cardiff's Millennium Stadium, was moved to raise money for the victims of the disaster.

With the help of two friends, he vowed to put on a concert in the capital in just three weeks – with no artists signed up. As Sergeant says in the film: “We all thought it was probably a crazy idea.”

The documentary tells the story of how the trio pulled off one of the biggest charity concerts since Live Aid, with 66,000 people listening to Welsh stars such as Manic Street Preachers, Katherine Jenkins, Charlotte Church



Pablo Janczur (concert co-organiser), Adrian Jones (executive producer), Edward Russell (Chair, RTS Cymru Wales), Daisy Brown (director), Jack Carey (producer) and Rupert Moon (concert co-organiser)

Matthew Harrison

Are you ready to rock?

and Goldie Lookin Chain, plus Eric Clapton, Jools Holland and Craig David. It raised more than £1.25m.

The film is now showing on BBC iPlayer. Its executive

producer, Adrian Jones, told the screening audience how refreshing it was to make a feelgood show in a genre dominated by true crime. “Ultimately, Wales is a nation

of generous people, and this was a story that needed to be told right now in the world,” he said.

Edward Russell and Matthew Harrison

The winning formula for great sport docs

The *Drive to Survive* effect has brought a new lease of life to the world of factual and sports storytelling. One of the first teams to “truly get under the skin of the athletes” is Box to Box Films, the company behind the hit Netflix documentary.

Box to Box's Head of Sports and Factual, Warren Smith, spoke to former England netball captain and now broadcaster Pamela Cookey at last month's RTS Technology event, “Televising the greatest sporting spectacles on Earth”, held at IMG Studios at Stockley Park, London. Smith detailed his own

career, via structured reality formats such as *SAS: Who Dares Wins*, through to his current role, advocating for contributors to “own their story”. Encouraging his team to take the narrative beyond the headlines, Smith said: “What would the story be without the game? The game is the icing on top.”

This humanising approach to documentaries is working: in the US, where the popularity of *Drive to Survive* now means that more Formula 1 races are held there than in any other country.

The ripple effect for Box to Box has been huge, with an expanding slate of titles,



Netflix

including the likes of *Break Point*, *Full Swing* and *Tour de France: Unchained*.

Smith said a key factor has been building trust with organisations and athletes, exemplified by “crews hanging out with athletes during hotel breakfasts” to establish a level of familiarity that goes beyond standard

observational documentaries. He emphasised the importance of sound in the shows. Formula 1 and rugby already had microphones in helmets and attached to referees, and by embracing and utilising this added layer, Box to Box has been able to bring a level of intimacy to its shows. Its upcoming Isle of Man TT series will see microphones put on riders and their bikes.

Smith added: “Sideline stories can be as important as the winners.”

The trials and tribulations of Formula 1 team manager Guenther Steiner and golfer Joel Dahmen are just “as enthralling and entertaining” as the big names such as Mercedes and Ferrari. Both teams declined to take part in the first series of *Drive to Survive* ... but subsequently featured prominently.

Kim Rowell

Roger Appleton 1935–2025

RTS
Obituary

Roger Appleton, who died on 2 January at the age of 90, was an RTS Fellow and a stalwart of the Society.

He joined the RTS in 1955 and was awarded a Fellowship in 1978 in recognition of the contribution he had made to the development of electronic engineering facilities for independent television, his contribution to the Society as a member of its Council and as the first Chairman of the new London Centre in 1976.

Roger was educated at the Oxford School of Technology. He joined the BBC in 1954 and subsequently worked for Granada and Associated Rediffusion, joining London Weekend Television in 1968.

He became Chief Engineer

in 1972 and Director of Engineering in 1981.

He was Chairman of the ITV Technical Committee in 1976, and Chairman of the ITV Engineering Research and Development Committee twice, in 1979 and 1984.

In these positions, Roger was responsible for building the ITV R&D system of laboratories and ITV's HDTV development programme, including the first European HDTV outside broadcast unit for the Eureka project.

In 1974, LWT won a contract from the Ministry of Defence and British Forces Broadcasting Service to provide a television service of BBC and ITV programmes to the 20,000 British servicemen in Germany. Roger's Engineering Group designed



and built the system, which started broadcasting in Celle, Germany. His team was also responsible for the first ITV Oracle Teletext Editorial

Suite at LWT in 1975. Roger was also President of The British Amateur Television Club from 1981 until 1989.

RTS London founder and the ITV Network's first Head of Technology, Norman Green, recalls: "Roger and I worked closely together for some 15 years. I well remember driving to LWT at around 6.30pm and going up to the 7th floor where he had his office on the corner of the building overlooking the Houses of Parliament, behind which the sunsets were wonderful.

"We would work on ITV business until about 9pm. This could happen two or three times a week at 'politically difficult' times! He was a great person, engineer and friend."

Norman Green

The UPSIDE

Now press play to see the real Dylan

The Dylan biopic *A Complete Unknown* topped the UK cinema box office. Now there are small-screen treats for Bobcats young and old on BBC iPlayer: Martin Scorsese's epic two-parter, *No Direction Home*, a compelling documentary that includes interviews with Joan Baez and Pete Seeger, and *Shadow Kingdom*, an intimate and atmospheric acoustic concert containing such Dylan gems as *Forever Young* and filmed during lockdown in glorious monochrome.

The BBC is yet to offer the *Omnibus* film *Getting to Dylan*, first shown in 1986 and

featuring a surprisingly revealing interview conducted by the film's director, Christopher Sykes. Dylan has always been a reluctant interviewee, especially when the cameras are rolling, but Sykes does an impressive job in the face of the troubadour's fierce charisma.

Brian and Maggie ... and little old me

Talking of interviews, Channel 4's two-parter *Brian and Maggie*, scripted by James Graham, was an early highlight of the viewing year. Steve Coogan and Harriet Walter excelled as LWT's great political interrogator Brian Walden and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

Their relationship was lubricated by late-night whiskies, as the show made clear. The Upside witnessed first-hand Walden's

fondness for a tippale when interviewing the great man back in the 80s. On an otherwise sober Monday afternoon, the erstwhile Labour MP was in his element, fortified by more than a drop of the hard stuff.

OK boomer, don't write off Gen Z!

Great to see a former RTS Bursary Scholar going from strength to strength in the TV/digital sector. Mahnoor Akhlaq, a Multimedia Producer at *Channel 4 News*, was an outstanding panellist when speaking at last month's joint RTS/Channel 4 event, "Gen Z: trends, truth and trust".

She urged the audience not to underestimate young people and reminded broadcasters that Gen Z has a keen appetite for news, as its response to *Channel 4 News's*

recent reporting from the DRC demonstrated.

Bang a gong for this worthy pair

Finally, congratulations to Jasmine Dotiwala and Steve Morrison, both of whom were rewarded in the King's New Year's Honours List. Jasmine, a member of the RTS's Futures committee, received an OBE following more than 20 years of working across Netflix UK, the Media Trust, *Channel 4 News*, and MTV. Her achievements promoting diversity and inclusion are legendary.

Steve was awarded a CBE. He is a founder of All3Media, a former Director of Programmes and Chief Executive of Granada, and more recently Director of the BBC Board. Importantly to the Upside, Steve is also a friend of the RTS! ■



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